



Digital Justice

Keynote Speech at the WCC Conference Sept 18, 2021, in Berlin

1. Neither heaven nor hell: Shaping digitalisation responsibly

Dear sisters and brothers, Let me first praise the WCC for bringing us together for this conference. We all feel the mighty vehemence with which digitization has changed our lives in the last decades. If Christian



faith is about bringing the gospel in dialogue with life, if we as the church have the task of reading the signs of the times, as the Second Vatican Council has told us to do, and if we can fulfill this task only ecumenically because as Paul says "Christ is not divided" (Rom 1), then, we need to do exactly what we are doing today: reflect on digitization and its spiritual and ethical and political implications, and do it ecumenically.

There is no doubt that digitization is a crucial dimension of the "signs of the times". In 1641, the French philosopher René Descartes - in his work "Meditationes de prima philosophia" - has created a sentence that has been quoted many times up to this day and that stands for a whole age, the age of enlightenment: "Cogito, ergo sum" - "I think, therefore I am". If we were looking for a comparable phrase for our age, a proposal, which German scholar Gesche Joost has made, would be a good candidate: „I am online, therefore I am."

The larger consequences of the enormous impact of this new technology on our lives are discussed controversially. Some see the injustice of opportunities and resources growing rapidly by digitization. Others praise the possibilities of the talented young woman from the Philippines

to ad-hoc-design T-Shirts for the company in Kansas, earn a good salary and develop her abilities without ever having set a foot on U.S. territory.

Some rejoice at the medical potential that promises individuals treatment and healing according to their unique DNA; others see a second-class medical system coming that will only allow a few rich people to enjoy and also afford top medical treatment.

Some happily expect a development of artificial intelligence (AI) that does not just cover self-learning systems, but sooner or later the switch to a consciousness that will be superior to human beings. Others ask the concerned question about where AI development is actually leading and whether we are moving towards a new religion of dataism with extended awareness (Harari) and our classical picture of humankind doomed.

We in the Churches are in the thick of these discussions about what may come: some see digitization as the fulfillment of a biblical vision. You can certainly sense a little of the Pentecostal spirit blowing in the new possibilities of the digital world and its non-hierarchical communication model of all-to-all. It did seem to me like a communication miracle when I sat with some young students at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey some years ago, and a young Georgian woman showed me her translation app with which I could simultaneously read what she said in Georgian in my own German language.

Yet, there are some differences between the Pentecostal language miracle and this digital language miracle. The algorithms, which govern so much of the digital worlds, are not god-made but human-made. What appears in the digital arena does not come like fate out of nowhere - it is guided and controlled. Those responsible for this change have a phone number and email account. Therefore, what happens in and with the digital world needs to be subject to conscious human agency - hopefully with guidance by God's spirit, but still as result of human agency. This is why it is so important that we come together to seek and find orientation for this agency.

2. Justice for all: the option for the poor as the basis for reading the signs of the times

The biblical option for the poor has become the key phrase for a characteristic of both the Old and the New Testament which has meanwhile gained wide consensus in the churches all over

the world. No ideological distortion of the biblical witness has ever been able to extinguish this key feature of the Bible, so prominent in its various layers. We must only recall the notion of human being as the image of God as a source of equality or the astonishing fact that the very founding story of God's people is a story of liberation from slavery. We may simply look at the specific character of the law of the torah as protecting the weak and marginalized or listen to the prophets' passionate critique of a religious cult which ignores the struggle for justice. We only have to take account of Jesus' understanding of his mission as proclaiming the gospel to the poor (Lk 4), his critique of a wealth detached from the needs of the community and his radical identification with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the strangers and the sick (Mt 25). We must simply make an effort to understand the deep social ethical implications of a God whose incarnation on earth ends as a victim of torture, and we may only take seriously Paul's reflection on the cross as a key for God's action in the world (1 Cor 1). If we reflect all this, we cannot but understand that care for the situation of the poor and disadvantaged and every effort possible to remove the obstacles which prevent them from improving their situation is not a special interest of some politically biased Christians influenced by radical theologians, but a central characteristic of the Christian understanding of God and of Christian life in its personal and political dimension.

This fundamental perspective on life must also shape our view when we read the signs of the times.

3. Confronting the digital divide

If the biblical option for the poor shapes our perception of reality, it directs our attention to the divides in the global face of digitization. As Henrik Simojoki has noted, the discussions on global digital transformation are often characterized by „sweeping generalizations“. We speak of „the digital world“ or „global digital transformation“ or „the net generation“ or the often used word "digital natives". Such generalizations suggest that participation in these digital developments is more or less general.

The reality is that access is highly divided. Drawing on recent research Simojoki describes eight forms of digital divides: the income divide, the geographic divide, the ethnic divide, the education divide, the gender divide, the age divide, the technological divide and the global divide.

Usage of the internet is highly different in numbers between different parts of the world. While the number of individuals using the Internet is high in the developed countries, it is – according to World Bank statistics – relatively low in most less developed countries. In Eritrea – to give just one example – only 1,2% of the population use the internet while the number in Germany is 88,1 %.

