

Challenges and opportunities for Freedom of Expression: how communications changes are affecting us all

Report of seminar held in Manchester, UK, 14-16 February 2007

About the seminar

This event's character was shaped by the profile of the participants, who brought a diverse range of professional, cultural and personal experiences to the discussions. The seminar was hosted by the British Council, in the context of promoting inter-cultural dialogue. It set out to be exploratory rather than to develop shared programmes for action: it sought to give participants a framework for learning and for considering challenges in their own contexts. Discussions ranged widely within the framework of the event programme.

The seminar programme and list of participants are attached

The context for discussions was set with presentations based on the Freedom of Expression Project's own mapping research:

- A global analysis of how people access news information, what sources they trust and who controls and regulates these sources. (Paper: *The Contemporary Communications Environment: Mapping the Communication Platforms of Freedom of Expression*)
- An examination of the ways in which technological, political and economic factors interact to change the shape of the communications environment. (Paper: *Shaping the Networked World: Drivers of change in the networked communications environment*)

Key themes

Key themes emerged, through participants' discussions and working groups, as crucial to debates about freedom of expression in the networked communications environment (NCE). While many issues overlap, they can be broadly grouped under the following headings.

Building knowledge

- There's a need to build knowledge and the evidence base about this developing environment. There are acknowledged gaps in the data, e.g. about: the non-English speaking on-line world; the realities of private ownership of the media as a measure of openness (Turkey, Yemen); the extent of cross-border international dialogue; blog content; internet use.
- This poses challenges for policy making: distinguishing between real trends and 'hype'. There's a level of scepticism about some of the claims made for aspects of the NCE: e.g. the potential of blogs as a tool for social change.

Developing multi-disciplinary discussion and engagement

- There is a recognition of the interconnected and multi-disciplinary nature of the threats and opportunities for freedom of expression. The challenge is in formulating discussions that reach beyond familiar 'compartments' (mobile phones, the internet, traditional media etc.).

- In particular, debate about the control of the physical communications network and its connectivity provides a valuable new dimension to the issues (for participants from a non-technological background): a new appreciation of technology's significance and of the need to develop their own knowledge and collaborations.
- A key challenge is how to bridge the gap between 'technologists' and others concerned with the implications of technology. Who needs to learn whose language? How do we illustrate and communicate the implications of the fact that this is *digital* technology? How do we make alliances and involve the right players in discussions?

Respecting cultural, political and economic frameworks

- A tension: many people are outside conversations happening in the West about technology and regulation. They need to join them but at the same time preserve cultural, political and economic autonomy (with particular reference to Middle East and Latin America)
- The concept of freedom of expression is not always unproblematic or uncontested: there is some sense of this being a cultural imposition of the West (not necessarily amongst the participants, but in wider society). It brings different meanings and implications in different countries.
- There's a need to consider different global perspectives. Issues of concern (e.g. surveillance capabilities of technology) or models with some success (e.g. public service broadcasting) in certain regions may not transfer to countries where cultural norms are different and/or the technologies less developed.

Thinking through questions of authority and credibility

- The internet interacts with and is complementary to traditional media; not necessarily an alternative. Citizen participation is enriching traditional media channels.
- But there is still a need for high-quality journalistic analysis and interpretation. Where does authority derive from and what standards apply? Are bloggers self-appointed commentators?
- There's a need to consider the context of declining levels of trust, in authority and in the media. In some countries a paradox is emerging of more openness/plurality and less trust.

Understanding roles

- The NCE is creating spaces for new roles. We need to understand their potential and limitations, e.g: motivated and less active users; citizen journalists in relation to traditional media; artists and creators of digital content.
- The rules and norms of behaviour are not uniform, e.g. we need to consider the intentions and political circumstances of anonymity; it can be in the public interest or it can be dangerous.
- The internet is a tool, neither benevolent nor malignant. It does not make human interaction and interpretation redundant. It is not itself an answer to problems with e.g. political disengagement or democratic deficits. Does it create an environment for civil society action or mobilise social forces that already exist? what already exists?
- There's an acknowledgement of the emergence of 'internet elites' or super-engaged users: if they do have a transformational capacity, how can we

develop that? The challenge is for internet activists to connect with wider social movements. Person-to-person interactions will continue to matter.

