

The right to communicate affirms and restores human dignity

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Communication as a right is a comparatively new concept, although its roots reach deep into the history of human thought. The arguments that underlie it are complex and contested. The first task is, therefore, to identify some of the philosophical and ethical strands that comprise this right. The aim is to provide some grounding for discourse on the right to communicate, which includes many aspects of human life, from the right to be heard to the right to be silent. The second part shows how the right to communicate lies at the very heart of the work of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). It emphasises, in particular, the intellectual and advocacy role WACC played in the critical promotion of the rationale for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). It also touches on WACC's more recent endeavours in coordinating the input of civil society groups to the UN-convoked World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

WHAT DOES COMMUNICATION HAVE TO DO WITH BEING HUMAN?

People see themselves first and foremost as individuals, although they are fundamentally social beings who realise their identities by living in community. In this sense, the personal identity, or personhood, of an individual depends crucially on other people. People coexist with others and are socially and culturally conditioned by others. Consequently, communication is vital to creating and maintaining the unique social and cultural habitat that is the source of individual and collective identity. It can be argued, therefore, that the right to communicate is essential to that "morality of intersubjectivity" (Pasquali, 1997: 24-45), whose prime characteristic is the relationship and which sets freedom, equality, and solidarity above all else. Since all relationships presuppose interactions that are mutual, there can be no relationship without dialogue.

Plato and Aristotle thought of the human being as "the animal possessing speech" (*zoon logon echon*). As a further distinction, Aristotle defined other creatures as *alogon*, meaning without speech (*logos*). Gregory Hays has described the Greek concept of *logos*:

"The term has a semantic range so broad as to be almost untranslatable. At a basic level it designates rational, connected thought - whether envisioned as a characteristic (rationality, the ability to reason) or as the product of that characteristic (an intelligible utterance or a connected discourse). *Logos* operates both in individuals and in the universe as a whole. In individuals it is the faculty of reason. On a cosmic level it is the rational principle that governs the organisation of the universe" (Hays, 2003: xx).

It was the scholastic philosophers, beginning with St Thomas Aquinas, who translated the Greek *logos* into Latin as "reason". Thus, speech and reason, or rationality, became the keystone of Western philosophical thinking. It is reason that enables human beings to justify their beliefs and actions; to make moral judgements (criticise); to choose; to contemplate past and future; and to imagine. Reason makes them aware of themselves (self-conscious), aware of their state of mind and of others from whom they knowingly distinguish themselves.

To carry out these tasks, reason requires language. People's "passage from a natural to a cultural state - the single major act in [their] history - is at every point interwoven with their speech faculties" (Steiner, 1975: 70). Language is the ability to represent the world in signs, initially by speaking (using a recognised system of sounds), and later by writing (using a recognised system of symbols). Language expresses:

"thoughts about absent things, about past and future things, about generalities, probabilities, possibilities and impossibilities ... [It] permits the construction of abstract arguments ... permits new kinds of social relation, based on dialogue and conversation ... enables people to criticise each other's conduct, to provide reasons to each other, and to change each other's behaviour by persuasion" (Scruton, 1996: 64).

Language is the shared condition of the human species. According to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells"

(Heidegger, 1977: 193). Living in partnership with other people requires language to establish and maintain relationships and, since negotiation, compromise and agreement form the basis of all human communities, language is crucial to forging the kinds of relationship that ensure peaceful coexistence.

Communication in freedom, equality and solidarity

To enter into relationships, to establish communities, to survive, people must communicate. Genuine communication (language in action) is, therefore, a basic human need - like food, clothing and shelter. Basic needs are defined as those that are essential to our very existence. This is why they are considered fundamental human rights and are protected by international conventions. While this logic is generally acknowledged with regard to physical needs – food, drink, shelter, clothing — non-material human needs like language and communication are more controversial. If “language is the house of being”, what purpose does it serve to live in it unless people can converse freely?

