Rethinking digital rights through systemic problems of communication

Repensando los derechos digitales a través de los problemas sistémicos de la comunicación

Outi Puukko
University of Helsinki. Finland.
outi.m.puukko@helsinki.fi

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Recent debates concerning problems in the digital environment have promoted different conceptualizations of digital rights. However, current problems of digital communication are often discussed separately from earlier debates pertaining to the democratization of the media. This article argues for the re-grounding of digital rights debates to address systemic communication problems. **Methodology:** Intended as a conceptual contribution, this article connects recent critical research on digital rights to the body of literature on democratic media activism through an analysis of problem representations. The article draws on the "What is the problem represented to be?" approach to study problem representations in the academic accounts of mobilizations and to identify common themes that describe systemic problems of communication. **Results:** The results identify problem representations that have emerged in and been defined by mobilizations over time and illustrate persistent themes with examples from the digital and mass media eras, including inequalities in the distribution of communicative resources, ownership and economic model of the communication system, and problems of participation and exclusion. **Discussion:** Focusing on problem representations enables identification of alternatives to current dominant discourses and offers grounds for collaboration at the nexus of activism and scholarship. **Conclusions:** Future research can benefit from a further dialogue between the framework of democratic media activism and rights-based approaches to the digital communication environment.

Keywords: Communication rights; Media reform; Social justice; Media activism; Digital rights; Problem representations; Discourse analysis.

RESUMEN:
Introducción: Los debates recientes sobre los problemas en el entorno digital han promovido diferentes conceptualizaciones de los derechos digitales. Sin embargo, los problemas actuales relacionados con la comunicación digital no tienen en cuenta los debates anteriores relacionados con la democratización de los medios. Este artículo propone que hay una necesidad de volver a fundamentar estos debates en torno a los problemas sistémicos de la comunicación. **Metodología:** Concebido como una contribución teórica, el artículo conecta la investigación crítica reciente sobre los derechos digitales, con la literatura existente sobre el activismo democrático en los medios. Lo anterior, a través del análisis de las representaciones de problemas. **Resultados:** Los resultados identifican la existencia de representaciones problemáticas a lo largo del tiempo que siguen vigentes hoy, tanto en el mundo digital como en los medios de comunicación, tales como: desigualdades en la distribución de los recursos comunicativos; propiedad y modelo económico del sistema de comunicación; problemas de participación y exclusión. **Discusión:** El enfoque en las representaciones problemáticas permite identificar alternativas a los discursos dominantes hoy en día y ofrece un terreno para la colaboración entre activistas y académicos. Conclusiones: La investigación puede beneficiarse de un mayor diálogo entre el marco del activismo democrático de los medios de comunicación y los enfoques basados en los derechos para el entorno de la comunicación digital.

Palabras clave: Derechos de la comunicación; Reforma mediática; Justicia social; Activismo mediático; Derechos digitales; Representación de problemas; Análisis del discurso.

1.   Introduction

Problems in the digital communication environment, such as hate speech and disinformation, as well as those related to technologies, such as algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI), have widely raised concerns about safeguarding democracy and fundamental rights. Simultaneously, different conceptualizations of "digital rights" (e.g., Redeker et al., 2018; Karppinen and Puukko, 2020) have been discussed in the context of policy solutions that seek to address these problems. However, digital problems are not often discussed together with the democratic deficits of media, which have been widely debated in various mobilizations around media democratization and communication rights (e.g., Hackett and Carroll, 2006).

Thus far, little research exists on the connections between communication-related mobilizations in the digital and mass media eras (see, e.g., Pickard and Yang, 2017). The current article makes a contribution by analyzing problem representations in the extant literature drawing on "What is the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). This approach offers analytical tools to focus on both the explicit meanings and underlying assumptions in the conceptualization of policy problems and builds on a poststructuralist research paradigm (e.g., Foucault, 2002). This means that meanings are understood as socially constructed and changing. Importantly, for the present article, the WPR approach enables the identification of alternatives to dominant representations of problems today (Bacchi, 2009).

As scholars have recently observed, the histories of mobilizations that have called for substantial changes in the communication system often seem to be sidelined in regulatory debates regarding digital problems (e.g., Hoskins, 2021; Siapera and Kirk, 2022). The present article aims to connect the body of literature that has addressed undemocratic features of mediated communication (e.g., Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Napoli and Aslama, 2011) with recent research on the digital communication environment, including debates on human rights in the age of platformization (Jørgensen, 2019) and mobilizations related to rights-based approaches to communication (e.g., Redeker et al. 2018).

As Milan and Padovani (2014) posit, one can distinguish eras of mobilizations. From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, there were many media debates around postcolonial transformations. The following decade (the mid-

1980s to the mid-1990s), characterized by accelerating neoliberal globalization, saw the rise of transnational movements and activism, while the subsequent decade (the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s) witnessed a crisis of postnational governance and legitimacy while also providing opportunities for civil society participation in global communication governance (Milan and Padovani, 2014). Arguably, today marks an era in which it is difficult to find one defining term. The focus on problematizations can highlight some continuities between various efforts, suggesting their relevance for current struggles related to mediated communication.

The longitudinal perspective adopted in this article highlights that the roots of current problems extend beyond the prevailing technopolitical contexts. While the contexts of communication-related mobilizations have drastically changed over time, continuities can still be identified. Based on the reading of problem representations in the literature, the article identifies overarching themes that describe systemic problems of communication, including inequalities and the distribution of communicative resources, ownership concentration and the economic model of the communication system, as well as exclusions from participation that various mobilizations have challenged. Arguably, persistent problems also offer conceptual resources for challenging the dominant discourses of today (e.g., Hoskins, 2021). Moreover, problem representations can offer ground for a further dialogue between research on rights-based approaches to digital environment and democratic media activism.

