The Freedom of Expression Project: Africa Workshop

Global Partners & Associates
Democracy | Governance | Human Rights

Report of workshop held in Nairobi, Kenya, 16-19 July 2007

About the workshop

The workshop was hosted by Global Partners & Associates (UK), Twaweza Communications (Kenya) and African Woman and Child Feature Services (Kenya). The programme and list of participants are attached.

This was part of a series of discussions held on behalf of the Ford Foundation. The overall aim is to explore the implications of the development of digital communications for the human right to freedom of expression. An important goal is to help shape the Ford Foundation's future funding priorities in this field globally.

The workshop was designed to enable participants to: discuss particular challenges and opportunities in African countries; share perspectives and develop links internationally; and consider global issues. Presenters and participants came from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda; also from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, UK, US and Indonesia.

Discussions over the two and half days were given context through briefings and information including:

- the background to the Freedom of Expression Project and its objectives
- data on the use of communications media and trends in Africa
- presentation of the Project's own research into the global networked communications environment, including its 'layer model' analysis.

Key themes

The following areas of significance and concern emerged from broad-ranging discussions over the two and half days.

The mainstream or the margins?

- There's considerable optimism about the potential of new communications technologies, and there are many examples of their ability to support positive changes. For example, participants referred to:
  - enabling new communities of interest (social, political, creative, civil society groups) to form and mobilise, including across national boundaries
  - improving political involvement and accountability, e.g. by enabling activists to change the news agenda, challenge corruption, compare international situations, whistleblowing
  - providing a forum to discuss formerly taboo issues, e.g. homosexuality
  - giving a voice to marginalised communities and groups, including women and people in rural communities
  - providing economic opportunities, including for rural and traditional

communities (e.g. sending money via SMS; new markets for traditional Maasai artefacts).

- Yet there are serious concerns that Africa risks remaining on the margins unless the potential of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) can be more fully realised. Several major factors bear on this:
  - The technological infrastructure (communications and electricity supply) is in development. In many countries, substantial government investment and/or regulation of private companies' investment is required to improve access.
  - The bulk of communications technologies are imported rather than owned, developed and manufactured in African countries.
  - Internet penetration has grown far more rapidly in many African countries than the global average, but from a very low starting point.
  - Internet and mobile phone tariffs are very high in comparison with the global North. Access is concentrated among urban, comparatively wealthy citizens.
  - Illiteracy and/or a lack of English prevent many people's participation.
  - New ICTs can reproduce existing inequalities, as their uptake is affected by economic, social and cultural factors. It is important to educate and enable women to benefit from them.
  - Traditional forms of representation and symbolism are important for many African cultures and modes of communication; it is important to explore how new technologies can include and promote these.
- These factors balance optimism in some people's assessments of the significance of new communications. More people have access to traditional media; e.g. community radio. Participants cited examples of how radio is improving rural communities' access to information and political involvement (e.g. via a network of 'bicycle reporters' gathering community news and opinion in rural Uganda).
- There's a need for more research into the uptake and impact of new communications in Africa in order to inform future policy. This includes: who is using new technologies and how; their political and social impact (e.g. blogs); the effectiveness of ICT tools as catalysts for development; who benefits and how; what the barriers are to further progress.

About 'freedom of expression' as a framework

- The concept of 'freedom of expression' provides a broadly accepted framework for analysis and action. Participants' observations about its further development and exercise in an African context included:
  - freedom of expression should not be viewed only as part of a narrative of economic development; this ignores the importance of self-actualisation and self-expression for their own sake
  - freedom of cultural expression is particularly important in many African contexts and an essential element in realising human dignity
  - freedom of expression does not imply a 'free for all' and is not incompatible with restrictions where necessary to safeguard the rights of others (e.g. regulation of hate speech)
  - it can be difficult to see a positive role for the state in protecting freedom of expression and regulating content, when experience has been of

governments acting outside the law and by force
- there can be tensions in reconciling notions of community identity and cultural expression with individualist conceptions of human rights
- other framing concepts may also be useful in some advocacy work. For example, governments have taken sexuality issues more seriously when they have been framed as public health rather than rights concerns.

