COMMUNICATIVE POWER AND CURRENT MEDIA DEVELOPMENTS

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Introduction
Issues of information and communication lie at the heart of this edition of the Yearbook. For citizens to participate in democratic life and to exercise democratic choices, they need access to information about the issues that shape their lives, the spaces to discuss and debate those issues openly with others, and the opportunity to make their perspectives and demands heard.

If, as Neera Chandhoke argues (Chandhoke 2002; 2005), civil society is the public space in which people meet, discuss and engage with politics and public policy, then the media is an essential determinant of the success of civil society as a creator of public spaces, and of how effectively people’s voices can be heard. Manu Trivedi argues (Trivedi 1999) that media have become the social space where power is decided’ (2007:1).

The link between communication and power, and voice and citizenship is ancient: throughout history, the extent to which citizens have made their voices heard has depended on their ability to exercise communicative power - to exert influence over policies that affect them by communicating, either individually in ways that resonate in the public sphere, or collectively in ways that will pressure those in authority to consider their arguments.

This Chapter will explore how civil society and democratic engagement are mediated through the media and communication technologies, how this is changing and what is driving those changes. It will focus on the efforts - including those of various global civil society actors - to engage and challenge the media by creating alternative forms of mediated communication, and engaging with existing mainstream media. It will also describe how rapid changes in the media present new opportunities for communicative power and action, as well as many new obstacles to a democratic public sphere.

Providing an insight into the relevance of the media for public spaces in the twenty-first century within the context of the Global Civil Society Yearbook requires a global perspective. Mapping the complex, diverse and rapidly changing universe of the media on a global scale in a single Chapter is clearly impossible, but some indication of how the media is reducing and expanding the public sphere can be provided. The Chapter will focus more on the information, communication and media realities of people outside the industrialised world, which have been documented and analysed exhaustively - particularly on the two billion people who live on less than US$ 2 a day. Countering media trends will be examined, some of which contribute to an expansion and enrichment of the public sphere, and others to a contraction and stifling of it. Similarly, interactions between civil society and media that expand the public sphere, and those civil society actions that potentially undermine it, will be explored.

The Chapter makes three main arguments. First, it argues that nearly all the trends outlined are rapidly changing in their character and double edged in their impact, contributing in some ways to an expansion and in others to a contraction of the public sphere, and of the capacity of citizens to make their voices heard. This suggests that a much greater strategic understanding and engagement by civil society organisations in media issues and trends is critical if these organisations are committed to enhancing the plurality and inclusiveness of democratic systems.

Second, the Chapter argues that civil society’s relationship with the media is also double edged in terms of its impact on the public sphere. If media is a critical place where power is decided, civil society organisations have an obvious interest in understanding and engaging in processes that shape such power. Civil society actors are, or could be, sources of accountability for media organisations as well as sources of support for media-related attempts to enhance the communicative power of marginalised citizens. Most civil society organisations are often more preoccupied with using media as a conduit for their messages than as a critical component of democracy. This preoccupation can encourage them to appropriate communicative power for themselves through their advocacy initiatives.

Third, the Chapter concludes that international public debates on these issues are hampered by lack of appropriate public fora in which actors from media, civil society, government and business can discuss such issues intelligently, comprehensively and constructively. It calls for a greater investment in spaces for critical and constructive dialogue capable of engaging a broad spectrum of opinion on these issues.

Communicative power and the public sphere
There is a substantial literature on notions of communicative power and communicative action, most famously developed in the context of Jurgen Habermas’ argument around the development of the public sphere (Habermas 1983, 1987, 1988, 1989). This Chapter, which is more concerned with trends and actions than concepts, leaves discussion of the many debates around Habermas’ and others’ work on the public sphere to other contributors to this edition (see for example, the Introduction). However, it does argue that these debates are increasingly relevant in the context of twenty-first century events and trends.

Habermas argued that a public sphere in an idealised form was a space where citizens could discuss their common public affairs and organise around Habermas’ and others’ work on the public sphere to other contributors to this edition (see for example, the Introduction). However, it does argue that these arguments are increasingly relevant in the context of twenty-first century events and trends. The principles underpinning the public sphere included an open discussion of all issues of general concern, in which discursive argumentation was employed to determine general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision making (Kellner 2007).

Discourses on the public sphere, communicative action and power acknowledge the critical importance of the media in determining the character and quality of the public sphere, and the distribution of and access to communicative power in the twenty-first century. This analysis downwards the role of the media as a critical determinant of the quality of democratic life, culture and effectiveness (J Jacobson 2006). This Chapter explores some of the trends shaping the media’s role in relation to communicative power, the public sphere and democracy.

Media and the expansion of the public sphere
During the last two decades, for much of humanity, the public sphere has expanded substantially and the capacity to contribute to public debate increased. Three main trends have shaped this expansion of the public sphere: first, the wave of media liberalisation that, as part of broader democratic reform movements, swept much of the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall; second, the transformative changes wrought by new technologies; and third, how advocacy and the effective use of communicative power is increasing the pressure for social justice.

Media liberalisation, freedom and expansion
Some of the reverses to press freedom and media pluralism in recent years are outlined below; but the analysis presented in this Chapter is rooted in an acknowledgement of the major expansion of the public sphere over the last two decades. The global wave of media liberalisation that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the associated pressures of globalisation, continues to reverberate on the ever more rapidly changing media landscape of the twenty first century.

This wave was not uniform, but it did transform state control of communication systems in large parts of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere. It led to a proliferation of new media actors and the replacement of media monopolies with a profusion of commercial and, in some cases, community and public service media. For a large portion of humanity, media was transformed: once the presence of government which used it as a tool to control information and maintain power, media now offered opportunities for the creation of fora, and a plurality of sources of news and other information.
Box 8.1: Media, democracy and the public sphere: how community media changed Nepal

2007 marks the tenth anniversary of Nepal’s first community radio station. What started out as a pilot project that has spread to nationwide movement for grassroots communications is now able to shape the course of radio becoming a critical catalyst in the struggle to restore democracy in the country. Radio Sagarmatha 102.4 FM first came on air in 1997 after a long struggle, lobbying by the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists to win a licence, and with seed funding from UNESCO. Its aim was to use grassroots community radio in rural areas and help foster participation in the democratic process. But it soon opened the floodgates for dozens of other FM stations. Besides using communication for development, the stations also acted as a medium for conflict resolution during Nepal’s insurgency - 1996-2006.