The article is organized as follows. The next part presents the objectives and research questions of the article. The following part discusses the methodological approach to analyzing problem representations and research material that consists of literature. The next part presents the results of the analysis through an overview of problem representations in communication-related mobilizations, common themes that describe persistent problems of communication, and reflections on problem representations in digital rights debates. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion about the relevance of problem representations and suggestions on some questions as starting points for further research.

2.   Objectives

This article is situated at the intersection of critical research on the digital communication environment, particularly research on digital rights and the tradition of democratic media activism. Its objective is to contribute to a further dialogue between these lines of research. In particular, the article examines how the problems of communication identified in the literature on mobilizations around communication rights and media democratization can inform current digital rights debates. The research questions are as follows: 1) How are problems of communication represented in different mobilizations over time?, 2) What are the recurring themes in problem representations?, and 3) How can these problem representations inform current digital rights debates? The next section outlines the methodological approach that forms the basis of the analysis.

3.   Methodology

This article presents a novel reading of problem representations in the literature on democratic media activism. It also assesses the literature in relation to recent research on mobilizations pertaining to the digital communication environment. The paper proposes that problem representations serve as prime sites for investigating connections between communication-related mobilizations over time. The reading aims to identify how the problems of communication and their underlying causes have been represented in selected academic accounts of mobilizations.

3.1. Research material

The article has evolved as a part of a research project focused on discourses of digital rights[1]. The literature consulted for the article consists of over 80 academic and applied texts, book chapters, and articles related to

---

[1] One objective of the present study is to analyze how digital rights relate to earlier movements for communication rights. The research project has also included interviews with civil society actors in the context of UN Internet Governance Forum in 2019-2020. Some interviewees criticized the lack of historical perspectives in digital rights debates and others commented on the recurring nature of problems.

"This article presents a novel reading of problem representations in the literature on democratic media activism"

mobilizations for communication rights and media reform from the 1970s onwards (e.g., Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Freedman et al., 2016; Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Milan and Padovani, 2014; Napoli, 2007; Napoli and Aslama, 2011)[2]. The material can be seen to cover central issues in research on these mobilizations. However, the article is not the result of a systematic literature review or meta-analysis. Instead, the material was collected through searches to research databases, recommendations, and by following bibliographical references[3]. As an overall limitation, the material covered only literature written in English.

The analysis builds on previous periodizations (Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Milan and Padovani, 2014) used heuristically to identify some of the core debates and problem representations connected to them. As these periodizations focused on mobilizations for communication rights and media reform between 1970 and 2005, the current study added an interpretation of more recent mobilizations focused on the digital communication environment.

As Snorton (2009) reminds us, it is important that "we exercise extreme caution in our attempts at periodizations, particularly as they relate to social movements, as these time markers may serve as arbitrary demarcations that unwittingly slice ongoing mobilizations for change" (p. 26)[4]. Thus, the problem representations discussed in the article are not considered mutually exclusive but, in many ways, overlapping. In other words, "newer" and "older" problems co-exist.

Given the vast array of local, national, and regional contexts and issues, the analysis focused on accounts of transnational mobilizations, which are often discussed in relation to specific milestones and events that have provided opportunities for advocacy and activism, such as the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) (e.g., Pickard, 2007; Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006). The literature included detailed analyses of these events, but the research interest was on a more general level of identifying and comparing problem representations.

3.2. Problematizations as an analytical focus

This article draws on the WPR approach, which has been developed for the analysis of problem representations in government policies (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). This approach has also been used beyond policy analysis, for example, by assessing expert and academic commentaries in less institutionalized policy areas, such as digital policy with various arenas, stakeholders, and competing definitions (e.g., Karppinen, 2023).

Here, the focus is not on current policy debates. Instead, the article analyzes evolving problem representations in selected academic literature. The article posits that scholarship and activism do not simply reflect pre-given problems of the communication environment, but actively participate in constructing and contesting them, especially because scholars have often played a major role in media democratization efforts (e.g., Napoli and Aslama, 2011).

Based on the poststructuralist research paradigm, the WPR approach focuses on the construction of societal problems and the unstable nature of their meanings. As Bacchi and Gooodwin (2016, p. 16) put it, "Policies do not address problems that exist; rather, they produce 'problems' as particular sorts of problems." Thus, problem representations can be considered sites of definitional struggles and contestations.

---

[2] The compiled literature focused on efforts to change mediated communication environment instead of activist strategies to use media for social causes, although the field of media activism encompasses both perspectives (e.g. Pickard & Yang, 2017).

[3] The searches were related to keywords "media activism", "media reform", "communication rights", "digital rights".

[4] For a critical discussion on historical periodizations of digital activism, see Candón-Mena and Montero-Sánchez (2021).

Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 20) provide a set of analytical questions (see Table 1) that can be applied to empirical material and used to question the researcher's own background assumptions about a given policy problem. Importantly, for the objective of this article, one premise of the approach is that the investigation of problematizations over time can challenge currently dominant representations (Bacchi, 2009).

Drawing on the WPR approach, the aim here is to identify and compare problem representations in the literature, focusing on suggested measures for change, the actors involved in the articulation of problems, and their underlying causes. Finally, the author's subjective understanding, research interests, and positionality have inevitably impacted the analysis, as well as the broader objectives of the article. Thus, the analysis does not aim to provide a value-free or exhaustive view of communication problems at any given time; rather, it is based on a reading with an aim to carve out connections in problem representations.

Table 1. *What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) approach.*

1) What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2) ¿What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem" (problem representation)?
3) How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
4) ¿What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?
5) What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
6) How and where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

Source: What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) approach to policy analysis (adapted from Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, p. 20).

