

**MEDIA MATTER  
CITIZENS CARE**

**The who, what, when, where, why, how,  
and buts  
of citizens' engagement with the media**

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## INTRODUCTION

“The BBC and other British broadcasters will face more upheaval in the next five years than at any time in their history,” according to Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV), an independent organisation based in London.

Among the parallel developments expected to contribute to this upheaval are:

- the British government’s consultative Green Paper on the future of the British Broadcasting Corporation,
- the renewal of the BBC’s Royal Charter,
- the ongoing review of public service broadcasting by the Office of Communications (OFCOM), the “independent regulator and competition authority for the communications industries” of the United Kingdom,
- the proposed switch from analogue to digital TV transmission by 2012, and
- plans by ITV to halve its non-news regional programming by the end of 2005.

VLV has launched a “Broadcasting Matters 2005” campaign in response to this unprecedented situation which points towards a period of transition and transformation in the country’s media environment. The idea is to ensure that the voices of listeners and viewers are, indeed, heard in the process of determining the future of British broadcasting, in general, and the BBC, in particular. According to Jocelyn Hay, founder of VLV, the campaign aims “to raise awareness of the vital role that broadcasting plays in British life and democracy, and of the threats to the quality of radio and television that now exist.” The campaign includes a series of public events designed to enable as wide a range of people as possible to influence the future of the BBC, as well as public service broadcasting as a whole.

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Citizens across the globe are slowly but surely waking up to the notion that they have a stake in the media, even if they are not always recognised as stakeholders by the powers that be in governments and media organisations. The new awareness is based on the understanding that, in today’s world, the mass media are increasingly playing the role once played by family, community, religion and formal education: not only disseminating information and knowledge, but also shaping values and norms, moulding attitudes and behaviour, and influencing the very process of living. A growing number of people everywhere are coming to the conclusion that it is important for the public to be critically aware of the media – not only in terms of programming, but also with regard to various determinants of policy, such as institutional structure, funding and regulation. As a result, broadcast audiences, long presumed to be passive consumers, are beginning to turn active, seeking recognition as citizens who have a right to be heard on all issues relating to the media.

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For instance, thousands of people will converge in St. Louis, Missouri, in May for the National Conference for Media Reform 2005, as more and more citizens of the United States of America begin to comprehend the impact of what local activists describe as the country's "broken media system." The last such major event, held in 2003 in Madison, Wisconsin -- in the wake of the Federal Communications Commission's decision to relax the regulation of ownership in media industries -- was a groundbreaking forum which drew over 1700 participants, many of them "ordinary" citizens.

In June 2004, the cause of American media reform was strengthened by a court decision which held that the FCC's attempts to further deregulate the US media system were unjustified. The ruling came at a time when there was unprecedented public debate on the role of media in the lives of the American people. The FCC's June 2003 move to grant big media conglomerates greater powers to secure monopolies on media markets had catalysed a massive grassroots protest. Nearly three million Americans had written letters to members of Congress to register their opposition to media consolidation.

According to Hanna Sassaman of the Prometheus Radio Project, which had challenged the FCC's proposed new rules in court, "Thousands of Americans are telling the Commission and everyone who will listen that consolidation is bad for their communities and families. It is of paramount importance that the FCC use that testimony to inform new ownership rules that will preserve and protect America's diverse, local voices."

A small coalition of groups working behind the scenes have helped to keep media reform on the political map of the US since 2003. Among them are organisations such as Free Press, Common Cause, MediaChannel.org, the Center for Digital Democracy, the Media Access Project, the Alliance for Better Campaigns, the New America Foundation and the Center for Creative Voices in Media. Determined to restore diversity, independence, accountability and democracy in the US media, many of these groups have combined policy work in Washington with grassroots activism and outreach across the country to give shape to a movement sparked by concerned citizens.

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Across the border to the north, news in the first quarter of 2005 that the federal budget would include additional funding for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reinforced the demand from the citizenry for more regional programming. Local "supper-hour" newscasts had been slashed in 2000 amid deep budget cuts. More than 200,000 viewers across the vast country had tuned out when these hour-long, regional evening newscasts were shortened, and critics had assailed the CBC's effort to replace the popular local newscasts with Canada Now, a Vancouver-based show that includes regional inserts.

"It's not up to the president of the CBC to expand or diminish CBC's grassroots mandate. It's the law. The Broadcasting Act calls on the CBC to 'reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions,'" commented Noreen Golfman, of Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, in a February 2005 article in *The Globe and Mail* headlined 'It's not a Toronto Broadcasting Corporation.'

“The notion that people in the communities where 90 per cent of Canadians live should be content to have a national conversation moderated almost entirely from Toronto is a patronizing throwback to the past. The CBC should chart a new course, live up to its legal mandate and take advantage of the incredible wealth of talent in communities across the land,” she continued.

Ian Morrison, spokesperson for Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, was quoted in newspaper reports calling upon the government to make sure that the additional resources are, in fact, spent at the grassroots rather than for “generating more network programming out of Vancouver.” Friends, as it is commonly known, is a non-profit, independent watchdog group, voluntarily financed by 60,000 Canadian families, which seeks to defend and enhance the quality and quantity of Canadian broadcast programming.

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Across the Atlantic, in Germany, a political decision against an increase in the broadcast license fee, which had been recommended by an independent commission, provoked several institutions of civil society to rise in support of public service broadcasting. In Germany, as in the U.K., public broadcasting is supported by citizens in the form of a license fee, which supplements revenue from advertising. The Deutsche Kulturrat, the main association of cultural institutions and people working in the field of culture, appealed to politicians not to interfere with the established, legal process of determining the fee amount. The Initiativkreis, an organisation representing German listeners and viewers, convened a conference to highlight the importance of public service broadcasting for the country’s culture, and stress the need to fund it adequately.

At the same time, these and other organisations, including churches and labour unions, criticised German public broadcasters for shooting themselves in the foot by cutting down on cultural programmes serving various minorities while increasing popular programmes that appeal to the majority. They called upon broadcasters not to reduce such vital aspects of programming in a knee-jerk reaction to the government’s controversial decision not to increase the license fee.

“...Civil society has to support public service broadcasting in difficult times,” said Manfred Kops of the Institute for Broadcasting Economics of the University of Cologne, speaking at VLV’s 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on “The Future for Public Service Broadcasting in Europe and the Commonwealth” in February 2005, on behalf of the European Alliance of Listeners’ and Viewers’ Associations (EURALVA). According to him, such support must include the protection, elaboration and implementation of the legal framework by which public service broadcasting is constituted and guaranteed. “The independence of public service broadcasting is not only a matter of legal culture but also, maybe even more, a matter of political culture,” he explained. “Civil society must preserve and foster this culture – together with the state, but sometimes also against it.

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Further north, Denmark boasts a long tradition of citizens' participation in broadcasting. Organisations of listeners and viewers have the officially recognised right to be heard about new legislation on broadcasting emerging from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs or the Parliament.

According to Preben Sørensen, chair of SLS, the umbrella group for four Danish listener and viewer organisations, the country's two national public service broadcasters have established constructive dialogue with various national organisations of listeners and viewers, sometimes through legislation, at other times through specific agreements on cooperation. The broadcasters also function under annual "public service contracts" that detail their public service obligations to the society. The contracts stipulate that dialogue with citizens, including organisations of listeners and viewers, is an essential aspect of public broadcasting.

As a result, regular meetings are held about programme policy as a whole, as well as about individual programmes. Such meetings are held not only in the capital city but also in places where regional stations are based. Both the public broadcasters use the Internet for better contact and communication with citizens, initiating panel discussions and debating forums on radio and television programmes.

In addition, citizens are involved in voluntary work with the approximately 200 local radio and television stations in Denmark, which receive some public support from the State and local boroughs. As in several parts of the world, Denmark has a Press Council – an independent, public tribunal – to deal with citizens' complaints about the mass media, and office-bearers of listeners' and viewers' organisations are represented on the Council.