The first community radio stations in Nepal were important in two respects: first, creating awareness about the significance of community communication in expanding the public sphere; second: creating the conditions for democracy and development to thrive. Sagarmatha set up a network of community stations throughout the country for training and exchange of programmes.

Facing with commercial pressures and political interference, Nepali listeners showed there is a tremendous demand for public broadcasting in rural areas for information, entertainment and education. Here, information is at a premium; most listeners want news they can use. The advent of FM radio in Nepal virtually wiped out the heavy censorship the army singled out radio for special attention. The authorities had realized that the network of community and local FM stations - which by now reached around 65% of the population - had become a powerful tool in forming public opinion and making citizens aware of their democratic rights. They had to control it at all costs.

The army told the stations they could not broadcast news, only music. In response, radio reporters and producers deserted their stations and went into hiding. They fought back using broadcasts that created situations. They broadcast radio discussions and phone-in programs, providing the protests with broad coverage. This information allowed pro-democracy activists to coordinate demonstrations nationwide, thus magnifying their impact. The military responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and curfews. News of these were relayed live from the streets by radio reporters with mobile phones and transmitted nationwide by FM networks. By mid-April it was clear that the government had lost control. Hundreds of thousands of people were marching to Kathmandu despite curfews and shoot-on-sight orders. An activist media played a major role in keeping the public informed about the demonstrations. It covered extensively the perspectives of leaders of the democratic movement. And although it may have seemed biased, most journalists justified the activism because they said they were fighting for fundamental freedoms.

As the People Power Uprising of April 2006 gathered strength in the streets of Kathmandu, the media played a key role in disseminating the news nationwide. On television, the protests had entertainment value: people battled riot police and went home to watch themselves on the evening news. In many cases television cameras changed reality just by being present at a demonstration. However, it was radio that brought more nuanced coverage, especially to areas of the country where media had less reach and to sections of the population that could not read. In remote areas of Nepal like Jumla district in the west or Taplejung in the east, people walked around with earphones in one ear: they weren’t listening to music, but to news transmitted live from Kathmandu and other cities.

Throughout this political transition, community radio stations took the news from the capital to remote rural areas, and brought feedback and reaction of the nation to Kathmandu. Several syndicated services for radio exchange were set up to facilitate this two-way conversation between the centre and periphery. The end result was maximum public participation in the political evolution through horizontal nationwide communication via the FM network. Radio stations read out sections of the constitution to rural audiences in their own language. There were interviews with political leaders, human rights activists and members of civil society. The yearning for an end to the 10-year conflict was so strong among Nepalis that they identified with the demonstrations and got the message that an autocratic king was the biggest obstacle to peace. The slogans changed from ‘We Want Democracy’ to ‘We will bring peace’.

If it had not been for the ‘media multiplier’, especially through country-wide networks of radio stations, it is doubtful that the uprising would have gathered the momentum it did. Finally, as demonstrators announced another series of massive protests, King Gyanendra gave in. On 24 April 2006 he announced the restoration of parliament. Since then, Nepal has seen a dramatic transformation of the state structure, which in any other country would have been impossible without widespread violence and loss of life. The king is no longer supreme commander of the army, royal succession will henceforth be determined by parliament. Nepal has been declared a secular state, and the monarchy has been reduced to little more than a tourist attraction.

After the victory of the democratic process, the new administration rewarded radio for its support for democracy by announcing that it would fast-track applications for new FM licenses that the previous royal government had shelved. Seventy new licenses were granted immediately and new applications rose. By the end of 2007 there could be as many as 200 FM radio stations, nearly half-owned and run by local communities. Many fragile states have seen significant investment in media development, often driven by external stakeholders and often with mixed results. In Nepal, external investment by organisations like UNESCO was largely internally shaped and driven and its impact has been immense.

However, the challenges for the future are mounting. Are current growth rates in radio too rapid, and has radio become a victim of its own success? Indeed, radio stations are facing a host of second-generation problems: commercialisation, political interference, lack of professional training and business sustainability. Companies and organisations are getting into radio without understanding its technical, managerial and editorial aspects. The state still does not distinguish between commercial and community stations, which means that non-profit cooperatives must pay a four per cent tax on income, and a broadcasting levy. Rural community stations run by volunteers find it hard to sustain themselves. There is a danger they will turn into donor-driven mouthpieces if forced to depend on sponsorship from development organisations. Central government control of the licensing process has brought fears of politicisation: licenses are handed out routinely to politicians or favoured business interests. After the peace process the Maoists joined the government, including former rebel spokesmen, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, who is now Minister of Information. There are fears that radio will be used for propaganda rather than public interest information.

Nepal’s experience illustrates the importance of media that is connected to grassroots concerns for fostering catalysing and enriching democracy. The radio movement faces major challenges for the future, but its development builds on strong foundations. Radio Sagarmatha was established with relatively modest support and snowballed into a vibrant community media nationwide. There are few instances in the world where so little money has gone so far.

Kunda Dixit, editor and publisher of the Nepali Times newspaper, Kathmandu

During this period, there was a greater expansion in both the numbers of media entities and their audiences than at any other time. Despite serious economic difficulties and declining circulations in many Western countries, the number of newspapers has increased substantially globally. Global newspaper circulation has increased by almost 10% over the last five years, according to the World Association of Newspapers, and the number of daily newspaper titles has surpassed 10,000 for the first time (World Association of Newspapers 2007). Most of this increase has occurred in developing countries.

A decade ago, with some exceptions (for example in large parts of Latin America, and in South Africa), television was largely the preserve of industrialised countries and the rich in developing countries. Today, satellite dishes are a prime consumer item in some of the most remote areas of the world, particularly the Middle East, where the new channels (most famously Al-Jazeera), have profoundly impacted the public sphere in the Arab world, providing spaces for people to gain insight into political and state actions, and engage in debates around them. Educational soap operas, such as South Africa’s award winning Soul City, are broadcast to townships where television ownership is common. In Asia, even among the poor, television ownership is rising exponentially, and in many regions of the world it provides the main source of information for people, particularly in industrialised countries. Where there remains a gap in television ownership between rich and poor, and urban and rural, these gaps – at least in terms of access – are shrinking rapidly.

