



Media News

Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa

MediaNews 19- November 2005/ Quarterly newsletter of NiZA 's Media Programme

Zimbabwe: repressing media through law

Interview – Special report Living Yearbook NiZA’s annual forum (‘Living Yearbook’) in Amsterdam was a good occasion to catch up with one of the guests: Zimbabwean lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa. In an interview with this courageous defender of press freedom we discuss how the Zimbabwean media has been beaten into submission through repressive laws.

Swazi-born Mtetwa is a human rights lawyer in private practice and has been living in Zimbabwe since 1983. Much of her work concerns defending journalists and media outlets in Zimbabwe who are charged with ‘criminal offences’. She also sits on, among others, the board of the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ), and the board of two ‘independent’ newspapers in Zimbabwe, the *Standard* and the *Zimbabwe Independent*.

Since Robert Mugabe and his ruling Zanu-PF saw their constitution refused by a majority of Zimbabweans in a referendum in 2000, they have embarked on a policy of ruthless repression, including repression of freedom of expression and access to information.

Repressive laws

The main tool for media subjugation in the Zimbabwe of 2005 is the Media and Information Commission (MIC). Based on their loyalty to the ruling party, the MIC and

Zimbabwe: repressing media through law
(Living Yearbook)

Interview special report **P1**

What Mushizi did next A community radio, rebels and people

(Living Yearbook)

Interview special report **P3**

Investigative journalist in 8 days

News **P5**

Louw wins press freedom award

News flash **P5**

First Grassroot Media Summit succesful
Reportage **P6**

Global Forum for Media Development
Meeting **P7**

African investigative journalists cross the border -

Meeting **P9**

Awards for ICT stories

Newsflash **P10**

African media and the Information Society

Comment **P11**

South Africa is no solved problem

My point of view **P12**

its chair, Tafataona Mahoso, are politically appointed by government. Mtetwa: “The media commission is a law unto itself. Mahoso views the independent press not just as a threat to government but something that should be abolished entirely.”

According to Mtetwa, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) lays the framework of the media commission and stipulates that all media and

NiZA's Media Programme supports civil society organisations in Southern Africa that contribute to the creation of more democratic and open societies where governments are held accountable to citizens' needs and interests. To this end the Media Programme supports the strengthening of our partner organisations so that they can: 1. Influence the media and freedom of expression policies and legal environment in the SADC region to reach a conducive freedom of expression environment, 2. Increase access to information for citizens, 3. Train media professionals to deliver more balanced and accurate information on key political, social and economic issues, 4. Improve the financial sustainability of media outlets.

www.niza.nl/medianews
(un)subscribe: medianews@niza.nl

journalists have to seek annual registration and accreditation. Individual journalists as well as media outlets such as newspapers are thus privy to self-censorship if they want to be accredited. “For the simple reason that when you know that you are subject to re-registration at the end of each year, you will be thinking ‘if I write this story will the media commission register me or deem me not fit for continued publication?’”

Journalists are furthermore in danger of state reprisal under the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). This act states that journalists may be criminally prosecuted if they make statements that are dangerous to the public order and security. Mtetwa clarifies: “So if you get your story wrong for any reason, it can be argued that that story endangers public order and security and you can be arrested and prosecuted.”

And it doesn’t end there, tells Mtetwa. The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) is meant to limit the number of broadcasting outlets by obliging all would-be broadcasters to apply for licences and by only giving licenses to those broadcasters the state approves of. The Official Secrets Act (OSA) criminalises the release of certain information, even if that information is beneficial to the public at large, that can be seen to be prejudicial to the safety or interests of Zimbabwe or information which might be useful to an ‘enemy’. The act makes provision for the purpose of preventing persons from obtaining or disclosing official secrets in Zimbabwe and prevents unauthorized persons from making sketches, plans or models of and to prevent trespass upon defense works, fortifications, military reserves and other prohibited places.

