



Concept Paper

World Press Freedom Day 2012

New Voices: Media Freedom Helping to Transform Societies

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Consistent with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development.

– **The Declaration of Windhoek, 3 May 1991**

New Voices: Media Freedom Helping to Transform Societies

The World Press Freedom Day (WPF) was jointly established in 1991 by UNESCO and the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI), in the framework of a conference held in Windhoek, Namibia. The conference, which gave us the Windhoek Declaration¹, emphasized the idea that press freedom should be understood as necessitating pluralism and independence for the mass media at large. Since then, the World Press Freedom Day has been celebrated every year on 3 May, and the relevance of these ideas is underlined by democratic events during 2011. In addition to the annual WPF celebration, UNESCO's Executive Board also created the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize in 1997. Each year, the prize is given to a person, an organization or an institution that has dedicated its activities to promote or defend press freedom anywhere in the world.

More than two decades after the Windhoek conference, WPF continues to resonate in the defense of media freedom. This year, we all have been encouraged by the unprecedented global socio-political democratic developments in which various media played an important part, even if not to the extent where some have spoken about the "social media revolution". Indeed, many factors came into play with the events taking place, particularly in the Arab states, including underlying economic woes and political suppression, which elicited mass organization especially by young people. However, we cannot deny the fact that the freedom to harness the power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and especially those of new media played a significant role, even while often being in conjunction with satellite television. This has reaffirmed what the WPF had been championing for the past twenty years—media freedom is part of the package of fundamental rights for which people will strive.

¹ Declaration of Windhoek 3 May 1991. Available at http://www.unesco.org/webworld/fed/temp/communication_democracy/windhoek.htm

The confluence of press freedom and freedom of expression, through various traditional as well as new media, has given rise to an unprecedented level of media freedom. It is helping to enable civil society, young people and communities to bring about massive social and political transformations. Media freedom entails the right of any person to freedom of opinion and expression on a public basis, which includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers, as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The recent uprisings in some Arab states have highlighted the power of media and the human quest for media freedom, as well as underlining the fact that social inequalities will indefinitely search for equilibrium, in order to address those inequalities. Could the Arab Spring have taken place without the proliferation of social media or satellite TV? ICT (like text messaging) and social media have enabled the diffusion of vital information to reach the widest number of people in a very short span of time. Social media have enabled protesters to self-organize, and have engaged the global youth in the fight to be able to freely express themselves and the aspirations of their wider communities.

This newfound media freedom is promising to transform societies in ways perhaps unimaginable only a year ago. It has enabled the emergence of new ways to communicate, to share information and knowledge, and for people to widen their sense of participation, identity and belonging. Media freedom, including online freedom, also plays a dynamic role in the economic transformation of society. Indeed, it is an incentive for foreign companies and private investments. Companies are much more disposed to have long term business interest in countries where media freedom is respected. It is necessary to ensure the transparency of public information, including public spending, so as to curb corruption. Public information is rightfully common public goods, with the government acting as its caretaker, and hence should be made easily and readily available – including via social media, cellphones and the Internet.

Yet, media freedom is fragile, and it is also not yet within the reach of everyone. While the enabling environment for true media freedom is improving, the harsh reality is that many in the world still do not have access to basic communication technology. Furthermore, as more reporting is transmitted online, more and more online journalists including bloggers are being harnessed, attacked and even killed for their work. UNESCO has dedicated a webpage, *UNESCO Remembers Assassinated Journalists*, to remember the journalists who were murdered. Lastly, States have a responsibility to ensure that national laws on freedom of expression are in accordance with internationally accepted principles as laid out in the Windhoek Declaration and UNESCO's Media Development Indicators, which are both documents that they have endorsed.

Theme 1: Media Freedom has The Power to Transform Societies

Free media transform societies by enlightening the decision making process with information, and thus empowering individuals to take control of their destinies. In this context, media freedom plays a crucial role in the transformation of society by reshaping its political, economic and social aspects. That is why media freedom is promoted by UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency with a mandate to defend and promote freedom of expression and its corollary press freedom.