Radio remains the most accessed medium in the world, and it is arguably this form of media that has undergone the most significant revolution in structure, content, audience and diversity, with profound impacts on the public sphere in many countries (Girard 2005). In 2004, there were more than five times as many radio sets per hundred people in low income countries than there were television sets. More people in the world have access to radio (86%) than to television (83%) (ITU 2003). According to a major recent study of African media, radio is the most accessible of all media, with both television and newspapers concentrated mostly in urban areas (BBC World Service Trust 2007).

Commercial FM radio has revolutionised broadcast in many developing countries, transforming broadcast environments from monolithic monopolies to a panopoly of new actors. For developing countries, the role of radio in underpinning and enriching democratic debate and processes has been especially significant. Within a decade of liberalising its broadcast policy in 1993, the number of radio stations in Uganda increased from two to nearly a hundred, and the country’s FM sector has become famous internationally for its muscular political talk shows and for Ebitréeze - public discussions on political issues that are broadcast live.

Liberalisation of media in Ghana produced a smaller number but no less dynamic group of FM radio stations. Their impact in opening up public debate and facilitating the public monitoring of the elections in 2001 (Friedman 2001) and in 2004 (Sakyi-Addo 2007) was particularly significant.

In some of the more mature markets, such as the United States, concentration has led to radio ownership becoming increasingly concentrated, and the effect of liberalisation in former closed markets has been a major increase in diversity and pluralism, creating new public spaces of discussion and debate. Later, this Chapter will explore the growing political and commercial pressures onmaturing markets which threaten to close down these new public spaces. However, in large parts of Africa, Asia and, to some degree, in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Latin America, the events that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall have had a major and sometimes a lasting effect on the media and public sphere. In some countries, the effects of these changes are only becoming fully apparent now (see Box 8.1).

While commercial media has benefited most from liberalisation, new policy environments in many countries have also sparked a mushrooming of community media, a trend also facilitated by falling technology costs and a substantial decrease in the price of entry into the radio market (see AMARC URL). The community radio movement in Latin America, which has a long tradition, is experiencing an unprecedented expansion, with liberalisation having led to radio ownership becoming increasingly concentrated, and the effect of liberalisation in former closed markets has been a major increase in diversity and pluralism, creating new public spaces of discussion and debate. Later, this Chapter will explore the growing political and commercial pressures onmaturing markets which threaten to close down these new public spaces.

Communication technologies

Most current discussions of communicative power focus on the Internet, mobile telephony and other new technologies, and concentrate on what Manuel Castells calls ‘the rise of mass self-communication’ (Castells 2007: 246). While the revolution in media, particularly in developing countries, has been prompted in large part by a change in politics, policy, economics and society, leading to transformed systems of ownership, it has also been fuelled by, and is itself helping to catalyse, the technology revolution.

Never before have new territories for claiming (and possibly confining) public space emerged as rapidly as they have over the last two decades, with the emergence of the Internet, and the allied technological revolutions of mobile telephony, satellite broadcasting and communication, and the host of other applications (blogs, vlogs, wikis etc.) that make up what is termed Web 2.0. These issues have been discussed in previous editions of the Yearbook (see Castells et al. 2006; Naughton 2001) and elsewhere in this publication; here attention will be paid to the links between new and traditional media in opening public spaces and enhancing communicative power.

Mainstream media increasingly turn to blogs and podcasts for stories, opinion and inspiration, and are using the same tools as delivery platforms. Social spaces such as MySpace and Facebook enable the instant creation of networks of liked people, and activate fluid, dynamic interactions that are beyond – but also can influence - traditional media. Wikis create democratic tools for defining concepts, movements and innovations. The difficulties of censoring such technologies pose a challenge to governments and to mainstream media, which may fear that its reluctance to cover sensitive issues will reduce its credibility as the story becomes available through viral communication networks.

While in the West and established media markets, the Web 2.0 technologies are reshaping media markets and communication opportunities available to citizens,
A radio programme in Guinea Bissau about HIV/AIDS

the effect in resource-poor countries is even greater potentially. Such technologies reduce substantially the price of entry into the media market and they provide an even greater opportunity for unheard, marginalised perspectives to be aired and new public spheres to be created, particularly in environments where media freedom is restricted, indigenously produced media content is often prohibitively costly or where existing media markets are too expensive for new independent entrants to survive.

Online public interest journalism is no longer new, with some of the leading online public interest sites demonstrating a capacity to sustain themselves over time, establish a strong brand rooted in public respect and demonstrate a capacity to sustain themselves over time, with some of the leading online public interest sites providing a critical monitoring function of the media (for example, Malay siakini, which has been targeted repeatedly by the authorities and equally repeatedly made the subject of the response to the pandemic, to transform networks of people living with HIV/AIDS — have become increasingly powerful, built largely on their capacity to embarrass and hold governments and international agencies to account through sophisticated public protest and media strategies. This adept use of communications, combined with excellent advocacy focused on the MDGs, has transformed networks of people living with HIV/AIDS from the subjects of the response to the pandemic, to agents and strategic shapers of it. In this way, the resources, infrastructure and political commitment galvanised around HIV/AIDS, and other global health issues, such as TB, have increased significantly. The HIV/AIDS global campaign echoed other social movements, for example around debt cancellation, fair trade and against globalisation.

This move has coincided with and increasingly been overtaken by the rapid rise in the communicative power of celebrities to shape media and public agendas around issues of concern to civil society. Rock stars such as Sir Bob Geldof and Bono epitomise the shift in sources of action on development issues, with policy agendas not only represented by but increasingly shaped by figures who have instant access to media. For example, Geldof suggested the establishment of the Commission for Africa, prior to the G8 Summit in 2005, and as one of its 17 commissioners, he played a role in shaping its content. This trend is augmented by massive resources being made available for development work (particularly in health) from new private foundations and individuals, most notably by Bill Gates. The communicative power of such figures is greater than virtually any other development actor, be they implementing agencies, grassroots NGOs or research bodies. In addition, a new generation of US foundations, established by technology entrepreneurs such as Jeff Skoll and Pierre Omidyar, are supporting social entrepreneurs and advocacy.

