

Chapter 10

Media, democracy and the public sphere

James Deane

The relationship between media, democracy and the public sphere has been the subject of intensive and increasing academic debate over the last forty years. The most influential thinking on the concept of what the public sphere is and why it is important has been made by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. His conception, first defined and outlined in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and updated by him over the next four decades, provides a starting and reference point for this chapter.

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The role of the media has been particularly highlighted by Habermas in forming a crucial constituent and catalyst for the existence of the public sphere. In general, the media have been characterized principally through their perceived evolution from a fourth estate guarding the public interest into media that commodify news and are more interested in people as consumers than as citizens.

This brief discussion will not seek to rehearse these debates –covered exhaustively elsewhere– in detail, but it will attempt to examine the current state of the media in facilitating public debate and underpinning democracy. It will focus particularly but not exclusively on those countries where marginalization from public debate and a lack of voice in democratic decision-making have the most immediate and severe consequences –namely those countries where most or a large minority of people live on less than two dollars a day. It will also seek to focus on what realistically can be done to counter the negative trends identified in the chapter¹.

¹ Few of the trends highlighted here are adequately researched or well understood and resources available for tracking these trends are extremely limited. Many of the highlighted trends are based on the

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“The public sphere can best be described as a network of communicating information and points of view” which is “reproduced through communicative action”, argued Habermas. The principles of the public sphere, which according to him initially evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries, involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern, where issues relevant to the public good could be subject to informed debate and examination. 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.

The importance of exposing issues of public policy and concern to public debate has been the subject of many other authors, including in the context of development policy –the best known and most influential of whom has been Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen and his analysis that catastrophic but preventable disasters such as famines rarely or never occur in democratic states (Sen, 2001). Partly because of these arguments (and other, as we shall see below) the existence of free and plural media constitutes a major policy platform of much current development policy by bilateral and multilateral organizations, particularly in its role of ensuring good governance and transparency in decision-making.

Much commentary on media in relation to the public sphere over recent years portrays an almost linear process of the erosion of the public sphere and the media’s role in creating it. This was already identified by Habermas (1962), as summarized by Douglas Kellner:

Hence, Habermas describes a transition from the liberal public sphere which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolution to a media-dominated public sphere in the current era of what he calls “welfare state capitalism and mass democracy”. This historical transformation is grounded, as noted, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry, in which giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. In this transformation, “public opinion” shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. Rational debate and consensus has thus been replaced by managed discussion and manipulation by the machinations of advertising and political consulting agencies [...] For Habermas, the functions of the media have thus

author’s own exposure of working to support media in developing countries and of communication and development issues over a period of twenty years, particularly his work with the Panos Institute <www.panos.org.uk>. Further analysis of some of these trends can be found in the Global Civil Society Yearbook 2002 published by the London School of Economics <www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook> and updated more recently in “The other information revolution: media and empowerment in developing countries”, by James Deane with Fackson Banda, Kunda Dixit, Njonjo Mue and Silvio Waisbord in *Communicating in the Information Society*, Bruce Girard and Sean O’Siochru (eds.), UNRISD, 2003.

been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing, and limiting public discourse to those themes validated and approved by media corporations².

Particularly over the last decade, the dizzyingly rapid change in the media, not least in resource poor countries, has made it difficult to track both the effects and implications for public policy and the direct impact on ordinary people's lives. Much of this change has been spectacular, and spectacularly positive for the evolution both of democracy and the public sphere. Later in this chapter we will document the growing crisis and shrinking space for public debate, but before doing so we need to acknowledge that the picture is a complex and contradictory one and that in many respects the public sphere has undergone an unprecedented expansion.

For most countries on the planet, the most consistent trend over the last two decades has been the decisive shift from government control to private (and to a much less extent, community) ownership and control of media. Most of the inhabitants of the planet, encompassing the former Soviet Union, China, most of Africa, and large parts of Asia including several democratic countries such as India, were to one degree or another exposed to information that their governments wanted them to be exposed to. In many countries, particularly in Latin America, where government control of media was not exercised through ownership, it was exercised by proxy, particularly where media were controlled in large part by private interests closely linked to government or other elites.

