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Special Edition on African Media in
the Global Information Society

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Africa. Media.



Those are our twin concerns as we move into this new moment in human history which is being called the “Information Society” or the “Information Age”.

While “new”, in that information now has a currency it never seemed to have before in the globalised realm of economics and politics, and also “new”, in that the technology that underpins information is unprecedented in its power and reach, “information” is as old as the human drive to make meaning and has always been crucial to our negotiations of the world we live in.

So we need to have a sense of history, a sense of modesty and a sense of democracy as we contemplate the issues the “Information Age” throws up for us. (To get a little perspective read Juliet Were Oguttu’s remark on the women of Africa who for millennia have kept cultural knowledge safe, page 26.)

It’s amazing how every “new” technology that comes along is embraced with passion, is hailed as a saviour for all human ills, and is seen as full of promise alone.

We constantly forget that as we move forward we humans carry our baggage (visible and invisible) with us, we create out of what we already know – nothing is brand new, we taint what we encounter with who we already are. As Rudy Nadler-Nir points out (on page 46) new spaces are not free of the old discriminations.

And so to the debate before us.

The world process unfolding has some significant holes in it. And they can be summed up in two words: Africa. Media.

Africa: the agenda for discussion cannot be set by those who have always been in power. Exclusion by default cannot continue to be the way the conversation happens. This summit was proposed as necessary for the world by the country of Tunisia and set in motion by African concerns, it will go through Geneva and come back to Tunis. It should truly be a “Summit with Two Peaks” (in the words of Alain Modoux, the consultant to the Swiss WSIS delegate). Africa-Europe-Africa – with the concerns of the world’s usually excluded seriously on the agenda.

Media: how is it possible that in the media-saturated world we live in, that this dimension of our lives does not immediately echo when we say “information”? Media in all its facets is crucial for the “Information Society”, but more than this media is crucial for development and crucial for democracy, hence crucial for Africa. And this is borne out by the many stories we carry in this Review of innovative and extraordinary people using media all over this continent for change and progress.

So if you are involved in debates in the ongoing WSIS process or merely doing your job as a media worker engaged in reporting ICTs, keep these two words ringing in your mind.

Africa. Media.

Anthea Garman
Editor



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At WSIS The

Guest editorial by Brenda Zulu

The Information Society is upon us. The promise is for a knowledge-based society, yielding untold dividends for education, health, developments, democracy and much more. Seamless networking and knowledge flows from major centres to the village and back.

The reality, if current trends continue, might be very different, the dream become nightmare. The fruits of human creativity – from academia to media, from indigenous medicines to music being privatised, ownership concentrated into the hands of a few, and access restricted to those who can pay. The airwaves for radio, television and telecommunication being sliced up and sold to highest bidders. The Internet, once a promising new sphere increasingly commercialised and controlled.

Most threatening is the fear that behind the current drive towards the Information Society is the





promise... and the reality

relentless expansion of corporate control, stifling dissent and manufacturing consent. Global corporate interests are firmly in the greater share of spoils. Scant attention is paid to international regulation and the implication for the people and social development.

The people world-wide are also forging a new vision of the Information Society, one with human rights at its core. New forms of media and networking tools are being used to build global communities from the local levels to share knowledge, amplify marginalised voices, organise political action, empower participation, and sustain and celebrate cultural and intellectual diversity.

We must choose and then build the Information Society we want. Will it be one that suits the corporate elites, but excludes the majority? Or one that sustains and expands sustainability, human rights and peoples' dignity? The right to communicate is a universal human right. The emergence of the Information Society must see this right extended and reinforced to the benefit of all.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in Geneva in December 2003 and Tunis 2005 aims to develop a common vision and understanding of the Information Society and to draw up a strategic plan of action for successfully adapting to the new society.

The summit offers African media a starting point. Journalists in Africa should have the right to communicate as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities. African governments should make sure that within each country there is freedom of expression.

Crucial to this is that African media should help build the Information Society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social economic justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

WSIS offers an important forum to promote this objective. The African media role in the Information Society should be to aim at broadening the WSIS

agenda communication issues, and encouraging the participation of a wide spectrum of civil society groups in this process.

Journalists should help ensure that:

- ♦ information and knowledge are readily available for human development;
- ♦ there is affordable access to effective use of electronic networks through innovative and robust regulation and public investment; and
- ♦ public resources are not sold for private gains.

They should also:

- ♦ tackle information surveillance and censorship, government or commercial; and
- ♦ support community and people-centred media, traditional and new.

ICTs provide a tool to share local knowledge, culture and languages with others and build bridges between the local, national, regional and even global. In conclusion, Internet technology should be used for solidarity and struggles for justice rather than becoming a tool of capital consumption.