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To the south, an extraordinary process has been under way over the past few years in Southern Africa. It all began with the Gender Media Baseline Survey (GMBS), the most extensive study on gender in the media ever to be undertaken anywhere in the world. According to Colleen Lowe Morna, executive director of Gender Links, a South Africa based organisation committed to promoting gender equality in and through the media, the GMBS was "at the heart of a groundswell of activism in Southern Africa that culminated in the historic Gender and Media (GEM) Summit in September 2004."

This summit, convened by Gender Links and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), brought together 184 media decision-makers and practitioners, non-governmental organisations, trainers, researchers and analysts from across the region and further afield. Men constituted over one third of the participants. During three days of intensive discussions, presenters shared 46 case studies and twelve country reports that provided a fascinating glimpse of the many inspiring initiatives currently under way to make media more responsive to the needs of citizens -- women and men -- in the region. The summit led to the formation of GEMSA, a unique regional network established for the express purpose of promoting gender equality in and through the media.

In Southern Africa, as elsewhere in the world, much of the awareness and work on the media, especially in the context of gender, has been and continues to be raised by media women's associations. Gender Links (GL) was formed in 2001 by a small group of gender and media activists who felt the need for activists and the media to be talking to each other, rather than past each other. The group's work is firmly located in the context of ongoing efforts in the region to guard and strengthen the fragile freedom of expression resulting from the end of apartheid and the emergence of multiparty democracies in a number of countries.

The group's early activities included the presentation of a Gender and Media Handbook to editors in the region on the tenth anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration on Press Freedom. GL went on to form a strategic alliance with MISA, the membership-based organisation with chapters in every Southern African country, which is at the forefront of promoting freedom of expression in the region.

The GMBS, spearheaded by GL and MISA in 2002, in partnership with 32 institutions in 13 countries, provided overwhelming quantitative and qualitative evidence that women are both under-represented and portrayed in a narrow range of roles in the region's media. During national action planning workshops which took place the following year in the countries that had participated in the GMBS, media practitioners, decision-makers, analysts and activists devised a range of strategies for addressing these gender gaps.

The GEM summit served as an accountability forum for each country to share experiences and report on measures taken in the interim. The formation of GEMSA is intended to strengthen these national efforts. The network brings together MISA and its country chapters, GL and the gender and media networks that it has helped to establish in eight countries, the Federation of African Media Women (FAMW) and its country chapters, training institutions, editors' forums, media regulatory authorities, media NGOs, gender-related NGOs, as well as individual members. A new publication, *Getting it Right: Gender and Media in Southern Africa*, brings together the ideas, strategies and tools shared at the summit, which constitute the core of GEMSA's programme of action.

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Further east, the Citizens' Media Commission of Pakistan was established as an informal network in December 1997 in response to the need "to organise a process by which a purely citizens' perspective on media's role and on media issues ... could be articulated and projected on a sustained basis." According to its founders, the more a society becomes media-centric, the greater the need for a public interest perspective to be applied to media issues, independent of the interests of both media and of government. The seven-year-old body is dedicated to promoting such a public interest approach, which it believes is required to strengthen the principles of fairness and balance in the media, and to advance the goal of equilibrium between information, education and entertainment.

The Commission's decision to observe 14 February every year as "Electronic Media Freedom Day"<sup>1</sup> has provided a focus for media-related activities in the country. According to Javed Jabbar, its founding convenor, "The public activities of the Commission continue to attract sizeable attendance of people as well as some coverage by media, but the basic work of sustaining the citizens' media initiative remains a lonely campaign. The concept of taking initiatives on behalf of citizens in their relationship with media remains at a nascent and incipient stage. Several more years, and a great deal of mobilisation effort will have to be invested before the subject of citizens and media comes up to the level of awareness and activism which subjects such as human rights, education, health care and the environment presently enjoy."

At present the process is hampered by twin realities: the paucity of volunteers willing and able to devote time to the cause of citizens' media issues, and the dearth of financial support within the country for media-related activities in the public sphere. However, the fact that a few people in various cities and towns across the country have expressed interest in organising local chapters of the Commission could augur well for the future.

Indeed, in February, March and April 2005, small groups of 15 to 20 persons from a range of disciplines formally agreed to establish chapters of the Commission in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab and in the federal capital of Islamabad. Chapters in the remaining two provinces -- Balochistan and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) -- are expected to be formed by June 2005. In each case, the core group of voting members will comprise citizens who do not have a financial or full-time professional association with the mass media." The German foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, has agreed to supplement with funding support the voluntary inputs of time, effort and financial resources by Pakistani citizens.

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Next door, the winter of 2005 was a busy season for the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), which oversees the telecommunications and broadcast industries in the country. Between December 2004 and February 2005 it released consultation papers on issues relating to satellite radio services, digitalisation of cable television and private terrestrial TV broadcasting services. It made follow-up recommendations to the government on the second phase of private FM radio broadcasting. As a corollary, it also submitted recommendations on the possible licensing of community radio stations, which had been the subject of a consultation paper released in August 2004.

These significant media-related developments caused scarcely a ripple on the surface of Indian civil society. This is not surprising since they were reported and analysed, if at all,

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<sup>1</sup> This is separate from the annual World Press Freedom Day (3 May), instituted by the United Nations and observed worldwide as an occasion to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom applicable to both print and electronic media, to evaluate the status of press freedom across the globe, to guard against attacks on the independence of the media, and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

mainly in the business press or web-based media, which are accessible only to a small fraction of even the educated population of the country. Civil society in India, which is vocal and vigorous on a wide range of important issues, has yet to intervene actively in media matters.

Nor is it encouraged to. Although TRAI has established a worthy tradition of issuing regular press releases, posting all vital documents on its website, calling for comments from stakeholders, and even organising open house discussions on the subjects covered in its consultation papers, the process has not yet attracted substantial public participation.

This is partly because there is little public awareness of these developments and their significance, thanks to the limited coverage provided by the “mainstream” media, which appear to view them as issues exclusively concerning the government and the media industry, with little relevance to “the people” except in their role as consumers. The information gap is exacerbated by the fact that the deadline for feedback set by TRAI is extremely tight, leaving little time for news to trickle down to the public and generate informed responses. Further, the open house discussions are not adequately publicised and, in any case, are typically held only in two or three cities.

But perhaps the most critical reason for the present non-involvement of the public is the fact that citizens are not yet seen – even by themselves -- as legitimate stakeholders, with every right to participate in discussions on the media, which constitute a vital and influential aspect of modern life. As a result, there is little attempt from any quarter to ensure that ordinary people, who constitute the bulk of media audiences, have a say in issues relating to the media, including policy.

Media activism in the country, such as it is, tends to be largely restricted to critiques of content in the “mainstream” media, and the creation and promotion of “alternative” media. Valuable as these efforts are, they are clearly no substitute for citizens’ engagement with the media, especially at a time when the media landscape is in a state of flux and far-reaching media policies are in the process of being formulated. In the absence of citizen action on policy matters it is hardly surprising that it is, primarily, the broadcast industry that currently contributes comments on TRAI’s consultation papers on various aspects of the electronic media and participates in its open house discussions.

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Across the seas, in the Philippines, the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility (CMFR) was set up in 1989 to address one of the critical issues confronting the country after a popular movement led the way to democracy: the power of media and the role of the free press in the development of Philippine democracy.

The organisation’s work is based on the understanding that press freedom is essential for democracy and that effective, democratic governance requires a well-informed society whose members can freely exchange ideas, and where public debate and discussion is grounded in knowledge and understanding of current affairs. Accordingly, it seeks to

promote the idea that press freedom involves not only media professionals and managers but, equally, the public served by the media: members of civil society -- readers, listeners and viewers, as well as public officials and the private sector.