This wave of revolution was triggered by the self-immolation of a vegetable peddler in Tunisia who set himself on fire after having his vegetable cart confiscated and being publicly humiliated by the authorities. This singular image of a desperate act by an ordinary person, which went viral through mobile

technology and social media, heralded an extraordinary beginning for this new decade. Years of censorship, suppression, and restriction came crumbling down with the fall of the former Tunisian authorities. Tunisia demonstrated the transformative power that can be brought forth by the convergence of social media, mobile connections, satellite TV and an earnest desire to fundamentally change socio-economic-political situation. It started a domino effect that went on to reach Tahrir Square in Egypt, the city of Benghazi in Libya, and other parts of the region. The actions of young people have been crucial during the movement, and amongst their tools has been social media.

Similarly, in Egypt, the use of social media, ICTs and satellite TV, has also played a revolutionary role in the democratic and political processes. Indeed, the protest movement against the Egyptian authorities was accelerated through the use of social networking sites and specifically through mobile phones. A case in point was the effort of a young Egyptian, Wael Ghonim, who created the Facebook campaign, “We are all Khaled Said”, referring to a 28-year-old Egyptian arrested six months earlier and beaten to death while he was held in detention. This Facebook campaign soon snowballed from thousands to more than a million supporters online. It has been one of the rallying points to denounce the regime’s violence and abuse.

From developed countries mired in economic woes to developing countries aching for change, people and especially young people found a voice where there was none before. Where their voices had been muffled and ignored, new voices—stronger, more powerful and using communication tools—have emerged. The “Occupy” movement, spread across Europe and North America, finds its strength from its ideology, its presence in occupying physical location and also through occupying a prominent spot in various social media. In this way, media freedom has amplified and multiplied each individual voice. As media freedom grows, the strength of the new voices grows in tandem, and their calls for social transformation and positive political change become an unstoppable force.

Food for Thought:

- What are the best ways to engage youth in the wider promotion of freedom of expression?
- How to use media freedom to improve the democratic development of a country?
- How can governments use new media to better meet citizens’ rights to information?
- What are the added values of social media in contributing to the democratic debate?
- What can we do to capture and sustain the gains on freedom of expression created by social media, and on the Internet more broadly?

Theme 2: Difficulty in The Access to Quality Information Undermines Media Freedom

Media freedom is undermined by a lack of information infrastructures as well as the skills and literacy to access and critically evaluate information. Not only do many people not have access to be able to express themselves publicly, they are also deprived of information resources that could otherwise empower them. The lack of access is particular glaring in the context of access to the Internet and computers. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), more than 60 percent of the world’s households still do not own a computer² and no more than 35 percent of the world population

² See *Key Global Telecom Indicators for the World Telecommunication Service Sector*. Available at http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom.html

consider themselves as “internet users” with the vast majority of these surveyed belonging to the “developing countries”³.

Considering that the right to free speech and press freedom are deeply interconnected with the right to access information, it is a priority to bridge the digital divide both between and within countries. Many of the youth are acutely aware of this obstacle. In fact, the participants at the recent 7th UNESCO Youth Forum underlined that democratizing access to ICTs is an urgent challenge. Universal access to information must be pursued especially in remote areas such as rural, remote and insular areas.

Despite the fact that information is yet to be accessible to everybody and at all times, there are some encouraging trends. A particularly bright spot is the development of ever cheaper and more powerful mobile telephony. Currently, there are about 5,3 billion mobile phones in use throughout the world and the numbers are increasing month by month. Some recent studies also suggest that by 2015, more than 5.6 billion personal devices will be connected to mobile networks, and at least 788 million users will be connected to the Internet exclusively from mobile platform⁴. Already, short-messaging system (SMS) is being used to disseminate latest news to mobile phones of users who would otherwise be left out of the information loop. Harnessing this development could be seen as one way to improve the access to information to the majority of people in the world.

Nevertheless, infrastructures alone are not the only consideration in the issue of access. Good access could be greatly aided with information friendly policies, and a solid implementation of freedom of information act (FOIA) or right to information act (RTI). Less than half the world’s countries have some kind of FOIA or RTI enacted, or in the process of being introduced. More countries should be part of this growing trend. This could be achieved by working with law and policy makers and special interest groups to tailor FOIA or RTI in accordance with international standards and national needs. Media practitioners are natural allies in this regard as they are well positioned to sensitize the public to this issue. Governments can also do a lot to proactively make information available through ICTs.

