



Regional Seminar on Access and Equity of Communication Technology and
Rights for the Marginalized Peoples in Asia

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Communication Rights, Access and the Digital Divide: Leaving No One Behind

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The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda is called *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development*. The Report identifies five transformative shifts, the first of which is extremely ambitious and noble: *To leave no one behind*.

The twenty-seven eminent persons who made key recommendations to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon wrote:

"We should ensure that no person – regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race or other status – is denied universal human rights and basic economic opportunities. We should design goals that focus on reaching excluded groups... We can be the first generation in human history to end hunger and ensure that every person achieves a basic standard of wellbeing. There can be no excuses. This is a universal agenda, for which everyone must accept their proper share of responsibility."

Remarkably, while the Report asserts that civil society organisations can play a crucial role in giving a voice to people living in poverty, it gives extremely short shrift to communications and the media. While placing people at the centre of

the new global partnership, the Report merely acknowledges that, “they need the freedom to voice their views and participate in the decisions that affect their lives without fear. They need access to information and to an independent media.”

This is as good an illustration as any of why organizations like WACC need to promote communication rights as a vital component of future sustainable development.

A global snapshot

Over the past decade, the world has become even more interconnected. Many people are living in environments where the Internet and its associated services are accessible and immediate, where people and businesses can communicate with each other instantly, and where machines are equally interconnected with each other. This interconnectivity is redefining relationships between individuals, communities, citizens and governments. Of course, it is introducing new opportunities, but also new risks in terms of individual rights and privacy, security, cybercrime, the flow of personal data, and access to information. As a result, our societies are undergoing fundamental transformations.

In privileged parts of the world, the dominant trend has been towards the Internet and Web 2.0 applications and platforms that extend the quantity of both professionally disseminated and user-generated content, the capacity for user interaction with that content, and the redistribution of content to global audiences. These developments have had a significant impact on media and press freedom in relation to traditional media, newsgathering practices and platforms, ethical considerations and professional norms.

In terms of media freedom there has been a diversification of production methods, ways of publishing and distribution, as well as the growth of audiences for global media. The Internet and satellite television have become more widely available, diverse, and influential, partly because most national and international outlets now make content available online. At the same time there has been a return to tactics such as blocking and filtering applied to a wider range of media and by a wider range of actors.

On the positive side, the trend towards increased opportunities for citizen media and interactive journalism has blurred the boundaries both between media sectors, and between journalists and news consumers. In turn this has disrupted traditional information flows and journalistic practices and challenged existing legal and regulatory frameworks. Technical convergence has also meant that content originating in broadcasting, telecommunications, print and the Internet can increasingly be accessed on multiple platforms (including laptops, mobile phones and iPads), at more locations, by more users, and through a variety of intermediaries.

And yet there are still major problems. Millions and millions of people continue to live in poverty; conflict and violence – including gender-based violence – rage in many parts of the world; climate change is beginning to have a catastrophic impact on nations and populations; the global economic system is still skewed towards the rich; and corruption and impunity appear to be the norm.

Asia today

More than two thirds of the world's poor people live in Asia, and nearly half of them are in South Asia. This means that some four billion people are crowded into towns and cities or scattered throughout rural areas on land that covers roughly 17% of the world's surface. 40% of that population – a staggering 1600 million people – live in areas prone to drought and desertification whose conditions are being exacerbated by climate change.

Despite the apparent wealth of many of its leading cities, poverty in Asia is an overwhelming problem. An expanding population and high density have increased the demand for agricultural production, which has led to the cultivation of lands previously regarded as unsuitable. Climate change is impacting food availability, food consumption and diet. Climate change also serves as a hunger risk multiplier, making populations more susceptible to infectious disease.

Of an estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, around two thirds live in the Asia-Pacific region. They suffer from a range of problems associated with marginalized socio-economic status: cultural and linguistic preservation, land rights, ownership and exploitation of natural resources, political determination and autonomy, environmental degradation and incursion, ill health, substandard education and discrimination.

In terms of statistics, this rather grim picture indicates why communication rights are important. Free, pluralistic and independent media, covering print, broadcast and online, are crucial to the post-2015 development agenda because they offer an inclusive public sphere for involving citizens in the processes of good governance and sustainable development. In particular, within the broader media landscape, news media – whether private, public or community-owned – are especially important. They help a society to define the real meaning of development, including its relation to human rights and democratic values. Further, the news media, and others who contribute journalism in the public sphere act as watchdogs of the people and scrutinize those in power, exposing corruption and promoting transparency.

In today's mediascape, digital platforms provide new opportunities for self-expression, but they also challenge traditional news media. Community media

and other media sectors increasingly overlap with social media and enable public voice. In this context, digital communications raise important political, economic and social questions that must be addressed both by providers and users, governments and communities. Media and information literacy competencies are also increasingly significant if the public is to find, assess and participate in the information flows that are relevant to development and its debates.

As the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons faintly acknowledges, if people cannot communicate their needs and aspirations, they stand far less chance of transforming their lives. Access to information and communication technologies – from cell phones to community media to digital platforms – is increasingly seen as a genuine alternative to the undemocratic ownership and control of mass media by corporate and government interests. Of course, it is much more than that. Accessibility is also a measure of political dissent and we only have to look at the furore over control of the Internet to prove the point.