4. Results

In this section, a contextual overview is reconstructed based on previous periodizations (Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Milan and Padovani, 2014) and academic accounts of mobilizations to highlight some of the ways in which communication problems have been debated over time (see Table 2). Then, the article discusses recurring themes in problem representations and provides examples that illustrate them in the mass media and digital eras. Finally, the problem representations are reflected in the context of digital rights debates.

4.1. Problem representations in communication-related mobilizations

4.1.1. Problems of communication flows and global inequalities

Widely documented in the literature on communication-related mobilizations is the period from the 1970s to 1980s, which has seen the rise of several debates regarding the problems of the global media system (e.g., Carlsson, 2003; Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006). One prominent problem representation in these debates focused on the imbalances in communication flows that manifested inequalities between and within states (Padovani, 2005). These debates linked the communication problems with human rights and social justice agendas, as well as changes in international relations, such as decolonization (Jørgensen, 2013).

The debate particularly emerged in relation to the notion of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which aimed to end the dominance of Western media and news content and open possibilities for the Global South to take part in the global media system (Nordenstreng, 2012; Jørgensen, 2013). In the NWICO debate, the problems of communication were represented as "four D's": democratization, decolonization, demonopolization, and development, all of which reflected the imbalance of news flows among countries, the misrepresentation of cultural identities, the monopolies of transnational corporations, and the unjust distribution of communicative resources (Nordenstreng, 1984, p. 34; Carlsson, 2003, p. 40).

Another prominent example is the debate around the "right to communicate", a concept coined in 1969 by Jean d'Arcy, an influential French communication figure (González-Rodríguez, 2012; McKenna, 2012). As the existing human rights related to communication were seen as unidirectional, the right to communicate was promoted as a reciprocal and interactive right to communication for all people, reflecting the possibilities of satellite technology in electronic communications (McKenna, 2012). This debate problematized the lack of a universal right that would guarantee the opportunity for two-way communication through which "people are enabled to participate in societal dialogues" (Hamelink, 2014, p. 22). In the UNESCO, political efforts to establish the right to communicate as a new human right gained momentum (Hamelink, 2014; Mueller et al., 2007), but later became entangled within power relations and ideological divisions between the East and West and between the North and South (McKenna, 2012; McIver et al., 2003).

The inequalities of the global media system were further highlighted in the work of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems and the so-called MacBride report entitled "Many Voices, One World" published in 1980. The report discussed, among others:

> (…) the "one-way flow" of communication from the dominant economic centers of the world; by a failure to encourage critical awareness of the relationships among the media, journalism ethics, and democratization; and by the absence of policies to encourage the equitable spread of communication infrastructure and diversity in media content. (Mansell and Nordenstreng 2006, p. 19).

The MacBride report marked one endpoint for the debate on communication problems in UNESCO (Nordenstreng, 2012). However, debates on media imperialism and the alignment of Western corporate-state interests remained on the academic agenda (e.g., Thussu, 1998). Yet, the focus on information flows was also challenged. In particular, the debate was seen as being state-centric and having a one-directional perspective from North to South, disregarding the intellectual work of movements in the Global South, while scholars emphasized both the material and cultural dimensions of the problem of communication "flows" (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016).

Thus, these problem representations highlighted the entanglement of the global communication system with unequal power relations and colonial legacies. However, the debates primarily relied on the capacities of states and international institutions to address prevalent communication issues.

4.1.2. Problems of commercialization and concentration of media

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the intensifying globalization and commercialization of media markets in many parts of the world, coupled with deregulation. In this mature broadcast era, several mobilizations emerged on the "democratic deficits inherent in a corporate-dominated, highly commercialized media system—its inequalities of access, representation and political/ideological power, its economic and structural integration with globalizing capitalism and consumer culture" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 83).

Media democratization debates particularly problematized the commercialized communication system from the perspective of a functioning public sphere (Napoli and Aslama, 2011). The linkages between commercial media and the broader economic system were pronounced in problem representations that highlighted media reform as a prerequisite for substantive democratic reform (McChesney and Nichols, 2002). Moreover, the global concentration of media conglomerates continued to raise critiques about the control of distribution and content (McChesney, 1998, p. 28).

While the problems of communication were increasingly framed through "rights" and "democratization" at the international level, national efforts began to take hold, especially in Latin America and the US (Milan and Padovani, 2014, pp. 41-43). Around that time, many scholars and activists did not see communication rights as an adequate framing for national and local activities that emerged under various labels (Napoli, 2007). For example, a distinction was made between the concepts of "media justice" and "media reform." Both terms were coupled with the word "movement" by both practitioners and scholars (e.g., McChesney, 2006; Pozner, 2011). While media justice groups stressed substantive moral reform (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p. 79), particularly in connection with the media representations of marginalized communities (Gangadharan, 2014; Snorton, 2009; Themba-Nixon, 2009), media reformers advocated for policy changes (Berger, 2009). Several mobilizations also focused on alternative media (Wolfson, 2014) and grassroots praxis that combined communication rights to radical democracy (Kidd, 2014).

The problems of communication were seen as integral parts of the privatized media system. Multiple alternatives were initiated through different frames, which were discussed and acted upon as democratic media activism (Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Hackett and Carroll, 2006). As reflected in these plural practices, the diversity of media was considered a common, shared problem despite the seeming fragmentation of issues, strategies, and tactics (Karaganis, 2011). Adding to earlier calls for media reform, recent research has also drawn attention to the environmental deficits of commercialized media system and digital infrastructure (e.g., Park, 2021). Interestingly, the underlying causes of the problems have remained the same.

In summary, the mobilizations for media democratization explicitly problematized the functioning of a communication system under commercialized, profit-driven motives, as well as growing concentration. In contrast to earlier problem representations, the problematizations that emerged in these mobilizations also emphasized alternatives beyond international institutions and states and, in this sense, relied less on universal frameworks as a remedy to solving communication problems.

