

**New media and networked
communications environments:
Opportunities and
threats for
press freedom and
democratization**

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

Copenhagen 15-16 September 2008



International Media Support

The event:

An expo and debate

On 15 and 16 September 2008, International Media Support (www.i-m-s.dk) will host a meeting in Copenhagen on the threats and opportunities presented by new media and networked communications environments for press freedom and democratization.

This event will bring together civil society groups and new media industry innovators, with panelists including **Linus Thorvaldsen** creator of **Linux**, and **Jussi Impiö** from **Nokia Research** and others.

The first day will be an 'expo' of new media and technological developments with relevance for press freedom and media development advocates, particularly those working in countries affected by conflict and press freedom repression organized by Kaospilots (www.kaospilots.dk).

This will include hands-on presentations on areas such as **secure web-based and mobile communications**, **'guerilla' broadcasting**, **hidden audio-visual recording**, **safeguarding** and **defending websites**, and more.

The second day will be debate-style discussions based around three themes, these being:

- **Changing the way media operate**
- **Building the capacity of press freedom and civil society groups**
- **Deepening democracy**

The context:

Technological, business and political forces as drivers of change

Means of communication are undergoing significant changes throughout the world as a result of the emergence of a networked communications environment, characterized by the increasing intensity and speed of global communications and supported by interconnected and converging internet-

based technologies. As the communications environment changes, so will the prospects for protecting and advancing peace, democracy and freedom of expression.

These changes are being driven by technological, business and political forces.

Technical change

Key trends in this area include:

- Converging electronic communications.
- Mobile phones emerging as key communications platforms.
- Changes in broadcasting such as the growth of satellite and community media.
- Growing internet access.
- Expanding use of voice over internet protocols (VOIP).
- Increasing importance of search engines and portal sites such as Google and Yahoo.

Market changes

Key trends in this area include:

- Increasing media ownership concentration amongst powerful multimedia conglomerates.
- Emerging business models based on citizen sharing and collective endeavour.
- Expansion in the use of intellectual property rights to protect corporate interests.
- Reconfigurations in media markets due to the increasing dominance of electronic communications.

Political changes

Key trends in this area include:

- Debate amongst governments, businesses and civil society about how to govern and regulate the networked communications environment.
- Shifts in the relationships between increasingly powerful media companies and political elites.
- Struggles between stakeholders over the use and evolution of the internet for different purposes such as business, economic development, democracy and human rights.

The themes:

Opportunities and threats for press freedom and democratization

The following three questions will form the basis of the debate on the second day¹.

Changing the way media operate...

- *Do these changes change the way the media operates through increasing access to information and participation in the media? Is the media model changing?*

Yes. The networked communications environment is challenging the traditional mass media model of the unidirectional flow of information from news providers to the general public. It is doing this through creating new ways for people to communicate with each other, for example through private conversations via e-mail and chat rooms and public discussions via blogs and internet forums. Through offering people more opportunities to engage in public debate and shape the public agenda, new communications can take power away from dominant groups that control the mass media such as big business and the state, redistributing it amongst citizens. The networked communications environment therefore lays the foundations for the construction of a more democratic and participatory media and public sphere than was previously possible.

No. The new opportunities created by the networked communications environment do not necessarily translate into a more democratic public sphere. New communications provide as many new opportunities for disinformation, propaganda and thoughtless argument as they do for democratic debate and reasoned citizen journalism. The same powerful groups that dominate information flows in mass media dominate the networked environment, namely governments and big business. For example, many internet users only look at the news sites of a few large news corporations rather than the websites, blogs and user forums of fellow citizens. Where people do access alternative websites, the sheer

¹ *The selection of these three areas is based on the research and work of Andrew Puddephatt and his colleagues from Global Partners and Associates. Andrew is also the IMS Deputy Chairperson.*

amount of information available prompts many to look only at sites that support their own opinions, resulting in the polarisation of public opinion and the fragmentation of the public sphere.

Building the capacity of press freedom and civil society groups...

- *Does the networked communications environment increase the capacity of press freedom and civil society organisations to achieve positive social change?*

Yes. Digital communications empower civil society organisations through reducing the costs and time required to communicate across both short and long distances. Civil society organisations are able to disseminate information with increasing ease via the web and e-mail, making it easier for them to access funding, mobilise the public and to form national, regional and global alliances with organisations working in similar fields. This has facilitated the rise of a global civil society and a proliferation of transnational social movements, making it easier for groups to share experiences and act together in both real space and cyber space. New communications are also provide civil society with new ways of taking action, for example through e-mail and SMS campaigns, and facilitate the formation of dispersed networks which are difficult for centralised power structures to resist and destroy.

No. Social movements that mobilise via new communications are likely to be fragmented and unsustainable, consisting of people with diverse interests who come together at specific political moments rather than committing to more effective sustained action over time. Moreover, new communications not only make it easier for groups to engage in peaceful protest, but also make the intensification of conflict more likely as subversive or violent groups find it easier to spread socially divisive messages and disinformation. The networked communications environment also provides criminal, violent and fundamentalist groups with new opportunities to bypass the law, with the lack of regulation of the internet making it an ideal environment for them to communicate, organise and disseminate offensive and dangerous material.

Deepening democracy...

- *Does the networked communications environment hail a new era of democracy, offering opportunities for improved government service delivery, transparency and accountability?*

Yes. The networked communications environment offers new opportunities for bringing governments and citizens closer together through removing bureaucratic boundaries, making state services more accessible and efficient. E-government facilities combined with new information rights make governments more transparent and accountable to their citizens. New communications make it easier for citizens to engage in politics, and can make stakeholders participation in the formation of public policy easier. The networked communications environment has the potential to revolutionise the relationship between citizens and government, re-establishing trust and dialogue, and providing new possibilities for participatory democracy.

No. Governance systems that make use of the new technologies offered by the networked communications environment will only be as democratic as the governments that design and use them. Communications technologies themselves do not have the capacity to make political systems more democratic or to change historically embedded formal and informal political institutions. Rather than using communications technologies to increase transparency and dialogue with citizens, many governments are using them to introduce more pervasive surveillance and personal data storage systems, sometimes with the consent of citizens but often without their knowledge. Particularly since the beginning of the 'war on terror', citizens have been gradually giving up their right to privacy and are subject to increasing government control in ways that are not always obvious.

Further Information:

Additional information – including invitations, the agenda and recommended accommodation – will be sent out in the coming weeks. However, in the meantime, if you are interested in participating do please keep 15 and 16 September 2008 available.

For further information please contact:

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