According to Luis V. Teodoro of CMFR, the organisation is a private, non-stock and non-profit corporation which seeks to protect and strengthen the free press as a pillar of democracy, to establish a framework of responsibility and ethics in the practice of the press, to foster journalistic excellence, and to engage different sectors of society in building a free press in the Philippines.

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Organisations like the CMFR, focussing on different aspects of the media, now exist in many countries around the world. A number of them conduct systematic surveys on media coverage of various issues, including elections, which contribute to public awareness of the impact of the news media on their lives, beliefs and actions. They also analyse other categories of media content, especially with regard to media representations of particular sections of society. In addition, they organise activities to generate debate and discussion among and between media professionals and members of civil society about media-related issues.

The main thrust of their work is to advocate media that are more responsive and responsible to the people they are meant to serve: readers, listeners and viewers. They urge the media to live up to their role as the Fourth Estate and to be true watchdogs of society. They hold them accountable for sins of omission and commission. There is little doubt that their efforts lay the foundation for greater citizen involvement in media matters.

However, that foundation has yet to be effectively built upon in most parts of the world. There is, at present, little organised action on the media front by citizens, especially -- but not only -- in developing countries. The European Alliance of Listeners' and Viewers' Associations (EURALVA), initiated by VLV, comprises organisations from Great Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, and Portugal. The Alliance, which cooperates with associated organisations in Australia and Canada, probably represents the core of citizen action on media matters across the globe.

A recent survey on the status of citizens' media organizations, or associations of viewers and listeners of electronic media, conducted on behalf of UNESCO by Javed Jabbar, founder of the Citizens' Media Commission of Pakistan, found "a vacuum in respect of associations of viewers and listeners of electronic media," especially in the developing world.

Yet the survey also discovered growing awareness in these countries about the pivotal role of the media -- especially the electronic media, the need to ensure genuine choice and alternative options within the broadcast sector, and the importance of public service broadcasting. In addition, it detected increased consciousness in many places of the need

for regular interaction between citizens, on the one hand, and media professionals and decision-makers, on the other, on issues such as public service broadcasting.

According to the researchers, the general preference seems to be for a form of dialogue that goes beyond the conventional letter writing and the more trendy “phone-ins” that tend to be too brief and superficial to be meaningful and are, in any case, within the exclusive control of the media. However, at present interactions between citizens’ organizations and media are primarily reactive and generally take the form of complaints and responses.

Genuine, effective dialogue calls for a regular process of direct, reciprocal communication, with the involvement of the senior-most decision-makers in the media, they point out. Further, a sincere exchange of ideas and perspectives can take place only if adequate time and attention are devoted to the process. And, finally, there has to be real commitment to appropriate action, as well as to monitoring and assessing progress on a periodic basis. The survey reveals that such dialogue barely exists at the present time in most parts of the world.

Yet it is clearly a felt and urgent need. This document represents an attempt to encourage more efforts to establish a healthy dialogue that could be beneficial to both the media and the public.

## **WHY**

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.”

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19*

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

*The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19, Paragraph 2*

“The free flow of information is the fundamental premise of knowledge societies. In a knowledge society, each individual will have more freedom and greater possibilities for self-realization, while respecting beliefs and ethics. Knowledge societies encourage openness and dialogue and appreciate wisdom, communication and cooperation. They must be based on the principle of freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...”

*Communiqué issued at the end of a Ministerial Round Table Meeting organized by UNESCO (“Towards Knowledge Societies,” 9-10 October 2003)*

“...Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers...”

*Declaration of Principles, World Summit on Information Society,  
Section A, Paragraph 4, 12 December 2003*

“Free and independent media are essential to democratic principles and practices. Broadcasting open to pluralism of opinion and cultural diversity offers the widest public access to the knowledge, education and information required by an active citizenry.”

*Arne Wessberg, President, European Broadcasting Union, presenting the Declaration of  
the World Electronic Media Forum to the Secretary General of the United Nations, 9 December 2003*

“Convinced of the key role of public and private broadcasting, including digital and enhanced broadcasting in the years ahead, in bringing about an information society in which all citizens are included and can participate,

Stressing broadcasters' commitment and contribution to such fundamental values as freedom of expression, access to information, media pluralism and cultural diversity,

Believing that the information society should be founded on the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in particular Article 19, on the fundamental right to freedom of expression,

The World Broadcasting Unions (WBU), comprising regional Broadcasting Unions representing the leading radio and television organizations throughout the world, hereby put forward the following principles and objectives...”

*Preamble to Broadcasters' Declaration,  
World Summit on the Information Society, 9 December 2003*

“The impact of the electronic media is probably greater today than at any time in history. Rapid and radical technological change is opening the door to information access and exchange on an unprecedented scale, reshaping the way human beings communicate with each other and lead their lives. If well managed, this holds enormous promise for the people of ... the world -- to improve health, trade, education, governance and ultimately, individual lives. However, there is much work to be done to bring this revolution into the hands and homes of ordinary people everywhere... Let us all work to ensure that the communication revolution empowers all people, and nurtures tolerance among all peoples.”

*Message from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the General Conference of  
the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, Colombo, 26 July 2004*

“It can never be stressed enough that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are prerequisites for the participation of citizens in the democratic life of their societies, for

social and economic development and for the achievement of peace. It is increasingly clear that the implementation of these principles is also essential for cultivating the intercultural understanding upon which lasting peace, security and development can be built.”

*Address by Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO  
on the occasion of the celebration of World Press Freedom Day, May 2004*

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## **Democracy, citizens and the media**

Democracy begins with citizens. Indeed, there can be no real democracy without citizens who are reasonably well-informed. Information and communication are, therefore, integral to democracy. By the same token, the democratisation of communication is a prerequisite of democracy.

The media have traditionally played a central role in the working of democracies. Historically, a critical feature of movements toward democracy has been the creation of a ‘public sphere,’ comprising all the places and forums where issues of importance to a political community are discussed and debated, and where information that is essential to citizen participation in community life is exchanged.

A democratic society depends upon an informed populace making political choices. In large and complex societies, public participation in political processes is already largely limited to occasional expressions of opinion and protests, and the periodic selection of representatives through the vote. For such weak participation to be even minimally effective the public has to know what is going on and what options they need to weigh, debate, and act upon -- when, where, why and how. This is where the media come in.

“There is an important connection between media and the strengthening of civil society: citizenship,” say Ashwin Mahesh and Subramaniam Vincent, editors of a website called India Together. According to them, media can play a stronger role if their reporting is premised on citizen participation, and does not regard readers, viewers and listeners as passive consumers... The principle that journalism must place its loyalty to citizens ... above all is what locates media in the public trust in the first place. “The fact that, time and again, media organizations digress greatly from serving this trust has not diminished the expectation that this principle should be adhered to,” they point out.

According to Jocelyn Hay, “In democratic societies, two of the most influential determinants of national identity are the nature of civil society and the debate which goes on within it. A country’s broadcasting services should provide part of the public sphere, the public forum for that debate to which individual citizens and institutions contribute their thinking on issues of general concern to the community. Their responsibility grows as radio and television become increasingly significant in the national life.”

Instead, the public sphere – in the real sense of the term -- has been shrinking rather than expanding as the media have become critical cogs in the globalisation wheel, particularly from the late 1980s and early 90s onwards. The growth of trans-national media conglomerates, leading to greater concentration of media ownership, the increased flow of media outputs across borders, and the spread and intensification of commercialisation are among the central features of media globalisation.

According to American journalist Bill Moyers, “The very soul of democracy is at stake” with the increasing concentration of ownership of public media such as radio, newspapers, television and the Internet.