Recognising negative as well as positive potential

- There are many positive examples of technologies playing a role in mobilising civil action or exposing abuses (e.g. Abu Ghraib). Yet the NCE has the potential to exacerbate divisions in society, and to polarise groups towards extremes, e.g. of ideology. There are also numerous examples of participants opting out of on-line interaction as the arena of debate becomes a battlefield (e.g. Serbia), and concerns that conversations are being shaped by minorities (e.g. radical Islamists).
- There's a need to be wary of the potential for manipulation and infiltration by economic or political interests (e.g. Bosnian elections; 'astroturfing' - the mimicking of grassroots movements - by corporate lobbies).

Considering regulation and watchdog functions

- There's a recognition of the need to develop public oversight and regulation of the NCE to ensure access and a plurality of voices. Models for developing and delivering this will need to be sensitive to cultures and national contexts: how appropriate is a public service broadcasting model worldwide? what should the state's role be in developing a 'civic commons' online, particularly where the political distance between government and governed is great?
- Need to consider the role that regulation can play in promoting access to devices and networks (e.g. significance of mobile phones in Africa) as well as the physical availability of bandwidth and spectrum.
- At the content level, the potential for civil society monitoring or watchdog roles could be explored, in terms of freedom of expression responsibilities parallel to e.g. Human Rights Watch.

Tackling censorship

- There is concern that self-censorship of content may be following similar patterns in the NCE as in traditional media (e.g. Middle East, China); but there is also optimism that in the longer term state censorship and monitoring might not be effective.
- There's a recognition of the need to build awareness and educate about the potential for indirect censorship and control embedded in: technologies (search engines; content blocking); ISPs; concentration of media; political agendas (surveillance post 9/11). Individuals need to be informed in order to be effective advocates for freedom of expression.

Analysing power and control

- On control of content and intellectual property rights (IPRs): there is a need to explore imaginative ways to protect creativity, preserve cultural life and ensure public access to cultural and educational goods: shared subscriptions, new forms of licensing and copyright.
- There is a need to consider states' role in investing in technology to develop interaction with the public. The challenge is to insert social demands and safeguards into the technological discussions and specifications.
- Freedom of information is central to empowering individuals as actors, but in developing democracies, the potential of legislation depends on civil movements to enforce and realise it. Debates about freedom of information,

privacy and the response to states' and private companies' data collection on individuals, are in different stages of development globally. Their significance is perceived differently where there are other pressing rights agendas (e.g. police violence in Argentina).

- In summary: to understand opportunities and challenges for freedom of expression, we need to understand power and control. We need to analyse who controls and regulates: the physical communications layer? connectivity? applications? content?

Next steps

By the end of the seminar, participants expressed that they had gained a better understanding of the ways new communications can both challenge and provide opportunities for freedom of expression. The participants agreed that the seminar acted as a starting point from which to further discuss the issues and start to formulate creative approaches to harnessing the potential of new communications technologies. The next step for them was to assess how the issues discussed play out in their own countries, and to consider what they can do in their own professions to help build a communications environment that promotes freedom of expression. Global Partners will help facilitate this by encouraging further discussion via its website, and through bringing more perspectives, ideas and opportunities for collaboration to the table through future seminars in Latin America, Africa and Asia.



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14-16 February 2007
Manchester

Event Director: Andrew Puddephatt, Global Partners

PROGRAMME

Participants

Beatrice Ashikem	Head of Corporate Practice, Sola Bajulaiye and Company, Nigeria
Dr Arunas Augustinaitis	Professor at Mykolas Romeris University , Vilnius, Lithuania
Ivan Barbalic	President of NGO (Association Alumni of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies) Bosnia and Herzegovina
Bilge Eser	Reporter Turkey
Fatemah Farag	Assistant Editor in Chief, Al Ahram Weekly Egypt
Ali Fisher	Director Counterpoint British Council UK
Farah Kabir	British Council, Scotland
Amela Karajbić	British Council Governance and Society Manager Bosnia and Herzegovina
Olga Kelly	British Council, Wales
Zaven Kouyoumdjian	Talk show host and producer Lebanon
Lenart Jurij Kučič	Journalist, business and economy, Delo Daily Slovenia
Sarah Metcalfe	British Council, UK
Katherine McFate	Program Officer, Ford Foundation United States of America
Elham Manea	Postdoctoral Fellow & Lecturer- Zurich University, Political Science Institute Switzerland
Heidi Nordby Lunde	Community manager, a citizen journalist, blogger Norway
Brankica Petkovic	Program Director Slovenia
Catrina Pickering	Programme Officer, Article 19
Suni Raivo	Programme Consultant of Estonian Television

