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RECEIVED 15 November 2024

REVISED 22 December 2025

ACCEPTED 24 December 2025

PUBLISHED 17 February 2026

CITATION

Morales RA and Milfred ZB (2026) Right to
media: breaking Indigenous Peoples' systemic
isolation.

Front. Commun. 10:1528824.

doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1528824

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Right to media: breaking Indigenous Peoples' systemic isolation

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Representation of the world's Indigenous Peoples' cultural, political, environmental, and social issues continues to be marginalized within and across the seven sociocultural regions designated by the UNPFII (Africa, the Arctic, Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, North America, and the Pacific). This marginalization is characteristic of the global Indigenous political identity recognized by international law and treaties. This perspective study proposes and advocates for the right of people to have their own media, a stance informed by and grounded in field research by Indigenous policy negotiation teams at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the UN Media Caucus Board since 2018. This study makes a case for the urgent need for Indigenous media ownership as essential to discussions of how global policy development could support this media. This includes, for example, curating specialized content provided directly by Indigenous Peoples' newsrooms, as well as the development of special programming that links into the United Nations streaming system in parallel to negotiations through mainstream global media platforms. At present, decisive negotiations between nation-states, stakeholders, and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities are taking place across complementary treaties, which address the case of enhancing the visibility of Indigenous Peoples through their own global media networks, a historical shift in the terms of representation between Indigenous Peoples and the rest of the world.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous meaningful representation, Indigenous media, Indigenous Media Caucus, Indigenous media networks, Indigenous Peoples

Introduction

Meaningful mainstream media representation of Indigenous Peoples is necessary to strategically assist in ensuring the global inclusion of Indigenous issues in the public agenda to motivate and facilitate UN agencies, governments, NGOs, and research institutions to include them as productive partners in global sustainable development initiatives. This perspective article discusses the arguments for the curation, reprogramming, and dissemination of news and content produced by Indigenous Peoples' organizations affiliated with the United Nations (UN) or in partnership with the UN Indigenous Media Caucus. The latest UNESCO report, [Indigenous Peoples and the Media \(2025\)](#), offers revealing estimates, such as that 34% of Indigenous media outlets are radio stations or programs and 74% are hybrid media platforms, which are crucial for content distribution, yet only 6% of Indigenous media have expanded to television. The global report states that "non-Indigenous media often

lack formal frameworks for reporting on Indigenous Peoples and issues related to them, with 25 percent indicating the absence of specific editorial guidelines or being unaware of such frameworks” (p.13; see also Annex A, Figures 46 and 47). At the same time, it was reported that 77% of Indigenous media organizations collaborate with other non-Indigenous media organizations for sharing content, and 53% collaborate for training and capacity building.

The calls for indigenizing digital information and communication technologies have already been part of the cultural construction of information technology applications under unequal conditions. Moreover, Indigenous media compete with thousands of media initiatives across the world, confined to personalized private-use web-based applications that offer limited possibilities of socializing complex information, such as social media, video games, micro-dramas, and language interpretation and translation apps for personalized learning and communication. The call for supporting Indigenous Peoples’ rights of media intersects with the realities of Indigenous media operating in very hostile contexts and facing a total lack of protection from their states or support from private financial institutions.

Media decolonization efforts began in the nineteenth century, challenging mainstream media in settler-colonial countries controlled by dominant ethnic groups. However, there is no standard meaning or practice for decolonization. In some regions of the world, decolonization meant denying rights to the very colonization efforts in parallel with Indigenous governance restoration in the Americas’ Indigenous governance systems. Some “decolonized” nations, such as Indonesia, once freed from Dutch colonization, deepened the constitutional mandate to dismantle Indigenous claims to self-governance in their newly subject territories, from West Papua to Maluku to the now-independent Timor Leste, a former Portuguese territory. For instance,

