

National Conference for Media Reform, Minneapolis, 6-8 June 2008

Note of pre-conference on international media and human rights Convened by Consumers Union, 5 June 2008

Panel 1: Spotlighting Human Rights Abuses

Tools to expose human rights violations, circumvent government control and generate international pressure to address them

Moderator **Sam Gregory** (WITNESS) outlined Witness' work to enable people to use media technologies to document human rights abuses and promote change. He raised key questions: How does video enable change? What are the ethical issues about filming and sharing abuses? How do we include the many who can't yet access technology in this way?

Søren Ring (DanWatch) introduced this Danish NGO, founded in August 2007. DanWatch promotes sustainable consumption of electronic goods and is a watchdog on corporate behaviour in the developing world. Projects include: *Bad connections*, a report showing the links between mobile phones and unfair cobalt mining practices in the Democratic Republic of Congo; *Hidden flow*, a film showing the environmental impact of the disposal of electronic waste in West Africa.

Wilson Ugangu (African Women and Child Feature Services, AWCFS) discussed the roles and uses of media in Kenya's 2007 general elections, including community/vernacular radio and new technologies. It was positive that new spaces emerged for discussion after the clampdown on mainstream media, and civil society campaigns successfully reached foreign affairs departments in other nations. However, use of false information by political parties/kinsmen (e.g. via SMS) contributed to violence and destruction of property. Bloggers were a valuable link to the rest of the world, though with a variable quality of information.

Kimani Njogu (Twaweza Communications) also spoke about media experiences in Kenya, emphasizing that new technology and traditional media work together rather than in isolation. The media's role after the elections highlighted: the importance of professionalism in reporting, including 'filtering' of images of violence; the positive role the corporate sector can play, e.g. by donating free mobile air time to people in distress; why the media must take full account of tensions between national and local identities in their reporting/coverage. Overall, communications helped to reduce the duration of the violence after the elections.

Stephanie Wang (Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School) focused on filtering of information in Burma and China. The priority in Burma has been to control information flows, and internet penetration is extremely low (<1%). However, adept activists have been able to get information out and route it back in to Burmese people. China's attention to the control of its citizens includes a range of technical, legal and social mechanisms, so that the internet has become a contested space not fully available for political discussion and action.

Questions and discussion covered:

- The possibility of a 'public interest' role for business and the potential for positive dialogue between businesses and civil society
- A common framework for understanding the new/alternative communications environment, and the need for normative work in different communities

Panel 2: Amplifying the Voices from the Margins

The role of community media in a developing communications sphere

Merlyna Lim (Arizona State University) presented case studies of community empowerment media projects from South East Asia. These included: *thaitambon.com* ecommerce partnership from Thailand; *Salaam Wanita* women's economic empowerment project in Malaysia; *e-Bario* project bringing ICTs to the marginalized Kelabit community in Sarawak, Malaysia. The characteristics of successful and sustainable projects are: people-focused; multi-media or involving multi-disciplinary team; collaborative; use local resources and community participation.

Jim Ellinger (Austin Airwaves and World Association of Community Broadcasters, AMARC) highlighted how radio is effective in getting news and local information to communities. E.g. 'radio theatre' in Mozambique gives vital health education messages; Nepalese community broadcasters have sung news bulletins to comply with government rules on music-only broadcasts. AMARC works to lobby governments – the US as well as in the developing world – for community radio licenses.

Doug McGill (Professor of Journalism at Carlton College, and publisher of *McGill Report*) discussed the role of journalism in today's media environment. He described his role in bringing to light the ethnic cleansing of the Anuak community of Ethiopia during 2003. In Minnesota, home to the largest Anuak diaspora, family members were 'earwitnesses' to murder and violence. As a journalist/blogger, based in rural Minnesota, Doug's interviews with witnesses guided his research and reporting of events in Africa.

