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Transparency and Accountability Through New Communication Technologies

By Robert Lamb
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Introduction

"'Let us drink to the success of our hopeless endeavour' goes the old toast of Soviet dissidents. And perhaps for Index to have been truly successful it should have made itself redundant. But the world being what it is, that is unthinkable. So thank God, alas, we are still in business, circulation rising, readership broader than ever. The geography of silence may have altered since Stephen Spender founded the magazine, but there is still plenty of it...”

Ursula Owen, editor of the Index on Censorship, wrote these words in her preface to An Embarrassment of Tyrannies, a collection of the best items that appeared in the magazine during its first 25 years (1972-1997). Her words resonate with the sentiments of thousands of other activists, publications and organisations -- including my own -- who share the ideals of freedom of expression, freedom of information and a world free of tyranny, corruption and poverty. But the world being what it is, these are grim realities of life that can't just be wished away. So like the Soviet dissidents used to do, we have to keep working at it, employing every tool, every technology and every tactic brainwave that we can find. And, of course, we cannot afford to give up.

In this presentation, I want to explore how the new information and communications technologies (Its) impact our continuing struggles to achieve greater transparency and accountability at every level in society. My premise is that while the ICTs have given us new weapons and new capacities with which to fight tyranny and corruption, technology by itself cannot turn the tide. In fact, if we're not careful the same ICTs will end up being dominated by the elite and the powerful in government and corporate structures.

Understanding Good Governance

Transparency and accountability are not new concepts -- debates on these, and concerns on their absence, were expressed even in ancient Greece and Rome. As both these are essential attributes of good governance, it's useful to start by looking at what I understand by good governance.
All societies express a desire for good governance: a system that promotes, supports and sustains human development - especially for the poorest and most marginal. But there is no consensus on a clearly articulated concept of good governance. It is so often defined by the negative - when you experience first hand bad governance you begin to appreciate what is understood by good government. I could spend all day talking about it, and so much would betray my Western notions. For me it is a free, open, tolerant democratic society with all its many imperfections. As Churchill said, 'Democracy is the worst from of government, except for all the others'.

As a UNDP concept paper on the subject put it: "Good governance is, among other things, participatory, transparent and accountable. It is also effective and equitable. And it promotes the rule of law. Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources."

Governance encompasses the state, but it goes beyond the state by including the private sector and civil society organisations. What constitutes the state is another unresolved debate that we shall not enter: for our purposes, the state can be defined to include political and public sector institutions. The private sector covers private enterprises (manufacturing, trade, banking, cooperatives, etc.) as well as the informal sector in the marketplace. Civil society, lying between the individual and the state, comprises individuals and groups (organised or unorganised) interacting socially, politically and economically. Civil society organisations are the wide range of associations around which society voluntarily organises, including trade unions; non-governmental organisations; gender, language, cultural and religious groups; charities; business associations; social and sports clubs; cooperatives and community development organisations; environmental groups; professional associations; academic and policy institutions; and media outlets.

Taken individually, the characteristics of efficient government, successful businesses and effective civil society organisations are widely known. But the characteristics of good governance that involve and engage all three have only recently been articulated. UNDP has identified the following characteristics of good governance:

- **Participation**: All men and women have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through intermediate institutions. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively.

- **Rule of law**: Legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights.

- **Transparency**: Transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information are directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them.
• **Responsiveness**: Institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders – no one is marginalised or ignored.

• **Consensus orientation**: Good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interests of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.

• **Equity**: All men and women have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.

• **Effectiveness and efficiency**: Processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources:

• **Accountability**: Decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organisations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders.

• **Strategic vision**: Leaders and the public have a broad and long term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development.

These core characteristics are inter-related and mutually reinforcing – each cannot stand alone. For example, accessible information means more transparency, broader participation and more effective decision-making. Broad participation contributes both to the exchange of information for effective decision-making, and for the legitimacy of those decisions. Legitimacy, in turn, means effective implementation and encourages further participation.