The first Indigenous newspapers in the world were possibly initiated by the Cherokee Phoenix (Tsalagi Tsulehisanvhi), which began publication on February 21, 1828. Printed in both English and Cherokee, it was the first newspaper published by Native Americans in the United States, and the first to be written in a Native American language utilizing the Cherokee syllabary created by Sequoyah. Also, during the Hawaiian Kingdom era, an Indigenous student newspaper called *Ka Lama Hawai’i* (The Hawaiian Luminary) was first published on February 14, 1834, at the Lahainaluna Seminary on the island of Maui (Chapin, 1984, *Newspapers of Hawai’i 1834 to 1903: From He Liona to the Pacific Cable*).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), as well as international aid agencies, fostered the establishment of a “communication for development” framework, a scholarship and practice of media and communication for development, social justice, and the empowerment of individuals and communities around the globe, inscribed in the context of increasing globalization and the emergence of participatory communication strategies operationalized by FAO and the World Bank (Melkote and Steeves, 2015). The components of this framework were included in

their projects to help ensure that marginal populations would be able to access information and educational resources within the IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) model used.

The concept of “grassroots alternative communication” in the Global South emerged from processes that involve collective actions such as traditional means of collective decision-making as group dynamics under strict protocols that help sustain active participation in large-scale assemblies and small group meetings (Smith, 2005; Minkler, 2005); local place-based education; use of self-designed methods that included participatory action research; community action theory to identify living conditions in Indigenous contexts; and participation in capacity-building opportunities directed toward specific groups within Indigenous communities such as workers, youth, mothers, and seniors. The premise of these actions has been to document and disseminate the lived reality of situated Indigenous communities and then develop projects to modify living conditions, increase literacy levels, and use local sources of information in community actions, journalistic reports, and educational activities (Manero et al., 2024).

Communication for development, for example, has been implemented in the sphere of public health-related cooperation among many regions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Since the 1980s, grassroots alternative communication has provided a marginal channel for the participation of Indigenous Peoples in community training and capacity building in the use of media, particularly printed, radio, and later video, all of which remain central community-building mechanisms in rural contexts across the Global South (Backhaus, 2019; Pavarala and Malik, 2021; Mehan, 2023). This community training and capacity-building dynamic created community-based networks by hosting different collectives that focused on areas such as governance, language and culture, spirituality and religion, history, and entertainment. Belotti and Siales (2017), reflecting on the case of Latin America, which is “characterized by a media ownership concentration,” argues that community radios play a key role in challenging the marginal representation of Indigenous Peoples as they can “decentralize and hybridize mainstream themes” and open spaces for “subalterns’ voices” (see also Villamayor and Lamas, 1998). Many important community media initiatives that started within “rural radio” and “radio for development” systems were conceived specifically for the benefit of Indigenous populations in the region.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), enacted in 2007, underscored among its tenets on collective rights the right to self-determination as a principle of the economic, social, and cultural development of the world’s Indigenous Peoples. Regarding the media specifically, the Declaration’s 16th Article clearly establishes uniqueness, and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) invited UNESCO to present the findings of the study at the 24th session of the Permanent Forum (E/2024/43/E/C.19/2024/8). The presentation emphasized that, regardless of the demographic minority in some countries or regions, Indigenous Peoples have the distinct right to own media (par.1) and stated that privately owned media should reflect cultural diversity among Indigenous Peoples (par. 2), which also includes the right to establish their own media in their own Indigenous languages and to have equitable access to all technologies as used by non-Indigenous media entities and outlets.

UNDRIP aspirations include the proposition that nation states shall provide support to ensure that national media coverage on

sustainable development, climate change, biodiversity conservation, human rights, collective land rights issues, and other issues shall exist without being subject to any form of censure. The latest UNESCO Report (2025) conducted a global survey and found that 49% of Indigenous media staff surveyed reported facing threats or violence, 36% of Indigenous media outlets reported that their staff faced psychological threats, 22% faced online harassment, 19% faced physical attacks, and 13% faced legal threats. It also documented that 39% of non-Indigenous media staff reported facing threats or violence, specifically when covering Indigenous issues. This worrisome situation led the UNDRIP to recommend that nation states, without prejudice, ensure that Indigenous Peoples exercise their full freedom of expression, also encouraging that such outlets are not editorially controlled by tribal governments or governance organizations in order to adequately reflect Indigenous cultural and economic diversity.

