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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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New Technologies and Civil Society

As somebody who traveled a lot in Asia and lived for some time in an Asian country I should start my remarks the Asian way by means of an apology. As a person who spent five years of his life in New York I should begin the way Americans do: telling you a joke. But I promise: I am not going to crack a joke and I am not going to apologize for it.

Communication technologies and civil society has been given to me as a topic. Well, that is a tall order and a subject that cannot be treated in twenty minutes or so with any claim of competence. So, the only thing I can do is to share with you some personal views and experiences drawn from my work in the media and communication field with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation over a long period and, more recently, as Chairman of the International Programme for the Development of Communication at UNESCO.

Civil society has become a key word for development since the end of the Cold War and I think we can only be happy that this concept was universally accepted as a common platform for development. It is understood that –ideally- all groups of the society should be able to voice themselves and to share the responsibility for the common good. It is also understood that civil society cannot exist and develop without responsible and independent media, because it is based on a public discourse and a free exchange of opinions and information. Civil Society and free and responsible media are two sides of the same medal and one cannot exist without the other.

Some prominent researchers have taken this thought to a new level by describing the societies of today as information societies in order to emphasize that information and communication are the real pillars and the most important tools of modern public life. Some of them deliberately speak of the Information Society in singular to stress the universality of this phenomenon. More recently, a new keyword was introduced: that of the knowledge society where no longer a cacophony of information bits forms the prevailing criteria, but where organized information is available just in time to everybody in politics and cultural life, in business, education, trade and commerce, social groups and international relations – to name just a few fields of relevance.

I recently attended a conference in Montreal, Canada, which was organized by UNESCO and Orbicom, the chain of communication chairs which UNESCO has brought together on global scale. There a speaker carried the idea of the knowledge society yet another step further to what he called the “wisdom society” His idea was that the availability of knowledge at every level and for every group of the society will, eventually lead to the right, the “wise” decisions as to what should happen to the society.

Now, it is nice and gives us all a kick to dream a wonderful dream, to think Utopia and to invent an ideal world. I am convinced that we need great men and women who lead us in thinking the unthinkable, who dream our dreams and tell the world about them and who become “gurus” of societal progress. I am very pleased to know some of them in person such as the „investors “of the Human Development Report” Mabub-ul-Hag from Pakistan and his colleague Inge Kaul at UNDP or Hans d” Orville, who served the unique body of elder statesmen called the „Inter-action Council” for many years. Hans was invited to this event and he tried hard to come, but other conferences in Bonn (where I met him last) and in Geneva prevented him from doing so. He sends his greetings through me. I love to listen to these people with a vision: They give me the feeling that the world can be treated and eventually Civil society –information society-knowledge society –wisdom society? Where are we and what shall we do? I am convinced that we need the people with a vision that try to lead us into wisdom society as well as the practitioners that build the small steps on the staircase towards that great goal which will eventually never materialize. We need AMIC and IPDC, we need PIBA and PINA in the Pacific, we need AIBD and ABU as agents of change, we need UNDP and donor organizations such as FES, CICA, IDRC, the Thomson Foundation and the Hosokawa Foundation etc., we need all those who are ready to help to bring about civil society by way of turning it into knowledge society.

At the edge of Utopia versus reality it is high time to talk about the role technologies and their influence on the communication technologies-especially the new ones-useful for the civil society? Do they even allow leapfrogging in development? Do they persist to make short cuts that would not be possible without them?

The immediate answers to these questions is “yes” If information and communication are, as Marianne Scott and Inge Kaul have coined it, “global public goods” then the technologies to spread and disseminate them can only be useful.

However, if not use the good old “stream radio” or build Web sites on the Internet it is imperative that these technologies are being properly used and developed.

The first project I was in charge of for FES many years ago was a small radio recording studio we established in Georgetown, Guyana. It was shared by the broadcast-to-schools people in the morning, reaching out mainly to teachers and pupils in isolated schools in the hinterland, and an ambitious adult education crew that took over the studio in the afternoon. We were proud of both teams and of the opportunities we gave them for comparatively small money. The school broadcasters had invented an elaborate scheme to obtain feedback from teachers around the country by means of introducing an answering card which was to be filled in and sent back to the capital every week.