The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the massive political changes that swept much of the world following its collapse led to a transformation of media in most countries. Governments who saw their power base mostly as rural populations initially liberalized the more urban based print media, but often sought to retain control of the broadcast media, particularly radio with its much greater reach to rural populations. Liberalization of radio ended up being the most important and radical change during this period which continues now. There were four main mutually reinforcing and interlocking reasons why governments decided to liberalize media in general, and broadcasting – a key tool through which political control was exercised – in particular.

The first is political, with new governments being swept into power in the wake of the end of the cold war, the accompanying collapse of one party states (many of them the client states of the superpowers) and a wave of democratic elections that followed. New governments were elected, committed to more democratic and open government and explicitly to more open media.

Second was the spread of new communication technologies, which itself had two main consequences. The first was that the Internet and other new technologies made control of information far more difficult, and therefore control of other media more expensive and less worthwhile. Second, economic

² Kellner, Douglas, "Habermas, the public sphere and democracy: a critical intervention", UCLA. The full text can be downloaded at <www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner>.

180 | development was increasingly seen as being dependent on access to new technologies. Liberalization of media went hand in hand with a broader liberalization of communications, based on an assumption that liberalization of ICTs and media were essential for the effective functioning of increasingly liberalized and free market economies.

Third was globalization and the increasing economic pressures to open up markets, and the accompanying trend of freer access to information.

Finally there was a steady increasing pressure from donors on developing countries to liberalize media both as part of a generalized trend to open markets and liberalize industries and as a concerted attempt to invest in good governance, transparency, democratic government and human rights.

These and other trends had, by the early years of the 21st century led to a transformation in media marked by four main consequences.

The first was the widespread *proliferation* of media organizations: a huge increase in the number of newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television stations. In Uganda in 1987 there were two radio stations, one of which was independent of government. Today there are more than 100, almost all of them independent of government. In India there was just one television station in 1990, but following the introduction of CNN (1990), Star TV (1991) and Asia Television Network (1991), soon to be followed by many more, there has been a revolution in the number, content and structure of Indian broadcasting (although the government is one of very few democracies in the world to retain a virtual monopoly of terrestrial broadcasting). Similar patterns can be seen in many other countries.

The second was the *content* of the media transforming largely dull, formulaic programming into engaging, popular high energy programming, with a drive to maximize audiences –or at least audiences with disposable income. Programming has focused principally on capturing high spending, urban based, middle class young audiences, and content has reflected that.

The third is the introduction of *new communication technologies*. New technologies have radically reduced broadcast and print media production costs and revolutionized the delivery platform of media, particularly with the introduction of satellite and cable. More importantly, the spread of the Internet and mobile telephony, together with the rapid fall in the costs of telecommunication following liberalization of those industries, has created a communication environment where communication increasingly happens between people horizontally, rather than being directed to people vertically.

The fourth –largely a consequence of the new technologies– is a fresh *interactivity of media*. In 1926, the German playwright and author Bertolt Brecht wrote:

The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this prin-

ciple the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers.

The 1990s saw the dawn of a new radio age, an age where radio did begin to organize its listeners as suppliers, with the flourishing not only of many hundreds of radio stations but many types, and a new era of interactivity for radio broadcasting. For a large minority if not a majority of people on the planet, radio remains the most important communication medium available in terms of its accessibility and reach. During the 1990s, liberalization of radio awakened a long smothered public demand for debate and discussion. Liberalization unleashed a pent up energy both from the private commercial sector, which was responsible for most of the mushrooming of radio, and from a burgeoning community radio sector. The latter, through the commitment of thousands of community organizations (such as AMARC, the World Association of Community Broadcasters) and individuals and the steadily increasing interest of donors, has flourished.

From Kenya to Nepal, Uganda to Sri Lanka, and in dozens of other countries, talk-shows, discussion programs and phone-ins have become some of the most popular programming. Focusing on everything from football to the upcoming national elections, from "Big Brother" to HIV/AIDS, they have sometimes done as much as investigative journalism to shine a light on social and political issues. Even in countries where liberalization has been slow or non-existent, there are important examples of talk radio catalyzing major social change. In China for example, the well known radio journalist Xin Ran (2003) has published an internationally best selling account of how her radio talk-show –entitled *Words on the Night Breeze* and principally made up of contributions from women from all over the country– for the first time brought to public attention the appalling accounts of hidden, unnoticed discrimination and abuse. In Uganda, radio stations hold regular *Ekimeeza*, public debates on current issues bringing together perhaps 400 people, the results of which are broadcast. Civil society has enjoyed unprecedented access to the airwaves from radio producers hungry for opinion and perspective. The 1990s and first years of the 21st century saw massive, unprecedented and complex social changes across the world, and much of that was shaped by these new interactive and dynamic media environments.