Freedom and language are interlocked. The gift of language is, intrinsically, the gift of freedom. At the individual level, depriving someone of his or her freedom makes genuine communication difficult or impossible. In society, one early sign of repression is to restrict freedom of speech or access to public media to express dissenting opinions. In severe cases, newspapers, radio and television stations are censored or closed down, and in the Information Society, access to the Internet is curtailed. The worst scenario is when journalists and dissidents are murdered for speaking out — savagely depriving them of freedom of expression.

Of course, language itself has the potential to imprison the mind and to dehumanise other people. It was used in Argentina’s “Dirty War” of 1976-83, when a regime of political and civil terror took place during which some 30,000 people were kidnapped, tortured and killed:

“Brutal, sadistic and rapacious, the whole regime was intensely verbal. From the moment of the coup, there was a constant torrent of speeches, proclamations, and interviews; even certain military memos were made public. Newspapers and magazines, radio and television all were flooded with messages from the junta. The barrage was constant and there was no escape: Argentineans lived in an echo chamber. With diabolical skill, the regime used language to: shroud in mystery its true actions and intentions; say the opposite of what it meant; inspire trust, both at home and abroad; instil guilt, especially in mothers, to seal their complicity; and sow paralysing terror and confusion” (Feitlowitz, 1998: 20).

A different, no less murderous process, took place in Rwanda during the genocide of 1994. Studies have shown that in the years before the genocide, the Hutu-led government of Rwanda sponsored “hate media” against Tutsis. In 1990 *Kangura* newspaper began systematic abuse of Tutsis. In December 1990 it published the notorious “Ten Hutu Commandments”, inciting mistreatment of and discrimination against Tutsis. The newspaper also began to identify and denounce people as “enemies”, “accomplices” and “traitors” secretly working for the dissident Rwanda Patriotic Front. Eventually other newspapers joined the “hate speech” bandwagon and engaged in varying degrees of incitement to ethnic hatred. But the most notorious channel proved to be the independent radio station Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), committed to an extremist agenda. It began broadcasting in July 1993, conducting a persistent campaign against Tutsis:

“The language RTLM used to incite genocide indicated that the aim of this ‘battle’ was not simply to win the armed combat but rather to utterly destroy the opponent. Occasionally the analogy of the battlefield was dropped in favour of something more direct... ‘continue to keep your eyes open, remain vigilant and give them the punishment they deserve” (*Broadcasting Genocide*, 1996: 116).

These tragic and by no means unique examples demonstrate that communication freedom is not absolute. It is often circumscribed for political, economic and cultural motives that must be challenged in terms of rights and freedoms. Human beings are not “born free”. They come into existing relationships in families and communities. Here they encounter the personal and collective understandings of other people and only by experiencing and accepting such encounters can they find genuine solidarity. This

experience reveals another dimension of communication, that of equality. People cannot communicate with other people if they consider them "inferior" in any sense. Communicative freedom presupposes the recognition that all human beings are of equal worth. By classifying animals as *alogon* (lacking communication, non-rational), Aristotle is implicitly declaring them to be inferior, subservient, expendable. So, too, with people. The Nazi regime in Germany and the Stalinist regime in the USSR are mirrored in all those later regimes in Africa, Asia and Latin America that dehumanised their own peoples. Nor should we believe that North America and Europe are untainted. The First Nations people in Canada, Black people in the USA, and people in Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo and Northern Ireland are all suffering the traumatic consequences of sustained acts of dehumanisation. The right to communicate is needed precisely because it affirms validity and equality.

Equality as a philosophical concept is unconditional, but it does not negate specific social identities, loyalties or interests. Equality does not demand homogeneity or uniformity; neither does it contradict the special roles that societies confer on individuals or groups of people. Yet equality does imply the right not to be discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, religion, sex or age, etc. Commenting on the 1986 African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which emphasises the duties of the individual towards the community and formalises the notion of group and collective rights, Charles Husband states:

"In recognising that our individuality is contingent upon those communities of identity to which we belong we recognise our connectedness, our solidarity. Consequently, individual rights cannot be fully enjoyed, or guaranteed, in the absence of respect for the dignity, integrity, equality and liberty of those communities of identities, including our ethnic community to which we belong. And in demanding the recognition of any one of our communities... we must reciprocally recognise the legitimacy of the existence, and the integrity, of other communities, including their differences from us" (Husband, 1998: 139).

