Community Media and the Communication Divide

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This paper tells a story of struggle. It is a story of people and communities striving to speak out and to be heard. It is a story about information and society. Against the odds, it is a story in which the tools of communication can be a means of empowerment and self-reliance.

This is about the right to freedom of expression, a right that is universally recognised but far from universally respected. A right that is widely understood to underpin other human rights, democracy and sustainable development, but one that all too frequently seems available to wealthy and political elites while excluding people from poor and marginalised communities.

People living in poverty face barriers to the freedom of expression that are directly associated with the conditions in which they live.[1] Economic obstacles include the costs of production and reception. Social obstacles include discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, caste and class. Educational obstacles include literacy and language. Logistical obstacles include transport, physical access and inadequate supplies of electricity. Political obstacles include repression and lack of will of states to allow democratic expression and voice for the most marginalised groups, as well as censorship by government, commercial and social interests.

To understand the barriers that exclude poor people from modern information-based societies, we have to talk not of the *digital divide* but of the *communications divide*. It is a divide that can be seen to emerge from the earliest written forms of communication and from the use of elite languages that exclude the uneducated and the illiterate. It is a divide reinforced by the first information technology, the printing press, but one that can be overcome today

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[1] Bellagio Symposium on Media, Poverty and Freedom of Expression, September 2003.

by new information and communication technologies that offer means for the participation of all.

I am not talking of the Internet. For the poorest people, the Internet will remain an elite medium for many years to come, at least until there is universal access to education, basic literacy for all, universal access to electricity and enough hours remaining in the day after working in the fields, collecting firewood, filling water jugs and other essential chores of survival.

This is why, if the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is serious in fulfilling its development mandate, it must pay greater attention to the role and the potential of the traditional media in bridging the communications divide. Traditional media, particularly radio, can reach out to those people who are most at risk of exclusion from an information-based economy, the same people whose livelihoods must be improved if the international community is to achieve the development goals it has agreed and to which the WSIS has declared its intent to make a contribution.

The End of Dictatorship

This is a story of a rural community in Indonesia. Just outside Yogyakarta, in the village of Timbulharjo, there is a community owned and volunteer-run radio station called Radio Angkringan. It is named after the informal pavement food stalls where people sit to eat, drink and talk – a kind of popular meeting space. Broadcasts are in the evenings because in daylight hours people are too busy working their living from the land. The station has just one computer with an audio bank of Indonesian music, together with microphones, a small mixing unit and an antenna. This, together with the voices of volunteers, local listeners and guests, provides the broadcast service. The volunteers at Radio Angkringan gather news from the Internet but connectivity is unreliable and expensive. Their immediate priority is to acquire a motorcycle so they can take their reporting kit to the neighbouring local villages.

Today there are thousands of community radio stations around the world like Radio Angkringan, giving voice and access to information for poor and marginalised communities. Operating often with a precarious economic base and sometimes in uncertain legal conditions, community media have nevertheless built a niche for themselves as a voice for civil society. Radio Angkringan, founded in 2000, was a product of the end of dictatorship.

In Indonesia, as in many other countries, the emergence of community broadcasting was associated with political reform and democratisation. Until the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, the Ministry of Information exercised strict media control, journalists were censored, publications banned, reporters and writers jailed. A few brave alternative

publications used the Internet but mainstream media avoided all criticism of the regime and dared not speak out on issues that crossed the "red line" such as disappearances, land seizures and corruption.

One of the first actions of the new Indonesian government was to abolish the Ministry of Information, to annul the press laws of the dictatorship and to introduce a new press law guaranteeing freedom of the press. The media environment opened up and hundreds of private broadcasters, newspapers and community radios were established. Community radio and television have been among the provisions of more recent Indonesian media reform.

Unfortunately there are still too many governments that remain resistant to media reform. Despite widespread access to satellite channels and the Internet, the urge of governments to control what their populations can see, hear and read is preventing the establishment of civil society media that give voice to people and communities and help bridge the communications divide. In this respect community media can be a measure of a commitment to democracy.