“In Defence of Journalism as a Public Trust,” a statement drafted by an international group of journalists and other supporters of press freedom who participated in a Salzburg Seminar (Session 396) in March 2002, outlines emerging concerns about the changing face and role of the media in society:

“A free and independent press is essential to human liberty. No people can remain sovereign without a vigorous press that reports the news, examines critical issues and encourages a robust exchange of ideas. In recognition of the press's vital role in society, many countries extend it special legal protections under constitutions or legislatively-enacted statutes. These protections are unique, for they safeguard print, Broadcast and online organizations against government interference and censorship.

“Where this special status has been accorded the press, news organizations have been held to a high standard of public service and public trust. Over time, this ideal has become a bedrock of journalism, an enduring tradition by which a free press has been a powerful force for progress and informed citizen participation in society.

“Historically, threats to press freedoms have been political in nature. At the start of the 21st century, however, a new kind of threat emerges that, if continued, will endanger the freedoms guaranteed to the press and put at risk the sovereignty of the citizens.

“The nature of the press as a commercial enterprise has changed significantly. The emergence of media conglomerates and intense market competition are creating new organizational priorities in which profit growth is replacing public service as the principal mission. Sustaining profit growth often requires reducing the resources for news gathering, thereby diminishing the role of the news media as a public trust.

The primacy of commercial interests tends to erode the public sphere by creating a “culture of entertainment.” Under the “commercial model,” media outputs are often commodified and designed to serve the needs of the market, more than of citizenship.

As the Salzburg statement points out, “Business priorities are encouraging the blending of news and entertainment as a strategy to build audiences and ratings. This trend, most noticeable in television, has led to a reduction in serious news coverage and may be

responsible for a decline of public confidence in this medium as an essential source of information.”

According to the statement, “a shrinking commitment to both domestic and international news means that news organizations are missing opportunities to connect people and ideas globally at the very time technology has made such connections increasingly possible.”

As a result of the decline of diverse and comprehensive news produced in the public interest, a growing number of people across the world have inadequate access to varied sources of information on important aspects of life. Consequently, there is a general drop in public understanding of current affairs, as well as in citizen participation in community life. This situation, in turn, leads to a diminishment of citizens' political authority.

What is required is, clearly, a wiser balance between business goals and public service responsibilities within the media, and a reaffirmation of the role of independent media in sustaining human liberty.

### **Homogenisation vs. diversity**

As American media critic George Gerbner sees it, even as broadcast channels and other avenues of communication multiply, technologies converge and media merge. Cross-media conglomeration decreases competition and creates hurdles for newcomers. This often means that creativity and diversity give way to standardisation that, in turn, leads to an increasingly homogenised cultural environment.

For the first time in human history, Gerbner points out, most children are now born into homes where most of the stories told do not come from parents, neighbours, schools, churches, communities, or even, in many places, from their native countries, but from a handful of global conglomerates.

“It is impossible to overestimate the radical effect that this has on the way our children grow up, the way we live, and the way we conduct our affairs...,” he says. “People think of television as programmes, but television is more than that; television is a mythology -- highly organically connected, repeated every day so that the themes that run through all programming and news have the effect of cultivating conceptions of reality.”

This is the case in most parts of the world, with both public and private television contributing to the sorry situation. For example, according to British media scholars David Page and William Crawley, who have closely observed the situation on the South Asian sub-continent since the satellite television explosion of the 1990s, “The new television scene in South Asia is still characterized more by the number of channels than by the diversity of their content. The pursuit of similar commercial formats across both state and private channels has reduced the scope for programming which serves a public purpose and to some extent real choice for the viewer.”

## **Citizens and the airwaves**

Citizens' entitlements to freedom of expression and information have been long enshrined in international agreements on human rights. They have also been affirmed in several national Constitutions, as well as in legislation and judicial opinion in a number of countries. In addition, and equally importantly, courts in various parts of the world have upheld the notion of the airwaves as a public good. For example, in India, as well as Sri Lanka, Supreme Court judgements have clearly stated the important principle that the airwaves/frequencies constitute public property and are to be used to benefit the public, with states functioning primarily as trustees for the public. In other words, the judges have ruled that the primary purpose of all broadcasting is to serve the public interest.

As Rose Feliciano of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines, points out, "Because radio and TV networks are only "caretakers" or franchise holders of the 'airwaves,' *not* the owners, the public can demand that they use them responsibly to first serve public interests before their self-interest." According to Kishali Pinto Jayawardena of the Law and Society Trust, Colombo, it is up to citizens to use these progressive judgements to secure their rights and, especially, to ensure that media are independent and impartial.

Judicial endorsement of the idea that the airwaves constitute a public good is a potentially powerful tool that has, so far, not been sufficiently highlighted, let alone effectively used, even by those in favour of democratising the media. The concept clearly needs to be invoked more widely and forcefully since it provides a sound, legitimate basis for citizens' involvement in matters concerning broadcasting. Of course, in the present digital environment, which has created fresh opportunities for the media, words like "airwaves" – used in this context -- must be read and interpreted broadly to cover other transmission technologies.

## **Moving towards dialogue**

Gerbner suggests that building a broad new coalition of individuals and organisations committed to broadening the freedom and diversity of communication is one way of circumventing and, indeed, improving the present situation. He also proposes that cultural policy-making be placed on the socio-political agenda to secure children's right to be born into a cultural environment that is reasonable, free, fair, diverse, and non-damaging.

Recent indications that many broadcasters across the world are committed to fundamental values such as freedom of expression, access to information, media pluralism and cultural diversity hold out hope of a dialogue rather than a confrontation.

For example, a workshop on cultural diversity at the December 2003 World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF) came to the conclusion that "Broadcasting is a cultural industry par excellence, and – depending on the way it is organised and regulated – it can and

should make a key contribution to the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity,” according to Guillaume Cheneviere, executive director of the Forum, held more or less parallel to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Another WEMF workshop reportedly affirmed that “Private broadcasting has a central role in providing citizens with information and strengthening democracy.”

What is more, 150 participants from all over the world advised public service broadcasters to “actively seek and encourage the advice of civil society associations in the determination of policies and priorities for programming” during a UNESCO workshop on public service broadcasting held in Geneva during WSIS and WEMF, according to Vladimir Gai, chief of UNESCO’s Communication Development Section.

The Independent Press Councils website makes it clear that the news media and the public need to be mutually supportive of each other. On the one hand, the media have to be trusted and protected by the general public in order to obtain, keep and increase their own freedom. On the other hand, so as to gain that support, the media need to “inform readers/listeners/viewers properly” and, in addition, “listen and render accounts to them.”

This is the context within which Jocelyn Hay suggests that “A strong relationship between the nation’s broadcasters and its citizens provides one of the means for withstanding threats to national identity implicit in market pressures and in multi-national media corporations’ capacity to introduce globalisation and cultural homogenisation.” According to her, the promotion of a constructive dialogue between citizens and broadcasters has now become more vital than ever.

### **Consensus for action**

“Media have assumed a position that is unprecedented in human history,” said Javed Jabbar, reporting to the first Asia Media Summit on a workshop on “Citizens’ Media: Promoting Citizens’ Participation in Broadcasting” held in Kuala Lumpur in April 2004, which was organised by the Asia-Pacific Institute For Broadcasting Development (AIBD), in collaboration with UNESCO and the World Radio and Television Council (WRTVC). “The growth of mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the emergence of new media close to the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, focuses attention on the need to examine the context of citizens’ rights with regard to conventional media as well as new media.”

The purpose of the workshop, the first of its kind in the Asia-Pacific region, was to review the current situation regarding the place and role of citizens in relation to the media in general, and broadcasting in particular, and to discuss the possibility, potential and principles of constructive dialogue – in the public interest – between civil society, broadcasters and media regulatory authorities. According to the organisers, the issue of citizens’ rights vis-à-vis the media has become critical in view of the extraordinary growth of mass media and the emergence of new media in recent times, and the media’s consequent, unprecedented position of influence in the world today.