Enabling easy access to public information relates closely to a fair and balanced electoral process. Elections are the cornerstone of democracy, and media have a vital role in the election process. Media have the power to mobilize voters and remind them of their responsibilities and their rights. Journalists also have a duty to express citizens’ problems and expectations to the candidates. Media including social media are able to contribute to a fair election by reporting the irregularities in the organization of the elections⁵.

The challenges relating to the access to information also concern the lack of training and human capacity building, especially among youth, women, and older people. The education system should include specialized training in ICTs, and in media and information literacy (MIL). First of all, information gatekeepers such as teachers and media practitioners should become highly media and information literate in order to train their students. Moreover, MIL should be strengthened in order to enable us to be a better judge of both the good and the bad of all the terabytes of information that overload the daily lives of many people.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Mobile Africa Report 2011*, p.11. Available at http://www.mobilemonday.net/reports/MobileAfrica_2011.pdf

⁵ Reuters Foundation, *Reporting Elections: A Guide*, http://webworld.unesco.org/download/fed/iraq/english/media_elections_en.pdf

Food for Thought:

- What are some of the considerations for implementing FOIA or RTI in countries with no such provisions?
- How can free media in the online area better contribute to the success of democratic elections?
- Where do mobile technology and service providers fit into the long term development of press freedom and freedom of expression?
- Which strategy could enhance the media and information literacy?
- What are the priority groups who would benefit most from a strengthening of media and information literacy?

Theme 3: Challenges to Media in A New Environment

New media and new opportunities have raised new issues around the safety of journalists and citizen reporters, as well as the character of regulation and training in the media sector, especially in the newly democratic countries. As more and more news is being transmitted through the Internet, the number of cases concerning safety of journalists who operate online has greatly increased. Four years ago, the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ) reported that for the first time in mass media history, more online journalists are being jailed worldwide than of any other mass medium⁶. Quality journalism is unlikely to flourish if media practitioners are constantly under the threat of abductions, hostage-taking, intimidation, illegal arrests, sexual attacks especially on female journalists, and most of all murders.

The protections afforded to traditional media workers must necessarily be extended to new media practitioners. The problem of impunity must be addressed because the majority of crimes committed against media workers usually remain unpunished and uninvestigated. Indeed, according to the *International Safety Institute* (INSI), the murderers of journalists are never prosecuted in nine out of ten cases. In this context, cooperation with media freedom watchdogs such as *Reporters without Borders*, *Inter American Press Association* (IAPA), and *Article 19* is crucial to combat impunity.

In addition, the number of citizen reporters is also on the rise. They report on events mostly out of their own initiative. They include the brave individuals who decided to turn on their camera and to become more than a passive bystander as history unfolds around them in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere. Some of these individuals will return to their normal daily lives, but some continue to be committed to bringing news to the wider audience despite the danger this act of reporting poses to them and their families. Their contribution should not be unsung and their safety should not be ignored.

While social media offers an unprecedented amount of connectivity and information, there is a worrying trend of threatening the freedom of expression and press freedom online. There is an increase in cyber-attacks on sites that are critical of the ruling government, imposition of bans on certain social networking sites, and the arrests of bloggers⁷. Comments left by anonymous individuals on social networking sites are being used as justification to block certain websites, or as cause for mounting defamation law suits. Where does the responsibility of a defamatory comment made on a third party

⁶ <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2008/12/cpjs-2008-prison-census-online-and-in-jail.php>

⁷ For example see <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1398> and <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2011/05/the-10-tools-of-online-oppressors.php>

social media application lie? What kind of penalty, if any, corresponds to liability of such defamation cases? Defamation must be decriminalized both on- and off-line, and be made part of the civil code, in accordance to international standards. And much as attention may be given to curbing hate speech online, even more should be given to advancing information and media literacy so that users are empowered to be the final arbiters of assessing the content that they consume and produce online, operating with appropriate understandings of international principles of freedom of expression and the limited nature of limitations that can be placed on this human right.

