



Regulation **Ethics** Accountability

Neo Ntsoma



Journalism in the global agenda

Journalists need to take seriously that the UN creates a big-picture intellectual climate for their work

by Guy Berger

Here's one thing I've observed: journalists like talking to each other. By contrast, it's rather rare for them, as a collective, to engage with other groups.

That's too bad because they miss out on chances to find common ground with other communities, like geeks, librarians, parliamentarians, educationalists and the like. But at least one forum in February 2013 did succeed in bringing a range of constituencies together exactly for this purpose.

The occasion was a conference in February at Unesco headquarters in Paris, where I nowadays work. Jargon alert: the gathering was called "Towards knowledge societies for peace and sustainable development – First WSIS+10 Review Event". Here are the definitions to decode this:

WSIS+10 – an acronym for the World Summit on the Information Society, which was a UN-convened global event in two phases, held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. So WSIS+10 Review Event means an assessment of the impact of these summits the past 10 years.

Information society – describes a society that increasingly relies on information flows, thanks in particular to the spread of mobile phones and internet access (summed up as Information and Communication Technologies, or simply ICTs).

Knowledge societies – this is when information is converted to know-how in social life, and so it's a higher stage than information societies. For this to

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happen, ICTs should be ubiquitous, and in a context of human rights, education, cultural diversity, multi-lingualism, universal access to information and more.

In a nutshell then, the Unesco WSIS+10 conference in February joined up diverse groups – including media people – to take stock of the underlying trends taking place in communications.

The discussion also analysed what this means for the final review of the implementation of WSIS decisions, which will be done by the UN General Assembly in 2015. That milestone should ring a bell, because it is also the deadline for the conclusion of an even bigger UN initiative, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Both WSIS and the MDGs have strongly influenced state policies on telecommunications, broadcasting, education, gender and health. The big question now is how the UN system will shape the sequel.

The journalists who came from the world over to February's WSIS discussions in Paris were naturally pleased to be visiting what's called the "City of Light". (Et pourquoi pas – and why not?) Yet they also saw the professional value of inserting media voices into the debates about ICTs and development... for good reasons:

Like all journalists, they're convinced of their importance as key agents for spreading information (and, hopefully, knowledge), and they exploit ICT to better their journalism.

They also know that journalism impacts on development, influencing the extent to which it is respectful of rights and is corruption-free, not to mention equitable, environmentally-sustainable, rural- and gender-sensitive, etc.

The problem is that while most journalists see all this, most other social actors don't, no matter that it seems so obviously self-evident.

In fact, back at the original 2003 WSIS discussions, media had to push its way onto the agenda. Community radio activists like Tracey Naughton lobbied at the time with the argument that without media, WSIS would be akin to holding a world summit on agriculture without the farmers being there.

Eventually, media's potential was inserted into the WSIS conclusions, alongside the recognised roles of governments, tech

companies, civil society groups, and others. But journalism has been less successful in getting itself taken seriously by the development community.

One result is that, as anyone who has ever tried fundraising for journalism projects knows, most development donors are still far from seeing the importance of supporting journalism. The irony, as Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation has proposed, is that: "Media development aid creates the independent journalism that tells you whether all the other aid is being stolen. Just as freedom of expression supports all other freedom, media aid supports all other aid."¹

Nevertheless, the importance of media has not been top of mind in policies about the information society and the MDGs. In short, unless media people are proactively part of the agenda of global initiatives for the post-2015 period, journalism is likely to be underestimated.

The good news is that journalists in Paris for the WSIS+10 conference didn't spend all their time sipping noisettes² at pavement cafes or visiting the Louvre.

Instead, they ensured that media-centric discussions were prominent parts of the agenda, including who controls the internet. The debate also covered items like how to entrench a free press in the Arab Spring countries if democratic gains are to be secured.

There were also analyses of Africa's media industries and convergence, and assessment of the significance of citizen journalism.³ Tech trends like the growing "shuttle-screen situation"⁴ were interrogated.

The result was a Final Statement⁵ that highlights a very fundamental interest for journalists: namely, if the world wants further progress towards knowledge societies, then freedom of expression in all its dimensions has to be respected. One point especially singled out was the need for safety for online journalists, bloggers and human rights activists.

Indeed, journalists in the digital era need many voices in support of this cause. It is about their ability to work, in the digital age, without fear that they or their sources may be harmed as a result of underhand electronic

surveillance of their communications or illicit tracking of their geo-location.

The WSIS+10 Final Statement also stresses something else strongly in journalists' interests: the "multi-stakeholder processes" which have grown out of the WSIS initiatives. In context, the phrase means that measures to restrict the internet should be subject to widespread public debate among interest groups, and not be the preserve of a single constituency (be this governmental, intergovernmental, or corporate).

The Final Statement of WSIS+10 was supported by the diverse participants, which included representatives of many governments. This level of agreement differed from an earlier division in the international community in December 2012, when about one third of the world's governments declined to back a draft treaty at the International Telecommunications Union.

The dissenters saw the wording of the treaty as the product of an overly government-centric process and as giving a green light to illegitimate controls over the internet at state level. In contrast, with the WSIS+10 event, the pendulum swung back to emphasising consensus seeking over shared international norms for the internet.

Journalists have a direct interest in global consensus about this multi-stakeholder principle, because it opens doors to them to have their concerns represented in a range of fora. For them, a unilateral concentration of power over the internet could end up being detrimental to independent media whether online, print or broadcast.

These Unesco WSIS+10 Final Statement will now feed into further WSIS review processes, which will culminate in a position being adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

However, the WSIS+10 statement also goes beyond WSIS to also call for the lessons learnt to date to inform the formulation of global development goals after 2015.

As it happens, the two WSIS+10 themes of freedom of expression and multi-stakeholder processes are also mirrored in a report released in June for the UN Secretary General. Dealing with the post-2015 UN development agenda, the document was compiled by world

leaders who included the Indonesian, UK and Liberian presidents.⁶

The original Millennium Development Goals declaration put much less emphasis on these two issues. It could be that this new document, combined with the WSIS+10 Final Statement, will ensure these concerns are reflected in how the UN frames the sustainable development agenda after 2015.

Some journalists will think that this is all such big-picture stuff, that it has no connection to the day-to-day grind of the newsroom or citizen-generated sms's published in the media. Others may also question the gap between fine words at the UN, and actual actions in countries.

At the same time, no journalist should underestimate the impact of a UN-influenced intellectual climate which defines what is significant and legitimate, and conversely which stigmatises actions outside the consensus. The UN agenda also has also enormous material impact on how governments and donors decide to spend money.

Journalists can do a lot more to keep their concerns aloft in other quarters, and particularly at the level of the UN system. There are opportunities to capitalise on the current points of traction.

To take advantage, however, journalists need to get organised, penetrate the jargon, and recognise that the high stakes will have an impact on the profession. Some journalists might even get to visit Paris as part of the process.



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Endnotes

1. <http://www.knightfoundation.org/press-room/speech/eric-newton-world-press-freedom-day-2011/>
2. An espresso coffee with a dash of milk – with the resulting colour of a hazelnut (literally, "noisette")
3. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/unesco-and-wsis/wsis-10-review-meeting/>
4. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/wsis/WSIS_10_Event/exploring_the_evolving_mediascape_Report_final_version_DFM.pdf
5. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/wsis/WSIS_10_Event/wsis10_final_statement_en.pdf
6. A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development. The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda