

Freedom of Expression, online and offline

Elizabeth Smith, *Transforming Broadcasting*

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Freedom of Information has been greatly helped by the internet and by social media. But the reality is that these are not universally available. This may be due to lack of infrastructure, or poverty, or lack of skill through age or lack of training. So while people in the developed world often behave as though the internet and social media are as freely available as the air we breathe, this is far from the case. In most of the developing world, it is only available to small elites and to the educated young who use huge ingenuity to access it, often at high personal cost.

So the majority of the world is still reliant on radio and TV and newspapers for its political information. In many countries these are far from free – even in countries with reasonably democratic structures. The internet and the rise of social media does, however, make it harder for the state, or commercial organisations, to control the content of radio, TV and the press. The internet can show up censorship – as this example demonstrates:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTGogMq9NZ0> 3.00'

We also have examples from the revolutions in Libya, Egypt and in other parts which have experienced the Arab Spring, of how the internet and social media proved crucial to disseminating accurate information, despite attempts to censor it. When you visit countries such as Egypt, which I went to shortly after their revolution, I saw how people gave a very high priority to the reform of the media, so that state control, particularly of broadcasting, cannot continue to offer only a government line.

The same is true in many other countries where there is a longing for quality broadcasting which is fair and open and unbiased in its coverage. This is of course very difficult to achieve, especially as there are vested interests in the continuation of existing large state broadcasters. But because something is difficult, it does not mean it is unachievable. This is why, with UNESCO's support, I have written a booklet called *A Road Map to PSB*, which spells out how broadcasting can be transformed in those countries where it is controlled by Government.

Essentially, there needs to be a hearts and minds campaign, to persuade the public that this is achievable, and then one targeted at opinion-formers and legislators. I argue that this is a process, not a quick fix, and it may take a considerable time. I look in detail at three countries currently trying to move develop and support their Public Service Broadcasting – Namibia, Sierra Leone and Bhutan. They are all taking different routes and have different obstacles, but the will for change is there, if only it can be released.

One of the benefits of PSB is the way a Public Service Broadcaster can lead a population into the digital world. They can link their programmes into the internet and into social media and expand the horizons of the whole population. Some countries have adopted the deliberate objective of taking their people into the digital world. The cheapest and most efficient way of doing this is through a cooperative and benevolent Public Service Broadcaster, taking on this role not to make money but to benefit society. This makes a contribution to Freedom of Information: the more the population has access to the wealth of information on the web, and via social media, the harder it is for Governments to control what the public see and hear. By using all the potential for interactivity in broadcasting, it becomes less of a machine for transmitting material, and more a responsive system which viewers and listeners can influence and ultimately control.

Some people argue that in the digital world, with lots of choice, there is no need any more for a PSB. The market will supply all that is needed, as it has done, to a considerable extent, with books. I do not share this view. The market is out to maximise return, not to serve those parts of the population, such as children, the elderly, the poor, and the disadvantaged minorities. None of these provide lucrative markets for the supplier. It is widely accepted that there should be some state provision of education, otherwise huge numbers would have no access to it. It is equally important to provide socially-inspired broadcasting, in order to reflect local culture, to increase understanding of the modern world, and to offer free and fair reporting.

So what we have to do is encourage the internet and social media to work together with the more traditional media, so that each can grow stronger and freer. Already there has been a huge advance in openness, through the availability of key documents on websites, through cheap communications for action groups, through platforms for minority views, and through communication upwards as well as downwards. Now we have to develop this so that it is available universally, so that it cannot be tampered with or switched off, and so that it reaches in time all the citizens, using access through internet cafes, mobile phones, internet booths in public places, and the interactive potential of broadcasting. This in turn will make a huge difference to the quality of governance and so to the quality of life.