And the Miscellaneous Offences Act (MOA) criminalises basically everything in Zimbabwe, like for example riotous or indecent conduct. The police have frequently used this act to arbitrarily arrest opposition and civil society activists on spurious charges. Mtetwa: “This piece of legislation is used if they can’t convict you under any of the other laws.”

Judiciary repression

Mtetwa stresses the importance of the role of the judiciary in the clamp down on freedom of speech. “The media landscape has not been helped by the kind of compromised judiciary that we have. It is quite apparent that the courts are working hand-in glove with the government to ensure that media space remains shut.”

According to Mtetwa, the Supreme Court is now manned by judges who are loyal to the Zanu-PF establishment. “They are appointed not because they are judge material, but because they will not make decisions that go against the ruling party. The entire Supreme Court, which is tasked with interpreting the constitution, is made up of ruling party



Beatrice Mtetwa

supporters who have been given farms and other perks.”

This state control of media leaves the Zimbabwe media landscape stale indeed. There is only one TV station, ZBC, but that is state run, and no national radio that is free of state control. Internet media are only accessible for the wealthy few.

Printed press such as *The Herald*, *The Chronicle*, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Sunday News* are propaganda tools, says Mtetwa. “Everybody knows that those don’t even want to pretend that they are anything other than government propaganda tools.” This leaves the weekly *Standard* and *Independent*, as *The Daily Mirror* and weekly *Financial Gazette* are said to be partially owned by ruling party affiliated businesses. But due to the annual

registration process, even these newspapers can't be considered truly independent.

Is it surprising therefore that Afrobarometer concluded in 2004 that Mugabe's popularity had more than doubled since 2000, despite the fact that he had laid his country in ruins?

Afrobarometer revealed that the role of the remaining media as propaganda tools for the government was so effective that this led to rising positive appreciation of Mugabe. Mtetwa: "You will only operate for as long as government allows you to operate. And government will only allow you to operate if you print what they want you to print."

Website of MMPZ: <http://www.mmpz.org.zw/>

For the research of Afrobarometer: Chikwanha, Annie, Tulani Sithole and Michael Bratton, *The Power of Propaganda: Public Opinion in Zimbabwe*, 2004, check: http://www.idasa.org.za/index.asp?page=search_results.asp%3Fsearchtext%3Dafrobarometer%26searchtype%3Dbasic and scroll to category 19.

By Olmo von Meijenfeldt

*Olmo von Meijenfeldt works for the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA).
olmo@idasact.org.za*

NiZA congratulates Beatrice Mtetwa on winning one of the International Press Freedom Awards presented by the Committee to Protect Journalists. The award ceremony will take place on November 22 in New York. For more information on the awards and the other winners go to:
http://www.cpj.org/awards05/awards_release_05.html

What Mushizi did next : Dilemmas facing a DRC radio station

Reportage - Special report Living Yearbook

Based in Bukavu, South Kivu (DRC) Radio Maendeleo was set up in the last days of Mobuto Sese Seko's crumbling regime. The community radio station, launched in a time of uncertainty and disorder, has an interesting history, which is embodied in station director Kizito Mushizi.

At NiZA's annual Living Yearbook in September, Dutch radio journalist, Ginger da Silva, extracted the station's dramatic history from Mushizi. The history was disclosed in the form of a presentation of actual dilemmas that Mushizi had to confront in his dream of making Radio Maendeleo a broadcasting reality.

The dilemmas were also posed to the audience. They were asked what they would do if they were in Mushizi's shoes. Da Silva gave the public three options before she asked Mushizi what happened in reality. You, as a reader, will get the same options. Ask yourself what you would do before you read what Mushizi did and why.

Transmitter

In 1999, the rebel movement Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD-Goma) came to the radio station and demanded control of the transmitter.

What would you do?

- A.** Try to fool the attackers with a fake transmitter
- B.** Beg them not to take the transmitter and promise you'll broadcast propaganda for the rebels
- C.** Give up the transmitter immediately and flee

Mushizi agonised over this and eventually decided to surrender the transmitter. Mushizi: "I wanted to fool the rebels, but they were too intelligent. And because I didn't want to broadcast propaganda, I gave up the transmitter." Mushizi was imprisoned for two weeks. After his release he wanted to start broadcasting again.