Similarly, there is another type of reciprocity that supports the claim to a right to communicate, namely solidarity with the weak and most vulnerable in society, such as the physically or mentally ill, or the very young and very old. Solidarity means active commitment to individuals and groups who have been relegated to the margins of society, such as refugees, the poor, outcasts (for whatever reason), the exploited and oppressed. Not least it is a "solidarity with those whose freedom has been taken away, rendering them less than human" (Traber, 1997: 335). Our common being-in-the-world is ontologically inclusive and morally transforming. A morality of intersubjectivity implicitly strives for an equitable social order and, ultimately, for the "good society", both of which depend on the transforming potential of communication.

The right to communicate and personhood

Writing about the ethics of communication, Michael Traber also points out that:

"The debate about ethics and culture has brought to the fore the realisation that personhood transcends all cultures. This is, in fact, the ground of ethics. Personhood implies the capacity of free choice, the ability to reflect and argue rationally, and the endowment of its inner and intrinsic worth. Personhood thus brings together freedom, rationality, and equality in dignity" (Traber, 1997: 337).

Personhood may be described as the sum total of the numerous biological, social and cultural strands that are woven into the human being. It is the visible and invisible presence of individual and collective imprints and memories made by human beings in communication with others. Personhood inherently confers human dignity, which is affirmed:

"through various modes of communication: through intrapersonal reflections and interpersonal and social communications. As the mass media are an important source of meanings for many people, they contribute to our understanding of human dignity and respect for life" (Traber, 1997: 341).

The right to assert one's personhood, which is fundamental to the right to communicate, applies above all to those who hold different opinions or beliefs. As Voltaire is supposed to have remarked, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." The right to communicate affirms the possibility of asserting a different point of view, of claiming a different individual or communal history, of articulating a different identity - with the sole proviso that no one suffers as a result. In part this becomes a question of being able to recognise oneself in the public sphere, of seeing one's image in the public record of a nation or community, especially in the mass media that reflect that image.

In particular, the right to communicate unequivocally implies that marginalised people - women, refugees, displaced persons, migrant workers, people with disabilities, the poor, the dispossessed - must be empowered to express themselves in their own words. Such empowerment has political and social consequences, which is why authorities often deny or constrain it. Empowerment implies duties and responsibilities both for good citizenship and for good governance. The right to communicate is, thus, a moral claim because it affirms and restores human dignity. By affirming and restoring human dignity, society acts morally and in solidarity.

Of course, it is no good having a right to communicate if no one is listening. An indispensable element of genuine communication is dialogue, which is not only exchanging different points of view, but listening to (hearing) another person's opinions or beliefs and taking them seriously. Furthermore, dialogue is a means of entering into and sharing the worldview of another person, a means of immersing oneself in their way of thinking and feeling, of temporarily "becoming" that person. T. S. Eliot alludes to such an experience in *Four Quartets*:

"...music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts" (Eliot, 1944).

The act of temporarily becoming another person, of seeing with their eyes, of feeling (embodying) their needs, anxieties, joys, is the ultimate logic of all attempts at true dialogue. Properly understood, the right to communicate enables such a "translation" to take place. The metaphor of translation is a useful one. In Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom the weaver is "translated" into an ass by the mischievous Puck. Restored to human form, he gains in self-confidence and becomes much more aware of others. George Steiner has written with great insight and probity about literature and language, notably in his seminal book on *Language and Silence* (1967). Recently, in a spirit of regret at stones unturned, he reviewed his life, dwelling in part on the problem of literary translation. He identifies four key moments in the translation process (Steiner, 1997: 98-100). First is the "ontological trust" implied by assuming that meaning is inherent in a text. Second comes an incursion into the text, which involves a kind of benign aggression. Thirdly there is a homecoming, carrying what has been understood back to one's native tongue. Finally there is an element of compensation, offering "something new that was already there".