All development issues now compete for public profile, with the experience of HIV/AIDS, poverty and other causes depending increasingly for political and financial commitment on media visibility and public support. Celebrity ambassadors and endorsers have become a central strategy for many development actors, the massive communicative power of celebrities unleashing unprecedented and previously untapped financial and public support. Having been in decline for decades, development budgets, both formal (through governments) and informal (through NGOs and diasporic networks), are rising faster than at any other time. The use of communicative power in pursuit of a social justice agenda has arguably rarely been so great or so effective.

The contraction of the public sphere and the appropriation of communicative power

Media and the concentration of communicative power

The previous section of this Chapter outlined some of the ways in which the media has undergone a transformative opening worldwide, diminishing the control and influence of government, as a consequence of policy change, social change and
technology. This section deals with many of the opposing forces, documenting some of the ways in which public spheres are contracting, and how communicative power is increasingly being either co-opted from citizens or marginalised. Four trends in particular stand out:

1. Newly intensified assaults on freedom of expression, sometimes linked to the war on terror
2. The concentration of communicative power
3. The dependence on advertising and the reduction in public interest reporting
4. A growth in media numbers, but a shrinkage in diversity

1. Freedom of the media is under renewed assault
The number of journalists killed or imprisoned each year is reaching new records, according to Reporters Without Borders (URL). Both terrorism and the war on terror are cited by advocates of media freedom as a cause of media censorship and intimidation. According to the World Association of Newspapers, there is:

- a legitimate and growing concern that in too many instances tightening of security and surveillance measures, whether old or newly introduced, are being used to stifle debate and the free flow of information about political decisions, or that they are being implemented with too little concern for the overriding necessity to protect individual liberties and, notably, freedom of the press. (2007:1)

Such advocates argue that the constraints on press freedom arise from new anti-terrorism and official secrets laws, criminalisation of speech judged to justify terrorism, criminal prosecution of journalists for disclosing classified information, surveillance of communications without judicial authorisation, restrictions on access to government data and more strict security classifications. ‘All these measures can severely erode the capacity of journalists to investigate and report accurately and critically, and thus the ability of the press to inform,’ according to WAN (2007: 1). Legislative frameworks that guarantee freedom of expression clearly provide an important indicator of communicative power and plurality, but the existence of new legal and even constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, and mechanisms for media diversity, are no guarantee that these will be implemented in practice. Historically, the experience of many societies illustrates that while freedom of expression may be guaranteed under the constitution, it can be routinely violated by the government. Even where freedom of expression exists in theory and in practice, in many poor countries it can be meaningless for everyone except the elite, particularly people in rural areas, who for reasons of cost, media reach, language or other factors, are unable to access information or the means of communication.

In many countries, such as former Eastern Bloc nations, the liberalisation of media has enabled the establishment of media entities, but has not necessarily resulted in a genuinely free and plural media. According to a major review of European countries carried out by the Open Society Institute in 2005, ‘freedom of the media is rapidly becoming a private business. Private broadcasters pursuing above all commercial gains rapidly outperformed State broadcasters, which were mostly reluctant or unable to keep up’ (OSI 2005: 33).

2. Media ownership is becoming more globalised and concentrated into fewer corporate entities, which exert increasing control across media platforms
This enduring trend towards concentration of media and communication ownership has taken longer to reach the lower value markets of many developing countries, but it is now accelerating. The initial post-1989 explosion in ownership and control of the media in many new democracies and markets is being replaced by a steady consolidation of media systems, as commercial pressures, mergers and acquisitions increasingly focus media ownership on a smaller number of actors. This is evident at the global, regional and national levels.

At the global level, there is an increasing concentration of media and communication industries among a handful of giant, corporate media conglomerates. In Africa, traditional media conglomerates have increasingly merged with and been joined by new media companies, with Disney, CBS, AOL-Time Warner, News Corporation, Bertelsmann AG, Vacom, Yahoo, Microsoft, Google and General Electric dominating markets – by some estimates, around 90% of the media market in the US. Most of these conglomerates have major international operations; for example News Corporation is increasing its foothold in Latin America, through Sky Latin America, and Asia, particularly in India and China. Many of the Web 2.0 social networking sites are being bought by such corporations; for example, News International has purchased MySpace. The advertising industry, which shapes media markets, is also becoming more globalised; and the emergence of global advertising brands, global consumer cultures (for example, global teenagers) has been well documented (UNDP 1998).

At the regional level, global players are augmented by major regional players. In Africa, South African media companies such as Naspers, and others such as the Nation Media Group, are beginning to shape media ownership throughout the continent. Building on the rapid emergence of an African middle class (rather than simply an elite class), the trend is providing a ‘third wind of change’ for the continent according to Wallace Chuma of the University of Cape Town. ‘Africa has already experienced two “winds of change”, namely the decolonisation process that started in the late 1950s, and the democratisation and deregulation processes that followed the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s (Chuma 2005). In both cases, the media were rapidly influenced by the political upheavals. While these winds of change were catalysed largely by events and processes outside Africa, the third wind is likely to be driven by pan-African media investment projects from the southern tip of the continent. The changes wrought by this third wind of change seem likely to result in the increasing influence of a few global and regional media players across the continent, the consolidation of the media market, and the pre-eminence of business, sport and entertainment news.

At the national level, concentration of ownership has long been a feature of mature markets; for example, following the US 1996 Telecommunications Act, Clear Channel acquired 1,200 local radio stations across the country. And the trend continues in regions such as Latin America where, for example in Guatemala, four out of six television channels are owned by one businessman, a Mexican citizen based in Miami. These trends are being challenged, often controversially such as in Venezuela (referred to later in this Chapter). The same trend is taking place in newly democratic countries, as competitive pressures increase broadcast licences, other operational costs rise, and media markets mature.
3. Media is becoming increasingly competitive and advertising dependent, with a reduction in public interest reporting

Competitive pressures ensure that owners, editors and journalists focus coverage on those issues that are of interest to a paying market. A longstanding global trend, this pressure is intensifying in poor countries, where its consequences could be particularly acute. Arguably, the incentives to investigate local issues of poverty, marginalisation and injustice are weakening and the disincentives to doing so are growing, particularly if such coverage threatens to upset those with power or influence. Media owners are increasingly reluctant to exercise courage in the public interest, and the effect on many of those new markets that experienced an opening of public debate following liberalisation, is the beginning of a steady closing down of public spaces. From Russia to Uganda, where independent media offered new platforms for public debate, there seems to be a stifling of freshly opened public spheres as a result of political pressures and an increased focus on profit.