How would you achieve this?

- A. Get guns hidden in your car, call your friends and go back to fight the rebels
- B. Contact the rebels who've seized the transmitter and try to start a dialogue
- C. Contact NiZA and other donors to acquire a new transmitter and start an alternative station



Kizito Mushizi

Faced without any means to broadcast, Mushizi decided to negotiate with the fighters to retrieve his transmitter. Mushizi: "Acquiring a new transmitter wasn't an option because I was banned from broadcasting, so I contacted the rebel movement." With the rebel leadership constantly changing and Mushizi having to deal with different people most of the time, it was two years and ten days before he recovered it.

Rebels

But that was not the end of Mushizi's woes. The rebels were not done yet. A military man was placed in the radio station's newsroom to monitor all broadcasts.

How would you cope?

- A. Try to turn him into a friend by buying him one meal per day
- B. Set up fake meetings in the newsroom, while real editorial decisions are made elsewhere in secret sessions

C. Try to walk a careful path in programming between good journalism and the editorial bias of the censor and the people who put him there

Mushizi considered his options and he chose to feed the rebel a good meal once a day. Mushizi: "We were lucky because the soldiers weren't being paid. So it was easy for us to feed him and he forgot about his chiefs." This strategy worked, as the man never censored the broadcasts and instead became close to Mushizi and staff.

Coup d'etat

When Mushizi received fragments of information of a possible coup d'etat in the rebel movement, he pondered on whether to broadcast the story. If true, it was very important to warn the public. But on the other hand, you don't want to alarm the public and cause unrest if it isn't true.

What would you do?

- A. You broadcast the incomplete information, informing listeners of the dubious accuracy
- B. You hold off broadcasting, open a file and try to obtain more information
- C. You drop the story because, whether true or not, it's dangerous for your reporters' personal safety

Any action had grave consequences but eventually, Mushizi chose to hold off broadcasting and tried to source additional information. However, this was not forthcoming. Months later there was a rebellion within the rebellion.

Radio Maendeleo continues to broadcast. It is now able to work in solidarity with all media across Bukavu. While many of us take freedom of expression for granted, for Mushizi and many others, it can be a question of life and death. Mushizi's gamble seems to have paid off for now – at least until the next dilemma.

By Chris Kabwato

Kabwato (C.Kabwato@ru.ac.za) is the director of Highway Africa

Website Highway Africa:
<http://www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/>
Highway Africa News Agency (HANA),
www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/hana/

Investigative journalist in 8 days

News

A new investigative journalism program at Rhodes University in Grahamstown promises to teach South African journalists all the skills an investigative journalist needs.

Twenty-five carefully selected journalists will attend the first four-day session from November 21 to 25, with the second session being held from February 4 to 7. According to program co-ordinator and investigative journalism lecturer Derek Luyt, it takes only eight days to train students to become investigative journalists: "These sessions will be very intensive. The eight days will be enough," he says.



Rhodes University

Luyt says his aims are to develop local investigative journalism. In the upcoming three years he wants to train a *total* of 75 journalists, giving them continuing support and ensuring the sustainability of the program by offering mentoring services afterwards.

Focus

During the program, the journalists will focus on story selection, research, finding and

evaluating sources, accessing private and public records, interviewing, the ethics of investigation, reporting and writing investigative stories.

The idea is to help journalists fight corruption and protect the public interest while contributing to democracy and sustainable economic growth. Luyt: "South Africa needs special skilled and trained journalists such as these to fight poverty and inequality, especially in rural areas."

The program for local or regional journalists is sponsored by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Development Agency for Southern Africa (IDASA). Not only will the students receive full funding for the course, but the follow-up program after this investigative journalism course is also fully funded.

In future, Derek Luyt aims to extend the program to other African countries.

For more information visit the Rhodes University website:

<http://www.ru.ac.za/community/journ/>.

