

# • Where is the African voice in this debate?

By Theresa Swinton

**W**hat does the summit mean for Africa and African media? The impact of ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) for the African journalist and the African voice is one of the main debates on the African continent at the moment.

Alain Modoux, the adviser to the Delegate of the Swiss Federal Council for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), said: "ICTs provide immense opportunities to promote and foster social, economic, cultural and political development in African countries," and "will help leapfrog the development divide and accelerate efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and gender inequality."

Modoux highlighted the need to make ICTs accessible and affordable to everyone, and the ways in which access to ICTs can promote and develop cultural diversity, multilingualism and the human capacity for education and training.

However, problems of infrastructure, connectivity, cost of use and community access points are a major concern. With the barriers of illiteracy, access to content, information, knowledge, language and training, it does seem as though this proposal is too unrealistic for African.

Is it viable for the African continent, which contends with more economic, political and infrastructure problems than most globally 'industrialised' countries, to make this transition into the Information Society?

Governmental policies dictate the access and expense of acquiring ICTs, and high taxation systems hinder the importation of ICT equipment.

"With the correct infrastructure in place, new technologies should become cheaper over time. But in many African countries the state monopolises access to information and telecommunications tariffs. If the governments changed their policies they would undoubtedly lose a main source of income," said Modoux.

"We live in a paradoxical world where telecommunications tariffs are proportionately higher in African countries than in more industrialised countries. It is not a problem of technology, but rather a problem of economic and political infrastructure. There needs to be a political

will to change things."

In particular, the right to freedom of expression is an especially poignant issue for the African journalist, who has been contending with and still continues to contend with governmental censorship.

"This is a consequence of the traditional mistrust by certain governments of the media and its potential, and the division between the so-called mainstream media and the newer smaller media," said Modoux.

Paragraph 51 of the WSIS draft declaration states that "the existence of free and independent media should be in accordance with the legal system of every country".

"This paragraph should change, as it is not acceptable to put national legal systems above the media," said Modoux. If this paragraph does not change, it basically allows any country that imposes censorship to continue in its restriction of access to information.

But how can the African journalist challenge poor infrastructure and restrictive governmental policies in place?

"Media workers can participate in the WSIS process of amending the draft declaration and action plan by taking part in discussion forums on the Internet and sending comments and amendments to the draft," said Modoux.

Yet, there is a paradoxical situation placing the African journalist in a difficult position: how to participate in Internet discussion forums when there is no access to Internet in certain African countries?

What then can be done to ensure that the African voice does not become sidelined in the Information Society? And what are the benefits of making an African transition into this society?

"The emergence of new technologies and Internet means that Africa will have fantastic new opportunities. Newspapers can be put on the Internet and sent around the world. For example, Le Soleil, a newspaper in Dakar has been placed on the Internet. There are thousands

of Senegalese in Europe who are now able to access this newspaper over the web," said Modoux.

Sourcing would also benefit. "At present African journalists are limited to either traditional governmental sources, which are not always accurate, or international news agencies. Internet access increases the amount of information that can be researched, and the number of sources used. It also means that the journalist can check the accuracy and reliability of the news," said Modoux. "It is possible to work differently and exchange information among journalists on a global scale."

One problem that Modoux foresees is language. "Many African countries have many different local languages and concentrate on those local languages, but it is difficult to use them internationally. There should be an emphasis on language courses."

Another problem is the underestimation of management in traditional media. There needs to be an emphasis on training in order to master production and management skills. "At the level of community media there needs to be careful consideration in the investment of new technology. This is a domain which is changing every six months, so it is necessary to invest in equipment which will be useful for a longer period of time," he said.

ICT literacy is also an issue for African journalists. "The International Federation of Journalists and World Associated Newspapers have training programmes in Africa which teach journalists to use ICTs and create websites and improve radio stations."

Will Africa be able to move with the rest of the globe into the Information Society?

This is something which the World Summit on the Information Society is trying to ensure, however it is governmental and infrastructural policies which need to change, not only the attitudes of journalists.

There is an understanding that Africa needs to make the transition, but questions of viability, cost and training are still at the forefront of this debate.

"At the moment, African journalists that have access to equipment are as skilled as any other journalists," said Modoux, "but it is the access and cost of equipment which is creating the digital divide between African and global media."



Alain Modoux