Of the greatest interest to us here is the fact that freedom of information and freedom of speech are two key elements that are integral to several characteristics of good governance. There is a vast body of evidence and analysis – with examples drawn from across the political spectrum – to show that the suppression or denial of these two basic freedoms can reverse gains made in social, economic or cultural terms.

Let me give an extreme example. The 1959-61 Great Famine of China was probably one of the worst tragedies of recorded history, killing up to 40 million people – nobody outside China really knows how many perished. Yet, while starvation and death stalked the land, information about it was suppressed. Instead, manipulated harvest figures were given out to mislead the Chinese and the world. Much of China and the world discovered the true extent of the horror only decades later. Indian economist Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for economics, was the first to argue in the early 1980s that the China tragedy was exacerbated by the suppression of information. Censorship contributes to famine, he wrote, concluding that it is much more difficult for famines to occur in countries with a free press. In fact there has never been a famine in a country with a free press.

Sen has given the further example of sub-Saharan Africa, where non-democratic countries continue to face difficulties with food security. I saw this myself when I was in Ethiopia in
1984. There were pockets of the Dergue-ruled country where there were food surpluses. But under chairman Mengistu there was no public outcry that food had not been switched to the needy. (It is perhaps no co-incidence that the chairman found refuge in Zimbabwe – another potentially prosperous country ruined by a man coarsened by the long exercise of absolute power).

Similarly, Indian journalist and environmental writer Darryl D’Monte has cited examples where environmental degradation and resulting suffering of the people are particularly acute in countries that lack an open and free press. He has shown that there is a strong link between media exposures and environmental compliance in countries where the media are allowed free expression. I could spend a long time listing instances of my own to support his case. Indeed in many ways the last two decades of my career have been devoted to the notion that the most important environmental protection measure that can be taken is the free flow of information. Amongst a laundry list of examples to back this assertion must be the measure that gave the US Environmental Protection Agency the right to publish information on the worst chemical polluters. Fearing the publicity that may result, the companies voluntarily cut back an estimated 43% of their emissions into the environment. The UN ECE nations have now agreed a convention guaranteeing the rights of access of citizens to information. It won’t mean that much until it metamorphoses into a global agreement.

I am not saying improved communications and the free flow of information will by themselves create a world of peace and sustainable prosperity. But I am saying their absence can contribute to discontent, suffering and disaster. Again one example. The death and destruction that followed the flooding in China apparently shocked Beijing. An immediate ban was put on logging in the watershed areas. Highly laudable. But I have back in London shaky handycam footage of the Red Army trucks hauling away logs of the vestiges of old growth forest. I am sure the politicians in Beijing are sincere. But I would contend that unless there is the apparatus of a civil society in place that can blow whistles, little can be done. We had similar footage of what a French company was doing in Kenya. Coming from Britain we could get no interest in France and the British media would only have been interested if it was a UK company.

But what this all assumes is that a free press is actually interested in blowing whistles or in so-called ‘serious’, public-spirited coverage. The evidence is overwhelming that when public service controls or standards are watered down or abandoned altogether, it is a race to the bottom. Ratings which means advertising revenues which means profits for owners and shareholders are as much an enemy of transparency and accountability as any dictator and his apparatchik.

Responding to new ICTs
We are meeting in the Asia Pacific region that has been very eager and quick to develop or adopt new ICTs during the past decade. While transnational television is the most prominent example of the changes taking place in the region's communications scene, there are other forms of communication that have impacted the three billion Asians in a variety of ways. For example:

- The Internet is now spreading far more rapidly than anyone could have predicted even a few years ago. Most countries in the region already well connected to the global information superhighway, and others hastening to get a foothold.
- Cellular phones, faxes, email, databases, electronic networks and cable are also expanding their outreach, often at unprecedented growth rates.
- New communications satellites are being launched regularly by countries in the region while new fibre optic cable networks are commissioned, all in anticipation of much larger volumes of information exchange in the years to come.

In short, the barriers of distance, language and isolation are being replaced by connectivity, better services and, in many cases, a reduction of costs.