Indeed, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the media in many former Soviet countries has undergone a classic Bell curve: rapid transition from dictatorship or a one party state system catalysed free and open debate, facilitated by a confident, diverse and dynamic media movement, but was followed by a stiffing of public debate and media diversity through competitive pressures, media consolidation, the growth of poverty, marginalisation and injustice are weakening television illustrates just such a Bell curve, and argues that the investigative reporting and innovative approaches to news gathering and political analysis endured. It is increasingly visible, community media faces a challenge to develop sustainable business models, and the movement is fragile, even when it is effective (see Box 8.2).

4. A growth in media numbers, but not necessarily in media pluralism or diversity

The explosion in media discussed earlier in this Chapter is sometimes taken to indicate greater diversity, plurality and dynamism. However, there is no inherent relationship between the number of media outlets and the plurality of those outlets. Of course, the role and impact of media in a society varies immensely, but the number of outlets provides little guide to their social or political function. Multiple media outlets may just as likely indicate a sophisticated marketing environment as the prevalence of diverse political perspectives.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in China. Two decades ago the principal function of media in China was to provide the critical instrument of state control by framing and limiting news and information available to its people. Today, its principal function is the provision of advertising platforms to fuel the country’s huge consumer boom, exercised through a media environment transformed by an explosion of television and other media channels. Freedom of the press remains heavily curtailed and while a debate continues within the country about the role of a more open media in exposing corruption and providing a more stable business climate (Hilton 2000), the evidence suggests that the prevalence of diverse political perspectives can be shared and reinforced. The advantages of such opportunities are obvious, and have been outlined above, not least in their capacity to create new identities, solidarity, confidence and empowerment of those who are marginalised. There has been less debate about the implications of a communication environment fractured to such a degree that the contestation of ideas and policies is impossible to sustain. In this context, the public sphere erodes and is replaced by a panoply of individualised private and semi-private spheres.

In such a climate, communicative power may be increased, but the capacity for citizens to assess, evaluate and take informed positions and decisions – not least in elections – becomes far more difficult because the space to weigh up different arguments narrows, thus constraining interpretation. As a result, ideas receive neither due consideration, nor are subject to testing in a genuinely public forum.

In any case, the genuine inclusiveness of new technologies is debatable. The digital divide between those who have access to, or an interest in, new technologies, and those who do not, is an ongoing subject of debate. Even in the age of Web 2.0, there is evidence that media creation and readership using new technologies is drawn from a relatively narrow audience. The top 100 websites receive 62% of the online audience according to an unverified citation on Wikipedia, compared to the top 100 newspapers, magazines, and radio stations, which receive about 30% of their respective audiences on average.

It is not yet clear whether, in such an environment, communicative power will end up being exercised by those with the most marketing muscle, brand recognition and sometimes the most strident views. If there is value in a public debate where a range of perspectives can be aired and challenged, this fragmentation could as well mark the disintegration of
the public sphere as the regeneration of it. It seems likely that those brands with high public trust will strengthen their influence on the public debate and become a reference point, if not a platform within an ever more complex and noisy public sphere.

Meanwhile, the optimism for an unfiltered and accessible public arena ushered in by the Internet in the mid-1990s - epitomised by the Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace published by the Electronic Frontier Foundation in 1996 (EFF 1996) - has faded, with the rise of censorship. China restricts access to particular websites routinely (see Chapter 5 of this volume), and while those websites highlighted above such as Malaysian, have survived, they have been threatened by the authorities and struggle financially.

Civil society, media and the expansion of the public sphere

The trends outlined above demonstrate some of the shifting balances of communicative power. Most of these shifts result from changes in policy, often catalysed by the tectonics of globalisation and international movements by technology and commercial forces to maximise capital and market share. At the same time, there are also a host of civil society initiatives aimed at rebalancing communicative power in the public interest.

The current communication environment is frequently characterised as one that lends itself to alternative voices finding a platform, an audience and an organisational network capable of creating communicative power. Some of the limitations of such an environment have been touched upon above, but four key areas of civil society activity to improve the public sphere, through and with media, should be outlined.

1. Freedom of expression movements

The international freedom of expression movement, which comprises many international organisations, has become increasingly organised, better resourced and more dynamic. It has needed to, given the increasing worldwide assaults on freedom of expression. The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) lists more than 70 members, many working internationally and an increasing number from developing countries. The movement monitors abuses of media freedom, supports independent media movements in countries that face constraints or attacks on press freedom, and develops policy to

enshrine and make real rights to freedom of expression. While the movement has embraced members from developing countries, and from a broad range of actors beyond the mainstream media (such as the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), relations with civil society organisations are weaker. There are good reasons for this, not least a determination by the media to retain their independence, but both sectors share common concerns, such as increasing pressure from authoritarian regimes.

2. Communication rights in the twenty-first century

A growing international movement - which has sometimes been at odds with those in the freedom of expression movement - is coalescing behind the ‘right to communicate’. Such rights go beyond freedom of expression and extend to areas such as democratic media governance, participation in citizen’s own culture, linguistic rights, the rights to enjoy the fruits of human creativity, to education, privacy, peaceful assembly and self determination. Central to the right to communicate is the right to create one’s own media (particularly important for community radio, which continues to be banned or discouraged in many countries). Such rights are also aimed at countering the concentration of media ownership, control of intellectual property and exclusion of minority voices. In effect, the movement is attempting to establish a right to be heard and be listened to.