Well, one day the transmitter for these programmes broke down and could not be repaired for about two weeks. Nevertheless, 80 percent of the teachers continued to send back their answering cards confirming how great the programmes were and how well their students received them. Evidently, something was wrong with the system and we hastened to replace it with something more efficient and more productive. We could not take our first approach for granted.

So, we can learn by failure, however, we can also learn by success. Some ten years later a rather ambitious FES project took shape in Asia. In January 1984 ASIAVISION was launched, the first television news exchange outside of Europe and the US on a daily basis and using telecommunication satellites. Thus, another vision became true, the dream of Sir Charles Moses, the first Secretary General of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (who, among many other things, was the spiritual rector of the Sydney Opera House). Asiavision started in ten Asian countries, including China, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, and Malaysia where the coordination center is located.

In Malaysia (and maybe elsewhere) Asiavision caused a revolution. Not so much among the politicians (who were not really amused when an avalanche of foreign news entered their countries) and not so much among the broadcaster (who had to learn their new trade first). The revolution was among the kids of Kuala Lumpur. They watched the spectacular opening gala of Asiavision on the evening of January 4, 1984 and took in all the great pictures they had never seen from India and China, from Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The next morning (and several friends in Kuala Lumpur confirmed this) kids stormed their schools and demanded additional information on the countries they had seen pictures about for the first time the previous night. In some schools, indeed, the curriculum was changed and Asiavision recordings became a subject of teaching on a daily basis. Television as a teacher as it was mentioned yesterday.

Next scenario: In September 1996 we invited representative of community radios and small media from Africa to meet Internet service providers of the occasion of an IIC pre-conference seminar in Munich. This was an opportunity where these two groups met for the very first time, and they made the best possible use of it by way of exchanging their problems and expectations. They created a joint web Site that is till in operation and serves for interaction between them. Many of the small radios and newspapers present in Munich now profit from better conditions when using e-mail and the Internet. Later this year we will repeat this experiment for small media in Asia knowing that visions of a freer and better use of new technologies can only be achieved by way of hard work and small steps. This time we will also include regulators who play an equally important role in facilitating the work of small media.

Small media, such as community radios and local TV stations or rural newspapers should be pillars of the information society in developing countries. But more often than not they still belong to an endangered species. This is why last year I found myself in a small group of people representing AMRC, the world association of small radio, lobbying in Geneva at the meeting of the UN commission on Human Rights. AMRC had developed the idea that the Commission should pass a resolution asking for better protection and improved working conditions for their members in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Such a resolution would not be legally binding, but it would help, nevertheless, to stem the pressure of the big commercial broadcasters and of the politicians. The Big networks don't like their small cousins because they fear to lose advertising income, and the politicians do not trust them, because they are mostly politically independent. Community radios, therefore, have more often than not difficulties to get licenses and frequencies, and when they go on air without a frequency officially allotted to them they are branded as illegal. This vicious circle shall be broken by the resolution we obliged for.

We first approached the German Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva who showed a lot of sympathy for the AMARC members, but felt that broadcasters in Latin America should be more concerned with his Spanish colleague. The Spanish Ambassador received us, too, but saw no way of taking any action. We are good Europeans, he said, and we do nothing without the European Presidency and this is being held at the moment by the U.K. So we wait on to the Brits, at the British mission we were told that the Brits are at least as fervently European as the Spaniards. Therefore, they did not carry any resolutions of their own, only those submitted by other members of the European Union. So, we were back to square one and we had learned that a small, but important step towards the knowledge society, a resolution in favor of small radios, will take years and lots of lobbying before it will materialize.

As it stands today-we got the hint from the Dutch delegation in Geneva –Canada considers carrying a paragraph in the interest of small media in a resolution the Canadian government is drafting anyway with a reference to media and development. As I said before: a resolution would not be binding, but it would remind the world that information and communication are basic human rights.

Let me add one last one scenario which was given to us during the last IPDC Council meeting by Nina Ratulele, the editor of the PINA Pacific Newsletter in Suva. She told us about her family on one of the outer islands of Fiji. All members are cricket fans, and when the finals approach they throw their savings together and buy gas for the generator. The brothers set up the old TV set to a hilltop and a clever boy takes the antenna to the crown of a palm tree. Then they start the generator, watch the finals, take the set down to the village again afterwards and wait for the next year's games.

