Freedom of Expression, Access and Empowerment

Freedom of Expression is a fundamental human right as stated in Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. This is especially worth recalling as we mark the 60\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of that declaration. At this year’s World Press Freedom Day celebration, UNESCO would like to explore how media freedom and access to information feed into the wider development objective of empowering people. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social and political process that helps people gain control over their own lives. This can only be achieved through access to accurate, fair and unbiased information, representing a plurality of opinions, and the means to actively communicate vertically and horizontally, thereby participating in the active life of the community.

However, in order to make freedom of expression (FEX) a reality, a legal and regulatory environment must exist that allows for an open and pluralistic media sector to emerge; political will to support the sector and rule of law to protect it must also exist, and there must be law ensuring access to information, especially information in the public domain. Finally, news consumers must have the necessary media literacy skills to critically analyze and synthesize the information they receive to use it in their daily lives and to hold the media accountable for its actions.

These elements, along with media professionals adhering to the highest ethical and professional standards designed by practitioners, serve as the fundamental infrastructure on which freedom of expression can prevail. On this basis media serves as a watchdog, civil society engages with authorities and decision-makers, information flows through and between communities.

The fuel that drives this engine is information and therefore access to information is critical. Freedom of information laws, which permit access to public information are essential, but so are the means by which information is made available, be it through ICTs or the simple sharing of documents.

Open and pluralistic media are, perhaps, most precious when they simply provide the mirror for society to see itself. These moments of reflection are instrumental in defining community objectives, making course corrections when society or its leaders have lost touch with each other or gone astray. Increasingly, this role has fallen to the smaller community media sector as financial imperatives drive corporate media away from these core principles and into profit centers that do not cater to smaller or marginalized populations.
This concept paper aims to set a framework for WPFD 2008 by examining some of the mechanisms through which community empowerment can be achieved.

1- Press Freedom contributes to Empowerment

In order for citizens to engage in public debate and to hold their governments and others accountable, key elements of living in a participatory democracy, citizens must have access to free, pluralistic, independent and professional media. The idea that communication and dialogue between different members of society will occur naturally cannot be taken for granted, and the media provide a means of access to information and igniting dialogue.

A. Fueling the democratic discourse

The media can fulfill a watchdog role by reporting on the activities of governments, civil society and the private sector. A plurality of media outlets is key for this to occur because of the breadth of material to report on and to ensure that different opinions will be heard. The media enables citizens to be informed and participate in their society, which generates real empowerment. Accurate, fair and unbiased reporting is the best defense against ignorance and uninformed decision-making.

B. A Huge Task......

In all facets of community life, the media play a central role as the conduit for information and potentially a catalyst for activism and change. For example, development issues can have a polarizing affect on a community, encompassing a debate that can stretch from economic benefits to environmental impacts to overall quality of life concerns. Through media, a non-threatening informed debate can ensue that can yield positive outcomes for all stakeholders. In these instances, media ensure the voices in a community can be counted as much as the financial interests of investors in any one particular project.

It becomes increasingly evident that the responsibility to accurate, fair and unbiased reporting is critical to the media’s relevance and respectability in a society and to the community’s ability to fulfill its role in a democracy. Without the informed participation of its citizenry, a democracy is sure to crumble. If those in power are manipulating journalists, the media become a propaganda tool plunging the society into ignorance, indifference and despair.

C. Press Freedom today...

Press freedom is still not guaranteed in many parts of the world. With 171 journalists killed in 2007\(^1\), a number just short of the record, and hundreds more threatened, imprisoned or tortured, it is not difficult to understand the challenges that must be

\(^1\) International Federation of Journalists.
overcome. These acts are unconscionable, not only because they violate the human rights of individuals, but also because they are detrimental to good governance and democracy, namely, the flow of accurate and reliable information. On the other hand, advances in ICTs bring ever greater potential for the media to reach more people in more places and in practice enable people to have access to information and express their opinions. ICTs open up the possibility for rapid widespread distribution of information and for transparency and good governance to become practical realities.

2. The role of community media

Even though many media outlets have made provisions for audience participation and have therein become more accessible to the people they serve, nowhere is accessibility and specificity of purpose so well defined as with community media. Currently radio is the most widespread form of community media in the developing world because it is cheap to produce and to access, can cover large areas, and overcomes illiteracy.

A. Community Media, Media with a mission

Community radio defines itself more by its mission than its size or location. It usually evokes a grassroots attitude and a bias toward the free flow of opinions and ideas. It seeks to educate and entertain, to inform and amuse, and to create a big tent under which its listeners can engage and challenge each other as well as their political leadership. These operations tend to be smaller, community based and managed, with a reliance on local support that may include advertising but more often is reflected in donations and volunteerism. Community media will often fill the void left by larger corporate media entities that operate under different imperatives that may not include the underrepresented or marginalized populations in a society.