4.1.3. Problems of participation in global communication governance

Around the 2000s, economic and political trends emphasized changing global power dynamics, increased globalization through digitalization, and a focus on security post-9/11 (Milan and Padovani, 2014, pp. 44-45). The idea of a "right to communicate" gained new attention in academic discussions and resurged in international fora in the context of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, now reflecting technological visions for an information society (Hamelink and Hoffmann, 2009). Despite these linkages with the debates of the 1970s, the official agenda of the WSIS was criticized for its lack of a historical perspective on communication problems (Padovani and Nordenstreng, 2005, p. 265). For example, the inequities of the global communication environment were increasingly discussed as "digital divides" (Mansell and Nordenstreng 2006), and the problems of the media system only played a minor role on the agenda (Padovani, 2005).

The institutional effort of the WSIS was accompanied by civil society participation (Mueller et al., 2007; Hamelink, 2014), which led to civil society groups' articulation of the "communication rights" mobilized by the CRIS campaign (CRIS, 2005). Moreover, the civil society declaration illustrated an alternative vision for information and communication societies, as well as highlighted the continuities of problems raised in the MacBride report (Padovani, 2005). Despite these alternatives, civil society articulations that emphasized terms such as "communication" and "knowledge" in establishing "equitable" information societies, a neoliberal, techno-economic perspective dominated the official agenda, highlighting "markets," "technology," and associated "progress" as the primary frames of problems (Svedin, 2014, p. 81; Padovani, 2005; Pickard, 2007).

In this context, the participatory opportunities offered by the WSIS were contested (Carpentier, 2011). For example, participation was seen to require certain expertise and advance a neoliberal agenda (McLaughlin and Pickard, 2005), and the focus on opportunities for representation was seen to deprioritize claims for redistribution (Chakravartty, 2006). Nevertheless, the focus on participation and exclusion remained central after the WSIS. Notably, the Internet Governance Forum, with its global and regional gatherings since 2006, has sought to address different stakeholders and national–global concerns. However, the associated model of

governance, multistakeholderism, has been considered more performative than substantial in terms of civil society participation (Epstein and Nonnecke, 2016).

In summary, while the WSIS highlighted the demands for broadening access and participation in the global sphere of communication and its governance, the contested nature of these problem representations reveals competing logics and varying underlying assumptions about their causes. The WSIS debates also denoted a break from earlier debates on communication problems in the sense that the problem representations turned toward a more technological framing. This trend can also be connected to the dominant digital rights discourse of today (e.g. Hoskins, 2021).

4.1.4. Problems undermining digital mobilizations

After the WSIS, transnational networks continued to mobilize in relation to communication rights and media justice on multiple levels (Milan and Padovani, 2014). At the same time, ongoing digitalization brought about an array of optimistic thinking regarding networked public spheres. Many hoped—and argued—that the growing prominence of online communication and its infinite possibilities would solve the questions of media diversity and offer new democratic opportunities for participation (Ericksson and Aslama, 2010). Simultaneously, digitally enabled movements became widely discussed in the scholarly literature (e.g., Bennet and Segerberg, 2012).

In this context, organizations and groups that framed their work through digital rights often articulated these rights against the limitations imposed by governments in online spaces (e.g., Bennett, 2008). Isin and Ruppert (2015, p. 161) identified "a veritable 'digital rights movement' in the first decade of the twenty-first century," which emphasized privacy and anonymity on the one hand and sharing and access on the other. Others have discussed digital rights mobilizations specifically in terms of participatory culture (Postigo, 2012). One prominent example is the SOPA-PIPA activism, which emerged in the US in 2012. Two proposed acts would have reinforced stricter intellectual property law to protect major industries but were countered by platforms, advocacy organizations, activist groups, and concerned individuals (Powell, 2012).

Prominent scandals, such as the Snowden revelations, brought widespread surveillance practices under public scrutiny. These scandals have also been connected to the proliferation of the Internet bills of rights documents over the past two decades (Redeker et al., 2018). Promoted by civil society networks but also corporations, international organizations, and states, among others, these documents have been interpreted as a means to limit the exercise of power in the online environment (Celeste, 2023). Moreover, convenings, such as the annual RightsCon Summit held since 2011 by the US-based organization Access Now, emerged as a forum for voicing concerns about problems in online spaces. However, considering the diverse contexts, issues, and actors involved (e.g., Goggin et al., 2019), many have seen digital rights as a heterogeneous space instead of a unified movement (Postill, 2018).

In summary, after the WSIS, the problems of communication became increasingly represented as gaps or deficits that undermined the potential of the Internet and digital media to perform democratizing roles or function as tools for participation in the digital public sphere. These problematizations have also been featured prominently in scholarly accounts of digital rights mobilizations.

4.1.5. Problems of structural power in the digital environment

In recent years, the context of communication-related mobilizations has been marked with a growing attention to private actors' role in the digital environment (Padovani and Santaniello, 2018; Jørgensen, 2019) and the concentration of economic power in dominant digital platforms (e.g., Zuboff, 2019). For example, recent European policy debates have come to include new problem representations concerning digital platforms, although these debates have addressed the problem of structural power in varying ways (Karppinen, 2023).

In this context, acting from within and beyond institutional contexts, transnational mobilizations have continued to push for alternatives. For example, a recent initiative by a group of researchers and activists, the Digital New

Deal, highlighted a vision of a more democratic, equitable, and rights-based digital environment in connection with the decolonization of digital rights debates and the establishment of connections to movements beyond Internet governance (see Gurumurthy et al., 2021).

The broader shift to technopolitics has been identified as one common denominator for social movements of the past decade (Candón-Mena and Montero-Sánchez, 2021). Different mobilizations have emerged with diverse terminologies, including "data activism" (e.g., Beraldo and Milan, 2019), "design justice" (e.g., Constanza-Chock, 2020), and battles against algorithmic inequalities (e.g., Noble, 2018), among others. In this sense, problems in the digital environment have become widely debated from the perspectives of rights and democracy, as reflected in a multitude of mobilizations but also regulatory and policy initiatives. However, despite the seemingly common concerns, there is hardly a shared understanding of their underlying causes.