The 40 professionals from 22 countries working in and on different areas of media and broadcasting asserted that only a dynamic and mutually supportive relationship between major stakeholders -- broadcasters, governments, regulators, and citizens – could ensure that the media are able to promote democratic principles, as well as the equitable socio-economic and cultural development of all citizens of each country. They noted that, at present, the participation and role of a vital group among these stakeholders – citizens, who form the audience – was a weak link in the network of desirable relationships. They concluded that a strong relationship between citizens and broadcasters, based on mutual trust, was crucial for free and robust media organizations and, indeed, for healthy, democratic societies.

## **BUT**

It was clear from both presentations and discussions at the Citizens’ Media workshop that the situation of both the media and citizens in many countries characterised by diverse political and media systems, present many challenges as well as some opportunities.

### **Control and interference**

For one, there is the problem of common misconceptions about what constitutes public service broadcasting (PSB), with state broadcasters often, mistakenly, assumed to be public broadcasters.

In many parts of the world, where the dividing line between public service broadcasters and state broadcasters has traditionally been blurred, if not totally obscured, it may be necessary to reiterate what the former is supposed to be in order to restore in citizens’ minds the original, intended meaning, character and role of PSB.

“Public service broadcasting is a unique concept,” explains Werner Rumphorst, Director, Legal and Public Affairs Department, European Broadcasting Union, in his paper, ‘Model Public Service Broadcasting Law.’ “Although easy to understand, it is more often than not misunderstood, sometimes profoundly, sometimes even intentionally.

Some languages do not even have a term fully corresponding to the English word “public,” and the closest translation appears to confer the notion of state/government/official. Where this is the case in a country which has had a tradition of state broadcasting, this linguistic barrier constitutes the first obstacle to a clear understanding of the real nature of public service broadcasting (which is anything but ‘state,’ ‘government’ or ‘official’ broadcasting).”

Public service is the only *raison d’être* of public broadcasting, which is neither commercial nor State-controlled, according to ‘Public broadcasting: Why? How?’ (the World Radio and TV Council and UNESCO publication, 2000). Clearly establishing the links between public broadcasters, citizens and democracy, it goes on to emphasise that a public broadcaster “is the public’s broadcasting organisation; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They

develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.

Further, it continues, “Public broadcasting is defined as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals. It is an information and education tool, accessible to all and meant for all, whatever their social or economic status. Its mandate is not restricted to information and cultural development—public broadcasting must also appeal to the imagination, and entertain. But it does so with a concern for quality that distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting.”

“Because it is not subject to the dictates of profitability, public broadcasting must be daring and innovative, and take risks,” it continues. “...when it succeeds in developing outstanding genres or ideas, it can impose its high standards and set the tone for other broadcasters. For some, such as British author Anthony Smith, writing about the British Broadcasting Corporation—seen by many as the cradle of public broadcasting—it is so important that it has ‘probably been the greatest of the instruments of social democracy of the century.’ ”

As noted by the European Commission (in its Communication on the Application of State Aid Rules to Public Service Broadcasting -- 2001/C 320/04), “Public service broadcasting, although having a clear economic relevance, is not comparable to a public service in any other economic sector. There is no other service that at the same time has access to such a wide sector of the population, provides it with so much information and content, and by doing so conveys and influences both individual and public opinion.”

According to the document, “broadcasting is generally perceived as a very reliable source of information and represents for a not inconsiderable proportion of the population, the main source of information. It thus enriches public debate and ultimately ensures that all citizens participate to a fair degree in public life.”

It noted that a high-level group on audiovisual and media policy then chaired by European Commissioner Marcelino Oreja had observed that public service broadcasting “has an important role to play in promoting cultural diversity in each country, in providing educational programming, in objectively informing public opinion, in guaranteeing pluralism and in supplying, democratically and free of charge, quality entertainment.”

There is little doubt that PSB has a pivotal role to play in providing access to and participation in public life. PSB can be instrumental in promoting access to education and culture, developing knowledge, and fostering interactions among citizens, especially in developing countries, states a 2003 document emerging from the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of UNESCO’s General Conference (“Approved Programme and Budget, 2004-2005”).

For the majority of the world population, comprising inhabitants of huge rural areas and illiterate people, radio and television remain the most available and widespread ICTs, with radio in the first place as primary communication medium,” it continues.

According to the document, public broadcasting is meant to serve the interests of people as citizens rather than as consumers, reaching all populations and specific groups and, thereby, contributing to social inclusion and strengthening of civil society.

Broadcasting that is susceptible to pressure from either the state or the market, whose editorial independence is compromised by political or commercial considerations, cannot be guided by the public interest, which is the driving force of public service broadcasting.

As Kishali Pinto Jayawardena pointed out at the Kuala Lumpur workshop, the crucial relationship between broadcasters and citizens cannot be healthy as long as the broadcast regime is subject to governmental control and interference. According to her, structural reform of the domestic broadcasting system (vis-à-vis the independence of the public broadcaster as well as the basis on which licenses of private broadcasters are issued) must be among the first objectives of a process aiming to promote civil society participation in broadcasting.

As mentioned earlier, in Sri Lanka, as in India, Supreme Court judgements have upheld not only citizens' right to freedom of expression but also the important principle that the airwaves/frequencies constitute public property and are to be used to benefit the public, with governments functioning primarily as trustees for the public. Clearly citizens need to use these progressive judgements to secure their right to independent media that can create the public sphere so vital for democracy.

## **Democratic deficit**

The problem of democratic deficit is an even more fundamental challenge to citizens' participation in the media in several parts of the world. Isa Saharkhiz, editor-in-chief and manager of Aftab magazine, Tehran, highlights the importance of democracy to any kind of citizen involvement in the media, citing the example of his own country, Iran.

According to him, the liberal policies introduced by the popularly elected, reformist government that came into power in 1997 led to an upsurge in media proliferation and journalistic activity. Not only did the new openness encourage journalists who had left the scene on account of censorship and political pressure to return to the profession, but scholars and specialists in various fields began to contribute to the media. In addition, once citizens had witnessed and experienced the reality of political freedom, they also began to participate in the media more actively as contributors, sources of information and opinion, and audiences.

The situation changed dramatically in 2000, following the judicial clamp-down on the independent, pro-reforms media, which led to the shutting down of 20 newspapers and magazines within 40 hours. Since then over a 100 publications have been closed, and a large number of journalists, including senior editors and publishers, have been prosecuted and imprisoned. Self-censorship has naturally increased, and many journalists have quit the profession. The bottom line, according to Saharkhiz, is that democracy and freedom

of expression are “absolute prerequisites for meaningful, dynamic media activity and the promotion of citizens’ participation in broadcasting.”

### **Extra-constitutional pressures**

A different note of caution is sounded by Atmakusumah Astraatmadja of the Soetomo Press Institute, Jakarta. According to him, the advent of democracy in 1998 was catalysed by an unprecedented growth of media – both print and broadcast -- in Indonesia, too. However, he points out, the termination of an authoritarian national regime does not necessarily end all pressures on the media. For instance, threats still come through local governments using legal measures based on a 50-year-old “emergency law.” They also exist in the form of violent protests against and threats to journalists and media outlets from members of various organisations, including some representing religious communities or movements. Such censorship by mob, or street censorship – increasingly common in many parts of the world -- is clearly not the kind of citizen participation to be encouraged.

### **Community media**

On a happier note, community media clearly represent an important avenue for citizens’ participation in broadcasting. Radio is “the most widespread, accessible and cost-effective means of communication,” which has been proven to be “an affordable, decentralized and simple-to-manage medium especially for the poorest and most marginalized communities,” said Steve Buckley, president of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), at WSIS in Geneva in 2003.

