



A New Communications Paper for the 21st Century

A vision of digital justice

The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. (Psalm 33:5)

Introduction

Digital technologies are transforming our world and the multiple spaces in which we live and move. These technologies offer us new ways to communicate, to inform ourselves and navigate the world, to advocate for human dignity and rights, and for multiple voices to be heard.

However, while digital technologies can be powerful tools for living in relation with others, for inclusion, education, encounter, imagination, creativity, and understanding, they also pose challenges through their conception, design, and use. Digital communication platforms, with all their opportunities, are used to spread disinformation and hate, exploit individuals and communities, increase surveillance, and contribute to growing gaps in access, power, and wealth – including between private companies and national governments.

In 2022, the ecumenical fellowship gathers in Karlsruhe, Germany, for the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and this digital transformation of society raises profound issues that the ecumenical fellowship has wrestled with for many decades: power, justice, equity, participation, promoting sustainable communities, care for creation, how voices from the margins are heard, as well as human dignity, and what it means to be human, made in the image of God.

The WCC has a long history of raising issues related to the role of communication in society and its implication for ecumenical witness. The WCC's founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 referred to the vast concentration of power in a society "dominated as it is by technics," while also noting how technical progress "provides channels of communication and interdependence which can be aids to fellowship." Subsequent assemblies returned to the challenges posed by communication for society and ecumenical witness.

In responding ecumenically to the contemporary challenges posed by digital transformation, the ecumenical fellowship can draw upon the resources and insights gained over the past seven decades in grappling with the challenges of communication. In particular, we recall that the Uppsala (1968) and Vancouver (1983) assemblies focused on key contemporary aspects of mass communication.

A statement on "The Church and the Media of Mass Communication" presented to the WCC's 4th Assembly in Uppsala in 1968 described mass media as the "agora and town meeting of technological society," and the mainstay for a "responsible world society," while, at the same time, "[p]owerful minorities can pervert the media for limited or selfish purposes."

Recommendations on "Communicating Credibly" from the 6th Assembly in Vancouver in 1983 warned of the "pervasive and often dominant role" of mass media, which "distort and diminish the life of the world, by packaging it as entertainment, or simply as propaganda." At the same time the new electronic media threatened to "enlarge and confirm the global domination of a few countries and make it almost

irreversible,” widening “the gap between the information-poor and information-rich both within and between individual nations”.

In today’s digital world, we see many of these same dilemmas not only replicated but magnified by the speed of digital developments and networks and the ability of individuals themselves to be active participants and “influencers” as never before.

As we wrestle with these continuing and new opportunities and challenges, two intrinsically connected aspects must play a central role in our vision and theological reflection on digital justice: relationality and vulnerability. As Christians, we believe that being created in the image of God provides inherent dignity to every woman, man, and child (Gen 1:27.) Humans are created to be relational and capable of collaboration and communication. For this reason, we are called to take responsibility for and to care for God’s creation.

To address the urgent issues raised by digital transformation, we believe the time has arrived for a “new communications paper for the 21st century”, drawing in particular on the insights of the symposium on “Communication for social justice in a digital age” that took place in September 2021.

Global and societal digital realities

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation as organizations and individuals moved online to maintain livelihoods, education, worship, and connections when physical interaction was necessarily limited. For many, what we could accomplish online was a revelation – reconnecting to distant family and friends, holding meetings without the obstacles of travel and funds, finding new ways to live and express ourselves as Christians in a globalized society. At the same time, we lamented the loss of physical connections that deepen our relationships.

Our growing digital dependence has highlighted distinct challenges. Communities of faith, political, cultural, and civil society actors are all struggling to respond effectively to these issues of social justice, including:

Digital Divides: One challenge is “digital divides” between those who have access to new technologies and those who do not. Such digital divides exist at many levels: economic, geographic, racial, educational, class, gender, age, cultural, technological, and global. These divides point to both the complexity of social justice in a digital age and the need for intersectional reflection. In the same way, digital justice must be seen in the context of gender equity, racism, environmental sustainability, economic justice, intergenerational relationships, and so much more.

Accessibility: Meaningful access requires basic communication infrastructure such as stable electricity and internet connections, the availability of digital tools, data, programming and content from the local cultural context, as well as the legal frameworks and economic resources to access and invest in them. Access is also enabled by language diversity and facilities for full inclusion of persons with disabilities. Access affects power relations and distribution of resources, and as such, access to digital technologies is both a cause and a result of divides.

Public space: This is the space where States and the public interact, where people, including the media, can express thoughts and feelings and participate democratically. Digitalization creates the opportunity for expanding this space, but the restriction of digital freedoms and abuse of the space through disinformation and hate speech can also cause this space to shrink.