Table 2. *Problem representations in communication-related mobilizations.*

Periodization of mobilizations	Examples of problem representations
From NWICO to MacBride report.	Global imbalances of communication flows.
Democratic media activism emerges.	Commercialization and concentration of media ownership connected to the democratic deficits of media.
Civil society participation in WSIS.	Problems of participation in global communication governance.
From WSIS to digitally enabled movements.	Problems undermining internet and digital media as tools for participation.
Rights-based mobilizations in the context of technopolitics.	Concentrations of structural power in the digital environment.

Source: Periodization of communication-related mobilizations (modified from Hackett and Carroll 2006; Milan and Padovani 2014) and examples of problem representations in the literature.

4.2. Persistent problems of communication

4.2.1. Structural inequities

Structural inequities within and between societies present a persistent theme in problem representations of communication-related mobilizations from the 1970s onwards. On the one hand, inequities have been connected to a lack of access to the communication system, while on the other hand, the problems have been exacerbated through the communication system.

Global inequalities were widely debated, for example, in the MacBride report and the WSIS, where civil society actors called for "people-centred, inclusive and equitable concept of information and communication societies" (WSIS Civil Society Plenary, 2003, p. 2), in contrast to the official agenda that focused on techno-economic conditions for overcoming the digital divides.

Calls for broadening access to a global communication system have continued to be debated after the UN's call for defining access to the Internet as a human right and the ensuing civil society campaigns against Internet shutdowns. Recently, the global disparities in communication have also been increasingly questioned from the

perspectives of environmental injustices, which are related to the extraction of minerals for building unevenly distributed infrastructure and devices, energy consumption, production of e-waste, among others.

Simultaneously, the extractive logics have been increasingly problematized in the context of data and algorithms (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), which reproduce and exacerbate inequalities within societies and are often deployed in connection with neoliberal policies and surveillance of poor and racialized communities. In the US, racial exclusion in media content was one of the first fundamental cases of media policy advocacy during the civil rights movement (Themba-Nixon, 2009), but it can also be argued that "our digital lives reveal critical race insights anew" (Powell, 2018, p. 342).

4.2.2. Economic model

Many of the persistent problems pertain to the market-driven imperatives of communication. The market logic has been considered particularly ill-suited from the perspective of a communication environment that supports democracy.

A relatively recent shift can be traced to problem representations focused on dominant digital platforms. The economic model of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) has been discussed as the underlying condition of many current communication problems. In this context, the MacBride report's call for the social responsibility of transnational communication corporations has been hailed as "prophetic" (Rodríguez and Iliadis, 2019, p. 18). As Julie Cohen (2019, pp. 270-271) puts it:

> Just as the most effective institutional changes of a previous era engaged directly with the logics of commodification and marketization, so institutional changes for the current era will need to engage directly with the logics of dematerialization, datafication, and platformization, and will need to develop new toolkits capable of interrogating and disrupting those logics.

While the concentration of economic power on digital platforms has also been recognized on a policy level, the ownership concentration of legacy media continues to be rarely discussed (Fenton et al., 2020). Moreover, many of the regulatory initiatives have rather aimed at providing competitive advantage to smaller players of data markets rather than fundamentally changing the economic model of communication.

4.2.3. Participation and exclusion

Problems related to participation and exclusion have been widely discussed in various mobilizations across eras. Just as calls for media justice have questioned the lack of representation in the public sphere, recent mobilizations have also called for data justice (Dencik et al., 2016; Fenton et al., 2020; Taylor, 2017; Our Data Bodies, n.d.). Related to this, design justice principles exemplify efforts to broaden participation directly in the design of technologies (Constanza-Chock, 2020). Scholars have also posed the question of whether the focus should be on refusal rather than on participatory inclusion (Gangadharan, 2021).

Movement building and broad alliances between groups have often been highlighted in the literature on democratic media activism (e.g., Freedman and Obar, 2019). Recent debates regarding digital problems have evoked not only calls for new charters of rights and regulatory frameworks (Zuboff, 2020), but also for new forms of mobilization. For example, Mejias (2020) proposed a non-aligned technologies movement to challenge how governments deal with Big Tech. Interestingly, these articulations clearly borrow from earlier mobilizations regarding communication rights and media justice from the 1970s and beyond. However, they also emphasize that different issues and movements co-exist in the present moment.

"The longitudinal perspective adopted in this article highlights that the roots of current problems extend beyond the prevailing technopolitical contexts"

4.3.   Rethinking digital rights

This article proposes that a focus on problematizations provides conceptual resources for rethinking digital rights. The notion of digital rights has recently been featured in various political initiatives that seek to address the various problems of the digital environment. However, it has also attracted criticism for its ambiguity and strategic employment in various political projects.

Research has discussed different discourses through which digital rights have been articulated (e.g., Hoskins, 2021; Karppinen and Puukko, 2020). From this perspective, digital rights can be understood as a site of ongoing discursive struggles seeking to "fix" its meaning, rendering it potentially relevant for various mobilizations. For example, the discourses of negative liberties, positive rights, platform affordances, and informational justice can imply different subjects, objectives, constraints, and governance models for these rights (Karppinen and Puukko, 2020).

Arguably, these discourses also imply different problems to which "rights" are seen as a solution. For example, when digital platforms are positioned as governors of "user" rights, the problems evolve around the lack of accountability and transparency of these dominant actors, while the discourse of informational justice would imply that digital problems cannot be separated from the economic, social, and cultural conditions in which they emerge (Karppinen and Puukko, 2020). Three further critiques can be raised concerning the dominant framings of problems in digital rights debates.