Questions and discussion covered:

- Concerns that people may no longer be able to listen to radio without that being known/visible when it's digital radio; and the potential uses of 'closed technology' digital radio bandwidth for surveillance
- Varying understandings and definitions of community radio – e.g. according to its purpose; its not for profit status; its involvement of volunteers/community
- Citizen i.e. unpaid journalism: its sustainability; ensuring quality; the potential for business models that can answer demand for local information

Panel 3: Working within Government

New technologies and their impact on national struggles for democracy and fairness

Estela Waksberg Guerrini (Instituto Brasileiro de Defesa do Consumidor, IDEC) explained the implications for Brazilian consumers of telecommunications convergence and consolidation of media ownership. Legislation lags behind technological change, and consumer rights are not consistent across platforms. Broadband access is not considered a social utility, and there is little choice of ISPs, some of which make purchase of other services a condition of supply. Copyright restrictions also affect the free flow of information. IDEC works to extend people's access to sources of information, e.g. by providing accessible information on a current telecoms public enquiry and by pressing for regulatory/legislative change.

Kwame Karikari (Media Foundation of West Africa) was positive about the development of mass media at all levels in West Africa. E.g. Accra alone has 32 radio stations; Mali has 300; mobile phone usage is booming. Developments have opened up spaces for discussion in local languages and brought more participation and pluralism into politics. Cell phones have been used for election monitoring with telcos providing free air time for users to call in to local radios. Yet there are corresponding moves towards greater government repression of freedom of expression and civil society movements. Civil society is growing to address the key challenges: quality, standards, access and cost, and dependence on imported technology.

Roberto Saba (Association for Civil Rights, Argentina) outlined the problems of indirect censorship in Argentina, e.g. through the allocation of broadcast licences and government advertising revenue. These problems are about regulation and licensing, we need an effective language to address these. The challenges are to: bridge gaps between human rights and media reform communities; translate media reform into the language and institutions of human rights; intervene in media reform process; build capacity in human rights activists; build a global coalition.

Questions and discussion covered: bringing other rights – land rights, environmental and indigenous people’s rights – into the agenda.

Panel 4: Mapping Next Steps

How to meet communications policy challenges to human rights

Andrew Puddephatt (Global Partners, UK) introduced the Freedom of Expression Project. This global collaboration is developing and consulting on a set of universal principles to guide policy in the networked communications environment. The principles set out overarching values that are grounded in the international human rights system, and articulate overall policy goals for each ‘layer’ of the communications environment (infrastructure, code, applications and content). The development of the draft principles follows 18 months of research, policy analysis and a series of participative workshops in Europe, Latin America, East Africa and South East Asia.

Caroline Fredrickson (ACLU) outlined some current challenges to freedom of expression from the US government and ACLU’s role in responding to these. Proposed legislation (now stalled in the Senate) to address ‘violent radicalization and homegrown terrorism’ would effectively restrict speech on the internet; ACLU has worked with 20 other groups to challenge the designation of ‘extremists’. Also working through the courts to oppose the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretaps.

Willie Currie (Association for Progressive Communications APC) highlighted the challenges of developing broadband access in East Africa, i.e. working to realise a key policy goal in the ‘infrastructure layer’ of the communications environment. A ‘missing link’ in submarine cabling affects East Africa, though government and businesses are now involved in a range of programmes to address that. Advocacy must respond to shifts in governance, and develop work at national, regional and global levels at the same time to meet the complexity of multi-centred regulation.

Bjarne Pedersen (Consumers International) explained how unfair intellectual property (IP) and copyright regimes are abuses of rights when they exclude people from knowledge and information. Addressing these requires both technical and political strategies: CI is proposing a new IP ‘paradigm’ and also working to raise awareness, create networks of common interest and make proposals at international level. Key issues include: use of digital rights management, excessive pricing and unavailability of information. Investigative media are also essential in enabling consumers to be fully informed citizens.

Questions and discussion covered:

- Role of citizens and citizen journalism in contributing to transformation of media and promoting human rights

- The challenge for civil society of responding in policy terms to the chaotic and rapidly evolving new media environment; and the importance here of articulating shared values as a framework.
- Potential alignments of interest between civil society and businesses in developing shared values and policy.
- The idea of a 'world communications and human rights bank', in which consumers/citizens/civil society/businesses could register and donate current and potential activities that would contribute to developing the communications environment in the public interest.

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