	Estonia
Roberto Saba	Executive Director Association for Civil Rights Argentina
Tamara Skroza	Journalist, Serbia
Kiril Terziyski	Law Attorney Bulgaria
Ramatu Umar-Bako	British Council Nigeria

Contributors

Charlie Beckett	Polis
Agnes Callamard	Article 19
Suw Charman	Social Software Consultant
Stephen Coleman	Professor of Political Communications, University of Leeds
Becky Hogge	Director Open Rights Group
Lisa Horner	Researcher, Global Partners
Gene Kimmelman	Vice President American Consumer Union
Becky Lentz	Program Officer, Ford Foundation United States of America

Wednesday 14th February

Time	Programme in detail
09:00	<p>Purpose of seminar</p> <p>Introductions</p> <p>Presentation on how people access information</p>
11:00-11:15	break
11:00-11:30	Presentation on how the communications environment is changing
11:30-12:45	<p>Panel One - Increasing access to information and debate</p> <p>Question : <i>Do digital communications create new possibilities for exchanging information and ideas and increasing accessibility, even in those countries where a free press does not exist?</i></p> <p>This session will explore the claims that a new type of citizen journalism is emerging by-passing censorship by the state or commercial imperatives, opening up vast new areas of information. It will examine the challenge this poses to conventional media and will examine the case that the media are failing democracy. On the other hand is the public sphere of communication fracturing into incoherence – unmediated, unedited comment all too often disintegrating into conspiracy theory or uncivil behaviour?</p> <p>Contributors – Charlie Beckett, Suw Charman, Agnes Callamard</p>
12:45-13:45	Lunch
13:45-15:00	<p>Panel Two - Civil society capacity building</p> <p>Question. <i>Do networked communications have the power to dramatically empower grassroots civil society and enable citizens to act in new ways? Or do they simply empower those otherwise excluded from normal discourse?</i></p> <p>This session will examine case histories of internet use by NGOs, and examples of democratic action and potential through new technology, such as SMS in the Philippines. It will also consider the arguments of critics who say that those who benefit appear often to be terrorists, paedophiles, or repressive government-sponsored agents. What is the net neutrality debate and why is it important?</p> <p>Contributors – Becky Hogge, Gene Kimmelman</p>
15:15-15:30	Break
15:30- 17:00	Break into working groups to tackle key questions identified in the session previously

17:00	Close
	Dinner at hotel

Thursday 15th February

Time	Programme in detail
9:30-9:45	Recap of Wednesdays discussion
9:45-11:15	<p>Panel Three - Re-engaging citizens and government</p> <p>Question. <i>Do new communications allow politics and democratic activity to be revitalised by interactive communications and more direct relationships between governed and governing – e-government and e-voting?</i></p> <p>This session will look at how modern interactive communications, alongside new information rights in law, can combine with e-government initiatives to rebuild relations between public administration and those it serves. But in the context of heightened concerns about security and the war against terror government can keep greater tabs on the electorate through electronic surveillance and violations of privacy, producing what maybe a negative effect overall.</p> <p>Contributors – Stephen Coleman, Suw Charman</p>
11:15-11:30	Break
11:30-12:30	Panel Three continued – working groups to discuss questions raised in previous session
12:30-13:30	Lunch
13:30 – 15:15	<p>Panel Four - New cultural possibilities</p> <p>Question <i>Are we seeing the democratisation and proliferation of arts, culture and educational content? Do new communication possibilities allow greater democratic control by artists over their product through self-marketing and production, and also allow people to access more diverse cultural production through facilitating long tail niche markets'?</i></p> <p>This session will look at the potential cultural impact of new networked communications from self marketing of music on MySpace etc., self publishing of books, the vast amount of content on the net, and the Internet marketing of niche products. It will examine the importance of the intellectual property debate.</p> <p>Contributors – Gene Kimmelman, Becky Lentz, Becky Hogge</p>
15:15-15:30	Break

15:30-17:00	Panel Four continued Working groups to examine key questions.
17:00	Close
19:30	Dinner at Yang Sing Chinese Restaurant

Friday 16th February

Time	Programme in detail
9:00-9:30	Recap of previous day
	Evaluation and focus group
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:00	Next steps and key challenges for participants
12:00-12:30	Wrap up and closing remarks.
12:30	Lunch and finish