Pathways to digital frontiers

Each new medium of communication changes society. From printing to broadcasting to digital technologies, communication media have had successively greater impact on people's lives and their way of viewing the world. As a consequence, throughout history what became known as the mass media have often been constrained by government, corporate and religious interests – raising explosive questions of ownership, control and censorship. Such constraints inevitably led to the creation of alternative media – more accessible, less restrictive spaces in which citizens could express their own opinions and agendas.

Today's communication scene is no different. Once again, the new media of communication are providing alternatives that have the potential to empower ordinary people – but on a scale and at a speed and with a connectivity unimaginable in the past. Digital technologies and social networks facilitated by access to the Internet, to mobile telephony and to satellites have enabled many people around the world to establish new online communities. Social media are a key element of the way computers and digital technologies are revolutionizing how people create, store, transmit and consume information and knowledge.

These new media and ways of networking have important implications for society, culture, and politics. Besides offering alternative means of consuming news, information and entertainment, social media sites present opportunities for establishing and building virtual networks both within countries and across national borders. Three distinguishing factors make emerging social media unique: their ability to share and spread information through an individual's

trust-based network, the flexibility offered by multiple options for accessing (i.e. by mobile telephony or through computers, laptops and tablets), and their accessibility and functionality for many people with basic computer literacy skills.

New media and new media tools have created spaces for more people than at any time previously in history to become engaged with the important issues of our time. They have made a significant and enduring difference to the way people organize for social and political activism, created economic opportunities for those in the developing and developed world, facilitated disaster response, linked networks across national divides, and shared previously inaccessible information and knowledge – such as alternative ways of understanding issues of conflict. Social media tools in particular have allowed people to be producers of content and to participate in dialogue that spans the globe in real time. Such changes are part and parcel of today's global scene and are only “revolutionary” when viewed in the context of history.

One of WACC's newest initiatives is its programme called “Pathways to digital frontiers: Communication rights and inclusion.” It aims to strengthen the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) at the national level in the use of citizen journalism to advance democratic participation and active citizenship. WACC is currently supporting or is seeking support for 15 projects that respond to the needs of marginalized peoples and communities in 11 different countries.

WACC argues that citizen journalism can provide a way for news media to add much needed voices and previously excluded voices to an increasingly fragmented and polarized media landscape. In this respect, citizen journalism can challenge the conventional role of mainstream news media and give a public voice to communities seeking to influence decisions or change policies that directly affect their welfare.

New media tools can also facilitate better communication between parties in pre-conflict and post-conflict situations. There are doubtless many cases where better communication – face to face dialogue or digital mediation – has resolved an issue before it became inflamed. On the other hand, as we know from many grievous stories in the media, post-conflict seems to be the norm. One example of the potential of digital communication platforms and citizen journalism to pave the way towards reconciliation lies close at hand.

The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea and the Republic of Korea

The two Koreas have remained divided since World War II separated them into a Soviet-influenced North and a US-influenced South. Today, they are profoundly different, despite sharing a common language and other cultural roots that go

back centuries. If the countries were to reunite, most experts agree that the wealthy South would have to pay the costs of absorbing the impoverished North, which would set up a spiral of recrimination and resentment similar to what happened when Germany was reunified.

The World Council of Churches is strongly promoting a new initiative aimed at reconciliation. A recent report pointed out:

“The present situation in the Korean peninsula prompts us to a renewed engagement in efforts to work for peace and justice throughout the region and for the reunification of a divided Korea. Despite many positive developments in the world during the post-Cold War era, the North East Asia region still contains the world’s heaviest concentration of military and security threats. Four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, who are also recognized nuclear weapons states, have military bases in this region. There are even signs of an emerging ‘new Cold War’, as the geopolitical map of North East Asia shows new shifts in the balance of power. New tensions are arising with the intensified political, economic and military presence of the United States in the region; and three other ‘power poles’, China, Japan and Russia, also are active in this region.”

My question is: What role can mass and community media play to open up new opportunities for genuine dialogue in this region? How can new digital platforms create better understanding between the Korean people of the larger forces at work that keep them apart? How can better access to communication technologies help address the pressing needs and concerns of both countries if and when they are allowed to live in peace together?

It is clear that bridging the digital communications divide in Asia can open up a myriad alternative points of view and opinion on political, economic, social and cultural issues, providing spaces for debate and constructive criticism, and helping coordinate civil society actions aimed at bringing about a more equitable, balanced and peaceful world.

We have to take advantage of such technologies in order to transform the structures that forestall or block genuine development and to strengthen those social movements that are struggling for justice and peace. Or, to use the words of the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, to “inspire a new generation to believe that a better world is within its reach, and act accordingly.”

Towards the end of 2012 WACC's Board of Directors approved a new guiding document for the organization. Called "Communication for All: Sharing WACC's Principles", it offers insights into the way communication can contribute to the common good of all people everywhere. The Principles include the following statement:

"Denouncing the abuses of the powerful is necessary not because communicators are without fault, but because they hope to create community in a world where others seek to divide. They promote participation and freedom where others seek to enslave and to silence, and they support and defend human dignity where others seek to destroy it. Communicators address power because those who seek it always, in every time and place, risk being seduced by power itself. When that happens, power becomes an agent of death. If communicators are to serve the God of Life, they must affirm justice and struggle against injustice."