From this background, we call for the states' responsibilities to reflect cultural and linguistic diversity in media platforms, a demand that is in alignment with UNESCO's *Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples* and the *Global Action Plan of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages* (IDIL2022-2032). Our perspective echoes a major development in "the analysis of areas of improvement to media access, policymaking, representation, programming, operations, and management practices," as well as in the "recommendations for the development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous media to promote inclusion and fair portrayal in the broader media landscape" (UNESCO, 2025, p. 3). For the global mainstream masses, Indigenous Peoples' media presence, voices, and visibility in the mainstream despite thousands of web-based Indigenous media radio and TV stations, national networks, websites, and media apps, remain insufficient to address the complexity of their rights and struggles and constitute the evidence needed for negotiations around climate change, biodiversity conservation, farmers' rights, and environmental, health, human, and labor rights, among others, that continue to impact their rights.

Decolonized media networks

Understanding the opportunities for supporting and expanding decolonized media networks that depart from colonial structures, paradigms, ideologies, and institutions (N'aputi, 2020) and for linking nexus research for the implementation of global sustainable development goals requires transnational approaches, given the proliferation of actors and institutions in global environmental and sustainability governance (Coenen et al., 2022, p. 1491). Critical geography lenses are also necessary to understand structural problems, power imbalances, and ideological biases (Sultana, 2018, p. 189) and to address simultaneous critical interrogations about the threats to Indigenous Peoples' rights. This is more pressing given that the majority of the proposed funding for climate action and biodiversity conservation is both heavily intermediated and has no clear path for directly benefitting Indigenous Peoples.

Proposals to *de-westernize* and decolonize media studies argue that "political and economic systems and institutions have often been shaped according to the model of former oppressors, and their ideas continue to influence social and cultural realities." Hence, the process of genuine decolonization starts with "decolonizing the mind" from

colonial thinking modalities (Wa Thiong'o, 2018, p. 355), which includes critical revision of and reflection about epistemologies left behind by the former colonizer(s) (Mignolo, 2011; Glick, 2018).

Decolonization, "once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government," is now "recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power" (Smith 1999, p.98). Embedding and interweaving anti-colonial or decolonization analyses into both knowledge and media production remains a major challenge for sustained action against neoliberalism (Choudry, 2007). The UNESCO global report (2025) confirmed that "Indigenous media have turned to digital platforms to bypass traditional licensing, although without affordable broadcasting access, their visibility and diversity of narratives remain limited" but in constant motion (p. 6).

Since the mid-1980s, Indigenous Peoples have actively reclaimed media production through community-based organizations (Morales et al., 2021) as a strategic platform through which to strengthen their languages, cultures, and identities; to support their resistance against threats to their territories and ways of life; and to lead their own development projects by building new scenarios for the future and establishing new ways to interact with mainstream audiences. These grassroots initiatives, in the specific case of Indigenous Peoples' media, have not yet reached the mainstream. However, they have proven that grassroots movements have served both to break out of regional isolation and to advance decolonization efforts, raising questions about how global Indigenous media networks might support self-determination and, in diverse international law and treaty negotiation platforms, support claims for autonomous governance.

The UNESCO (2025) report establishes that while media development in general encompasses both traditional and digital platforms that promote diversity, pluralism, and advocacy, Indigenous Media seek more specifically "to introduce to mainstream and Indigenous audiences a broader range of perspectives on Indigenous Peoples' overviews, cultures, languages, and traditional knowledge" (UNESCO Report 2025, p. 3). Thanks to the transformative impact of and possibilities offered by digital media and satellite communication, new technologies are being used in the development of tribal and independent Indigenous media and the advancement of experiences such as "ethnic television," catering to the specific interests, cultures, and even languages of distinct ethnic immigrant communities in the Global North.

Indigenous global media networks and the stories of our time

An unresolved point of contention between nation-states, stakeholders—including the private sector and science research venues—and Indigenous Peoples as rights-holders regards the inclusion of rights-based approaches with respect to and in observance of diverse local governance and knowledge systems. Recent studies on values-centered relational science models that support Indigenous rights and reconciliation in research have established that.