Or e-mail programme co-ordinator Derek Luyt: d.luyt@ru.ac.za.

By Elvira van Noort

Van Noort (elviravannoort@hotmail.com) works for the Mail & Guardian Online in Johannesburg through NiZA's program for young journalists.

Louw wins press freedom award

Newsflash

South African journalist Raymond Louw has won the Windhoek-based Media Institute of Southern Africa's (MISA) press freedom award. According to the newspaper *The Namibian*, Louw has been a very vocal opponent of restrictive media laws and press freedom violations. He also remains active as a journalism trainer and advocate of independent broadcasting.

For a bio of Louw check the site of the World Press Freedom Committee:

<http://www.wpfc.org/index.jsp?page=Bio%20Raymond%20Louw.html>

MISA: <http://www.misa.org/>

First Grassroot Media Summit successful

Reportage

Using appropriate and often free technology, grassroots media are coming up with affordable and innovative solutions to every day publishing problems, which help them compete on an even footing with their conglomerate competitors.

This became clear during the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) first ever Grassroots Media Summit, held in Johannesburg in September. It brought together almost 450 delegates representing small publishers from all over South and southern Africa. “It was an opportunity for like minded people who face similar problems to get together and exchange experiences, as well as to discuss joint ventures,” said AIP chairman Justin Arenstein.



A highlight of the two-day summit was AIP’s inaugural Media Innovation Awards, which are different from the usual type of journalism awards that recognise editorial excellence by individual journalists or publications. Instead these Open Society Foundation and NiZA-sponsored awards, focused on the nuts-and-bolts business aspects of publishing that are

vital for the sustainability and growth of small media.

“With limited resources it can often be a lonely battle for survival for small media, which are often up against the might of giant media houses with all their massive support structures and the latest technological tools,” the judges noted in a preamble to the awards. “And yet, within this small, independent media, innovative ideas and systems are being developed, often through necessity, using appropriate and affordable technology. It is these ideas and systems that the Media Innovation Awards seek to recognise and publicise so they can be shared for the good of the entire independent grassroots media sector,” the judges noted.

Free software

The awards showcased “home grown” cost effective solutions systems – many of which used free Open Source software - that ranged from management tools specifically tailored for the small newspaper sector, to innovative advertising booking and content management systems and highly innovative circulation and distribution systems.

“...with all the limitations, there were some outstanding entries that proved AIP’s original argument when it launched this initiative – that there is no shortage of good ideas and innovations in the small media sector,” the judges said.

Said Arenstein: “The real value of these awards is that people realised that there are grassroots solutions available that don’t cost an arm and a leg and can help small operations compete with their big conglomerate competitors. We are now engaged in discussions with various donors to ensure that it is possible for these systems to become freely available to community media,” he added.

Winners in the various categories included Rhodes University’s New Media Lab (NML) Digital Newsroom, an innovative newsroom automation system that is at an advanced stage

of development. Similar to systems used in the major publishing houses, the intention is to release it to the community media free of charge.

Think commercially

Another winner was the Zoutpansberger newspaper's simple, but effective, advertising booking system that ensures users have essential information at their fingertips at all times. As one judge remarked: "It trains a small publisher to think commercially just by using it."

The Big Issue South Africa received a special mention for its distribution system that creates jobs by using homeless, vulnerably sheltered or long term unemployed people to sell the magazine.

Another important aspect of the summit was a series of short workshops aimed at passing on a variety of "how to" skills that small publishers need to survive and grow. These included budget planning, designing ad rates and sales kits, advertising sales strategies and effective use of market research.

Other workshops focused on teaching practical design skills, including editing with Adobe Photoshop and making up eye catching front pages. Among the best attended workshops was one that looked at South Africa's upcoming municipal elections and the role of the community press in covering them. Another focused on media ethics, while another popular workshop looked at strategies on how community media could deal with the loss of income they face with the growth of state and municipal funded publications.

