

Traditional news media bring traditional values to information society

PARIS, FRANCE / DARMSTADT, GERMANY: When everyone has the ability to blog, tweet and publish, traditional media have a greater responsibility to provide ethical, credible journalism. That was a message that emerged from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) conference taking place this week at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.



In the context of the Summit's discussions on ethics, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum (WEF) panel focused on the role of traditional media in the digital age.

In the digital environment, when the source of information is often unknown, it becomes more difficult to determine credibility. Is the source supporting a hidden point of view? Is the blogger offering to promote products for a fee? Does the ethical culture transfer to the online environment? The panellists explored how the tenets of traditional media - quality editorial, credibility and ethical reporting, and investigative journalism - translate in the new media landscape.

"All too often, discussions about the information society focus on telecommunications and delivery platforms. But the focus should really centre on the content being delivered," said Larry Kilman, Deputy CEO of WAN-IFRA and the panel moderator. "I'm glad we have the opportunity to discuss the role of the traditional media in the new media landscape, but in some ways it is unfortunate that we need such a debate. The role should be self-evident - to provide the credible information necessary for citizens to make informed decisions in society."

Democracy is served by a broad media landscape

Aidan White, Director of the Ethical Media Coalition and a panellist, said: "If traditional media is not able to deliver quality journalism, then who will deliver and who will pay for it?"

Other experts on the panel included Amadou Mahta Ba, CEO of the African Media Initiative, Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Annette Novak, WEF Board member and Vice-president of the Fojo Media Institute, and Philippe Massonnet, Global News Director at Agence France-Presse.

"I believe that democracy is served by a broad media landscape", said Novak. "News is about content, not platform. Funding for quality content should go to platforms chosen by the audience, and at present, this is mobile devices."

Managing the online debate is pivotal, while guaranteeing journalistic transparency has become increasingly vital to the independence of news outlets, particularly given the reliance on citizen journalists who in many newsrooms play the role formerly occupied by foreign correspondents.

"Traditional media IS new media," said Massonnet. "Being on the ground is gold and whether it is a traditional foreign correspondent or a citizen journalist, our role as content providers is to check and double check our sources".

Africa heading for a billion mobile phones

How investigative journalism is benefiting from the mobile information society, especially in emerging democracies in Africa, also figured prominently in the discussions.

"By 2015, there will be one billion mobile phones in Africa. Mobile phones are now a universal right. We must make sure news content is available on mobile phones for the development of humanity," said Amadou Mahta Ba.

The World Summit on the Information Society provides a forum for discussion of the opportunities of the new information and communication environment, and also addresses challenges such as the inequality in access to information and communication called the 'digital divide'. Follow the discussions on Twitter #WSIS.

WAN-IFRA's participation comes in the context of the latest 10-year review conference, with outcomes due to feed into the 2015 United Nations General Assembly review.

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