Such debate and discussion is happening for many reasons in many different media. It is happening first and foremost because it is popular, attracting large audiences and therefore popular with advertisers. Radio talk-show hosts themselves have become well known personalities and have demonstrated real leadership in hosting issues of public concern. It is happening because many of these countries have been starved of spaces for public discussion and debate.

Habermas originally argued that a public sphere, independent of the reigning governments, was established out of a space carved out in the coffee houses of enlightenment Europe. The radio revolution in many developing countries can arguably be seen as a similar phenomenon, where public debate over radio meshes with the billions of informal and interconnecting conversations enabled by

182 | the new technologies of mobile telephony and the Internet. Information and communication have become impossible to control, and many countries where information used to be subject to absolute government control have seen unprecedented public debate and the arguable emergence of a fresh kind of public sphere. New spaces have been formed, independent of government.

The spread of more democratic forms of government, the liberalization of media and telecommunication systems, the ensuing proliferation, popularity and interactivity of the media –all of these suggest a substantial expansion of the public sphere for much of humanity.

How public is public?

However, Habermas' original thesis was criticized because those who he posited as first forming a public sphere where independent political debate could take place excluded large parts, if not the majority of populations. They tended to be male, urban based with disposable incomes, educated and literate. The original conception of the public sphere particularly excluded the poor and women.

The same exclusion is not only happening now, but is increasingly happening with much of the world's media. The early energy and dynamism following liberalization, and much of the idealism and hope that accompanied it among journalists, radio talk show hosts and others is declining in the face of a powerful set of trends. Most of these trends are eroding the public sphere and particularly from a development perspective, transforming what were a series of government monopolies into a series of private oligopolies.

When viewed from the perspective of development, a growing crisis may be emerging, a crisis marked by a collapse (or sometimes still birth) of public interest media. A new competitive market among media has brought innovation, dynamism and often greatly enhanced democratic debate, and has in a myriad of cases in many countries brought about profound social change, much of it positive.

But while the proliferation of media in the wake of liberalization in many countries was initially marked by an upsurge of public debate on a whole range of issues, evidence is growing that, as competition intensifies, content is increasingly being shaped by the demands of advertisers and sponsors who pay for the newly liberalized media, and an increasingly intense focus on profitability. The result is more urban biased, consumer oriented media which have diminishing interest in or concern for people living in poverty.

There are four main trends.

Alongside the rapid growth in all forms of media is the growing power of advertising. Unless subsidized by wealthy individuals or political parties, by the state, by donors or by community contributions, media organizations need to make a profit to survive. The vast majority of media organizations which have emerged in the new media landscape are dependent on advertising. Advertisers are obviously interested in those who are likely to buy their products, which is

normally a young, middle class audience with disposable income (increasingly a stronger market in media terms in developing countries than the traditional ABC1 market of highly educated high income individuals). Content of most media is increasingly aimed at attracting advertisers and is therefore focused on the main preoccupations of those advertisers want to sell to. Inevitably this means that issues of concern to those in rural areas, the poor and other minorities are not a commercial priority.

The dynamic between media and profit and particularly advertising has been extensively commented on in many countries over many years, but in developing countries the issue takes on an added dimension. For most people, particularly those living in rural areas, the media are often the principal source of information beyond their communities and outside their own informal communication networks. This includes information on everything from political developments to agricultural techniques, from weather to HIV/AIDS prevention and of course a panoply of other issues. Poor people, especially the almost three billion people in the world living on less than two dollars a day, do not constitute a market for advertisers. While media liberalization has had many benefits in terms of opening up new forms and spaces of public debate, there is no incentive for this debate to encompass the concerns of those living in poverty.

As a consequence, those concerns are increasingly being ignored. Editors and journalists increasingly report pressures to focus on a consumer oriented, advertising driven media agenda. This is not a problem in terms of creating spaces for public debate if other media, particularly public service media, are available to fill in the gaps. However, the former state monopoly broadcasters and media organizations, who retain the greatest capacity to reach rural and marginalized populations, are facing intense competition from commercial organizations as governments reduce budgets. As a consequence many are in crisis.