Said Arenstein, who was re-elected as chair of AIP during the Summit: "This was the first event of its kind we have held and it was a huge success. We have learned a lot and are now looking at how we can improve next year's event."

This, he said, included the possibility of holding a week-long series of 'boot camps' just before the actual summit during which

intensive, very practical, hands on training in things like journalism, advertising sales and planning and media management.

Website of the Association of Independent Publishers:

<http://www.independentpublisher.org/index.asp>

By Raymond Joseph

Joseph (rayjoe@iafrica.com) works as a freelance journalist and media trainer, with a special interest in community media, specialising in start-ups of new grassroots community print initiatives. He has worked extensively as a consultant for NiZA in South and southern Africa.

Global Forum for Media Development

Meeting

Over 425 delegates representing media assistance organisations from 97 countries attended the first Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) conference held in Amman, Jordan, from October 1-3. A look at the key findings.

According to Warren Feek, the Executive Director of the Communications Initiative in Australia, a group of economists from the London School of Economics have found that a 1.1% increase in newspaper circulation is associated with a 2.4% increase in food distribution and a 5.5% increase in calamity relief expenditure. Their conclusion: countries with higher levels of media development are more active in protecting vulnerable citizens.

And the World Bank Institute has found that its 'Voice and Accountability' index, which tracks how much say citizens have in the choice and replacement of political parties and actors, shows an almost overwhelming (0.97) correlation with the global Press Freedom Index produced by Freedom House in the USA for 188 countries in 2004.

These and many other examples were cited in papers to present the case for continued and increased investment and support to media development organizations at the conference in Amman.

Main points

Key findings of the conference, which was held to explore and encourage greater value added collaboration across the media development sector, include:

- that media development organisations are vital to social, political and economic development;
- that media development should be viewed by practitioners, donors, and policymakers alike as a legitimate sector to be recognised in its own right within the broader framework of economic, political, and social development efforts supported by the international community, and not be dealt with piecemeal as a subcomponent of other sectors;
- that governments and other donor agencies must recognise that support for media development must be made directly or through local, regional or international organisations supporting such development and not incorporated through budget support to recipient country governments;
- that mainstream and commercial media are not covering development concerns effectively. This does not mean that journalists should become social activists, but that they should understand their role in giving voice to people and holding governments and other parties to account;
- that *Development of the Media* and *Media for Development* are complementary and interlinked strategies, and media engagement in development issues works best within

the context of a strong independent media environment;

- that the impact and credibility of the entire media development sector will be greatly reinforced by collaborative work that defines better empirical measurements to monitor and evaluate projects within the field and impact on the entire media landscape in any given country or region. This work should also take up the challenge of developing indicators and mechanisms to measure the linkage between media development and the overall development process at country level.

During the final plenary session of the conference, at which delegates critically evaluated the conference and discussed the future of the GFMD, Nick Fillmore of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) described the GFMD as “an amazing meeting” in which he had “never before been in the same room with so many experienced people involved in media development”.

He urged the steering committee, essentially a group of volunteers from 18 organisations convened by the US international media development organization Internews, to come back in six months with concrete suggestions for the framework of a permanent Global Forum for Media Development.

Intense debates

The GFMD conference was characterised by many intense debates, in plenary sessions and in the many thematic and regional caucuses that took place. The draft report says: “One of the most heated [debates] focused on the issue of development of the media versus development communications.” Many delegates felt that the media should not be ‘assigned’ the role of advocates for development and that truly responsible, independent media would automatically focus on issues of concern to society. But others said there was a “market failure” and that journalists were not focusing on

[development], but rather more on “commercial” and “sensational” topics.

There was consensus that to increase society’s voice and government accountability, which has a direct correlation on development, the media must also focus on quality of content, integrity of content and its role as a conduit for the public voice. The media must utilize facts and voice opinions from all sectors of society, promoting balance”.

The final report of the GFMD conference, as well as papers delivered at the conference, can be read on the GFMD website: www.gfmd.info (go to Amman Conference).