The family does not yet live in an affluent information society and has to fight hard for the bits and pieces of information they are interested in. This is the case as well with hundreds of millions of people in the developing world that have never come near a telephone or never heard about Internet connectivity.

Modern information technologies continue to be a luxury in many countries and the long list of projects which is annually submitted to the IPDC mirrors the enormous task that is yet to be tackled.

Many of these projects are innovative and demonstrate the intention of groups in civil society to voice themselves and to share responsibility with the society.

This year, for example, the journalist associations of two neighboring African countries join hands and ask for animation equipment and training for their photo journalists and for those specializing in caricature. The first project of its kind, the head of many national news agencies in Africa fight with the rapid change of technology.

They enjoy more freedom granted to them by the politicians, but they also struggle with the economic challenges of a free market and competition from the outside. Therefore, they seek consultancy services pertaining to survival programs in a rapidly changing environment.

Radio stations, above all the smallest ones in Africa fear the avalanche of digitalization and the high costs involved for them. Bwundi asked for support to start an association of independent newspapers with its own "press club" which shall among other things organize the purchase of space parts and news unit.

Africa's first TV station that introduced color in 1973, Zausibas TV, requested means to improve their local and grass root reporting a tendency widely visible now in Africa.

The Central Asia a group from Khasakstau submitted a plan to start a rural newspaper for the farmers on the river of the Aral lake. In Asia Community radio in Nepal shall be strengthened and a radio recording studio for the exclusive use by women was tabled for the Solomons

A journal in Sri Lanka which so far is published in Singalese only proposed a Tamil version to help overcome the problem between these two ethnic groups.

Furthering a grassroots communication and proposal for a local TV station were the projects sent from the Caribbean. Rural broadcasting and local radio projects were submitted from South America.

Albania requested help for the transmission of the so far government-controlled TV system and national news agency to become independent entities.

Macedonia- for many weeks of the Kossovo war in the international headlines – now wants to set up its own news agency.

One of the most innovative project proposals sent to the IPDC this year is the plan to form a Pan-African Association of media commissions and regulatory board that have recently come into existence in many African countries. To organize a joint database and an exchange of experiences among them is highly important because these bodies are supposed to set the ground rules of communication and civil society in the future. We granted a comparatively high sum to this association and we were told that the French government will make additional funds in time available.

Another project strengthening the relationship between media and social society was developed in Ghana: The idea is to train young journalist together with representative of different groups of the society and as trade unions, women's action groups, youth activities or religious association.

A proposal how Brazil uses audiovisual programs to bring back marginalized individuals and groups in touch with civic society.

An NGO from the US submitted a plan to bring Israeli and Arab journalists together as a contribution to the Middle East Peace process.

This was one of the project proposals where the IPDC Council had to ask itself if this could be an effective contribution to the reconciliation of divided or suppressed societies or if they just were a kind of window-dressing in view of the saddening facts.

Therefore, this project was discussed in depth and along the same lines as two proposals from Irak and Syria by which the national TV systems of these two countries requested means for training and for production of programmes for women and children.

I think it speaks for the IPDC Council and its members that in all three cases the decision was positive, in spite of many concerns, because one argument prevailed: give peace a chance.

As always, there was not enough money available to support all projects the IPDC approved:

1998	1999
12 million	7.7 million
3 million	2.5 million?

What are conclusions that can be drawn from the proposals submitted to the IPDC?

- 1) Interaction between media and civil society is an ongoing dynamic process in many developing countries.
- 2) New technologies can enhance and facilitate this process if and when they are being used in a cost-effective and economic way.
- 3) New waves of technology, especially digitalization and compression, can be new binders on media and civil society as a whole.
- 4) Independent and responsible media that want to serve civil society cannot be left to the market forces alone. They need ongoing support and encouragement.
- 5) In order to enhance their role in bringing about civil society, media need independence, and above all, peace. As Willy Braudt has once said: "Without peace there is nothing " no bridges and no streets, no communication and no "common public good"

So, in the interest of peace, let us strive for the Utopia that will never be: the wisdom society.