This digital divide has different dimensions. Of course, there is the simple dimension of material resources. Who has the money to buy a smart phone or even a tablet or a laptop? How can people pay for the data volume they need to use their smartphone? In Uganda people spend about 15 %, in average, of their monthly income for 1 GB data volume. Popular services like facebook, Youtube oder Whatsapp turn – in their cost increased by taxes – into a luxury good for the poor.

There is a gender gap. In Rwanda, after all, the country with the highest percentage of women in parliament globally, 60 % more men have access to the internet than women.

There is a gap between cities and rural areas. In less developed regions it amounts to about 80%. In Tanzania it is 84%.

In the last years we have seen a shift in the causes for the global digital divide. While in former times the problem was primarily the lack of digital infrastructure, this infrastructure has been developed more and more globally. This progress, however, has increased the inequality even more, because while some can use this infrastructure and participate in internet communication, others – often the majority – are excluded. Participation is, therefore, not strengthened but even weakened – a phenomenon, which the Think Tank Research ICT Africa calls the „paradox of digital inequality on the African continent.“

The consequences of these divides for the distribution of global attention with all its effects on what is perceived as important or less important, are fundamental. Henrik Simojok describes the selectivity of perception with the example of the terrorist attack on the French journal Charlie Hebdo on Jan 7, 2015. „[#JeSuisCharlie](#)“ became one of the most popular hashtags in the history of Twitter. Within 24 hours more than 3.5 million people expressed their solidarity through this hashtag. And this can only be welcomed. But two days later 2000 people were massacred in Nigeria by Boko Haram. It was an act of incredible cruelty. However, it did not evoke an outcry in any way comparable to the one two days before.

Let me make the theme of digital divide and strategies against it more concrete by introducing a school networking project which came out of our 500th reformation anniversary celebrations and which has developed into a success in global digital inclusion. Henrik Simojoki who – together with Annette Scheunpflug – has been one of the initiators and promoters uses it as the life world basis of his scholarly article on digital divide. The project by the name „schools500reformation“ with the internet platform [„schools500reformation.net“](http://schools500reformation.net) aimed at connecting Protestant schools worldwide by digitally bringing together teachers, students, school principals and administrators in education. The goal was bringing together 500 schools. But soon, there were already 660 schools registered. The strongest concentration of schools did not come from Europe but from countries in Central Africa like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Cameroon and Tanzania. News were being shared, newsletters were distributed, learning material was exchanged. An interactive forum was added in which teachers and pupils from the participating schools could interact directly.

The digital divide between the global north and south which the project wanted to bridge can be illustrated by the frequency of a school homepage. In Germany, it is standard that every school has a homepage of its own. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, from the more than 100 Protestant schools participating, only one had a homepage.

The project changed digital participation of the schools considerably. When all schools were asked to send in „Theses for the Future“, which teachers collected from students and then published globally, „strikingly, the country that sent in the most theses, was the Democratic Republic of Congo.“

During the project it became clear that digital exchange was not enough. Therefore, three regional conferences took place in Africa, which made face-to-face-exchange possible. And in the anniversary year, 80 principals from Protestant schools from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin and North America came together in Wittenberg to exchange their experiences. I will always remember this conference as a visible experience of the one global church of Jesus Christ, connected beyond national, social and cultural borders.

Despite this obvious success of the project, Simojoki's conclusion is also conscious of the difficulties: „...in the so-called digital age, connecting people and bridging distances between

the Global North and the Global South is still much more complicated and laborious than the popular idea of global connectivity would mislead us into believing."

The digital divide that we have looked at on a global scale is, of course, also an issue in national societies, even in the wealthy countries. The last 18 months have exposed this divide clearer than ever before. Access to the digital world turned from one among several dimensions of societal participation into the decisive form of societal participation. Lack of participation was therefore detrimental to human souls. This was especially evident for high age people not familiar with digital communication and therefore often literally isolated from their normal communities. Often enough, what was sorrow at the beginning, turned into tragedies, with people even dieing of loneliness.

The harsh consequences of the digital divide, however, also hit young people in a particular way. During many months schooling had to completely switch into a digital mode. In addition to the injustices of sharply differing levels of family support in home schooling during this time, the simple technical equipment sharply differed. In poor families with several children these children had to compete about the tablet or laptop if there was one in the family at all. Families who didn't have the digital equipment had to pay a monthly fee for borrowing it, adding to the strained daily budget.

The consequences of this digital divide during the pandemic will become really visible only in the future. But not much imagination is needed to conclude that the injustice in educational oportunities has been aggravated during this time.

It maybe at least mentioned that besides the divide in access to the internet, which we call the „digital divide“, there is also a discussion on what I would call the „digitally caused divide“.

There is research, which suggests that even equal access to the internet causes a divide.

Alexander Filipovic cites research showing that there is a „double spiral effect“ that increases inequality. Those with good education profit from a sophisticated use of the internet with the result of deepening their education, upwarding their social position and strenthening their social capital (spiral upward), while others with low education and a precarious socio-economic starting position do not profit from internet use comparably and are therefore even more left out (Spiral downward).