The history of attempts to establish such rights is contentious and occasionally bitter. The right to communicate was proposed in the 1981 MacBride Report (MacBride 1981), which initiated a global debate around what became known as the New World Information and Communication Order initiative (NWICO), led by UNESCO. The MacBride Commission pointed to the extreme dependency of developing countries on Western news sources, the concentration of media ownership, and an advisory board comprised of intellectuals and academics, is often described as an attempt to realise communication rights. Many of the same tensions that characterised the NWICO debate are re-emerging around the Chavez’s attempts to ‘rebalance’ the media (not least in the government’s withdrawal of the licence to RCTV and perhaps other commercial television stations that are accused of inciting rebellion in the country).

While the concept of communication rights is most vibrant in Latin America, a global campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society was formed in 2001, and led to significant lobbying at the World Summit on the Information Society, a two-stage UN summit held in 2003 and 2005 (see Box 8.2).

Today, no right to communicate has been established officially, but the campaign continues. At the heart of the debate on communication rights are three sets of issues.

First, the right to communicate is founded on and rooted in the principle of freedom of expression, but is supplementary to it. Nearly all actors involved in this debate argue that freedom of expression is a non-negotiable foundation stone. However, the right to communicate involves not only the right to say, but the right to be heard, and encompasses concepts of listening, understanding, responding and the capacity to create. For some there are tensions between the right to freedom of expression and the right to communicate; and for others, these rights are mutually reinforcing.

Second, there is a question of whether the right to communicate implies the necessity to listen (which in turn could imply compulsion). Many argue, for example, that there is an inherent contradiction in creating a formal right focused largely on ensuring that the authorities enable people to make their voices heard, while at the same time making governments the guarantors of such a right.

Third, and perhaps more profound, is the absence of serious international discussion about the problems that underpin and prompt the communication rights
Box: 8.2: Media and the World Summit on the Information Society: interventions in a policy-making process

Civil society has often been conceptualised and analysed in its interaction with political processes. As Dean argues in this Chapter, in order to influence policies that affect them, citizens need access to information and ‘the spaces to discuss and debate those issues openly with others, and the opportunity to make their perspectives and demands heard’. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) offered a prominent opportunity for such an endeavour. As a major forum for transnational policy making in the field of information and communication technologies, and interventions by a variety of civil society actors, the Summit attracted community and alternative media activists, including members of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasting (AMARC) and of India media, as well as representatives of public service media, such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), and of commercial media, such as the International Association of Broadcasting (IAB).

These different media actors formed an alliance, the Media Caucus, as part of a broader network of civil society caucuses such as on Human Rights, Internet Governance, and Privacy and Security, each developing and advocating a civil society agenda in their respective areas and bringing it into the WSIS negotiation process. However, with members ranging from grassroots activists to commercial media empires, the media alliance was conflictive and uncovered deeply-rooted divides. The only common denominator, for which the caucus lobbied fiercely and with some success, was freedom of expression. With other objectives eclipsed from the caucus agenda, community and alternative media formed a separate coalition, the Community Media Working Group, and developed their own agenda, which included financial and legal support for these media, access to the airwaves, and communication rights. Meanwhile, those media activists with a more radical agenda and opposed to a government-led summit held parallel events outside the summit compound, such as WSIS/WSeizeit, and articulated a more fundamental critique of current global governance structures, and of the privatisation of knowledge through the intellectual property regime.

Those community and alternative media participating ‘inside’ the official summit process applied some of the classical repertoire of strategy and action, which has been analysed and conceptualised by social movement studies (Khagram et al. 2002). As civil society actors operating within the WSIS institutional framework, the Community Media Working Group framed their objectives according to the dominant summit theme of enhancing communication technologies for development, focusing on the development aspects of communication, and consequently mobilising around the two WSIS summits. The slogan, ‘Create your own media – make your own voice heard’ permeated many smaller conferences, presentations and discussions organised by civil society, business and government actors, which complemented official summit proceedings. If these media failed to imprint their mark in the core WSIS documents, they did strengthen their position in the broader discourses on appropriate means of communication and on the role of information in society. Not least through their foundation in grassroots practices, they expressed a vision of the information society that is grounded in bottom-up processes, based on the creative acts of civil society initiatives, and focused on participatory and interactive communication rather than one-way information streams.

Beyond the limited outcomes of WSIS, as well as the latter’s promising testing of a ‘multi-stakeholder dialogue’, which includes civil society (Raboy/Landry 2005), the summit process represented a political opportunity structure (McAdam et al. 1996), which was used by formerly isolated civil society groups to share expertise and experience, create networks and converge their agendas. The vast field of ‘third sector’ media, including community, alternative, citizens and autonomous media, proved to be fragmented, yet communication between different entities emerged, and the raised profile of these media constitutes an important building block for achieving a more central role in future policy processes. However, coalitions between mainstream and non-mainstream media were fragile, and the inclusion of commercial media in a space dedicated to ‘civil society’ was frequently questioned. Linking the concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘media’ may encourage the notion that ‘civil society media’ encompasses only specific types of media – generally the non-commercial, non-state ‘third media sector’ – and not ‘the media’ as such (Hadi/Hintz 2007).

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debate. Issues of growing media concentration, the marginalisation of people living in poverty from debates that shape their lives, the perceived domination of a small number of international news providers, and the role of information and communication in sustainable democratic development – these issues have little place, space or home in international discourse. The World Summit on the Information Society failed to provide that space, and in any case was a forum defined by governments. Whether communication rights - or any other strategy or movement - is an appropriate solution to such issues is rarely subject to a serious debate at international level. This concern extends well beyond social activists and civil society movements as mainstream journalists become increasingly constrained by, and their work shaped according to, the commercial and political imperatives of their owners. No serious international fora exists where a diversity of engaged and concerned actors, from across the ideological spectrum, can address these issues. Without such a forum, the future debate risks continued polarisation (particularly between some free market advocates and social activists) misunderstandings, unhelpful assumptions, much of it shaped by the sad history of such debates.

3. Alternative media and communicative power

As this Yearbook makes clear, the opportunities for civil society actors to create their own communication platforms – often called alternative media - have never been greater. Many examples of these, such as the India media movement (see Chapter 10 of this volume), are well documented.

‘Alternative media’ encompasses an extraordinarily broad range, from citizens’ networks, community media and the many electronic and web-based entities outlined earlier in this Chapter, to theatre groups, oral testimony initiatives, and wall newspapers, to name a few. In truth, the term tends to define more what it is an alternative to, than what it is or what it stands for. However, regardless of this terminological debate, alternative media encompasses highly imaginative, dynamic and innovative manifestations of communicative power by ordinary citizens.