As well as a shift to more commercially and consumer oriented content, there are reports of cutting of language services, particularly in minority languages, and of transmitter capacity. In this sense, the digital divide—a phrase used in relation to the Internet, mobile telephony and other digital technologies—is being reflected in a much broader, deeper and perhaps more fundamental information divide between urban and rural, rich and poor. This is an information divide being shaped by far more than access to technology, it is one shaped by access to content relevant to people's lives, and the capacity of people to have their voices heard in the public domain. In countries where incomes are so low, such access and such capacity to express a voice have much more severe and immediate human consequences than in richer countries.

Journalism as a profession is dramatically changing and concepts such as investigative journalism are arguably under siege. Journalists themselves who want to explore and investigate development stories affecting those from outside the capital, are finding it more and more difficult to get either resources or attention from their editors. Rarely rewarding and always a difficult and dangerous

184 | profession, investigative journalism is arguably becoming steadily less attractive and there is little incentive and decreasing inclination among many journalists to focus on development issues since this is a poor career move. With no paying market for poverty related content, incentives for journalists, editors, publishers and owners to prioritize it are declining. Journalism training is also under pressure, particularly that which has a public interest remit, and journalism schools in some developing countries are finding that graduates are as often snapped up by the public relations and advertising industries as they are by news organizations.

Concentration of media ownership

The second trend, linked to this increasing power of advertising, is the growing concentration of media ownership –at the global, regional and national levels. Concentration of media ownership at the global level has been well documented, particularly by Robert McChesney (1999), who argues that there has been an explosion in recent years in corporate media, an explosion which fundamentally undermines public life. Chronicling a wave of mergers and acquisitions during the 1990s McChesney points to a series of fundamentally anti-democratic trends which are eroding the public sphere both at national and global levels.

Much has been written over many years arguing that a cultural imperialism is in play with giant Western media and communication conglomerates determining a set diet of content to be consumed in all corners of the world. The picture is more complex than this with a long catalogue of failures of Western organizations assuming that what is popular in the US will be popular in India, China or Nigeria. India provides the most dramatic example of this where Star TV and other satellite providers had to rewrite their business plans in the 1990s to adapt to consumer demand for indigenous content, content which ended up creating new cultural hybrids meshing influences from many different sources.

Given the rapid growth of television in India, from two channels to over eighty in a decade, cloning might be one means of coping with the imperative to fill the program hours. Original imported programs run the risk of failing completely in the foreign market or at best catering to a small minority. For example, US or UK programs cater only to those well educated in English and somewhat Anglophile. While cloning offers some hope of achieving a domestic ratings winner, this is by no means guaranteed. The clone in another country could fail utterly, do just as well, or even out-strip the original program's performance in its own country³.

Nevertheless, this concentration of media ownership is also a globalization of media ownership, with a very small number of giant global corporations owning and controlling media in all parts of the world. If such concentration of media ownership is undermining national public spheres, it is also undermining a global

3 Media Development, Dr. Amos Owen Thomas, School of Marketing & Management, Griffith University.

public sphere. The alternative is a reinvention of public service media which, according to McChesney, need to transform national boundaries.

In the end the goal should be not merely to have a series of national media systems with dominant public service components but to have a global public sphere as well, where people can communicate with each other without having the communication filtered and censored by corporate and commercial interests.

The third trend is the growing reliance for most people on the planet for their news on a small number of increasingly powerful northern based news providers, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Reuters and Cable News Network (CNN). While the costs of equipment and technology for news organizations have decreased, the costs in skills and distribution required for a substantial news gathering operation have increased markedly. Most developing country media are heavily reliant for their coverage of international news stories, including on issues as fundamental to their audiences interests as stories on globalization, trade and international politics. In newly democratic countries in the South, and particularly within civil society, there is a renewed and growing frustration at the southern media's dependence on what are perceived to be partial, biased or at least fundamentally Northern-centric news organizations for international coverage and the setting of news agendas.

There have been important exceptions to this trend, with the emergence of some new major southern based news organizations, such as Al Jazeera, which has rapidly established a greater credibility within the Arab world, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001 –albeit amidst intense controversy. But the emergence of networks such as Al Jazeera have been exceptions to a trend where many services established to provide news from a developing country perspective are facing financial difficulties. While there are important initiatives among southern news organizations (either commercial in the form of large media conglomerates such as the Nation Media Group, or non commercial such as several news exchange projects), none of these look at all like challenging the dominance of the northern news organizations.