While not always the case, women and young people will find a home for their issues and encouragement of their participation within the community media framework. The inclusion of women remains a challenging development issue because they are habitually excluded from the decision-making processes within their own societies, whilst being the first point of contact on many health and educational issues. Similarly, more attention should be given to the inclusion of youth within the media and to developing their media literacy skills.

Over the long-term, local media can create a coherent narrative of a region’s development and help people formulate goals and plans for how to improve their situation. The media can help contextualize national development programs within community frameworks and bring these goals closer to their intended beneficiaries. Effective local media can also help people understand the history and evolution of oppression or discrimination and give them the necessary perspective to make rational choices to emerge from it. With this information, people have the means to participate in democratic processes and shape their own futures locally and nationally.

B. Making every citizen a “reporter”
Professional journalists are the core of a reputable media environment. However, they are by no means the only ones actively chronicling the world around them. New technology is giving an unprecedented opportunity to citizens to inform others. In crises, citizens reporting like journalists may be the only way for human rights abuses and other violations of a criminal or environmental nature to be brought to face broad public scrutiny. Citizen reporting may also be a way to work against censorship, following protests or political turmoil. If information becomes decentralized, censorship becomes less effective because it is no longer containable within the media outlets.

C. The practicalities of participation

New technologies are not only changing the media dynamic when it comes to content, but are also a significant factor in creating new ways for media to interact with its audience. Blogs, mobile phones and various other online devices are bringing the producers of content in closer contact with the consumers of it. Feedback can be instantaneous. For the first time in the history of the media industry, especially in the most well developed media markets, there is as much information coming in from consumers as is going out to them through traditional and new means of communication. Managing these ebbs and flows of information is becoming increasingly critical to the future of the media business. The bonds are being strengthened between these entities and with this deeper connection come heightened expectations that the users will be listened to. Encouraging participation is therefore key to the survival of media outlets in a competitive market place, while also providing an opportunity to engage with audiences. From an audience perspective, it means that it can influence the content in a very proactive way and it enables individuals to access a ready made platform through which they can share their opinions.

3. Access to information

Information can change the way we see the world around us, our place in it, and how to adjust our lives in order to maximize the benefits available through our local resources. Fact driven decision-making can significantly alter our political, social and economic perspectives. The right to access information can be interpreted within the legal frameworks that support Freedom of Information as it applies to information held by public bodies, or in a wider sense to encompass both access and circulation of information held by other actors, where it becomes intrinsically linked to Freedom of Expression.

Freedom Of Information and the transparency it promotes, has a direct consequence on fighting corruption, which in turn has a tangible impact on development. Former World Bank president James Wolfensohn often identified government corruption as the primary hindrance to development and an independent media sector as the number one tool to fight public corruption.
A. The Basis of informed decision-making

Information is power. Freedom of Information and Freedom of Expression work against the concentration of information within the hands of a few. Of course, all information is subject to interpretation. For this reason, the clearinghouse function of an open and pluralistic media sector is critical to a better understanding of any issue.

In terms of encouraging the empowerment of citizens, Freedom Of Information is at the heart of a participatory democracy. Consider the consequences of an uninformed electorate going to the polls; consider the consequences when information flows are curbed or manipulated in times of political crisis or ethnic strife. Freedom of Information promotes a true sense of ownership within society and therefore gives meaning to the concept of citizenship.

B. The practicalities of access

Freedom of Information does not guarantee access. Even if governments were to become models of disclosure through e-governance by putting their information online, without a means to access that information people would not be more empowered. Internet connectivity and IT resources have become crucial to unhindered access to information. This is also true for accessing national or international news or even simply to provide a plurality of media options. If the absence of connectivity or equipment can highlight the digital divide and the ensuing knowledge gap that separates developing and developed countries, groups within a country can also become further marginalized by their inability to access information on the internet.

We must not underestimate the importance of access to technologies and infrastructure, which are still cruelly lacking in many parts of the world. What can the concepts of “digital revolution” or “information society” effectively mean to 80% of the world’s population who still have no access to basic telecommunication facilities, or to approximately 860 million illiterate individuals, or to the 2 billion inhabitants of the planet who still have no electricity? The priority given to narrowing the digital divide in every respect is therefore fully justified.

Learning to use new technologies or, in other words, building media and information literacy must be a primary objective as these advancements are coming in the area of information access and sharing.

Conclusion:

Ensuring freedom for the media around the world is a priority. Independent, free and pluralistic media are central to good governance in democracies that are young and old. Free media can ensure transparency, accountability and the rule of law; they promote participation in public and political discourse, and contribute to the fight against poverty. An independent media sector draws its power from the community it serves and in return empowers that community to be full a partner in the democratic process.
Freedom of Information and Freedom of Expression are the founding principles for open and informed debate. New technology will continue to evolve and allow citizens to further shape their media environments as well as access a plurality of sources. The combination of access to information and citizen participation in media can only contribute to an increased sense of ownership and empowerment.