

Media: The step-child of WSIS

The official WSIS process – and even civil society consultations – have focused too much on computers and Internet, ignoring the fact that the mass media have far greater outreach and power over people's lives and choices, says Nalaka Gunawardene – Panos South Asia director.

In his 1992 book, How the World Was One, Sir Arthur C Clarke described a bizarre vision of the near future: Ted Turner is offered the post of World President, but he rejects it – because he didn't want to give up power!

The media has always been a manipulator of power, in both politics and commerce. But it is only in the past two decades that this power has been amplified by new information and communications technologies – ICTs for short. These, and deregulation policies that opened by many national markets, enabled a handful of trans-national corporations to build truly global electronic empires that press barons of the past could only dream about.

Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch are only the best-known faces of this industry that runs wide and deep. And it is no longer a western monopoly either: countries like India, Thailand and Mexico have produced their own mini-Murdochs.

The implications of this have been slow to sink in, and not surprisingly, these issues are hardly discussed in the media itself. We in the media love to turn the spotlight on everyone else – except ourselves.

Take television, for example. Viewers across developing Asia were euphoric when, in the early 1990s, trans-boundary satellite television ended the monopoly of dull and propagandistic state owned television. Not even the Great Wall of China could stop satellite television transmissions from 36,000 kilometres above the Earth, cooed one advertisement for STAR which ushered in this change. (China found ways of coercing STAR, but that's another story.)

Shortly afterwards, many of our countries allowed private sector participation in the media – which transformed the entire mass media landscape in a very short time. Most parts of Asia moved rapidly from an average of 2.4 television channels in 1990 to several dozen by the decade's end.

Good news and bad news

A decade on, there is good news and bad news. As the 2002 Global Civil Society Yearbook, published by the London School of Economics and Political Science, noted: "Liberalisation and diversification, particularly in Africa and Asia, have transformed both print and broadcast media from a largely government-owned, monopolistic and uncreative media environment to a more dynamic, popular, democratic, creative, commercial and complex one."

That good news is also bad news – for some. Media liberalisation has not been matched by a corresponding increase in the public sphere – the area that accommodates and nurtures wide-ranging discussion and debate on matters of public interest.

News has taken a particular beating in the business plans of media empires run at a profit. "Infotainment is a commodity and today's news coverage reflects market forces and the desire of media moguls to rule the airwaves," says Kunda Dixit, editor of the Nepali Times and leading media commentator. "The public service role of media is being usurped by businesses for whom the definition of news is very simple: news has to sell, otherwise it is not news."

Meanwhile, the former monopolies have fallen on hard times and completely lost their way. State-run broadcasting systems have found their audiences migrating to newer channels and government subsidies reduced or withdrawn. Struggling to survive, they have abandoned their earlier remit for public interest broadcasting, and are trying to outdo private competitors in their own game. If they have to reduce transmission capacity in rural areas or cut down on programmes on health, education, environment or agricultural topics, so be it.

Media ignored by WSIS?

For many who are poor or living away from cities, there is now less information, fewer programmes on their concerns, and less chance to make their voices heard. As the Panos Institute has warned, without the capacity to seek information, to debate

issues, and to make their voices heard, poor and rural people risk becoming more and more marginalized from their nation's and the world's economies. The 'dot com' has not come to them – and is unlikely to arrive anytime soon either.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) provides an important opportunity to raise these critical issues about North-South and rich-poor gaps in media ownership, content and access. Unfortunately, the official preparatory processes – and even civil society consultations – have focused too much on computers and Internet, ignoring the fact that the mass media have far greater outreach and power over people's lives and choices.

In fact, the widely accepted definition of ICTs – also used by the United Nations – covers the conventional communications technologies of telephone, radio and television as well as the newer ones – personal computers, mobile phones, satellite and wireless technologies and the Internet.

The reality is that we have far more radio and television sets on the planet than computers. The electronic media still provide the most effective – and often the only way – that people can access information to make sense of their lives, livelihoods and the choices they have to make in the complex and globalised society.

The crux of the matter is not technology but information itself – how much of information is available, in what relevant and timely manner to how many people at any given time. Immersed in digital hype, governmental and civil society participants at WSIS risk missing this crucial point.

They cannot afford to do so. The media are likely to remain the principal source of outside information for a majority of humanity for years to come.

Media are also a critical way through which the people can, in turn, express their views and concerns in national discussion and debate. Consequently, the current status and on-going changes in the structure, content, ownership and access within these media is of equal, if not greater, importance in any discussion on how the Information Society affects the majority world.