From globalization to parochialism

Finally, there is a growing pressure and intimidation of media in the context of the war on terrorism and at a time of global insecurity in the wake of the events of September 11. Never before has communication across boundaries and between cultures been more important in nurturing a global public sphere, and never before has global security depended on the existence of channels that promote such communication. Arguably those channels have rarely been more fragile.

The prevailing context for much development discourse work before September 11 was focused on globalization and the associated interdependence and interconnectedness of all peoples, a process fundamentally dependent on and shaped by increasingly rapid flows of information around the world. The events of and following September 11 heralded a marked shift in international

186 | political attention away from globalization, a shift accompanied by an increased parochialism in communication channels.

This was most clearly demonstrated in media reporting of the ensuing conflicts, especially in Iraq. Several major western media organizations (including the New York Times, the Washington Post and CNN) have publicly questioned their own coverage of the run up to the Iraq war. These events saw the increasing credibility of new media players such as Al Jazeera who have, amidst controversy, constituted a major challenge to the dominance of western based news networks. In the US the emergence and rapid popularity of other new players such as Fox TV, explicitly more patriotic in its news values in coverage of the war on Iraq and the war on terror, has reinforced a trend towards a more fragmented media industry. These are among many developments that suggest a growing fragmentation of mainstream media reporting at a time of international crisis. Many countries, such as Uganda, have passed new draconian laws making support for terrorism by media organizations, a capital offence.

At a time when the international community is so divided, these trends might have been expected to prompt an increase in support for organizations seeking to foster informed public discourse and communication at national and international levels. Much evidence suggests that the contrary has happened. At the international level, many of the main international NGOs dedicated to generating perspectives from developing countries and broader information flows across boundaries and cultures have suffered substantial uncertainty in funding. At the national level, decisions by many donor organizations to provide budget support to governments have often resulted in a shift of resources away from civil society organizations, many of them dedicated to fostering informed dialogue in society.

In summary, this is a complex, contradictory revolution marking an extraordinary transformation over little more than a decade. New freedoms, a blossoming of public debate, a resurgent community radio movement, a proliferation of channels and titles across all media, a dynamic interplay between old and new technologies, the increasingly globalized nature of information and communication industries and connectivities, the loosening of government control over information, have all characterized this revolution. So, though, have a growing concentration of media ownership, a marginalization from communication agendas of those who do not constitute a paying market, a continuing, deepening North-South divide in information flows and a new threat of self censorship even among some of the most august news organizations in the world.

What is to be done?

While many of the trends summarized above are new, or are taking on fresh and important complexions, their underlying themes have been the source of discussion and debate for many years. There have been concerted attempts to highlight such trends in the past and put in place strategies to combat them,

most notably the MacBride Roundtable and the ensuing debate over the New World Information and Communication Order in the 1980s. Donor organizations have provided funding to projects to encourage public debate and advance the role of the media in holding governments to account, but such funding is woefully inadequate, particularly when held against the vast sums being spent globally.

The nurturing of a global public sphere will depend on four main things happening.

- » The first is to develop a better understanding of these trends and their impact on people's lives. Evidence of the link between public debate and development impact is growing, such as for example in the field of HIV/AIDS where evidence strongly suggests that countries where a vibrant public sphere has existed have been far more successful than those where it is limited (Scalway, 2003); and from the introduction of poverty reduction strategies by the World Bank, which are now the central pillar for poverty reduction in many developing countries but where public debate and consultation has been heavily criticized for being too limited and transparent, including within the media. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) process has been seriously undermined as a result (Warnock, 2002). Much more work needs to be done in order to track and understand these changes.
- » The second is the successful evolution of an increasingly vibrant and effective alternative media movement. Conferences such as the *Our Media* Conference in Porto Alegre in July 2004⁴ and many thousands of other initiatives, demonstrate the vitality and growth of alternative media. A new credibility and hope is attaching to different forms of media, from websites to news and features services as publics become hungry for different forms of news and a growing community media movement worldwide, while desperately under-resourced and fragile, is growing strongly.
- » The third is the Internet. A great deal has been written on the potential of the Internet to create a new independent global public sphere, and its potential was perhaps most feverishly captured in the Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace by the Electronic Frontier Foundation in 1996:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no

4 More details can be found at <<http://www.ourmedianet.org>>.

greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear⁵.