Community radio is well-established in Latin America, which has 40 years of experience in the area. “Today, any small country in Latin America can count by hundreds the stations, most of them FM, that serve rural or urban communities with content that is appropriate to the local language, culture and needs,” says Alfonso Gumucio Dagron in ‘Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change,’ a detailed report on how radio stations across the globe are making a difference, often to those who lack other means of communication.

Africa, too, is now home to a number of community media initiatives, some linking radio with the Internet in order to widen reach. According to Dagron, many countries in Africa and Asia are currently undergoing the same process that Latin American nations lived through decades ago. His study found that community radio stations have multiplied all over the world in recent years. “It is almost impossible to even calculate the real numbers, as statistics do not include the many that operate without a legal license,” he says.

As Buckley puts it, “community-based, independent media with social rather than commercial objectives” provide a necessary alternative to the two dominant, often opposing, media forms prevalent across the world: public and private. According to him, at present country-level legislative and regulatory frameworks, and associated

spectrum planning, remain the most persistent obstacles to the establishment and growth of this third option, although recent developments in several parts of the world indicate a trend towards the opening up of the airwaves.

Unlike the situation in India, where the government is only now - slowly and hesitantly -- formulating policy to make the dream of community radio a reality, and Sri Lanka, where community broadcasting has not yet been effectively delinked from the state broadcasting system, in Nepal community radio had slowly but surely been coming into its own since the introduction of parliamentary democracy, with seven stations already on air.

Until the suspension of democracy in the first quarter of 2005, the country appeared to be surging ahead with FM radio, too, with 53 independent channels run by diverse groups, ranging from commercial enterprises to non-governmental organisations. According to Manisha Aryal, executive director of the Antenna Foundation, Kathmandu (a production house which bought time on Radio Nepal for its programmes and also provided uncensored versions to other stations), even commercial stations were beginning to include public interest programming in their schedules.

In another inspiring story of citizen participation in Nepal, Aryal speaks of the 900 Listeners' Clubs spread across the country, each with memberships of up to a dozen teenagers and young adults, most of them male. The Foundation provided them with audio-tapes of programmes, which were played at village fairs, in long-distance buses, and so on, and they returned the favour by remaining in regular communication and, especially, sending feedback about the programmes and their reception by various audiences.

## **Reality checks**

Clearly there are many lessons in all these experiences for countries across the world, and citizens planning to intervene in media matters. In addition there are a few others that may need to be taken on board in this context. One of these is that "citizens" do not constitute a homogenous category.

Take, for example, the popular radio and television programmes based on "audience participation" in India. Diversity does not appear to be a criterion for the selection of participants, especially on TV. As a result, "the people" in the studios are hardly representative of the multiple classes, castes, ethnic and religious communities, languages and educational levels that make up the Indian population. Nor, for that matter, is there much variation in their geographical location, with "national" programmes remaining largely limited to the capital city, barring rare forays into other news hot spots. What is more, the airtime provided to "ordinary people" in the studio is usually just a fraction of that allotted to celebrity or "expert" participants.

Further, in the era of mass media as the new opiate of the middle classes, when even news programmes and channels have succumbed to the infotainment imperative, attention is not always paid to the diversity of interests and concerns that exists within the

urban middle classes. It is not surprising, therefore, that even programmes apparently open to public participation currently reflect little diversity in content or perspective.

Another important lesson is that citizens' involvement in media matters cannot be secured through lip service or token gestures. Unless policy initiatives are widely publicised in media that actually reach ordinary people, unless adequate time is provided for citizens to inform themselves of the implications and formulate their responses, unless debates and discussions are made truly accessible, and unless sufficient time and attention are devoted to the process, citizen participation is likely to remain a mirage.

## **Public service**

The interface between civil society and public service broadcasters represents a major area of activity of any citizens' media group. According to Manfred Kops, this is because they are natural allies. Both members of civil society and public service broadcasters who remain true to their calling pursue similar goals, which can only be attained through mutual support and reciprocal responsibility.

Public service broadcasting must provide a voice for civil society, particularly when institutions of civil society are threatened, and the latter must support the former, especially when public service broadcasting is under threat. According to him, civil society engagement with public service broadcasting should be in the form of "benevolent but critical control," especially if such broadcasters disregard their mission by, for example, serving the interests of the state or the market, which cannot but be at the expense of the public interest.

He believes that citizens can play an important role in ensuring good governance as well as the principles of public service in broadcasting through viewers' and listeners' associations. However, in order to play that role well, such groups have to not only be independent but also avoid cooperating too closely with either the state or with the market. In addition, they must take care to withstand the temptations of both the market and the state, however difficult this may be in view of the scarcity of resources that the voluntary sector, including citizens' media groups, generally suffers from.

According to Kops, although well-organised viewer and listener associations can play a prominent role in protecting public service broadcasters from both external and internal pulls and pressures, such an important function cannot be left to such groups alone. All members of civil society – indeed, all citizens -- need to support and control public service broadcasting, both as individuals and in their roles as members of different institutions of civil society: families and neighbourhoods, communities and religious groups, consumer organisations and labour unions, and educational, cultural, or charitable institutions. As he points out, such intervention can and must complement their roles as members of the political sphere, especially as voters in political elections, as well as their roles as members of the market sphere, especially as critical consumers.

## **International alliances**

Adding another interesting and relevant perspective, Kops suggests that the major reason for the commercialisation of society, in general, and broadcasting systems, in particular, is the decreasing importance of “physical input factors.” The spatial limits for production and consumption that existed earlier have decreased, he points out. As a result, the potential and pressure for a global, worldwide economy have increased.

According to him, growing commercialisation and greater globalisation bear severe risks for goods that cannot be provided solely in accordance with the rules of the market. In broadcasting these trends are likely to lead to the crowding out of programme content for minorities -- including local and regional minorities, the domination of programmes from countries that have large domestic markets and are therefore able to dump their programmes on smaller overseas markets, and the mounting pressure to produce programmes that can be internationally competitive (sports, for example) to the disadvantage of programmes that conform to the core of the public service mission but cannot always attract additional finances through international, or even national, markets.

It may be relevant to recall in this context the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted during the 31<sup>st</sup> session of UNESCO’s General Conference in Paris in November 2001, particularly Article 6: “Towards access for all to cultural diversity.” According to the Declaration, while the free flow of ideas by word and image needs to be ensured, it is also important to see that all cultures are able to express themselves and make themselves known. Freedom of expression, media pluralism, multilingualism, equal access to art and to scientific and technological knowledge, including in digital form, are pre-requisites for cultural diversity. Clearly access to means of expression and dissemination for all cultures is equally important for diversity to remain a reality.

Accordingly, among the guidelines for an Action Plan for the implementation of the Declaration is the following: “Encouraging the production, safeguarding and dissemination of diversified contents in the media and global information networks and, to that end, promoting the role of public radio and television services in the development of audiovisual productions of good quality, in particular by fostering the establishment of cooperative mechanisms to facilitate their distribution.”

Kops points out that, whereas the supporters of the market try to reach their targets through international cooperation, most individuals and groups attempting to combat excessive commercialisation act mainly at the national or even sub-national level. This is only to be expected, since many institutions of civil society are rooted in the family, the neighbourhood, in working and leisure groups, and in other local spheres. In order to become more capable of resisting the growing threat from the international sphere, he says, civil society must also organise more internationally.

Citing current threats to public service broadcasting, such as the WTO’s “General Agreement in Trade and Services” (GATS) and the European Commission’s attempts to interpret the license fee as an illegal state grant, he suggests that it is necessary for the

few existing listeners' and viewers' associations that exist to cooperate more closely with each other. According to him, EURALVA is a positive step in that direction. It could form the starting point for an international effort to support the idea and principles of public service broadcasting and to combat the challenges that are bound to persist and even increase in the future.

