

Opinion – Wi-Fi, War and West Papua in an Algorithmic Age

Written by Christopher Burke

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CHRISTOPHER BURKE, AUG 26 2025

We are hyper-connected and overloaded with information, yet increasingly detached. According to Amnesty International, over 25,000 Palestinians have lost their lives in Gaza with a further 10,000 people missing under the rubble, presumed dead. Real-time footage is readily available online; however, meaningful global action remains limited. This paradox underscores a crisis not of technology, but of governance and accountability in the brave new normal. The digital environment has transformed public discourse into an arena predominantly controlled by powerful technology corporations. Facebook's ad revenues are expected to hit US\$124 billion in 2025 underscoring the commodification of online visibility. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and YouTube effectively function as today's public squares, yet their governance is guided by corporate policies rather than transparent democratic processes.

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas envisioned a public sphere grounded in dialogue, mutual understanding and accountability. Today's digital ecosystem deviates significantly from this vision prioritizing efficiency, profitability and user engagement. The Pew Research Center reports that 54 per cent of Americans adults receive news from social media platforms, highlighting the shift in how public opinions and knowledge are shaped.

Algorithms play a pivotal role in shaping our digital experiences, determining which content is amplified based on engagement metrics, rather than informational value or public interest. According to a MIT Sloan study, false news stories travels farther, deeper, more broadly and about six times faster than true stories on social media, illustrating how algorithmic biases toward sensationalism can distort public perception and debate. These dynamics have tangible impacts on civil society. Content moderation policies are frequently opaque and inconsistent. Human Rights Watch reported multiple instances in which Facebook and Instagram restricted Palestinian users' content during heightened conflicts raising serious concerns about selective moderation. This selective visibility can marginalize important societal issues and suppress critical voices, hindering genuine democratic engagement.

Despite these structural challenges, acts of digital dissent continue to emerge. A wooden placard that reads "Free West Papua" painted in the colors of the Morning Star flag nailed to a roadside shop in a small informal settlement in the suburbs of Kampala, Uganda, stand testament. The shop owner, not an activist, learned about West Papua from a local artist Charles Mungai who painted the sign. Charles knows very little about West Papua, but found the image online and "somehow" identified with the situation on the other side of the world. This spontaneous expression demonstrates that digital information flow, while heavily influenced, is not entirely controlled.

West Papua, the western half of New Guinea, has been part of Indonesia since the 1960s. This status is contested and remains the focus of long-standing concerns from international human rights organizations. The United Nations has issued multiple reports highlighting ongoing tensions, allegations of inconsistent security responses, human rights abuses and concerns over the preservation of indigenous cultural identity. Nonetheless, mainstream media rarely cover these issues extensively, reflecting broader patterns of global media bias.

The limited visibility of West Papua contrasts sharply with more widely disseminated international news that benefits from broader algorithmic support due to higher potential profitability and geopolitical prominence. Platforms generally

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prioritize content that drives user engagement, often sidelining critical yet less sensational issues. Significant events and ongoing crises can remain largely invisible to the global public.

This systemic bias reflects a broader trend observed in research published by the Stanford Internet Observatory noting the disproportionate amplification of content that maximizes user interaction rather than public good. The implications are profound. The digital civic space, increasingly privatized, places critical societal discourse at risk. Civil society organizations rely heavily on these platforms to mobilize support, advocate policy change and disseminate information. However, the unpredictable nature of content moderation policies means organizations face significant risks. Amnesty International highlighted cases where advocacy campaigns were abruptly restricted, undermining essential civic efforts.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. Advocacy for greater platform transparency and accountability is essential. According to the European Union's 2022 Digital Services Act, platforms must adhere to stricter transparency and accountability standards, setting a regulatory example that other regions might emulate. Moreover, the development of alternative digital infrastructures is crucial. Initiatives such as the decentralized social media platform Mastodon demonstrate potential pathways for digital communities to reduce reliance on centralized corporate platforms. The open-source nature of Mastodon supports more transparent and democratic control over content and moderation practices.

Internationally, there is increasing recognition of digital infrastructure as a public good. UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators advocate for digital platforms that are rights-based, open, accessible and multi-stakeholder governed to ensure the digital sphere better serves democratic values. Grassroots digital activism also plays a vital role. Small acts, such as the "Free West Papua" placard in Kampala, indicate the resilience of independent thought amid algorithmically curated environments. Each act of resistance contributes incrementally to a broader challenge against the monopolization of digital narratives.

Preserving democratic ideals in the digital era demands vigilance, advocacy and investment in open digital ecosystems. Habermas emphasized, democracy flourishes through open, inclusive dialogue. As prominent Australian academic Joseph Camilleri observed, emerging models such as the Online Citizens' Assembly present new opportunities to reinvigorate inclusive democratic participation in the digital age. The Citizen's Assembly utilizes advanced deliberative technologies developed by Stanford's Deliberative Democracy Lab.

The digital civic space today faces substantial threats, but remains capable of renewal and transformation through concerted collective efforts, sustained resistance and strategic regulatory reform. If a message about West Papua can surface spontaneously in Kampala, there is hope for reclaiming digital spaces as genuine forums for public engagement and democratic discourse. Protecting these spaces means embracing transparency, resisting monopolization and supporting decentralized, democratic digital tools—one conversation, one placard and one community at a time.

About the author:

Christopher Burke is a senior advisor at WMC Africa, a communications and advisory agency located in Kampala, Uganda. With over 30 years of experience, he has worked extensively on social, political and economic development issues focused on governance, extractives, agriculture, public health, the environment, communications, advocacy, peace-building and international relations in Asia and Africa.