First, digital rights debates seem to emphasize technology-centric problem representations, such as malicious uses of technologies as threats to rights. This problematization can be found, for example, in policy proposals centered on the mitigation of specific risks related to technologies such as AI. Yet, the emphasis on "good" and "bad" uses of technologies represents problems as exemptions.

Analyzing Internet bills of rights declarations, Celeste (2023, pp. 135-136) found that these documents were often limited in scope to "Internet," "digital," and "information and communication technologies." Moreover, the dominant framings of digital rights have been connected to particular Western experiences and understandings of rights and technology (e.g., Goggin et al., 2019). Therefore, the critiques of technology centrism seem to emphasize a need for more explicit connections to earlier debates on communication rights.

Thus far, these connections have remained scarce. For example, Siapera and Kirk (2022) identified a gap between current regulatory debates on social media platforms and debates on communication rights, contending that such rights could provide a more comprehensive approach by historicizing regulations in the media sphere, focusing on inequality and justice, and challenging the individualistic approach to rights (p. 234). Similarly, Hoskins (2021) discussed the conceptual break between the dominant digital rights discourse and communication rights: while digital rights were constructed through the values of neoliberal individualism, expression, and openness, this dominant discourse replaced the social critiques of communication rights, such as values of collectivism, equity, and democracy (p. 93).

Finally, digital rights debates have often focused on individual rights. Yet, the emphasis on digital problems at the level of individual harm is considered insufficient in addressing systemic injustices emerging in datafied societies (e.g., Wodajo, 2022). This last perspective seems pertinent to various mobilizations in the current conjuncture. Thus, while rights-based approaches can continue to enable advocacy and activism for more just and democratic societies and communication environments, this article argues for the relevance of continued efforts to address the systemic communication problems.

5.   Discussion and Conclusions

This article presents a conceptual contribution that identifies connections among efforts that have proposed changes in the global media system over the past decades. The analysis also presents a novel reading of academic accounts on different mobilizations and highlights some of the ways in which the identified communication

problems have been discussed and debated in often disparate efforts. The analysis demonstrates the recurring use of terms, such as "rights" and "democratization," in the highlighted attempts to address the problems of a mediated communication environment.

Much of the current debates around digital problems seem to highlight technological threats to societies, as opposed to the view of digital media as necessary tools for participation, which prevailed in the past decade. This shift in the ways of representing problems of communication illustrates the contested nature of problematizations. Thus, the article proposes that problem representations provide a relevant analytical focus for understanding the highly diverse and ever-changing landscape of mobilizations pertaining to mediated communication. This analytical lens could be further used and developed in future empirical research with a comparative focus.

The analysis illustrates some of the ways in which the problems of mediated communication have been debated and defined over time in different mobilizations, guided by the goal of finding connections among various efforts in the digital and mass media eras. Thus, the article suggests that a longitudinal perspective enables the identification of alternatives for current debates pertaining to the problems of the digital environment.

In the current conjuncture of "world turbulence" (Padovani, 2005), marked by the interrelated crises of climate emergency and inequality, issues of the digital environment are increasingly discussed as their own domain of problems from the perspectives of democracy and fundamental rights. Certainly, discussions regarding platformization and datafication have broadened these debates beyond the media to many other societal sectors, including health, migration, politics, and public administration.

The problem representations discussed in this article facilitate the identification of some basic conceptual and ideological connections over time, although they inevitably miss several contexts and nuances. Moreover, as highlighted by the diverse terminology associated with the technopolitical mobilizations of today, the field seems to be growing, and debates on relevant problems have also become more dispersed. Thus, the very basic question about what is represented as the problem matters for the intersection of activism and research regarding mediated communication.

Furthermore, examining problem representations across eras of mobilization highlights systemic problems that have persisted over time. However, the identified common themes do not cover the multitude of different claims. Thus, more extensive empirical analyses would benefit our knowledge in this regard. This also applies to different articulations of digital rights that have emerged across locations and presented venues for further contestation. Thus, one relevant aspect for further research would be the extent to which digital rights discourses enable counter-hegemonic articulations rooted in various mobilizations as well as local struggles for rights.

In this context, the article highlights another relevant question often discussed in the literature on democratic media activism: How do we connect the discussions on problems of mediated communication to other social movements and mobilizations? Research on democratic media activism has highlighted collaborations among many grassroots projects, organizations, broader movements, and scholarship supporting them (e.g., Napoli and Aslama, 2011). Such collaborations have become increasingly important on multiple levels amid the emergence of new configurations of power. For example, current policy proposals often center on governance arrangements, such as digital platforms' self- and co-regulation, which raise further questions about exclusion and participation.

The article highlights some mobilizations that have emerged during the past decades, especially those related to rights-based approaches to communication. Today, the problems of the digital communication environment are complex, and their definitional struggles are dispersed in terms of the arenas, actors, and interests involved. Simultaneously, efforts for media democratization have remained highly relevant. In particular, democratic media activism has recently been discussed in connection with normative frameworks, including intersectional feminism and ecological justice (e.g., Park, 2021; Sorce, 2021). Thus, the present article suggests a further dialogue between research on rights-based approaches and media activism to advance alternatives for current communication problems.

6.   References

Aouragh, M., & Chakravartty, P. (2016). Infrastructures of empire: Towards a critical geopolitics of media and information studies. *Media, Culture & Society, 38*(4), 559-575.

Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Pearson.

Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Post-structural policy analysis: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bennett, C. (2008). *The privacy advocates. Resisting the spread of surveillance.* MIT Press.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: The personalization of contentious politics. Information, *Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739-768.

Beraldo, D., & Milan, S. (2019). From data politics to the contentious politics of data. *Big Data & Society, 6*(2), 1-11.

Berger, D. (2009). Defining democracy: Coalition politics and the struggle for media reform. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 3-22.