The emergence of new media outlets, in the aftermath of the uprisings particularly in some Arab states, is altering make-up of the media market in the region. Previously, there was a reliance on international media rather than local news sources. National media outlets founded before the revolution were often controlled by the authorities. In this context, international and regional news outlets became central actors in the Middle-East media landscape. However, since the fall of the public authorities in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there has been a mushrooming of new local media outlets. How will this new development influence the flow of information in the region? How will newspapers, radio and TV integrate with social media in terms of mutual value-additions and sustainability of quality journalism?

In the post-revolutionary situation, the media sector is enjoying a much higher level of freedom, but at the same time it suffers a lack of norms and internationally-referenced regulation systems. There are significant questions about whether state-owned media in a given country can be transformed into (one or more) public service outlets media, whether they should be privatised, or whether the two strategies could be combined in one way or another. Whereas government advertising was previously abused to support state or “sweetheart” media, systems need to be built to channel it on an impartial basis whose logic is only the audiences that various media can deliver. Subsidy systems (operating on a non-political basis) may be needed to help emerging media (especially in marginalised areas and social groupings) become commercially competitive. Regulation is always a tricky issue, especially in post-authoritarian societies insofar as it is often seen as censorship. However, the regulation of media can be beneficial to citizens. For example, specific norms can seek to protect them by requiring fair coverage on broadcasting during elections, as well as restricting language inciting violence, and hate speech. Thus, a legal framework for independent regulation, complying with international standards, could be implemented to set parameters for the media sector, and particularly broadcast on the public airwaves.

Moreover, the media must learn to adapt to a new culture of self-regulation and strengthening of the professional standards. Those who were accustomed to “sweetheart” journalism need to learn a new mind-set of critical independence, and how to ask difficult questions of all sides, how to conduct investigative journalism and how to best contribute to a democratic culture. In the aftermath of revolutions, notions of ethics and editorial independence may not be fully implemented in the media sector. Thus, the development of adequate media training systems is a priority. For example, the newly established *Egyptian Journalists’ Independent Syndicate*, and the *National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (NSTJ)* are promoting the reform of the media self-regulation system and the use of an updated professional code of ethics⁸. The challenge is: in the rush to win the market in the new freer environment, how would the quality and professional standards of the press be ensured when powerful commercial pressures can point the other way? In the current transitional situation, it is necessary to

⁸ Joan Barata Mir, *Political and Media Transitions in Tunisia: A Snapshot of Media Policy and Regulatory Environment*, Commissioned by Internews, August 2011: http://www.internews.org/pubs/MENA/Internews_Tunisia_MediaLawReview_Aug11.pdf

promote professionalism within the media landscape; and to provide media practitioners a solid capacity building about international standards.

Food for Thought:

- Would sub-regional networks and media workers' and journalists' unions be able to protect their rights and improve their working conditions?
- How can the decriminalization of defamation law be accelerated, and how can defamation be incorporated into the civil code, in accordance with international standards?
- Where does the responsibility lie for a defamatory comment made on a third party social media application? Who should take ownership of opinions posted on social media sites?
- Who are the citizen reporters and how can their safety be supported?
- How is regulation for the media sector changing after the fall of restrictive regimes?
- How to develop relations between major international media groups and emerging local media?
- What is needed for state-owned media, and can part of it regain the trust of the citizens in countries where it was highly manipulated in the past?
- What are the needs of the newly emergent non-state media sector?
- What is needed to raise ethical and professional standards in a media sector undergoing radical transformation?

Conclusion

The 2012 World Press Freedom Day takes place at an historic juncture, which highlights the power that emerges when people claim media freedom as a means to transform their societies towards a democratic future. At the same time, the development of media freedom remains limited by legal and practical access to quality information. Finally, there are substantial new challenges facing media, and to citizens using media, in this time of change – ranging from safety and ethics, and continuing through policy, regulation, institutions and law. The Day will be an occasion for many stakeholders to celebrate the significance of media freedom, to examine how to deepen it, and to deliberate on how to best resolve the new challenges of elaborating this right in complex and changing circumstances.