A Benchmark for Civil Society

"Governments should implement a legal and supportive framework favouring the right to free expression and the emergence of free and pluralistic information systems, including the recognition of the specific and crucial role of community media in providing access to communication for isolated and marginalized groups."[2]

These words were adopted, in September 2004, as part of the final Declaration of the United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development, hosted in Rome by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). To these leading specialists working in the field of communications for development, the statement is not controversial. Indeed statements in recognition of the role of community media can be found in reports of several United Nations specialist agencies including The World Bank[3], United Nations Development

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[2] Ninth United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development, Rome, September 2004
[3] The World Bank has said: "Community radio stations can be critical enablers of information, voice and capacities for dialogue", in Social accountability and public voice through community radio programming, Social Development Notes No 76, The World Bank April 2003

Programme (UNDP)[4], United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)[5] and FAO[6].

In the months running up to the WSIS Summit in Geneva in 2003, a similar statement appeared in a key document produced by civil society stakeholders. It was one of a list of benchmarks against which the government negotiations at the WSIS would be judged. It stated:

> Community media, that is media which are independent, community-driven and civil-society based, have a specific and crucial role to play in enabling access and participation for all to the Information Society, especially the poorest and most marginalised communities. Community media should be supported and promoted. Governments should assure that legal frameworks for community media are non-discriminatory and provide for equitable allocation of frequencies through transparent and accountable mechanisms.[7]

If the World Summit on the Information Society had the courage to recognize the role of community media and to adopt this simple proposition it would have achieved a significant step towards its United Nations mandate to put ICT "at the service of development for all".[8]

In Geneva 2003 it failed to do so, retaining only the weaker proposition to "give support to media based in local communities"[9] and rejecting inclusion of the words "community media". This was not an accidental omission. Proposals to include community media were submitted by civil society and government delegations and achieved substantial support but not sufficient consensus to find their way into the final Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action.

There were two obstacles. From an early stage in negotiations, it was clear the treatment of media and freedom of expression would be a highly sensitive issue. China led the way, among authoritarian governments, in resisting inclusion of the right to freedom of expression and seeking to keep to a minimum any new commitments to media freedom. But

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[4] UNDP has said: "Legal and regulatory frameworks that protect and enhance community media are especially critical for ensuring vulnerable groups freedom of expression and access to information", in Access to Information: Practice Note, UNDP October 2003

[5] UNESCO has said: "Community radio is one of the most effective and least costly means of communication for development, especially in rural communities" in Communication for Development, Report to the 58th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, May 2003

[6] FAO has said: "Community radio activities can help in bridging the rural digital divide facilitating the link with new information and communication technologies" in A Brief about FAO Communication for Development, FAO Communication for Development Group, 2004

[7] WSIS Civil Society Benchmarks Document, Final Version, 11 December 2003

[8] United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 56/183, 31 January 2002

[9] World Summit on the Information Society, Plan of Action, 12 December 2003

more explicit opposition came from a different source, from right wing Latin American governments, notably El Salvador, closely associated with the lobby of commercial broadcast proprietors.

Community media was squeezed out of the Geneva Declaration by an alignment of interests, from state control and market domination, against new commitments to media pluralism and diversity. Just as the existence or otherwise of community media can be a measure of democratic participation, so in Geneva it was also a benchmark for civil society demands.

Beyond Market Domination

This is a story of indigenous people in Mexico. It is the story of a day of celebration when, on 6 December 2004, Radio Jën Poj in Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec, Oaxaca and Radio Uandarhi de Uruapan, Michoacán became the first indigenous groups in Mexico to be granted broadcast licences to operate their own community radio stations. The move by the Mexican government followed three years of negotiations and lobbying by community media activists, human rights organisations and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.[10]

The struggle for recognition of community broadcasting in Mexico has not been easy nor is the process yet complete. When President Vicente Fox's Partido Acción Nacional won the Mexican election of 2000 one of the essential demands of citizen's groups was reform of the Radio and Television Act, guarantees of the right to freedom of expression and the need for limits on private media concentration in the hands of corporations such as Televisa.