Similarly documented has been the steady domination of the Internet by the same media and communication conglomerates that dominate much of the rest of the global communication infrastructure. Despite this, the Internet is the most decentralized, adaptive and interactive technology in existence and its use historically by civil society has been a core component in the growing influence of civil society in recent years. The gender movement, so often routinely excluded from earlier discussions of the public sphere, has in particular succeeded in successfully exploiting the creation of this new independent space.

The Internet also suffers from the same –but far more acute– division in access as the media, with poor, rural and marginalized communities generally those with least access to it, and with content least reflective of their needs.

The fourth, and perhaps most fundamental, is the creation of an environment where these trends and issues can be discussed in ways that command credibility amongst a broad audience. These issues are not and should not be limited to a small number of highly committed social activists, but to a broader swathe of people who are directly and indirectly affected by them (these might include for example mainstream journalists concerned about corporate interference in setting news agendas as well as development and civil society organizations). Very few global fora exist where the relationship between media and the public interest can be debated constructively in a way that can engage a broad spectrum of opinion.

The role of the media in the modern information society received scant attention at the latest World Summit on the Information Society (December 2003) compared to new communication technologies. Debates over the connection between media and poverty seem unlikely to progress substantially within the context of the next phase of the WSIS, and the opportunities of drawing the mainstream media themselves into such a debate appear slim. Before and since the debates over the New World Information and Communication Order in the 1980s, the subject of media content, ownership and relationship to public interest has been a subject of bitter disagreement.

The right to communicate

The long-standing problems associated with the role of the media in relation to development surfaced prominently in the approach to WSIS, as many information and communication NGOs had come together with a central vision “grounded in

⁵ Barlow, John Perry (1996) *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, distributed via Internet and elsewhere.

the Right to Communicate, as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities”.

This grouping, Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS), was highly effective both in assembling a large number of civil society and media advocacy organizations working on issues of information, and in engaging positively and highly efficiently in the WSIS preparatory process. However, criticisms were expressed by some media freedom organizations, most notably by the World Press Freedom Committee and Article XIX, over some articulations of this right to communicate. They feared that successful establishment of such a right could lead to the imposition of controls over independent media⁶.

The sometimes bitter debates, redolent of those of the New World Information and Communication Order in the 1980s, exemplified the continuing challenge of opening up a serious international public debate of the role of the media in the 21st century. While social advocacy organizations are increasingly concerned with the power and lack of accountability of concentrated and consumer oriented media, media freedom organizations remain concerned about any formal attempt to erode hard-won media freedoms.

The intimate connection between public discourse through the media and poverty has been highlighted for many years, but open and constructive discussion of this and other issues of social concern has often proved difficult. The rapidly changing communication environments in some of the poorest countries and the growing importance of communication for alleviating poverty suggest that new ways of discussing these issues, with the central inclusion of mainstream media and affiliated organizations, is becoming increasingly urgent. Currently however, credible fora which can bring together mainstream, alternative and social advocacy organizations, as well as government and development decision-makers on these issues are in short supply. Given the experience over the years such a debate would almost certainly need to be led by non governmental (particularly media) actors.

A new language and discourse is required which places these issues firmly within the context of the current challenges facing humanity at the beginning of the 21st century, and within the realities and complexities of the new communication environment. An attempt was made by the Panos Institute (involving this author) with the Rockefeller Foundation to reach a level of consensus among those who have so often disagreed on debates of the role of the media in the public sphere. That meeting drew together media freedom organizations with social activists working on these issues (particularly those advocating a right to communicate) and sought to reach sufficient agreement that could be used as a foundation from which a more constructive and broader debate could be founded. The declaration from that meeting is represented below.

⁶ Further information can be found at <www.crisinfo.org>, <www.article19.org/docimages/1512.doc> and a particularly strongly worded attack by the World Press Freedom Committee published on the US State Department website, <www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/othr/20101.htm>.

If there is to be determined and effective action to reverse the remorseless erosion of the public sphere –principally caused by the growing disinterest of the media in public interest issues– then a basic platform needs to be agreed upon. The Bellagio statement is one potential component of a far more intensive process that should be undertaken.

Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty

Statement

The Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty came together to explore the links between and develop a better understanding of current media trends and poverty. This meeting was in part an attempt to bridge differences in approach among organisations involved in media freedom, media pluralism and social advocacy. While we have differences in perspective, we agreed on the following points.