By Jeanette Minnie

The author, Jeanette Minnie (jcmmin@iafrica.com), is a member of the GFMD Steering Committee. GFMD documents refer to her by the name of her media consultancy service “Zambezi FoX”. Minnie is also an advisor to NiZA ‘s Media and Freedom of Expression programme.

African investigative journalists cross the border

Meeting

Last month NiZA invited journalists from the Forum for African Investigative Reporters (FAIR) to participate in the third Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Amsterdam, and to discuss their future as an organisation at a strategic planning session.

FAIR is a professional association of investigative journalists in Africa. As its website details ‘its mission is to enhance, deepen and build investigative journalism as a profession throughout the continent’. Established in May 2003 by 15 investigative journalists from six African countries, the organisation now boasts 29 reporters.

Seven of them visited the third Global Investigative Journalism Conference in

Amsterdam. The conference highlighted investigative journalism worldwide by means of debates, case studies and workshops with international top journalists. But the main buzz during the conference was ‘cross border investigation’. The event was used to network and to find out if it was possible to embark on projects together.

FAIR member Benjamin Thompson, who is a freelance investigative journalist from Tanzania, says the conference was very useful. He was informed of a possible story in which Russian aircrafts, thought to transport fish, allegedly fly out to East Africa carrying arms. Thompson says: “With the contacts I made at the conference, it is possible to research this story together.”

FAIR colleague Justin Arenstein, of the African Eye News Service, bears testimony to the importance of such co-operation. After the first Global Investigative Conference in Copenhagen, Arenstein linked up with journalists from Israel and Switzerland and tracked down a chemical weapons dealer. Arenstein: “We tracked him from South Africa to Hong Kong to Israel to Switzerland, New York and Las Vegas. He was arrested by Interpol due to our news reports.



Benjamin Thompson

Despite the emphasis on cross border investigation, one third of the conference focused on western investigative journalism and the other part was dedicated to ‘investigative journalism in the rest of the world’. Both Thompson and Arenstein were disappointed by this aspect. Arenstein: “There were hardly any representatives from, for example Latin America and the Middle East. And we were the only journalists from Africa. We really need to make this conference global.” According to Arenstein, there is a strong commitment to bring delegates from these areas to the next conference. Aside from the global conference, which is held every two years, regional conferences will be organised

in the intervening years. “The idea is that the results of those regional conferences will be presented in the global event,” explains Arenstein.

Strategic Planning

Thompson felt energised after the conference. “Examples from my colleagues motivate me to crack heavier stuff in my own country.” And according to Arenstein, it set the tone for FAIR’s *own* strategic planning meeting held at NiZA’s office *after* the conference. “It stimulated us. And by looking at other associations of investigative journalists, we realised that we don’t need to pretend that our organisation wants to save the world, which is often the image donors expect. FAIR is firstly about improving our own standards and professional skills.”

Despite setting up a website, doing some small scale cross border investigations and linking African journalists with their counterparts in the western world, the organisation has been ‘fairly unfocused’, says Arenstein. “What we have achieved with this planning session at NiZA is a *more focused* structure. Instead of the global goals of making the world a better place, we have set ourselves three aims we want to achieve in the upcoming year.”



Justin Arenstein

Three aims

The first aim is to find partners who can train investigative journalists. “The current training needs to be restructured to suit our purposes. For example, for us it would be useful to learn how to follow money across borders.” Part of this training program will consist of a fellowship where journalists can spend six months at a publication with an international reputation for investigative journalism.

Secondly, FAIR wants to assist in organising the first African Regional Investigative Journalism Conference, the spin-off of the global conference. “We will help to set up the program and invite speakers,” tells Arenstein.

The event will be held in July 2006 with the main organiser being the City University of London. “Because of their support they offered to hold the conference in London. But considering the conference is on *African* investigative journalism, we would like to bring the conference to the south.”

Finally, FAIR has also decided to launch one cross border investigation. Says Arenstein: “We want to look at financial contributions to political parties by the corporate sector: who are buying our politicians? We will try to perform the research in at least seven countries. We will publish the results in local media and present it at the next Global Conference for Investigative Journalism so we can show the world what is possible with little resources.”