In other words, in translation as in dialogue, we take "on trust", we venture into alien territory, we return to our native habitat enriched by the experience, and in recompense we offer *something new that was already there*. Steiner concludes that translation is "fundamentally, a dialectic of trust, a taking and a giving back. Where it is wholly achieved... translation is no less than felt discourse between two human being, ethics in action" (Steiner, 1997: 101). Exactly the same can be said of genuine dialogue.

How is it possible to translate these philosophical and ethical principles into practice? Only in solidarity with other human beings, by making a genuine and impartial effort to understand another person's life situation. Only by allowing unfettered communication to take place that expresses their hopes, fears and joys.

COMMUNICATION RIGHTS - WACC'S REASON FOR BEING

Communication rights are the ethical framework of the life and work of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). The organisation was founded in the wake of the 1939-45 War to oppose propaganda and misinformation in the mass media. Since then WACC has promoted the democratisation of communication, freedom of expression, and the right to communicate. It works to improve and implement

communication rights everywhere, especially those of women, indigenous peoples, refugees, and people on the margins of society.

WACC believes that communication must be used to create community, and to support and develop cultures. It must be participatory and “prophetic” — in the sense that it challenges injustice and inequality:

“...communication which liberates, enables people to articulate their own needs and helps them to act together to meet those needs. It enhances their sense of dignity and underlines their right to full participation in the life of society. It aims to bring about structures in society which are more just, more egalitarian and more conducive to the fulfilment of human rights” (*Christian Principles of Communication*, 1986).

In the 1970s and 1980s WACC supported the call for a New International Information Order (NIIO), later known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The term NIIO was coined at a seminar organised by the Non-Aligned Countries held in Tunis in 1976. This meeting called on non-aligned countries to fight “for their liberation from all kinds of neo-colonialism and imperialist oppression”, identifying the peoples of developing countries as “the victims of domination in information and this domination is a blow to their most authentic cultural values, and in the final analysis subjugates their interests to those of imperialism” (*Information in the Non-Aligned Countries*, 1976: 25-26).

That same year, UNESCO’s General Conference instructed its Director-General, Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, to undertake a review of the main problems of communication in contemporary society seen against the background of technological progress and contemporary developments in international relations.

The main issues raised in the NWICO debate were:

- How Third World countries increasingly depended on rich industrialized countries for nearly all of their communication equipment, technology, skills and software.
- How the poor countries were increasingly being integrated into a system dominated by multinational corporations, which for the most part would only respond to the needs of private profit.
- How indigenous cultures were being progressively diluted by such integration leading to their steady deterioration and even disappearance.
- How information was being transformed from a basic right into a commodity to be bought and sold in the market.

The NWICO questioned the imbalance in the flow of news, TV programmes, films, magazines, books and other cultural software between rich and poor countries, pointing out that the rich countries were overwhelming the poor countries with alien models and values, making national development goals difficult to realize. It identified the slanting of news and misreporting of Third World events by powerful agencies based in the North so that the images of poor countries, their cultures, struggles and development efforts were often a gross caricature of the reality.

Proponents of the NWICO pointed to the unfair advantages enjoyed by the rich countries in international institutions created to manage frequency allocations for the electro-magnetic spectrum and the threat to the survival of sovereign nations as a result of developments in satellite broadcasting technologies. They also emphasised the almost irreversible concentration of power in the hands of computer data banks and global computer networks owned and managed by multinational corporations primarily for their own commercial advantage.

In response UNESCO established the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, chaired by Seán MacBride. In the course of its work, members of the Commission held numerous conferences, meetings, seminars, and discussion groups, and reviewed countless documents, codes of ethics and papers on specific aspects of communication. The outcome, published in 1980, was *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*, whose slogan was “Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order”.

In 1984, international controversy over the call for a new order led to conflict between NWICO supporters (which included many Third World countries) and the US government and some of its Western allies. Following an intensive campaign of attacks by governmental, media-related and private sector interest groups, the USA, United Kingdom and Singapore withdrew from membership of UNESCO.

By 1988, the *MacBride Report* had gone out of print and UNESCO appeared reluctant to rock the boat by republishing it. This was problematic because its conclusions and recommendations had yet to be discussed or implemented. For this reason, and to strengthen its advocacy of communication rights, WACC stepped into the breach and was given permission to reprint *Many Voices, One World*.

