committed itself to for Tunis 2005 was to make up for prior mistakes by encouraging more suitable models of participation. In addition, the noble intention of integrating the global South into the Information Society needs to be backed up by a serious effort to monitor the follow-up and assess the impact of ICT on development in the South. This is what the NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) meant when they talked about developing a real follow-up and assessment power, in order for the South to make the most out of its integration into the Information Society. In the wider context, it is necessary to evaluate the normative underpinnings of the Information Society, making an effort to give the socially excluded, and indeed the people themselves, a voice, rather than just listening to their so-called representatives. This means using IT as a tool for development, peace-building, better public health, and more democracy. ∎

References

Ela, J.M. (1990). Quand l'Etat pénètre en brousse, la riposte paysanne à la crise. Paris: Kartala.

Huisman, D. (1985). L'incommunication. Librairie philosophique J. Vrin.

Kiyindou, A. (1997). Information et milieu rural au Congo, le cas des régions du Pool et des Plateaux. Lille: Septentrion.

Sources Observatoire des inégalités newsletter. Retrieved from http://www.inegalites.org

Usumier, J. (1992). Commerce entre cultures, tome 1. Paris: PUF.

The WSIS in Geneva on Pluralism, Media Quality, and Work in the Information Society: The Journalists' Perspective

Aidan White

Journalists have a front-row seat in the changing world of the Information Society. Most journalists are already wired into the networks, working practices, and the employment landscape of this new society and most recognize that, with the right approach, new communications networks will widen the scope of journalism, stimulate growth and job creation in the national and global media economy, and strengthen democracy through citizens' rapid access to policymaking at local, national, and regional level. But will it happen?

After the WSIS, most journalists will still have doubts. Nothing in the outcomes of the Summit seriously addresses the crisis facing information workers such as journalists. Nothing has been agreed that will diminish the increasingly insecure and pressurized conditions in which Information Society work is carried out. The Information Society vision remains one that is driven only by the commercial imperatives of the global marketplace.

Journalists and trade union groups that took part in the Summit are convinced that the market-and-technology-based approach—which has characterised the WSIS work—is bad news all round. It will drive down employment rights, stifle creativity, lower quality, and reinforce existing divisions within society at large.

The WSIS declaration and action plan make no serious mention of the need to protect workers' rights. Nor is there a serious attempt to combat the threat posed by unprecedented levels of media concentration and numerous examples of undue influence by global media conglomerates on the world's media market—and much of the public information available on the Internet.

In fact, despite all the hype, that there is less diversity and lower standards in media and a rush to the bottom in terms of quality and pluralism. Promises to open up Internet access to millions in communities starved of reliable information may prove far too optimistic. In fact, governments are taking more control of the Internet. In recent months there

has been increased monitoring of Internet traffic and e-mail communications by governments, which compromises free-expression rights around the world. Familiar opponents of press freedom in China and elsewhere limit access to the Internet and regularly crack down on Internet service providers.

The WSIS failed to address these and some other crucial problems:

- News and information sources are already dominated by northern media conglomerates and the voices of people of the South are rarely heard. This gulf in information resources must be bridged. WSIS provides no guidance as to how this will be done.

- Culture and entertainment resources are swamped by an increasingly monocultural vision of the world. This imbalance must be rectified. We all agree, but WSIS offers no solution.

- Quality of information is ravaged by excessive commercialization and a failure to invest in professional journalism and decent working conditions for media staff. The WSIS offers no coherent response.

The Information Society should be developed within a framework that ensures easy and free access to information, underpinned by the concept of universality in the provision of telecommunications networks and services. This should reinforce the need for public broadcasting, which, when exercised free of state and governmental interference, remains a critical and valuable link in the media quality chain, providing pluralism, diversity, and professionalism. But the vague language of the WSIS declaration makes no attempt to challenge the circling private-sector predators who increasingly demand an end to public-service values in media.

The Summit's lack of focus on rights of consumers and workers in this area fails to address the ongoing battles for quality information services.

The United Nations has recognized—through the UNESCO series of regional conferences on media pluralism—the importance attached to the requirements of a democratic society, such as notably, the respect for pluralism in the media and for freedom of expression. But states must demonstrate their commitment to these values. At present, there is a distinct lack of political will to take up this challenge. Perhaps that's not surprising given the enormous weight of political influence wielded by global media conglomerates that were not present at the Summit.

This raises the role of states—even in some of the most democratic countries—that play an increasingly ambiguous role when it comes to openness and the Information Society. Although most governments recognize that all obstacles to freedom of expression and opinion should be removed, there has been in recent years a weakening of protection in the field of data protection and privacy, which threatens journalism.

The use of new technologies should not undermine traditional rules governing interception of messages or monitoring of people's private lives. However, since September 11, 2001 and the launching of the "war on terrorism," a significant number of countries have promulgated laws and regulations to control the flow of Internet traffic and put under surveillance. All of this compromises the potential for an expanded information space that provides for added value in people's communications. The WSIS utterly fails to highlight this issue.

At the same time, there is uncertainty over the impact of the Information Society on jobs and work. As traditional media converge with new and innovative information technologies and services, some jobs disappear and others are created. The Information Society as defined by the WSIS will be flawed unless fundamental social and labor rights are put into the heart of the agenda for change. Perhaps in Tunis, but, seriously, who is holding their breath? ∎