For information on the Global Conference visit: www.vvoj.nl/conference.

Check www.fairreporters.org to read more about FAIR or e-mail Evelien Groenink at facilitator@fairreporters.org

By Elles van Gelder

Elles van Gelder is a freelance journalist. She is the chief-editor of MediaNews. ellesvg@yahoo.com

Awards for ICT stories

Newsflash

Nine African journalists proudly collected their African Information Society Initiative media award (AISI) during the annual Highway Africa Conference on September 13 in Grahamstown, South Africa.

The awards aim to create awareness for the developing role of ICTs in the media and journalism. The recipients were honored for promoting journalism which contributes to a better understanding of the information society in Africa.

One of the more prestigious awards is the AISI award for Best Female Reporter, which was awarded to Glory Mushingi from Zambia. Her

story, titled "Human Rights, Info Society Intertwined", was selected because of the in-depth nature of the article and her convincing arguments.



Glory Mushinge

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) introduced the annual awards in 2003 as part of its AISI Outreach and Communication Programme.

For more information on the awards and its winners, please visit the AISI website: <http://www.uneca.org/aisi/mediaaward.htm>

By Elvira van Noort

Van Noort (elviravannoort@hotmail.com) works for the Mail & Guardian Online in Johannesburg through NiZA's program for young journalists.

African media and the Information Society

Comment

From November 16th through 18th over 10,000 representatives from governments, civil society and the private sector from all around the world will gather in Tunisia's capital, Tunis, for the 'World Summit on the Information Society' (WSIS). This important global platform should take the African context into account when discussing the future of the information society.

In a first summit in Geneva in 2003, 175 countries agreed on the importance to build a 'people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society', meaning a global society in which the creation, distribution and manipulation of information are core to economic and cultural activities and development. Plans were made to put the potential of knowledge and ICTs at the service of development. The Tunis Summit is set to yield practical agreements between countries on how, who, what and when.

The fact that the information society is being shaped mostly in Western countries is evidently creating a digital divide. While the information revolution enables parts of the world to enter the so-called 'global village', the vast majority remains unhooked from this unfolding phenomenon.

Where ICTs in Africa are used in an innovative way to cater for local information needs, these initiatives go largely unnoticed. If the information society doesn't become inclusive and accessible to all, this electronic revolution might mean three steps forward for the happy few, and two steps back for the rest of the world. To create the global, inclusive information society that the WSIS is committed to, a few points should be taken into account.

First of all, it is important that the discussion not only revolves around implementation of ICTs, but also around who is using content, who is producing the content and in what language. The bulk of the current content on the Internet is produced by Europe, the US and Japan. The availability of Internet-based content written by Africans and focussing on their own local or national issues in their own local or national languages, is scarce. It is therefore not sufficient to focus on information streams, without considering what content is offered, who it provides for and in what language it is made available.

Infrastructure

Secondly, in the implementation of ICT infrastructure, which is high on the WSIS

agenda, it is important to look for solutions that are relevant to a specific local context. This is especially important in the African context, where several technological steps might have been 'leapfrogged', or where traditional information technologies are still more important for information exchange.

Jumping a technological level has, for example, happened where landlines were not available, and people started using mobile phones instead. This means that when upgrading ICT infrastructure, the introduction of landlines for connection to the Internet might not be the most suitable solution. The more cost effective and accessible approach might be creating wireless Local Area Networks via satellite.

On the other hand, in areas with high illiteracy levels, radio will still be the information source with the highest impact. Connecting this area to the information society might therefore be done through inclusion of streaming radio broadcasts to be accessed outside their region, and translation of information available on the Internet into radio friendly formats for local distribution.



Freedom of Expression

Lastly, to create a successful global ICT community it is important that information and opinions can be accessed and shared freely. This means that principles of freedom of expression and media freedom as put down in the 'Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression in Africa', Article 19 of 'the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' and other charters should apply to the information society as 'guiding principles'.