In the West, alternative media has been established in response to the unwillingness of the mainstream media to provide spaces and voices to marginalised groups, or those perceived to be outside of mainstream public discourse. It is often articulated as a challenge to the perceived domination of media by international capital, or a set of narrow commercial interests hostile to citizen power (Chomsky 2002).

In most non-Western societies, alternative media has tended to emerge less in response to commercial power and more in response to governmental power, in order to create spaces free of control and censorship by the state. While such distinctions between Western and non-Western societies may simplify a much more complex picture, they do explain, in part, the absence of an integrated and coherent global alternative media movement (another key reason is a lack of resources).

Over the last 40 years, there have been many efforts to establish alternative, non-Western based news and information services, some of which have been successful and achieved impact. The best known and longest lasting, the Inter Press Service (IPS), was established in 1964 as a Southern response to agencies such as Reuters. With strong networks in Latin America, IPS prides itself on breaking stories not normally covered by mainstream media, and on its close links to civil society. It is prominent in many countries in Latin America and Africa. Supported by various development agencies and philanthropic foundations, IPS is one survivor of a substantial number of similar agencies, such as Gemini News and Compass Features, which were not financially viable. In the meantime, regional agencies have become established through an online presence, such as AIAfrica.com.

4. Media for Development

Outlined above are efforts by citizen’s movements either to create their own channels of communication, or to establish new rights that enable people to utilise or create such channels. A more coherent set of actions are gaining momentum as media and media support organisations, both national and international, become increasingly organised and effective in formulating and implementing development strategies; the necessity for good governance, particularly the capacity of citizens, rather than donors, to hold governments to account for delivery of services, and the MDGs as the principal strategic framework for development; globalisation as an overarching context to development; the need for more rights-based approaches to development; the importance of coherence, alignment and harmonisation of development policy, and managing for results.

While all of these issues have major implications for the role of media in developing countries, one in particular stands out. Most donors, led by the UK, are committed to providing funds through budget support to governments. Only by doing so, they argue, can governments be held to improve the performance of the delivery of services, rather than to Western donors, and only then can real democracy take hold (budget support also enables donors to spend large amounts of money with relatively little administration at a time when spending budgets are increasing and administration budgets are being pared down). Increasingly, donors understand that if citizens are to hold government to account in new and poor democracies, capacities for that to happen need to be better developed. Citizens cannot hold governments to account unless they are informed of and have access to information on the issues that shape their lives. The role of the media and of communication structures at all levels (community, sub regional, national, regional and international) is inextricably bound up with how citizens understand and engage in democratic life. The rights and capacities of people, particularly those living in poverty, to voice their own perspectives and have them heard in public debate, particularly through the media, are increasingly recognized as critical to effective governance.

Such Western donor interest in promoting media and civil society in developing countries clearly leaves them open to criticism that they are using such actors as proxy sources of accountability. This has engendered efforts to develop a set of Southern- and particularly African-led agendas on media development. For example, the Strengthening African Media Process, supported by DFID, is expected to reach its conclusions in late 2007. These initiatives are complemented by a series of sector-led initiatives, such as the Global Forum for Media Development, which seek to map out a proactive agenda from media and media support organisations within which external actors – including funders – can operate.

This sphere of media and communication for development is increasingly dynamic. It includes, for example, work on:

- Asserting and developing better access and rights to information, such as enabling people affected by particular policies and initiatives to have access to
information about them. A highly successful citizens’ movement in India has been particularly effective in gaining legislative and judicial backing for this right.

- Support to media, including media freedom, community media, capacity building and enhancing financial sustainability of independent media, media policy, pro-poor/development focused content, professionalism and ethics in media.
- Strengthening a healthy public sphere, characterised by informed media, a vibrant civil society and decentralised patterns of information exchange.
- The role of communication in informing and generating public debate, and in ensuring the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups are prominent in such debate; and its allied role in enhancing ownership, accountability and transparency in development policy (such as formulating development, poverty reduction and other related strategies).
- Community empowerment through communication for social change and other dialogue-focused methodologies.
- Communication as part of a rights-based approach to development, and how communication (particularly with and through media) intersects with and enriches civil society voice.

However, while the media for development community and initiatives are increasingly effective, well organised and, hopefully, rooted in Southern frameworks of methodologies, such efforts remain largely marginal and poorly coordinated areas of development policy. Nevertheless, current development contexts and strategies strongly suggest more concerted and increased support for such initiatives in the future.

The appropriation of communicative power

Earlier sections have focused on the role of civil society in supporting public debate, often by creating alternative forms of communicative power and by placing pressure on mainstream media to cover particular issues.

However, as this Chapter illustrates, the relationship between civil society and media is complex, civil society’s efforts to enhance media freedom and expand the public sphere face many obstacles, and there are instances of civil society activity eroding the public sphere. While it is not of the same nature or intensity as the competition within the media, civil society organisations do compete with one another. Such competition creates incentives for civil society organisations to regard the media as a conduit for their messages, rather than as a critical component of the democratic fabric of society. Civil society organisations require a positive public profile and credibility in order to achieve their objectives, and this need has intensified. As a consequence, they have the potential to appropriate communicative power through the media. While the success and impact of advocacy and campaigning, and the exercise of communicative power by celebrities and public figures, has been acknowledged above, the social movements that were earlier the principal sources of public pressure for greater attention to be paid to debt, global inequality, poverty and the environment, have been supplanted by a set of new players who are better equipped to exercise communicative power in the twenty-first century. The anti-globalisation protests of Seattle in 1999, the World Social Forums and the many other examples of global civil society action, which have been explored in the Global Civil Society Yearbook series, are among the most visible examples of communicative power by civil society.

Many events have changed the dynamics, impact and influence of global social movements in the last few years, including, most importantly, Western political reactions to 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the subsequent constriction of spaces for social action, and the partial appropriation of many of these issues by mainstream politics and politicians.