At first it seemed there were good reasons to be optimistic. A multi-stakeholder discussion forum was established in 2001, including legislators, representatives of political parties, academics, media owners and citizen's groups. The demand for community radio recognition was presented, along with other proposals for reform and democratisation of the media. The government appeared to accept the case for reform and there was a short-lived moratorium on the closure of existing community radio stations that had started-up without a licence.

The process came abruptly to a halt. Behind the scenes lobbying of the federal government by commercial broadcast proprietors produced a new radio and television decree weighted strongly in their favour together with renewed persecution of the community radio stations. Community broadcasters, including Radio Jën Poj, reported military raids and violently implemented closures. To counter growing public disquiet at these interventions,

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[10] Aleida Calleja, The Odyssey of Community Radio in Mexico, InteRadio vol 12 no 1, April 2005

commercial broadcasters launched a campaign seeking, unsuccessfully, to discredit community radio.

In 2003 both the United Nations Human Rights Commission and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights intervened with recommendations to the Mexican government to cease the persecution of community radio and to provide proper licences to operate. While Mexican diplomats in Geneva were continuing to support the efforts of El Salvador to keep community media out of the WSIS, officials in Mexico City were quietly negotiating to find a solution to the demands of indigenous people to have their own voice on the airwaves.

In March 2004, at a hearing of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the Mexican government accepted that community radio is a human rights issue and gave undertakings to establish a process for legal recognition of not-for-profit community radio stations serving indigenous people and farming communities. Despite last-ditch efforts by commercial broadcasters to persuade President Vicente Fox to abandon the licensing plans, the first two licences were awarded in December 2004 and more have been awarded since. The newly licensed community radios have said they will emphasize indigenous languages and culture and will seek to address the social and economic problems of the communities they serve.

Empowering Communities

Twenty years ago there was almost no broadcast community media outside the Americas, a few Western European countries and Australia. State monopolies were the norm across Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Today that situation has changed dramatically. In the last ten years community broadcasting has gained a presence across the African continent, in most European Union countries and in many countries of Asia and the Pacific.

Throughout the world governments are reforming their media laws to recognize community media. In the last year alone, countries as diverse as the UK, Argentina, Bolivia, India, Indonesia and South Korea have adopted reforms that support community media. At the same time there has been growing recognition in the international human rights system of the importance of community media, including explicit calls for support issued by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission of

Human Rights[11], the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights[12] and the Council of Europe.[13]

When measured against media trends, commitments to the right to freedom of expression and the views of experts and multilateral agencies working in the field of communications for development, the failure of the first phase of the WSIS to give explicit support for community media in the final Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action appears all the more perverse

Yet, for community media activists the first phase of the WSIS has, paradoxically, been a success. The resistance of a few governments to the words "community media" has ensured it to be a subject of extensive debate and provided opportunities to set out precisely why community media is important. It has also brought new alliances with governments prepared to speak out and make the case for community media in the face of this resistance.

As long as there are dictatorships in the world or excessively powerful private interest groups then there will be governments ready to put obstacles in the way of community media and the right of everyone to the freedom of expression. As long as obstacles remain then the struggle for recognition of community media will be a core issue for civil society groups seeking a just and equitable world based on human rights principles and sustainable development priorities.

In the second phase of the WSIS governments will look more closely at how they can harness the power of information and communication technologies to implement their commitments to human rights and international development goals. Those governments who are serious about the vision and principles of the Geneva Declaration will know that implementation depends on empowering communities and that community media have a vital role to play.

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[11] The Special Rappporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights stated in his Annual Report 2002: "Given the potential importance of these community channels for freedom of expression, the establishment of discriminatory legal frameworks that hinder the allocation of frequencies to community radio stations is unacceptable."

[12] The Africa Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has stated: "Community broadcasting shall be promoted given its potential to broaden access by poor and rural communities to the airwaves" Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, Principle V, Adopted at 32nd Session of the Africa Commission on Human and People's Rights, 17-23 October 2002.

[13] A report adopted by the Council of Europe Steering Committee on the Mass Media stated: "Member States should encourage the development of the contribution of Community Media in a pluralistic media landscape." Transnational Media Concentrations in Europe, Council of Europe 2004