Countering these dynamics of divides is one of the challenges of shaping digitization responsibly.

4. Overcoming monopoly structures

Digital justice is endangered also by monopoly structures, caused by an extremely fast built up of entrepreneurial power. The communication of billions of people is controlled by a handful of powerful companies. Google's market share has constantly been above 90 %, with about 2 trillion yearly searches. Google's next competitor, Bing, only holds 2.5% of market share, while Yahoo even accounts for only 1.5%. Noah Yuval Harari has emphasized the power, which comes from this market position: "Since we increasingly use Google when we look for answers our ability faints to look for information ourselves. Already today "truth" is defined by the top results of the google search."

The number of Facebook users has constantly increased since 2008. As of the second quarter of 2020, Facebook had almost 2.9 billion monthly active users. Every change in the Facebook algorithm has an impact on the communication behavior of billions of people worldwide. The growth in usage of AI technologies like machine learning and deep learning spreads the ability to shift through vast amounts of data and mine them for patterns and trends. Hence, companies sitting on a treasure trove of user data, have new capabilities to use and commercialize it. That means: big data players become even more powerful. As German theologian Peter Dabrock has noted: "Large data collectors like digital platforms with a massive user base and enormous amounts of daily traffic can merge various silos of data and create new products and services with a clear advantage compared to small startup businesses that have yet to collect data from a far smaller user base. "This creates a "winner-takes-all" logic and makes it much harder for startups to join once a strong incumbent has established itself. The long-term effects, according to Dabrock, are significant: „Since this logic rewards great size we are experiencing a situation of monopolization which has never existed before in the history of economics."

For the famous global investor George Soros Google and Facebook are monopolists, "who cultivate addiction, menace independent thinking and make a state financed surveillance of their citizens possible for dictators.

How to counter such monopolist tendencies is an important topic of ethically reflecting on digital justice.

5. Making algorithms responsible. Reestablishing democratic discourse logic in digital communication

Besides the dangerous monopoly structures in the digital economy there is another source of danger for liberty and justice as they are crucial for pluralistic democracies. The commercial logic of the digital economy and its powerful effect on personal and public communication threatens the very fabric of discourse so crucial for democratic societies. The fact that the internet is full of fake news and hate speech, full of conspiracy theories and extremist content, is no coincidence. It has a reason.

Studies say that – through their recommendations and algorithms – platforms like YouTube quickly attract users towards more extreme, even extremist content. The platforms don't assess the political content, they do not create their algorithms according to truth criteria or according to certain fundamental values, but simply according to its potential advertisement based money output. If more extreme contents generate the highest financial revenue, the algorithms will push them, no matter how detrimental they might be for democratic culture or the promotion of human dignity.

If this is so, if algorithms really work like this, then platforms like YouTube or Facebook are the most powerful instruments in the 21st century for turning people into extremists. The fatal alliance of the extremist attitudes of some users and economic interests of the platforms is endangering our democracies.

Not the exchange of argument is the driving force but the logic of consumer preference. Algorithms serve the profit interest, not the pursuit of common good. The consumer logic of pleasing and nudging the recipient becomes the paradigm for communication. Mutual affirmation in opinion building in filter bubbles overtakes the sometimes quite unpleasant exchange of controversial arguments.

Jaron Lanier, one of the pioneers of the digital revolution, recommends leaving the commercial driven social networks altogether, and proposes moving towards social networks which are not

financed through commercials but through subscription fees. For him, this is the only way to prevent a culture of consumer idiots formed solely by commerce-driven communication culture.

A proposal which former CEO of the German Public TV station ARD, Ulrich Wilhelm made, envisions an international publically funded internet platform responsible not to shareholders expecting a certain financial output, but responsible to commonly shared basic values such as the inviolability of human dignity. Such a platform could become an alternative to commercially driven internet platforms ignoring such basic moral values.

6. Becoming human in the digital age

When we theologically reflect upon the Christian view on digital justice, two aspects must play a central role, which are intrinsically connected: relationality and vulnerability. What it means to be a human being can only be understood for us as Christians, if we interpret it from the humanity of Jesus. Whoever – says 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth “does not know and take into account from the very first place and from the very first view and word that the human being has a fellow human being, does not see him or her at all.” It is decisive for theological anthropology to understand how specific this christological foundation is. It does not suffice just to speak of some general humanity with some general relationality. Such humanity and such relationality are qualified. Jesus is the vulnerable human being, the tortured human being, the powerlessly abused human being. Relationality, theologically understood, is therefore, always relationality from below.

That will have to be the starting point when we reflect upon this sentence, which will hopefully reach our hearts and minds as the motto on our way to the Karlsruhe assembly a year from now: “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”. Our divided world needs our contribution as Christians. It needs our public witness.

As Christians we should be online wherever it can help to move the world to reconciliation and unity. But this digital presence is not an end in itself but only an instrument. We are not saying: „I am online, therefore I am“. But: I am in Christ, therefore I am. And – honoring our relationality – even more precisely: „We are in Christ, therefore we are.“ If this is true, then, it is

the most powerful expression of hope for this struggling world when we say: "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity".

Thank you for your attention!