

On April 25, 2024, Professor Fleur Johns will deliver the 9th Annual T.M.C. Asser Lecture at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Her lecture will explore the contested concept of "community" in today's international law, particularly in the context of humanitarianism. Registrations are open, and seats are limited, so make sure to [book your seat](#) now.

Professor Fleur Johns, a recognised expert on international law and on the role of automation and digital technology in global legal relations, will deliver the 9th Annual T.M.C. Asser Lecture on 25 April 2024 in the Peace Palace in The Hague. She will explore the concept of 'community' in today's international law, especially in the context of humanitarianism. As technology has radically changed the ways in which we connect, communicate, share values with each other, exercise power, and engage in conflict, the concept of 'community' in international law is once more in contention.

Abstract

Connection in a divided world: Rethinking 'community' in international law

The concept of 'community' (as in the 'international community' or the 'community of nations') has been a cornerstone of international law, sometimes aiding the articulation and promotion of public interests. For example, recent attempts to forge international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response have been spurred by governments acknowledging 'the catastrophic failure of the international community' to ensure solidarity and equity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

And lately, international legal litigants have invoked 'community interest' in seeking to hold states accountable for alleged violations of international law. Such claims have been central to recent proceedings brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging genocide or torture: by The Gambia against Myanmar; by Canada and the Netherlands against the Syrian Republic; and by South Africa against Israel.

Nonetheless, international legal notions of 'community' have also served racist, exclusionary purposes. The 19th century international lawyer James Lorimer famously argued that some religious and racialised peoples could never be full members of a community of nations under international law. Current international legal vocabularies, such as the ICJ Statute's reference to the 'law recognized by civilized nations' for example, remain redolent of this racist idea of community-as-privilege.

In view of their ambivalence, claims about 'international community' should be made with caution. They often imply commonality of experience and shared value on a global scale when the experiences and values at issue may, in fact, be partial or contested, perhaps increasingly so. Digital technologies have changed how nations and peoples are brought together or connect, creating new disparities between those made more vulnerable to violence and injustice by digital connectivity, and those who benefit from the uneven global spread of computation.

This lecture will examine the concept of 'community' in today's international law, especially in the context of humanitarianism and the growing use of technology. We will revisit key texts such as Georges Abi-Saab's 1998 article, ['Whither the International Community?'](#). Ideas of 'community' have long played a role in making insiders and outsiders in international law, and continue to do so. Yet techniques of community-making in international law may nevertheless present egalitarian possibilities—or so this lecture will show.

Fleur Johns, 2024

About Fleur Johns

Fleur Johns is professor in the Faculty of Law & Justice at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney (Australia). She works in international law, legal theory, law and development, and law and technology. Her latest research has focused on the implications of digital technology for international law and politics, and on the international law of diplomacy.

Fleur Johns has published five books, the most recent of which is [#Help: Digital Humanitarianism and the Remaking of International Order](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023) on the transformation of humanitarian aid by digital technologies, and why this matters for law and politics on a global scale. Professor Johns is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, an Australian Research Council Future Fellow (2021-2025), and a Visiting Professor at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (2021-2024), and has held visiting appointments in Canada, Europe, the UK, and the US.

She currently serves on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of International Law* and the journals *Technology and Regulation*, the *Journal of Cross-disciplinary Research in Computational Law*, and *Science, Technology & Human Values*, as well as being an Advisory Editor for the *London Review of International Law*, the *Australian Feminist Law Journal* and several scholarly book series.

Seats are limited, so [register now!](#)