## **Time for action**

It is clearly important for everyone interested in promoting more citizen action in matters relating to the media, especially broadcasting, to be aware and mindful of the challenges, stumbling blocks and bottlenecks likely to be encountered en route. Today's media landscape is highly complex and constantly evolving, at both the national level and the global one. In order to be effective, citizen action will necessarily have to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the multiple realities and subtle nuances of the media environment at any given time.

In view of the growing influence of the media, and the accelerating pace of technological and other developments that impact the media, there is little doubt that the time is ripe for public action to assert and activate citizens' right to be acknowledged as stakeholders in the media, to influence media policy, to shape media content and to be represented in the media. It is certainly time for civil society to recognise that media and culture are matters of public interest about which citizens must be both concerned and proactive. As Steve Buckley put it, "It is increasingly important that we, as citizens, articulate a broader perspective (on media) and build coalitions for the defence of culture and linguistic diversity, for progressive communications reform, and for the extension of communication rights."

## **WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE**

It is, therefore, not surprising that there is considerable consensus among a wide range of people the world over that a constructive dialogue between citizens and broadcasters is an imperative. At the same time, it is also evident that only organised and motivated groups of citizens can really engage in such a dialogue, especially in view of the enormous gap between the resources available to corporate or state media, on the one hand, and ordinary citizens, on the other.

The exact terms in which that dialogue will be conducted will naturally, and necessarily, vary from one society to another. As Jocelyn Hay points out, however, the underlying principle must be one of mutual trust -- first, trust by the broadcasters that the public will understand the practical constraints under which the broadcaster operates, particularly when the broadcaster is dependent on commercial revenues or financed by direct government grant, and, secondly, trust by the public that the broadcasters will treat the dialogue seriously, not exploiting it as an opportunity to promote their public relations while failing to recognise any obligations towards accountability and good governance.

## **Rights and responsibilities**

One way to nurture such trust may be to openly acknowledge that both parties have rights as well as responsibilities. The underlying rationale for citizen action in media matters is the perception that while the media enjoy enormous power, they are not always held accountable.

Most respectable sections of the media do have codes of conduct or ethics and/or other instruments and institutions, structures and systems for self-regulation. In addition, most countries, including democracies, have official policies, laws and rules to regulate the media. However, the fact that citizens still feel the need to intervene more directly in matters relating to the media suggests that these mechanisms are not sufficient to satisfy citizens' aspirations vis a vis the media and empower them to articulate their perspectives on media-related issues.

At the same time, citizens' interactions with the media may benefit from an understanding of their own rights and responsibilities towards the media. As Javed Jabbar puts it, "Citizens also have obligations to support and strengthen media independence." In the process of developing a framework for enabling citizens to intervene effectively in issues concerning the media, he has drawn up a tentative charter of citizens' media rights and responsibilities.

The draft charter, first presented for discussion at the Asia Media Summit 2004, is reproduced here to generate more debate as well as comments and proposals that could further enrich, refine and strengthen the document:

### **Citizens' Media Rights**

**(i.e., citizens' rights in the context of media in general)**

1. All citizens, indeed all human beings – including children, youth, adults and senior citizens – should have convenient access to all media, such access being subject to just and fair law, and universally recognised principles of human rights.
2. Citizens should be able to choose between options within each medium rather than be dependent on only one source or medium.
3. Citizens should be able to receive media content which is reasonably balanced between news/analysis/programming content and advertising content.
4. Citizens should have convenient access to information about identities of persons and organisations in regard to media ownership, management control of media, sources of funding of media, and on other financial aspects of media.
5. Citizens should have fair and convenient access to independent and credible mechanisms which enable media to be held accountable for accuracy, fairness and

- balance without such monitoring and accountability mechanisms unduly restricting the freedom of expression of media.
6. Citizens have the right to access all media at reasonable and, preferably, low cost.
  7. Citizens have a right to be given appropriate time and space in media – directly or indirectly – without charge in case media content is inaccurate, misleading or defamatory about a citizen or the community to which a citizen belongs.
  8. Citizens should have the right to own and operate non-profit public service media without being obliged to pay auction-based license fees.
  9. When citizens address letters or complaints to media about aspects of media content they should receive acknowledgements/replies from media, if the letters/complaints are conveyed in appropriate language.
  10. Citizens have the right to know how the media content they are being exposed to is being presented in other parts of the country, the region, or the world, through other editions or versions of the same media.
  11. Citizens, particularly youth and children, have the right to be imparted media literacy and be informed on media issues as part of their general education.

### **Citizens' Media Responsibilities**

(i.e., citizens' responsibilities in the context of media in general)

1. Citizens should help to ensure that all media function freely as per the laws of the country in which the media are based, and that media are allowed to similarly function freely across regions, and across the globe. Where laws are unjust or unduly restrictive, citizens should campaign to change and improve media laws.
2. Citizens should actively support and demand pluralism in media.
3. Citizens should also originate content and contribute to media content, and not remain passive consumers of media output.
4. Citizens should monitor media ownership and cross-media ownership to prevent undue concentration of media power – e.g., of state power or corporate power.
5. Citizens should create and operate civil society forums that serve as independent bodies to monitor media policies, practices and content, and to analyse media issues from a public interest perspective.

6. Citizens should fulfil their financial obligations to media by observing copyright of media content and by respecting intellectual property rights, and thereby citizens should reject purchase or use of pirated materials.
7. When citizens use media or appear in media, they should promote truth and accuracy, rather than disinformation and distortion.
8. Citizens should initiate and operate or support citizens' media that are focused on the public interest and help balance the dominance of corporate media and State-controlled media.
9. Citizens should help protect media and media practitioners from physical violence or coercion.
10. Citizens should operate citizen-controlled or citizen-driven media, such as the Internet, cell phones, SMS, and other new media by giving primacy to the values of friendship and fraternity amongst all people, to help build peace, tolerance and harmony.
11. Citizens should campaign for inclusion of information on media issues in school and college curricula and in other educational materials to prepare young people to effectively address citizens' media rights and responsibilities.

## HOW

VLV, a pioneer in the field of citizen participation in broadcasting, has outlined a useful set of guidelines to enable the formation of groups with similar aims and objectives in other parts of the world and, thereby, foster constructive dialogue between citizens and media everywhere. According to Jocelyn Hay, "In the nature of things, some dialogue participants – broadcasters (public or commercial), industry regulators and government departments – function in an organisational context where they are underpinned by established structures and substantial resources which are not available to citizens at large. VLV, therefore, believes – based on common sense and its own experience – that, in order to be effective participants in the broadcasting dialogue, citizens must take specific organisational steps to group themselves and to optimise their impact."

Clarifying that the proposals in the January 2004 document "makes no pretence that the transformation of principle into practice will be either easy or rapid or the same in every society," she says: "Nevertheless, we believe that, if carried out successfully, the process can make an invaluable contribution to the delivery of good governance and trust within the overall society."

VLV's guidelines for promoting citizen participation in broadcasting are as follows:

### **A. The Principles of a Citizen Group**

The members of a group will be drawn to work together by a shared belief in the importance of broadcasting, one of the most powerful influences on culture, language, political life and values, within a community as a provider of education at all levels, different forms of information, ideas and entertainment. National circumstances determine the principal sources of funding for broadcasting services, but there are few societies in which opportunities cannot be found to include in the broadcasters' schedules material which, besides satisfying popular tastes, reflects the interest of the community in the widest sense. VLV believes that striking the balance between these different objectives should be the result of a democratically-conducted public dialogue within civil society between the public, broadcasters, government and other policy-makers which it is their purpose to facilitate. Each group will express its aims in the terms which are appropriate to its own society, but a model summary of aims might be expressed as follows:

- To raise awareness of the role of broadcasting in the national life and in the lives of individual communities, as well as in the preservation and stimulus of the national culture and community.
- To promote a wide choice of high quality programmes.
- To encourage media literacy, that is, a better understanding of programme-making techniques and their underlying purposes.
- To maintain the editorial integrity of news, current affairs and documentary programmes.
- To oppose undue influence over broadcasting by commercial, political and sectarian interests.
- To ensure access throughout the country and by different communities to a diverse range of programming.
- To encourage public debate about current and future developments in broadcasting, with a special concern for the impact of new technologies.
- To protect the interests of citizens as consumers of broadcasting from exploitation.
- To ensure that public interest values are observed in those forms of the new media which converge with broadcasting.
- To provide an independent platform and forum for public dialogue and debate about broadcasting issues.