Candón-Mena, J., & Montero-Sánchez, D. (2021). From cyber-activism to technopolitics: A critical take on historical periods and orientations in the use of digital technology by social movements. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2921-2941.

Carlsson, U. (2003). The rise and fall of NWICO: From a vision of international regulation to a reality of multilevel governance. *Nordicom, 24*(2), 31-67.

Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and participation: A site of ideological-democratic struggle*. Intellect Books.

Carroll, W. K., & Hackett, R. A. (2006). Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory. *Media, Culture & Society, 28*(1), 83-104

Celeste, E. (2023). *Digital constitutionalism: The role of internet bills of rights*. Routledge.

Chakravartty, P. (2006). Who speaks for the governed? *Economic & Political Weekly, 41*(3).

Cohen, J. E. (2019). *Between truth and power: The legal constructions of informational capitalism*. Oxford University Press.

Constanza-Chock, S. (2020). *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. MIT Press.

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

CRIS Campaign. (2005). *Assessing communication rights: A handbook*. https://acortar.link/AvdQ3H

Dencik, L. Hintz, A., & Cable, J. (2016). Towards data justice? The ambiguity of anti-surveillance resistance in political activism. *Big Data & Society, 3*(2), 1-12.

Erikksson I., & Aslama, M. (2010). Making, breaking promises? Civic spheres and virtual engagements. *New Media & Society, 12*(4), 677-682.

Epstein, D., & Nonnecke, B. (2016). Multistakeholderism in praxis: The case of the regional and national Internet Governance Forum (IGF) initiatives. *Policy and Internet, 8*(2), 148-173.

Fenton, N., Freedman, D., Schlosberg, J., & Dencik, L. (2020). *The media manifesto*. Polity.

Foucault, M. (2002). *Archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge.

Freedman, D., Obar, J., Martens, C., & McChesney, R. (Eds.). (2016). *Strategies for media reform: International perspectives*. Fordham University Press.

Freedman, D., & Obar, J. (2019). Media development and media reform: Time for change. In N. Benequista, S. Abbott, P. Rothman, & W. Mano (Eds.), *International media development. Historical perspectives and new frontiers* (pp. 220-227). Peter Lang.

Gangadharan, S. P. (2014). Media justice and communication rights. In C. Padovani, & A. Calabrese (Eds.), *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations* (pp. 203-218). Palgrave Macmillan.

Gangadharan, S. P. (2021). Digital exclusion: A politics of refusal. In L. Bernholz, H. Landemore, & R. Reich (Eds.), *Digital technology and democratic theory* (pp.113-140). University of Chicago Press.

Goggin, G., Ford, M., Martin, F., Webb, A., Vromen, A., & Weatherall, K. (2019). Digital rights in Asia: Rethinking regional and international agenda. Author version of chapter. In A. Athique, & E. Baulch (Eds.), *Digital transactions in Asia: Economic, informational, and social exchanges*. Routledge. http://hdl.handle.net/2123/18879

González-Rodríguez, G. (2012). New scenarios for the right to communicate in Latin America. In D. Frau-Meigs, et al. (Eds.), *From NWICO to WSIS: 30 years of communication geopolitics* (pp. 69-79). Intellect Books.

Gurumurthy, A., Singh, P. J., Chami, N., Bharthur, D., Sarkar S., Korjan, A., Kanchan, T., Bhagwat, S., & Yogesh, K.S. (Eds.). (2020). *A digital new deal. Visions of justice in a post-COVID world*. JustNet Coalition. https://itforchange.net/digital-new-deal/

Hackett, R. A., & Carroll, W. K. (2006). *Remaking media: The struggle to democratize public communication*. Routledge.

Hamelink, C. (2014). Communication rights and the history of ideas. In C. Padovani, & A. Calabrese (Eds.), *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations* (pp. 17-28). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hamelink, C., & Hoffmann, J. (2009). Communication as a human right: Picking up the challenge? In A. Dakroury, M. Eid, & Y. Kamalipour (Eds.), *The right to communicate: Historical hopes, global debates, and future premises* (pp. 71-106). Kendall Hunt.

Hoskins, G. (2021). *Negating neutrality: The Marco Civil Da Internet, informational capitalism and contesting digital rights at the periphery* [Doctoral dissertation, York University].

Isin, E., & Ruppert, E. (2015). *Being digital citizens*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jørgensen, R. F. (2013). *Framing the net: The internet and human rights*. Edward Elgar.

Jørgensen, R. F. (Eds.). (2019). *Human rights in the age of platforms*. MIT Press.

Karaganis, J. (2011). Cultures of collaboration in media research. In P. Napoli, & M. Aslama (Eds.), *Communications research in action: Scholar activist collaborations for a democratic public sphere*, (pp. 287-312). Fordham University Press.

Karppinen, K. (2023). Problem definitions in European policy debates on media pluralism and online platforms. In T. Dwyer, & D. Wilding (Eds.), *Media pluralism and online news: The consequences of automated curation for society*. Intellect.

Karppinen, K., & Puukko, O. (2020). Four discourses of digital rights: Promises and problems of rights-based politics. *Journal of Information Policy*, 10, 304-328.

Kidd, D. (2014). Practicing communication rights: Cases from South Korea and Honduras. In C. Padovani, & A. Calabrese (Eds.), *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations* (pp. 249-268). Palgrave Macmillan.

Mansell, R., & Nordenstreng, K. (2006). Great media and communication debates: WSIS and the MacBride report. *Information Technologies and International Development, 3*(4), 15-36.

McChesney, R. (1998). Media convergence and globalization. In D. K., Thussu (Ed.), *Electronic empires – Global media and local resistance* (pp. 27–46). Arnold and Oxford University Press.