As AMIC's own Asian Communication Survey 1998 pointed out, these trends have brought in a new influx of capital, technology and human resources into the media and communications sectors, which resulted in more media organizations, media players and more outlets and channels for the audiences to choose from. It has opened up new opportunities for entertainment, information and education to be purveyed to communities in the Asia Pacific. But has more necessarily meant better?

According to a colleague who last year carried out an assessment of environmental communication in the region, the answer is 'No'. Much of the increased airtime on radio and TV, and column space in the print media, are occupied by entertainment or news related material, while the public interest information content – on topics such as environment, health or human rights – have to compete even harder than before to get in and stay on.

To draw from our own experience in broadcast television, even as the audiences expand and the amount of programming and channels increase, we have seen growing anomalies and imbalances in content. As in other parts of the world, entertainment and news programming dominate the airwaves, sometimes to the exclusion of educational and public interest content. The space and time for public service broadcasting have been shrinking in many countries – even government owned channels no longer assign sufficient resources and priority to these aspects. Thus, the Asia Pacific region – in common with virtually everywhere else in the world - has a paradox where the public service component on television is declining while the number of broadcast hours and channels continues to increase.

This, of course, is linked to the way media is increasingly commercialised in the globalised market. What we have seen happen in television tallies with what Edward Herman and Robert McChesney said in their 1997 book, Global Media: The New Missionaries of...
Corporate Capitalism. After tracing the intricate web of media ownership and decision-making structures, they found three key features of globalisation in today's media world:

- the implantation of the commercial model of communication;
- the creation of a culture of entertainment; and
- the consideration of media outputs as commodities to serve market needs and not citizenship needs.

However, they didn't paint a totally bleak picture; instead, they pointed out that globalisation has positive effects as well, such as:

- putting pressure on stodgy and inefficient state-controlled broadcasting systems energising them to extend and deepen their services;
- opening up to new cultures thus enhancing understanding and
- furthering transmission of fundamental values.

They concluded that as media globalisation continued, there would be wider audience options, increased diversity and preservation of the local character of national media.

Interestingly, these conclusions were similar to the findings of a study I carried out in 1996-97 on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), published in 1997 under the title The Bigger Picture. The task was to take a global view, assess the rapidly changing broadcast landscape, and come up with trends and recommendations that were relevant to an organisation like Unicef – which wanted to get the best returns for any future investments in media projects and programmes. In the recommendations, we noted that while new developments in ICTs offered the promise of new opportunities, new audiences and greater outreach, the scope and potential of these were determined and in some ways limited by economic and political realities. And it is precisely these realities that we are concerned with in any meaningful debate on good governance.

A choice of futures

This resonates with a remark by Sir Arthur C Clarke, who is acknowledged as the greatest living science fiction writer and an outstanding visionary. Three years ago, writing on the future of communications, he noted: "As the century that saw the birth of both electronics and optronics draws to a close, it would seem that virtually everything we would wish to do in the field of communications is now technically possible. The only limitations are financial, legal or political. In time, I am sure, most of these will disappear, leaving us with only the limitations of our own morality."

Back in 1945, while still employed in the Royal Air Force, Arthur C Clarke became the first to propose the concept of using a network of communication satellites in geosynchronous orbit for global television and telecommunications. His vision became a reality in the mid 1960s, and within a generation, humankind has come to rely critically on the network of comsats placed in what is now called the Clarke Orbit some 22,300 miles above the earth. But he is
not just another technological wizard who blindly endorses all new technologies; he has been more concerned with the social, cultural and political impacts of his invention, and indeed, of all ICTs, about which he has written extensively and perceptively. At this juncture, I would like to share some of his views that are particularly relevant to our discussion.

In an article he wrote in the South Asian journal Himal last November, Sir Arthur said: "The communications revolution - or perhaps that should be evolution - carries with it a promise that is, in the same instant, both exciting and frightening. Which of these alternative 'futures' we realise will depend on how responsibly the human race is able to face its obligations to its fellows."