Protocols governing Indigenous knowledge systems and data generated from them also vary across communities [and] require researchers to seek a nuanced understanding of the background context that includes existing governance mechanisms and

customary protocols. In some instances, ethical responsibilities related to Indigenous community rights are formally and clearly defined for community members, researchers, and administrators, whereas in other contexts they may not be (David-Chavez et al., 2024, p. 5).

These ethical responsibilities require a shift in positionality from Indigenous media producers and policymakers to expand the exercise of the right of media not only to the principles and values behind global media representation that all mainstream communities already enjoy, but also to the development of their own meaningful representation. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) formally acknowledges the existence of diverse epistemologies, a stance that adheres to international human rights norms and standards regarding both knowledge governance and the universal rights of knowledge holders to fair and equitable benefits. UNESCO recommendations also affirmed the importance of alignment with both the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and CARE Principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) for Indigenous Data Governance, in acknowledgement of the rights of Indigenous Peoples to govern and make decisions on custodianship, ownership, and administration of data on their traditional knowledge, territories, and resources. This shift in positionality from Indigenous media producers and policymakers includes questioning how Indigenous media content and data management systems will affirm and protect the collective benefit to assert proprietary rights to any inherent value derived from the curation and programming and to a form of financial security that simultaneously advances Indigenous innovation and self-determination.

In the specific context of a global media network, a focus on the goals set forth by key conventions and treaties is complemented by the existing FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable). This emphasis is encouraging, as the goals consider both people and purposes in advocacy and related pursuits. Indigenous Peoples' right to media further aligns with UNESCO's Open Science Core Values and Guiding Principles in its respect for diversity and inclusiveness, epistemic pluralism, public accountability, sensitivity to conflicts of interest, and vigilance around any possible social and ecological consequences of a diverse array of relevant activities. These positions include an emphasis on intellectual integrity, respect for ethical principles, and direct implications thereof that can only be conveyed internally and communicated externally to Western mainstream audiences under the collective consent of Indigenous People media providers. However, the possibilities and limitations of this collective effort are bound to the geopolitical location. Aside from what may be thousands of online media outlets experienced by Indigenous Peoples in the Global North (US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Sápmi), these regions produce all forms of media equal in quality to mainstream commercial media. However, they enjoy access to resources that are not easily found in the Global South. For example, programming on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN Canada), National Indigenous Television (NITV Australia), and Maori Television (New Zealand) have their highly competent media either subsidized by their governments or operated under specific funding mechanisms inaccessible to the global south, which

is much larger in composition and much more complex in social and political configuration than the global north.

The global survey that preceded the UNESCO report identified 32% of the Indigenous media respondents already expressing concern over their operations and coverage alignment with Indigenous worldviews, revealing an interest in reflecting and connecting with the conditions of other Indigenous Peoples in their own media programming. Indigenous media producers across the world can build the capacity to inscribe their practice(s) into a central repository and framework monitored by the UN Indigenous Media Caucus and participant Indigenous media organizations. The central goal then will be to establish a clear path to work among Indigenous governance and research systems, traditional knowledge holders, scientists, policy analysts, and cross-boundary thinkers, community journalists, and educators, to partner in the dissemination of the outcomes of Indigenous contributions. Policy analysis and negotiation working groups at the UN level require concrete evidence from highly specialized media, that is, generally dominant legacy media that work faster than peer-reviewed outlets.