McChesney, R. (2006). *A cornerstone of the media reform movement*. FAIR. https://acortar.link/64LyAG

McChesney, R., & Nichols, J. (2002). *Our media, not theirs: The democratic struggle against corporate media*. Seven Stories Press.

McIver, W. J., Jr., Birdsall, W. F., & Rasmussen, M. (2003). *The internet and right to communicate. First Monday, 8*(12).

McKenna, A. (2012). The right to communicate. A continuing victim of historic links to NWICO and UNESCO? In D. Frau-Meigs, et al. (Eds.), *From NWICO to WSIS: 30 years of communication geopolitics* (pp. 93-106). Intellect Books.

McLaughlin, L., & Pickard, V. (2005). What is bottom-up about global internet governance? *Global Media and Communication, 1*(3), 357-373.

Mejias, U. (2020). To fight data colonialism, we need a non-aligned tech movement. Opinion. *Al Jazeera*. https://acortar.link/y8HtKq

Milan, S., & Padovani, C. (2014). Communication rights and media justice between political and discursive opportunities: An historical perspective. In C. Padovani, & A. Calabrese (Eds.), *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations* (pp. 29-54). Palgrave Macmillan.

Mueller, M., Kuerbis, B., & Pagé, C. (2007). Democratizing global communication? Global civil society and the campaign for communication rights in the information society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 267-296.

Napoli, P. (2007). *Public interest media activism and advocacy as a social movement: A review of the literature*. McGannon Center Working Paper Series. http://fordham.bepress.com/mcgannon_working_papers/21

Napoli, P., & Aslama, M. (2011). *Communications research in action: Scholar activist collaborations for a democratic public sphere*. Fordham University Press.

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.

Nordenstreng, K. (1984). Defining the new international information order. In G. Gerbner, & M. Siefert (Eds.), *World communications: A handbook* (pp. 28-36).

Nordenstreng, K. (2012). The history of NWICO and its lessons. In D. Frau-Meigs, et al. (Eds.), *From NWICO to WSIS: 30 years of communication geopolitics* (pp. 29-40). Intellect Books.

Our Data Bodies. (n.d.). *Data Justice and Human Rights*. https://www.odbproject.org/

Padovani, C. (2005). Debating communication imbalances from the MacBride Report to the World Summit on the Information Society: An analysis of a changing discourse. *Global Media and Communication, 1*(3), 316-338.

Padovani, C., & Nordenstreng, K. (2005). From NWICO to WSIS: Another world information and communication order? *Global Media and Communication, 1*(3), 264-272.

Padovani, C., & Santaniello, M. (2018). Digital constitutionalism: Fundamental rights and power limitation in the Internet ecosystem. *International Communication Gazette, 80*(4), 295-301.

Park, J. (2021). *Media reform and the climate emergency: Rethinking communication in the struggle for a sustainable future*. University of Michigan Press.

Pickard, V. (2007) Neoliberal visions and revisions in global communications policy from NWICO to WSIS. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 31*(2), 118-139.

Pickard, V., & Yang, G. (Eds.) (2017). *Media activism in the digital age*. Routledge.

Postigo, H. (2012). *The digital rights movement: The role of technology in subverting digital copyright*. MIT Press.

Postill, J. (2018). *The rise of nerd politics: Digital activism and political change*. Pluto.

Powell, A. (2012). *Assessing the influence of online activism on internet policy-making: The case of SOPA/PIPA and ACTA*. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2031561

Powell, C. (2018). Race and rights in the digital age. *AJIL Unbound*, 112, 339-343.

Pozner, J. L. (2011). *Welcome to the media justice movement*. The Representation Project. http://therepresentationproject.org/welcome-to-the-media-justice-movement/

Redeker, D., Gill, L., & Gasser, U. (2018). Towards digital constitutionalism? Mapping attempts to craft Internet Bill of Rights. *The International Communication Gazette, 80*(4), 302-319.

Rodríguez, C., & Iliadis, A. (2019). The MacBride Report legacy and media democracy today. *Media Development*, 3, 17-24.

Siapera, E., & Kirk, N. (2022). Social media, electoral campaigns and regulation of hybrid political communication; rethinking communication rights. In E. Celeste, A. Heldt, & C. Iglesias Keller (Eds.), *Constitutionalising social media* (pp. 119-138). Hart Publishing.

Snorton, C. (2009). New beginnings: Racing histories, democracy and media reform. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 23-41.

Sorce, G. (2021). Theorizing feminist-democratic media activism via NGO media activism in South Africa. In G. Sorce (Ed.), *Global perspectives on NGO communication for social change* (pp.160-178). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188636

Svedin, I. (2014). Continuities and change in the nexus of communication and development. In C. Padovani, & A. Calabrese (Eds.), *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations* (pp. 74-93). Palgrave Macmillan.

Taylor, L. (2017). What is data justice? The case for connecting digital rights and freedoms globally. *Big Data & Society, 4*(2), 1-14.

Themba-Nixon, M. (2009). Mainstreams and margins: A critical look at the media reform "story." *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 54-56.

Thussu, D. K. (Ed.). (1998). *Electronic empires – Global media and local resistance*. Arnold and Oxford University Press.

WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). *Shaping information societies for human needs*. Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society.

Wodajo, K. (2022). Mapping (in)visibility and structural injustice in the digital space. *Journal of Responsible Technology*, 9, 100024.

Wolfson, T. (2014). *Digital rebellion: The birth of the cyber left*. University of Illinois.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs.

Zuboff, S. (2020). You are now remotely controlled. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/opinion/sunday/surveillance-capitalism.html

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS, FUNDING AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AUTHOR:

Outi Puukko
University of Helsinki. Finland.

Outi Puukko is a doctoral researcher in media and communication studies at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests include civil society roles in the discourses of digital rights, media activism, and social justice movemen.
outi.m.puukko@helsinki.fi

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0263-7545