Referring to concerns about the social and cultural impacts of trans-boundary satellite television and increasingly the World Wide Web, Sir Arthur argued: "...Our response to the new communications technologies and the new information media should be a mix of pragmatism and caution. It would be futile - even stupid - to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that these rapid developments don't affect us. We should instead explore ways of how we can turn (perceived or real) threats and challenges into opportunities. To use one of my favourite phrases, we must exploit the inevitable."

A choice of technologies and media

So much for caveats and cautions about ICTs. Returning to our topic, I feel that we have not adapted fast enough to exploit the inevitable where modern communications technologies are concerned. I say this advisedly, acknowledging our true limits: in comparison to the giant whales and sharks of multinational corporations and the intricate network of governmental and inter-governmental bureaucracies, we in the civil society organisations are small minnows. While we must not under-rate our worth and capability, nothing is served by over-rating them either.

As much as we like to think, we really do not set the agenda for the globalised world - that is negotiated behind closed doors in meetings held in Washington, London or Geneva (or, if you like to extend it, in Seattle and Davos as well). We can, however, take advantage of new ICTs to turn the odds in our favour at least in some of the major debates that are now underway. We can achieve this by:

- being always diligent on the emerging new ICTs that offer the greatest promise;
- being bold enough to venture into the unknown and to innovate;
- being courageous enough to question our conventional wisdom; and
- being rigorous in our research, homework, self-analysis and reflections; and
- being willing and able to change our views, positions and strategies in the light of new findings and changing realities.

These are, in fact, our own guiding principles at TVE International, where for over 16 years, we have been producing and distributing high calibre television programmes that look at
environment, development, health and human rights issues. Programmes that have inspired positive change; programmes that have focused worldwide attention on many burning problems of our times; programmes that have exposed and confronted corruption and malpractices in governments, multinationals, and in international relations.

One important lesson we have learned is to adjust with the changing times in order to survive. We constantly question what we do, and when confronted with forces that we cannot hope to change overnight, we try to exploit the inevitable to our advantage. As the commissions for high profile series on television have gone down, we have had to change our way of doing things, for instance by investing heavily in the new digital camera equipment and non-linear editing which enables us to tackle the difficult issues by producing programming at a fraction of the cost of a decade ago.

In short, we have to determine what technologies and which media are appropriate for us to be most effective, to get the biggest bang for our rather limited buck. Often, it is not just one technology or medium, but a sound mix of them, taken in the right proportion. During the past three years, we have invested progressively more time and resources in developing a strong presence in, and output to, the World Wide Web. But we conceived this as an extension of our television and video output. Our web site (www.tve.org) promoted our broadcast output, which at the moment is dominated by two important slots we have on BBC World: Earth Report and Life. We also store on our website additional background information that viewers of our programmes can access when they want, from any networked place on the planet. This arrangement has worked particularly well for our highly successful series called Hands On, which presents snapshots of tried and tested sustainable technologies and techniques.

So in one very important respect, nothing I say today is an academic exercise. The BBC does not commission programmes from TVE - it buys them in. We are, in effect, joint publishers. TVE can be sued. If we get the science wrong or forget our responsibilities to give all sides an opportunity to air their views - we lose our funding. If we fail to achieve a reasonable audience response we will lose our slots. On a day to day basis these factors impose accountability and transparency. Thus if we interview a critic of a particular multinationals' employment activities or environmental policies we have to put on record that we have given the company a chance to respond.

But broadcasting on the web is an altogether murkier field. And I am not yet even certain where we stand with it. Already it is possible to get broadcast standard pictures down a copperwire telephone line. ADSL and the myriad, head spinning techno developments are creating an uncertain but exciting new world communications. As the successful Internet-inspired campaign by NGOs to sink MAI - the multilateral investment accord - showed, the coprtatraist world is not going have it all their own way by any means.

Rising to the Web's challenge
Many civil society organisations are still uncertain as to how best to use the Internet and the World Wide Web to their best advantage. True, practically everybody is now on email, and as access speeds and the quality of service improve, more are surfing the net. But we need to go beyond these basic levels of use, and take to the net proactively and innovatively. Whether we like it or not, the Internet is here to stay, and it is growing in influence and outreach every passing month. We have to seize the opportunities and advantages that this new medium presents.