- There are serious concerns about protecting the rights and safety of vulnerable groups. A major issue is the potential exacerbation of ethnic and other conflicts. Other concerns included: women are exposed to risks including fake internet marriage sites; children are able to view inappropriate or pornographic content; religious people are vulnerable to financial exploitation by unscrupulous leaders. Can we foster a communications environment as a space of mutual understanding, where people with opposing viewpoints can co-exist?

Regulation and content

- A variety of contributing factors make the regulation of content a dense and complex issue, including: people's experience of government censorship and repression make it difficult to see a positive state role; tribal and ethnic identities are very powerful; diverse religious beliefs are widespread and very strongly held.
- What is the appropriate role of the media and journalists: 'reflectors' or 'activists'? While compulsory professional qualifications are not widely supported, journalists' capability and responsibility are critical, in reporting e.g. religious matters or ethnic conflict. Do networked communications change their role, from gatekeepers to moderators or curators?
- As well as having positive potential, the internet offers new opportunities for 'anti-progressive' individuals or groups, e.g. by making it easier to share information in order to perpetrate acts of terrorism. There's a need for regulation to address security issues, and guard against potential curtailments of freedom of expression that governments may seek to justify on security grounds.
- There's a need to develop and pro-actively promote a model for effective regulation of the new communications environment, rather than wait for governments and the private sector to take a lead. An effective model needs to: define the objectives of regulation; identify appropriate mechanisms; identify the regulators and their authority. A short brainstorming session produced interesting ideas on this, with general agreement that some public control of communications is necessary.

Culture and identity

- Future conversations about freedom of expression and new communications need to: recognise the significance and diversity of cultures, languages and identities in African countries; and explore how changes in communications are also 'refashioning' or recreating identities.
- There's a need to ensure that technological development does not equate to 'Westernisation' or result in individuals becoming alienated from their traditional knowledge and cultural identities. The challenge is to use new

technologies in ways that can preserve cultural diversity and to identify and develop policy that can support this.

- There's a need to ensure that intellectual property rights don't restrict the right of access to information (e.g. for educational purposes); also that they recognise and appropriately reward knowledge that is owned by tribes or groups (e.g. of medicinal plants; creative skills).

Developing African language content

- Mainstream print and broadcast media in African countries usually includes little content in community languages. The cost of importing (mostly US) content is lower than producing original and relevant content in African languages.
- The new communications environment has the potential to accommodate and enhance communication in a broader range of languages than the traditional media does. Effective policy and advocacy is needed at all levels of the 'layer model' to ensure this potential is realised.
- The internet favours English and French over African languages. There's a need to consider whether this legacy of shared languages could be used positively to promote international and inter-community dialogue.

Next steps

Participants gave feedback that this workshop was valuable as the first conversation of its kind, and that it articulated connections between freedom of expression and new technologies that need to be understood. The workshop emphasised that culture and creativity are crucial to self-realisation, identity and human dignity; and should be a key part of future discussions.

It was agreed that conversations begun here need to be developed, at national and regional levels in Africa and internationally. It was recognised that South/South dialogue and the involvement of the business community would both be valuable.

Priority areas for policy development and advocacy emerged, including: investment in infrastructure; legislation; media ownership; regulation; consumer protection; including excluded voices in communications. It is important to consider how old debates apply in the new environment. New research data is needed to inform and support this, including on: the structure of different media environments; content (including language, cultural and gender aspects; involvement in content production). Research needs to be systematic, ongoing and internationally comparable.

The Project will continue to provide opportunities for thinking and debate, by:

- sharing learning from this and future events through the website
- exploring further the perspectives gained from this event at the workshop in November in Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- continuing to work with partners in the regions to map out local and global communications environments.