We are particularly concerned that in the World Summit on the Information Society some of the measures being considered run counter to freedom of expression; that insufficient attention is being paid to the crucial role of the media, and to the importance of poverty reduction; and that there is inadequate mapping of development objectives against the proposed actions.

We believe that urgent attention needs to be brought to bear on issues of media and poverty in ways that are rooted in the principle of freedom of expression.

- 1 Freedom of expression, as expressed in Article XIX of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a fundamental right which underpins all other human rights, and enables them to be expressed and realised. The eradication of poverty is essential to the realisation for all peoples of the aspirations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 2 People living in poverty face particular obstacles to achieving freedom of expression and access to the media which are associated with the conditions of poverty. These obstacles include economic, social, educational, logistical, and political factors. Economic obstacles include the cost of equipment for production, distribution and reception, and the costs of licences and operation; social obstacles include gender and language; educational obstacles include literacy and language; logistical obstacles include transport, physical access and electricity; political obstacles include repression and lack of will of many states to allow democratic expression and to give voice to the most marginalised groups, as well as censorship by government, commercial and social interests.

- 3 The interests and concerns of people living in poverty are not sufficiently exposed in the media. Economic and market pressures on the media are tending to deprioritise journalistic investigation and reporting on issues of social and public concern. Because the poor often do not constitute a viable market, issues of concern to them are increasingly and particularly marginalised. New strategies, which address these issues and reinforce freedom of expression, need to be devised. Threats to media freedom and freedom of expression continue to come from undue political influence but we are also concerned about issues of economic control and pressure.
- 4 We recognise that these obstacles need to be overcome in the interests of society as a whole, and not only because in many societies poor people are the majority. When people do not have a voice in the public arena, or access to information on issues that affect their lives, and where their concerns are not reasonably reflected in the media, development tends to be undermined and catastrophes such as famines are less likely to be averted. Lack of access to communication undermines the capacity of the poor to participate in democratic processes. Frustration and alienation over lack of means of expression lead to disaffection with the political process resulting in apathy or violence.
- 5 Realisation of freedom of expression for people living in poverty requires: media pluralism and diversity, including diversity of forms of ownership; more equitable access to communication; support for cultural and linguistic diversity; and promotion of participation in democratic decision-making processes.
- 6 Action points
 - i* There is a growing number of initiatives taken by the media, by people living in poverty and by other actors to address poverty reduction, including issues of voice, content and access to information and communication. These should be encouraged and actively supported. Best practices should be publicised and exchanged.
 - ii* Access for the disadvantaged to information and communication should be an integral part of any strategy to reduce poverty. Such a strategy should include participatory media.
 - iii* Community media should be specifically encouraged, including through access to licences and spectrum allocation. Frequencies should be allocated in a balanced way amongst community, commercial and public service media. Broadcast licensing should be administered by independent and transparent regulatory bodies.

- iv* There is a need for increased resources, better coordination and targeting of training programmes; including training journalists in poverty related issues.
- v* Involvement of media in education, and the development of media literacy, should be promoted.
- vi* Public service broadcasting mandates should include obligations to provide information and education to address issues of poverty; and to ensure that public service broadcasters provide universal service.
- vii* National communication policies should be developed that address access to communication for people living in poverty. Such policies should be developed and implemented in a transparent and participatory manner.
- viii* Professional standards and ethics of journalism, as defined by journalists themselves, should be supported and encouraged. The journalistic ethic should include sensitivity to issues of poverty.
- ix* Journalists should be provided with living standards and working conditions which enable them to realise these professional standards.
- x* South-South and South-North exchanges between media and journalists should be encouraged, including personnel, training, equipment and content.
- xi* Support should be provided for civil society organisations in working with the media.
- xii* Mechanisms should be encouraged for making newspapers more affordable and more available to the disadvantaged, including measures to cut the price of newsprint and equipment.
- xiii* The use of ICTs to provide the media with more diversity of information sources should be promoted; together with combinations of traditional and new information technologies to facilitate better access to communication for people living in poverty.
- xiv* Resources should be provided, including by public authorities, to address shortcomings in communication access for those living in poverty and to remove cost and other barriers, in ways that do not compromise freedom of expression.
- xv* More research needs to be undertaken on the implications of current media trends for poverty reduction.