Sunita Narain, Deputy Director of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in India which is one of our partner organisations, says that the web has for the first time provided a level playing field to organisations in the South to disseminate their research, analysis and viewpoints to a global audience at a low cost that many southern organisations can afford. Indeed, the CSE is at the forefront in using the web not only for publishing and dissemination, but also in support of their outstanding work in environmental campaigning, for instance on global climate change. Their website, at www.cseindia.org, is one of the most extensive sites at the super-site called One World Online (www.oneworld.org) where TVE’s site is also hosted.

Organisations like CSE are using the Internet with a view to establishing a system of global environmental governance that is equitable, fair and democratic. The medium’s interactivity and low cost allow for the development of new virtual communities – people who imagine themselves as part of a single group regardless of how far apart they are physically or geographically. These virtual communities – not just in environment, but in every conceivable area of human endeavour – are becoming forces that governments and corporate bodies are having to come to terms with.

As Kunda Dixit, the Nepali journalist and commentator, has written: “Across the world, non-governmental organisations, human rights activists, trampled minorities, suppressed democracy supporters from Indonesia to Burma, indigenous groups like the Ogoni and the Karen, have found silicon bonding and solidarity via the Internet. Its inherent anarchy, its decentralised nature and freedom from official control has ironically made the Internet the most ideal medium to fight the commercialism with which the Internet threatens to undo itself.”

Dixit’s caution on the Internet’s commercialisation is timely. The Internet was founded and managed as a medium that is open and free of central control, but recent developments that seek to exploit it for commercial purposes need careful attention – and active lobbying by all those who want to preserve the inherent qualities of the medium. We who are in the development sector have been pointing out another concern: the new division created between those who have access, and those who don’t – the Digital Divide.

When half of humankind has never made a telephone call, and most of them are unlikely to be able to do so in the next decade or two, should we even be talking about ICTs? One can
argue endless on this, but I don’t agree that the poor and otherwise underprivileged sections of society can afford to ignore the implications of ICTs, including the Internet and satellite television. I want to quote here the perceptive remarks of Dr Shahidul Alam, Director of the Drik multimedia agency in Dhaka, and the man behind a pioneer Internet Service Provider (ISP) in Bangladesh:

"Where information is power, denying information to marginalised communities actively prevents the rural poor from overcoming the unequal power structures that they are trapped within. While it is in the interests of the powerful in society to restrict such access, it is also in the interest of the powerful nations to deny access and maintain domination. The unrestricted flow of knowledge is an essential pre-requisite for an egalitarian society."

Conclusions

If I had accepted AMIC’s invitation to participate in this seminar 10 years ago, I think I might have come with a text that might end with some neat conclusions. To be very candid, I have none. The world is undergoing a revolution as profound as the industrial revolution that began in my country two centuries ago. I don’t think those entrepreneurs had much idea about where they were headed. They saw opportunities and exploited them. That’s what’s happening now.

15 years ago TVE’s role was to persuade a handful of commissioners in public service broadcasting to carry our programming. Today we are toying with the idea of creating our own channel courtesy of the digital revolution. We’ll only take that step if we feel there’s a demand to watch the product and interact with the producers.

The point is that we will only be one player in a new electronic firmament. And I think that’s a good thing.

I began by talking about censorship. In the digital world censorship is starting to become a thing of the past. And that’s a good thing.

But as the digital media becomes more and more accessible, so we are bound to see the darker sides of no controls – pornography, racism, bigotry, bias, hatred. Civil society is always under threat. But CSOs also have a wonderful tool in ICTs for staying in touch, for finding common causes and striking common understanding.

ICTs are bringers of a new kind of freedom. And that must be a good thing. For as Amartya Sen has also said, freedom is both the means and the end of development.

Selected References:


D’Monte, Darryl. 1998. "Corruption, Violence, Safety and Environmental Hazard in Asian Societies". Paper prepared for a regional workshop on corruption and development (not circulated by the UNDP, which commissioned it, saying it was too controversial)