These principles should also be the basis for the development of national and international standards and legal frameworks for e-governance. In order to reach this it is important that African media (and other civil society stakeholders) participate in the development of national and international

standards and the formulation of national legislation.

While NiZA itself, as well as several partner organisations with NiZA support, are engaging with the WSIS, it is the media as a whole that has to engage with the information society. African media have a key role to play in empowering themselves and need to take responsibility in the follow-up after the Tunis summit in a bid to ensure that we all take steps forward to close the digital gap.

Official WSIS website:
<http://www.itu.int/wsis>

NiZA partner organisations active on WSIS and information society issues:
Media Institute of Southern Africa
<http://www.misa.org>
Highway Africa News Agency
<http://www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/hana>

By Christian Kuijstermans

Kuijstermans (christian.kuijstermans@niza.nl) is Programme Officer of NiZA's Media and Freedom of Expression Programme

My Point Of View

South Africa is no 'solved problem' **Jeanette Minnie's article in the previous edition of 'Medianews' entitled 'South Africa - Land of the Free?' was very effective in challenging the all-too-pervasive perception internationally that South Africa is a 'solved problem' when it comes to freedom of expression, says Jane Duncan, executive director of the Johannesburg based Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI).**

FXI has been arguing for some time now that democratic spaces in the country are beginning to close. While Minnie's article makes reference to some of the most highly publicized cases, many of the manifestations of this contraction are taking place away from

the glare of publicity.

In the past year, protest actions in a number of small towns have spread like wildfire, with communities rising up after repeatedly attempting to engage the local authority about poor service delivery; it is at this level where the shutdown is most evident, leading to frustrations boiling over. In fact, according to statistics released by the Ministry of Safety and Security, there were over 5000 recorded protests in the 2004/2005 financial year.

Some of these protests have been illegal and became violent as pitched battles between the police and communities spiraled out of control, even leading in one case to an ANC Councilor's house being burnt down. Clearly, something is going wrong in the 'land of the free'.

Verbal attacks

Non-governmental organisations that raise these issues are coming in for increasing verbal attacks by the government, including from President Thabo Mbeki himself; on two occasions this month, he has criticised international donor funded NGO's for serving foreign, anti-transformation interests.

Censorship is also creeping into the media, with the Mail and Guardian especially under increasing pressure. Currently they are under investigation by the state, leading to their service provider, M-Web, being issued with a subpoena in terms of the notorious section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act in an attempt to reveal their confidential sources of information in the 'Oilgate' saga where the state is accused of channeling money to the ANC through a front company to fund its election campaign last year).

This latest development comes on the back of two other attacks on journalistic sources, leading to editor of The Media magazine, Kevin Bloom warning of a looming press freedom crisis.

Positive results

On the positive side, the FXI has found that,

when censorship does take place, placing pressure on the offending parties can yield positive results. The courts have proved to be an important terrain in this regard. The case cited in Minnie's article involving the fatal shooting of Tebogo Mkhonza has led to the prosecution of the police involved. A case involving the alleged torture of two members of the Landless Peoples' Movement has also resulted in a prosecution.

Apart from the victory of Laugh it Off promotions in the Constitutional Court, an attempt by Telkom to censor a website critical of the high cost of its services (called 'Hellkom') was thwarted when the telecommunications company withdrew the case 'for strategic reasons' after adverse publicity. These experiences show that democratic spaces can be defended successfully, but that constant vigilance is required.

In this regard, the FXI has found that it is not possible to address all these challenges reactively in 'firefighter' mode, but that a more proactive intervention strategy is required to organise communities most affected by censorship and to build their capacity to address these problems themselves. This will be a key focus of the FXI in the coming months, as ordinary people are the most effective defenders of their own rights.

Your Point of View is a new feature in MediaNews to give readers the opportunity to respond on articles. If you would like to comment on the content please e-mail editor Elles van Gelder at ellesvg@yahoo.com. Please keep your contribution under 600 words.