Other influences on global civil society include the appropriation of leadership on central issues of concern by those who command and exercise communicative power – in particular, celebrities. The capacities of rock musicians and of wealthy individuals to mobilise their resources and public support base, to catalyse leadership, and to exert pressure on political processes surrounding issues of concern to global civil society, such as global poverty, has been extraordinary. The appropriation of communicative power by these figures has had the clear benefit of achieving an immense amount.

However, they have sought to address such criticisms: the Jubilee 2000 campaign was perhaps the best example of a genuinely global campaign on poverty rooted in communities throughout the world that were directly affected by debt.

Rather than deriving power from those most affected by particular issues, those leading the current movements on poverty and environment are those able to command communicative power. This is power rooted in their access to and easy capacity to use media to deliver their message. It is not power that is rooted necessarily in a democratic legitimacy or one founded on – or with any kind of accountability to – a large movement of concerned or affected people. This has had the clear benefit of achieving an immense amount. However, there are obvious and major risks.

The first risk is that it is a fragile movement on stilts, with shallow support structures incapable of dealing with setbacks and shifts in political mood. Live 8, the massive global music concert coinciding with the 2005 G8 summit was an event focused not on raising money but on raising public awareness of Africa – but African involvement and representation was limited. Criticism of this feature of Live 8 has been well rehearsed: it is perhaps emblematic of an event focused on the exercise of communicative power by those best in a position to exercise that power, rather than a deliberate attempt to share and invest others with such power. The opportunity of Live 8 was to provide the Make Poverty History campaign with a set of supporters and voices that could nurture it through the inevitable difficulties that lie ahead. Most opinion polls suggest that public support in the UK for efforts to tackle poverty is very widespread, but also very fragile. While the main justification of celebrity-led campaigns is their ability to reach a large number of people, some evidence suggests that their impact is short lived and shallow. Research in Britain shows public concern about poverty in poor countries reached a high of 32% in April 2005, prior to the G8 meeting in Gleneagles in July, but two months later, at the end of November, it had fallen to 22%, its lowest level since the study began (Darnton 2007).

The second risk of this style of campaigning is its depoliticisation and over-simplification of complex issues. The Commission for Africa (URC) set out a comprehensive analysis and strategy for action, including the need to tackle highly contentious political issues such as land reform and media policy, but the ensuing public debate focused on levels of development assistance. The need for simple media messages encouraged proponents, including development economists such as Jeffrey Sachs, to highlight the most practical and easily achievable actions (for example, the provision of bed-nets to malarial-affected areas). Complex issues, from macro-economic policy to often difficult policy choices that are required to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (many of which were outlined in the Millennium Declaration and the Report of the Commission for Africa) were lost in the public presentation of the campaign.

In the West, the media and public believe that increased aid to developing countries will and should achieve rapid results, and are ill-prepared for setbacks and slow progress. However sensitive the strategy of funnelling development assistance through the national budgets of developing countries, it is likely to lead to news stories of mismanagement and waste. As indicated above, public opinion is fragile and it is questionable whether those who have exerted the most communicative power through the media are able to maintain public confidence and support in the face of negative stories about the use of aid, or slow progress in developing countries.
The third risk is that, parallel to the globalisation of civil society, a globalisation of NGO advocacy is occurring. Such a global process retains credibility and legitimacy when it is rooted in the experience of ordinary people in developing countries. Instead, professional advocacy organisations have evolved a development agenda and associated campaigns designed to exercise maximum communicative power through the media. This has clear advantages, in terms of raising the global profile of poverty-related issues, but it risks excluding the very people most affected by poverty. This tendency is reinforced by other factors. As development budgets become increasingly decentralised and budget support mechanisms become the norm, policy and financial priorities are set within developing countries (rather than at donor headquarters), which has clear advantages, but it has effects on how international NGOs operate in developing countries and, in turn, how the media agenda is shaped.

By deploying their advocacy resources on issues and experiences within developing countries, in order to gain public and political attention, civil society organisations can dominate the media coverage at the expense of indigenous public debate and journalism. In poor countries, public spheres are more limited than in industrialised countries (because the number of and media for audience formation is so limited), and budgets for investigative journalism are more scarce, for example) and such societies can be particularly vulnerable to agendas – even public interest ones – shaped by forces outside the country. If the media and public agendas are shaped more by those with the largest advocacy budgets and access to global celebrities or brands, than by indigenous processes, this risks appropriating, rather than allowing the grassroots exercising of, communicative power.

Conclusion

This Chapter has sought briefly and partially to outline some of the key issues relevant to civil society that are shaping who has and does not have access to communicative power in the twenty-first century, and what is expanding and constraining public spheres internationally. This Chapter has sought to demonstrate how the complex, contradictory and countervailing media trends shaping the character of democracies in the twenty-first century. It has not been its intention, despite inevitable biases, to reach definitive conclusions or make specific policy recommendations. The author believes, for example, in the critical role that commercial media can play in invigorating the public sphere, which is also invigorated by community media and public service broadcasting; that globalisation and concentration of media can sometimes bring important benefits, although generally these are greatly outweighed by the problems; that the role of development agencies in strengthening the media is vital, but such support is fraught with problems and inherent contradictions.

The critical questions prompted by this analysis are whether there is a sufficiently serious, focused international debate on the state, role and importance of media and communication in twenty-first century society. If not, how, where, and by whom can that debate be held? Media organisations are often reluctance to engage in discussion about their role, because they fear the consequences, for example, on their independence. Governments should not lead such a debate for the obvious reason that it is principally governments that should be held to account by an independent media. International governmental organisations face a similar problem, as debate about NWMO demonstrated. Civil society organisations should be held to account by the media too, and should be wary of making efforts that could be seen as muzzling it. The fact that so many trends are contradictory and complex in their impact, as well as so rapidly moving, heightens the need for civil society (among others) to track, understand and respond to them. This analysis suggests that civil society should focus not only on the media as the conduit for its messages, but increasingly as an enabler of democratic debate and dialogue, and as a critical shaper of the public sphere within which civil society operates. That implies the need for a more determined and informed engagement with debates on the future of the media by civil society. Developing better strategies and spaces for such engagement, and ensuring that they do not threaten the independence of the media, is one of the most critical challenges facing democracy, civil society – and of course the media itself – in the twenty-first century.

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