The idea of developing central or regional data powerhouses aligned specifically to Indigenous Peoples' treaty negotiation processes proposes a wider and more complex evolution than mainstream educational or entertainment media models show in current practice. The field of human-centered interaction focuses, for instance, on the use of data, technologies, and networks for strengthening Indigenous sovereignty, as represented in Indigenous values, resources, and systems, especially in regard to how self-determination as a value has been adapted to Indigenous beliefs and ways of living. Guerrero Millan et al. (2024) describes experiences in the Global South that explore decolonial Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) applications by or in collaboration with Indigenous groups. In Kenya, the collaboration developed "systems for digital information based on eco-spatial perspectives, the incorporation of knowledge into science and technology, the reframing of HCI through Afro-Centric indigenous perspectives, and the experiences of diaspora" (Guerrero Millan et al., 2024, p. 4). Similar research projects in Asia consisted of framing knowledge through technologies and tools in Borneo, as well as the use of witchcraft in rural Bangladesh to inform HCI from a postcolonial computing framework. Guerrero Millan's work provides "a practical example of how an indigenous group approaches technological appropriation to suit their own values and needs" (Guerrero Millan et al., 2024, p. 3). Other experiences in Zimbabwe address communication challenges by translating orally transmitted indigenous knowledge into a digital format. A telling reading of this communication phenomenon can be seen in Mpofu (2022).

As the global trend for mainstream media is to move away from dense content and toward shifts in formatting, such as fewer 4,000-word investigative pieces and shorter 300-word web articles at low cost for publishers and micro-segmented audiences, Indigenous media needs to embrace its role in the documentation and production of evidence about the impacts of such changes in their territories while developing and disseminating content about their societies, governance, and resources within the nation states where they live. In this dissemination process, research universities can be helpful as strategic partners to support collective voices seeking solutions to problems that media and academic research protocols and the public agenda should address with the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples' media organizations. This participation includes

the design and execution of curated programming that can be used by policymakers and specialized audiences, as well as Indigenous learning communities, with the power to serve as legal evidence in Free, Prior, and Informed Consent processes in their own jurisdictions.

The meaningful mainstream media representation of Indigenous Peoples involves a process to ensure the global inclusion of Indigenous issues in public agendas, partnering with UN agencies, governments, NGOs, and research institutions, and promoting a fair visibility of their contributions and proposals as productive partners in global sustainable development initiatives. As stated in the UNESCO Report, “the right to freedom of expression and press ensures that Indigenous Peoples can share their views and opinions, making it essential for media managed by Indigenous Peoples to maintain editorial independence” (UNESCO, 2025). This “meaningful representation” is an essential counterpart to the obligations that nation states have ratified through treaties and conventions, which have critical implications for the territorial and economic development rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Conclusion

Supporting the process and consolidation of decolonized media aligns with the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. Seeing through the lens of transnational and critical geography, Indigenous decolonized media networks offer critical interrogations of the challenges of representing the cultural, political, and social issues of their societies, while ensuring the meaningful representation and protection of diverse rights recognized by international laws and ratified in global treaty agreements.

Despite thousands of web-based Indigenous media radio and TV stations, national networks, websites, and media apps, Indigenous Peoples’ voices and visibility in mainstream media and culture remain insufficient to address the complexity of their rights and struggles. An Indigenous Global Media Network would prevent content fragmentation and offer meaningful representation to Indigenous Peoples worldwide in their own terms. The right to media is inscribed in a long process of affirming Indigenous self-determination and re-emerges in the shoulders of grassroots movements and unique historical dialogues between Indigenous Peoples and nation-states.

The UNESCO Global Report (2025) is used to connect the proposition outlined herein to the need to develop and maintain professional standards, as well as to guarantee access to training, education, and networking opportunities that can make it possible for an Indigenous media platform to reach a global level, hence serving as the central repository of functioning Indigenous media networks gathered within a central platform. Thanks to the transformative impact of and possibilities offered by digital media and satellite communication, new technologies are being used in the development of tribal and independent Indigenous media and the advancement of experiences such as “ethnic television,” which caters to specific interests, cultures, and even languages of distinct ethnic immigrant communities in the Global North.

Breaking the systemic isolation of Indigenous Peoples means ensuring that controlling the production and dissemination of Indigenous Media through mainstream media is not confined to scattered sources at the will of legacy media and dominant editorial agendas. The Global Indigenous Peoples’ media platform must position itself as a global powerhouse, with a voice in the implementation of international law- and decision-making processes

on issues that directly affect them, a participation that is essential at critical times for our world.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants [legal guardian/next of kin] provided written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the [individual(s) and/or minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin] for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

RM: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. ZM: Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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