Converging Responsibility: Broadcasting and the Internet in Developing Countries

The following are excerpts from the report of the conference "Converging Responsibility: Broadcasting and the Internet in Developing Countries" that took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 4-6 September 1999. Isis International-Manila participated in this meeting that brought together broadcasters, media activists, regulators, NGOs, regional broadcast organisations and researchers from 35 groups and 19 countries. This report was also presented to the International Institute of Communications Conference (IIC) held on 8 September 1999 in Kuala Lumpur.

Despite democratisation and pluralism becoming widely accepted global norms, both public and private monopolies in media and telecommunication continue to exist in several countries. These prevent free and open competition. They also obstruct expression of alternative or dissenting opinions. Monopolies of any kind in media and telecommunications should end, and appropriate regulatory frameworks put into place. Though, with the Internet, the flow of information has become difficult to censor, mass media, even in some democratic countries, remain subject to arbitrary government control.
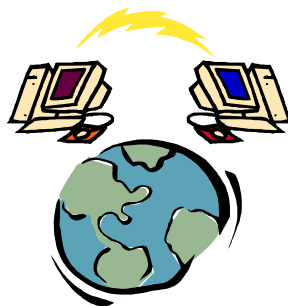
Taking note of the IIC's mission "to explore leading-edge issues and exchange ideas on the challenge of new communications technologies and their commercial, cultural and political impacts among policy makers, regulators, academics, content providers, technologists and industrialists," the conference participants considered the possibilities of convergence and community in mass media, with emphasis on the needs of rural and underserved populations.

Access is priority

Most people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are not yet connected to electronic networks, with the exception of one-way radio broadcasting. South Asia, where 23 percent of the world's people live, has less than one percent of the world's Internet users. Disparities like these pose challenges to both the public and private sectors engaged in communication.

But information and communication are not just a question of being online or being able to make a telephone call. As we enter the era of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, access to the infrastructure for knowledge-sharing is essential to social and economic progress. As the United Nations Committee on Science and Technology for Development put it: "Although the costs of using information-communication technologies (ICTs) are high, the costs of not doing so are likely to be higher."

Conventional telecommunication services using standard technologies are unlikely to bring about the required levels of connectivity within the desired time frames. Disparities of access are enormous—most people living in rural areas still have no access to basic telephone services. Radio is the most widespread communication device, and yet substantial numbers of people do not have access even to local radio.

By mixing and matching technologies and applications, we can transform the "global megacity" into a sustainable global village comprising a vibrant mosaic of cultures, voices and images. With such convergence, we are presented with a unique opportunity to promote equity and socio-economic development in a mutually supportive global environment.

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Recommendations

Meeting the challenge of communication and knowledge for all requires creative responses from government agencies responsible for communication policy and regulation, from the telecommunications industry and from international governance bodies. Organisations such as the IIC can catalyse

imaginative thinking required for this task and provide a forum for coordinating future initiatives. Governments must develop policy, establish regulatory measures and support programmes to ensure rural and underserved populations' access.

Transparency and Public Involvement in Policy and Regulatory Processes

Policy making and regulation in fast-evolving fields such as telecommunications and broadcasting have wide ramifications on society, and require transparency as well as the involvement of all sectors. There are efforts by various organisations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Bank, Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), and Federal Communications Commission-USA (FCC), to educate new regulators. They, and other regional and national organisations and institutions, need to expand these efforts to include the education of citizens and NGOs for their awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the new regulatory environments.

Governments and their regulatory institutions must be accountable and independent, especially in countries that have recently liberalised telecommunications and broadcasting.

Citizen groups have an important role to play in empowering communities and consumers to become active participants in the policy and regulatory processes. Building public awareness will lead to a critical mass of public opinion and action. Technology needs to be demystified and its benefits shared by all.

◆ Governments must create and implement consultative structures and processes that will result in fully informed and active

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public participation in policy-making and regulation.

◆ Licensing and regulatory functions addressing convergence must be performed efficiently, with consultation, and conform to social and cultural values and rights.

◆ Citizens' groups focussed on single issues need training to familiarise themselves with the cross-cutting nature of information-communication technologies and their potential applications to support development.

◆ Because of the increasing importance of setting international standards and frequency allocation, global governance bodies such as the ITU, World Trade Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Bank must also be transparent, accountable and allow broader participation from civil society.

Enhancing the Social Use of Radio through ICTs

While in some parts of the world, a radio is merely accessory, say, a radio in an automobile, in large parts of the South, it is the only communication device that most people have access to. Unfortunately, the potential for public service and community broadcasting has been largely squandered.

Radio that is relevant, inter-

esting and interactive will allow long-neglected people to be heard and to participate in the democratic process. Their having a say in decisions that shape their lives will ultimately improve living standards. This requires creative applications of technology that go beyond audio and other Web-casting technologies. The challenge is to enhance the social use of local and community radio, and to find innovative ways to use ICTs to extend radio's reach and interactivity, and to improve its cultural relevance and programming quality.

There are already working models for the use of the Internet in national news exchanges and programme syndication such as Radio 68H in Indonesia and Pulsar in Latin America that other countries and regions can consider.

The convergence of Internet and radio can provide an innovative and effective way for facilitating knowledge sharing and intercultural exchange. Various initiatives using radio as a gateway to the Internet such as the Kotmale Community Radio in Sri Lanka are ongoing. In so doing, these ventures are making the Net's information resources available to rural and underserved communities.

◆ Affordable access to frequencies and licenses must be made available to communities so they can set up their own development-oriented broadcast services.

◆ Socially oriented projects focusing on the convergence of ICT and local broadcasting should be supported, including research on affordable communications technologies such as the Internet. The results of such research should be disseminated widely and be accompanied by learning processes to help develop NGOs' and people's organisations' capacity. ◗