Inequity: Control, use, and analysis of data gathered due to digitalization are heavily vested in a few corporations and in specific geographic regions. Governments may also be heavily implicated in data control and manipulation.

Education: Digital education, including questioning and critical examination of information and sources, is vital for all people. Access to this education is often sharply divided based on age, academic background, language, gender, geographical location, and societal gender roles.

Gender justice: Active participation in the digital space can contribute to full participation in all domains of life for everyone. However, pervasive gender power inequities restrict this access, and gender identity can be a target for discrimination and online abuse. For example, increased digitalization has led to greater exposure of girls and women to sexualized harassment, surveillance, trolling, and online hate, which may also lead to physical violence. The impact of online violence is silencing women in particular, forcing some to disengage from the digital space.

Privacy and security: The universal challenges of the use of data and loss of privacy are compounded by arbitrary government control, national digital laws and guidelines that are vague and fraught with loopholes, corporate interests, state censorship and surveillance. Digital technologies can also present unforeseen dangers.

Militarization: There is military investment in digital technologies, and the technologies are in turn militarized –increasing risk in situations of war and conflict.

Artificial Intelligence and cyberspace: Artificial Intelligence and related technologies are transforming education, surveillance, foreign policy, commerce, and industry, and the way humans relate to each other. In the military sphere, there is intensive development of AI-guided missiles and autonomous weapons, including drones.

Our call for digital justice

We are called to a journey of justice and peace and to ensure the integrity of creation. Digital technology itself is a product of human creativity and should be celebrated when it is used to enhance human dignity.

We are called to participate in God's mission to ensure that all may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10), also in the digital sphere. The biblical preferential option for the poor and vulnerable (Matt 5) directs our attention to information poverty and the digital divides in the global face of digitalization.

The issue of digital justice relates to the whole range of issues of concern to the ecumenical fellowship. The increasing militarization of digital technology and artificial intelligence, its use in surveillance and censorship, and the deliberate destabilizing disinformation tactics impact our public witness.

The power and wealth concentrated in a few technological organizations, and the ecological impact of mining for the resources needed to meet the increasing demand of digital devices has clear implications for sustainability and the economy of life.

The gender gap in digital access, biased algorithms, and online abuse and violence against women affect our efforts towards a Just Community of Women and Men. And rapid developments and the use of artificial intelligence impact areas of health, race, and what it means to be human.

While addressing the challenges, we have the opportunity to identify and model digital justice in education, mission and evangelism, and work in human rights as well with international organizations and interfaith partners on the path of justice and peace.

Reviewing the ecumenical discussion over these seven decades, several common elements stand out:

- the right to access information, and thus opposition to policies that interfere with or undermine this right;
- the need to support truth and to express vigorous opposition when what is communicated distorts the truth, reinforces negative stereotypes, or supports violent behaviour;
- the need for pluralism and the voicing of diverse views and to work against media concentration;
- the need to protect communication freedoms in the context of global economic and political structures of justice and injustice;
- the need to support and advocate for the right to communicate for marginalized communities and those whose voices are suppressed;

- the need to support alternate means of communication such as theatre, special liturgies, and local, indigenous newspapers and radio; and
- the need for the ecumenical fellowship to offer an alternative vision of communication, based on solidarity and sharing, mutual accountability, and empowerment.

The global ecumenical fellowship will gather in Karlsruhe, in a world marred by many kinds of injustice and by the pain of many of its people, its creatures, and even of the earth itself. But it is also a world witnessing movements of change, justice, and hope.

To bring about digital justice, the WCC supports a transformative movement led by civil society and communities of faith. The broad support and joint commitment of civil society, including churches and faith communities, political actors, science, and business, is needed to guarantee and protect civil rights in the digital age and make the digital space usable for the common good. Technologies must be placed at the service of people rather than governments or corporations.

We commit ourselves, in our local contexts and as a global ecumenical fellowship, to address the challenges posed by digital justice in our work and advocacy on gender equality, environmental sustainability, human rights, democratic participation, and economic justice.

This involves:

- Re-imagining our digital public sphere continuously, emphasizing democracy, fundamental rights, mutual accountability, and solidarity.
- Raising awareness and promoting educational programmes, including theological formation, to equip ourselves to face the challenges of digital transformation.
- Working with state and civil society actors and faith groups to create spaces and channels that are inclusive, accessible, interactive, and participatory, promoting racial justice, gender justice, digital justice, expanding public spaces, and creating visions for the future.
- Encouraging theological and ethical critiques of the digital transformation, including the powers that operate unregulated, commercially driven digital spaces.
- Creating an informed, grassroots, faith-inspired resistance to the forces challenging human dignity and flourishing in digital spaces.
- Developing cross-cutting programmes of action to create this re-imagined reality in different contexts.

Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right. (Psalm 106:3)