Pursuing alternative communication strategies

In late 1996 WACC invited a number of NGOs to attend an informal gathering in London to discuss issues relating to communication and democratisation. As a result the group agreed to establish a Platform for Cooperation on Communication and Democratisation, whose members would pursue advocacy of specific communication issues, assess the feasibility of setting up a media research database and, in particular, lobby the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to include representatives of civil society in its decision-making processes. When UN General Secretary Kofi Annan announced a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to take place in Geneva in December 2003, the group was renamed the Platform for Communication Rights and agreed on the following strategy:

On the contribution of communication to the democratisation of society: to work for the Right to Communicate to be recognised and guaranteed as fundamental to securing Human Rights founded on principles of genuine participation, social justice, plurality and diversity and which reflect gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

On the democratisation of communication structures, institutions and processes: to defend and deepen an open public space for debate and actions that build critical understanding of the ethics of communication, democratic policy development, and equitable and effective access.

In November 2001 the Platform initiated the campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS), arguing that the World Summit on the Information Society was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. For CRIS, the "Information Society" must use the right to communicate to enhance other human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities. In this respect the Information Society should be based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation, social and economic justice, inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

The intention was to broaden the agenda and goals of the WSIS, especially in relation to media and communication issues, and to encourage the participation of a broad spectrum of civil society groups in that process. The CRIS Campaign focused on themes that directly affect people's lives, such as:

- Strengthening the *public domain*, to ensure that information and knowledge are readily available for human development and not locked up in private hands;
- Ensuring *affordable access to and effective use of*, electronic networks in a development context, for instance through innovative and robust regulation and public investment;
- Securing and extending the *global commons* for both broadcast and telecommunication, to ensure that this public resource is not sold for private ends;
- Instituting *democratic and transparent governance* of the information society from local to global levels;
- Challenging information *surveillance and censorship*, government or commercial;
- Supporting *community and people-centred media*, traditional and new.

A key concept in the CRIS campaign is that of transparency in public communication. To sustain democracy, the public sphere and freedom of expression — especially the mass media — must be protected from forms of censorship imposed by those who own or influence the means of public communication.

Signs of hope

This outline of WACC's agenda for action, focusing on the last twenty years, demonstrates the complexity of the right to communicate. It comprises the relationships between communication and power — political, economic, and increasingly military. It includes what WACC has often identified as the cultural struggle: the right to culture as part of the right to communicate. It involves the lives of countless individuals who are

subject to oppression or censorship for their passionately held views about freedom of expression and the right to hold opinions different from those in power.

There have been many setbacks to implementing the right to communicate. Yet, there is great resolve to pursue the agenda of communication rights at international, national and local levels. One is reminded of UNESCO's Constitution (1945) which states that "ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of [hu]mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken down into war." And the solution? "To develop and increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives."

As a recent commentator points out:

"Utopian though it may seem, the constitution of UNESCO gives substance to a profound belief: that communication can promote tolerance and provide the foundation for a politics that makes it possible to change peacefully (without violence and social turmoil) the rules we live by" (Magder, 2003: 30).

The 20th century saw the spectre of war and genocide haunt every continent of the world. The swiftly marred hope of the 21st century was that governments and social movements might work together to reform the politics, economics and cultures of confrontation. If such reform is to take place, three things must happen. Firstly, the mass media must actively assume and pursue their public service role as critical and investigative providers of information. There are notable examples where this is already happening, of course, but the recent and rapid growth of "indymedia", for example, suggests that the mass media largely serve other interests. The mass media have to serve the public, not governments or owners, and must uphold the democratic principles of truthful, balanced and contextualised reporting.

Secondly, the public must have equitable access to the media in order to express their political, social and religious opinions and concerns within a framework of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

Thirdly, but no less importantly, governments and civil society — understood as the many different social actors that use various public spheres to communicate their concerns — must work together to guarantee that individuals and communities, especially those that are marginalised on political, economic, social, cultural or religious grounds, have the right to communicate.

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