In order to maintain the integrity of the group's final aim, the group should not allow itself to become a channel for individual complaints against broadcasters from members

of the public, corporations or government departments, still less to become an arbitrator in disputes about staffing, etc. Broadcasters should, however, be encouraged themselves to establish clear means through which the public can register complaints and be satisfied that the complaints have been given a fair hearing and consideration. Where it is possible, complaint procedures should be handled by a separate organisation, independent of the broadcaster at whom the complaint has been directed.

## **B. Forming a Group**

The first initiative for forming a group may come from a small number of individuals, but it may equally well come from a group of women's organisations, trades unions or a set of academics within a single institution or drawn from several. The membership, however, should be sufficiently diverse to represent several distinct strands of interest and opinion, so that the group cannot be dismissed as concerned with only a single issue, however important it may seem. To be viable, a group has to be capable of carrying conviction in its dealings with broadcasters, government, policy-makers and other corporate interests, as well as with the public in general. It is not simply a matter of numbers, it also depends on the way in which a group presents itself, avoiding confrontation and pursuing a continuing, positive dialogue.

It is unlikely that broadcasters will themselves encourage the formation of such groups. Few take readily to the idea of discussing their activities, often regarding it as interfering with their ability to make their own decisions, preferring instead to conduct their relations with the public on their own terms. Groups should remember that the broadcasters' time and resources are often scarce and they will naturally be reluctant to use them for activities which may not, apparently, be of immediate value to them. While government departments might be more willing to take an initiative, they too are often suspicious, and their motives may be ambivalent, often varying from one moment to the next as political circumstances change. In all relations, whether with broadcasters, government departments or others it is important for the group to retain its independence.

### Communicating with the public and with members

The methods that groups adopt will differ from place to place. In some instances, the local press may be the vehicle by which news of the venture is communicated – perhaps the first move towards the calling of a public meeting or a series of meetings. Again, groups need to be careful that they do not unwittingly become involved in a wider game plan, as sometimes newspaper proprietors may own radio and television companies which are in competition with the public broadcaster.

In other cases the founding of a newsletter is recommended as the opening move, gathering circulation until other kinds of activity become realistic. The creation of a website and email mailing list is another recommended way of launching an initiative, but its credibility will depend on its quality and the reliability of its content and also on the group's ability to update it regularly.

It is most probable, but not essential if internal communications are relatively good, that the initiative will begin in a large town, often the capital city. But it is most important that the group's activities and sphere of interest are not, or are not perceived to be, confined to urban areas: rural areas often stand to benefit more from improvements in broadcasting services than towns and cities where means of communication and entertainment are more readily available.

### **C. Funding and Resources**

#### **(i) Accommodation, equipment and administration**

In the early stages of formation, it is highly likely that a new group will be run from a private house or, if fortunate, from space provided by a sympathetic company or institution with at least part-time access to a computer and the Web. Universities, colleges and schools are particularly useful in this respect. If the same organisation is willing to support the cost of mailings or other forms of communication, such as telephone or email or to provide practical help and expertise in designing and maintaining a website, that is an added advantage. At the same time, individual members may be able and willing – and be encouraged – to donate time to carrying out specific activities. How much can be demanded, however, for even a modest range of activities will depend very much on the individual circumstances of the group and its members.

#### **(ii) Membership**

It is important to gain the support of members with different interests and perspectives from the start. Forming a group from scratch is not an easy task and mutual support is necessary, both moral and financial. One very useful way to begin, as outlined above, is by involving academics, if possible from more than one institution, and perhaps by seeking support from existing networks and groups, for example, women's groups, rural cooperatives, professional associations of say, teachers or medical workers or trade unions, as well as well-respected local professionals and other individuals.

#### **(iii) Funding**

In many communities and at the start for most, members' subscriptions are unlikely to provide more than a part of a group's funding needs. However, even a very small sum can be useful and a valuable symbol of a member's commitment to the work of the group, and it is recommended that a sliding scale of subscriptions be introduced with concessions for students, pensioners and those on low incomes.

Sponsorship may seem an attractive source of funding but examples of sponsorship without strings are rare, whether it is offered by broadcasters, government or commercial corporations. All commercial companies have their own goals and corporate image to maintain and many are reluctant to be seen to be associated with controversial activities, views or personalities. If help is taken from a commercial company, care should be taken to ensure the company's interests lie outside the core purposes of the group and that it has

no financial interest in broadcasting. Great care is also needed if sponsorship or grants are offered by government, political parties or religious institutions, lest they seek to influence the group's policies. Often there is a danger of 'self-censorship' in relation to sponsorship, when members of the group might feel that actions they propose to take might not be approved by the sponsor. Charitable trusts and foundations, where they exist, may be able to give assistance, especially in the early days of formation, but again it will be necessary to check their objects and that by accepting help from them the group will not be labelled in any way. Inevitable, whenever a new group is formed or becomes powerful, some of those in the institutions the group is trying to influence, will see it as a threat and immediately try to label it as 'left-wing', 'right-wing' or a pressure group for a particular profession or interest group. Once this happens the label is difficult to lose and may well colour public perception for years to come.

#### **D. Governance and Activities**

##### **(i) Formation of a Management Committee**

The group will begin with a small self-appointed steering committee of enthusiastic members who decide to work together for a common aim. If possible the steering committee should seek advice on procedure and funding from respected professionals or institutions. As soon as it is practicable the steering committee should establish a small executive committee. Ideally this should be done at a meeting of all known interested persons, or at a public meeting, where the proposed members of the executive can be seen and voted for. In order to prevent a self-perpetuating clique emerging, it is desirable to limit the term of office of members of the executive to two or three years, with a compulsory break after say, two terms in office. Such a system encourages a turn-over in committee membership and prevents one powerful personality controlling policy.

As the organisation grows, sub-committees can be set –up to deal with specific activities and to encourage wider participation by other members, but the power to act or speak on behalf of the organisation must always rest with the main committee or board. An important early activity of the executive committee will be to develop and maintain relations with the public and also with broadcasters, government departments, policy-makers, regulators and others whose opinions may be influential in broadcasting, the press and new media matters.

The committee should also consider formalising policy and a few basic rules in a written constitution - in the drafting of which professional legal help should be employed. Clear rules should be established for responsibilities such as handling and accounting for funds, and for recording decisions taken at meetings. The general practice is that a treasurer will be appointed to handle all the financial matters and a secretary the recording of decisions, etc. A membership secretary will be needed to oversee the register of members and to ensure that for example, rules regarding the privacy of members' names are followed.

##### **(iii) Liaison meetings**

Meetings between committee-members and senior figures in different forms of broadcasting or managers in other relevant organizations, apart from furthering understanding, are important for obtaining information for distribution by the best available means to members and to the wider public. In this respect the use of a website is increasingly important. It is very important that the committee does not allow itself to appear as an exclusive clique or elite.

(iv) Membership meetings

Conditions may not always allow the regular convening of meetings of members, but, where possible, members should be encouraged to come together from time to time to express opinions, raise issues and be brought up-to-date with the thinking of the executive committee. An annual general meeting of some sort is highly desirable, if not essential, at which the executive committee can meet members, explain the policies they are following and be questioned by members. This is the occasion for the executive to be elected or at least validated. It may also be possible to take the opportunity to invite a senior broadcaster, minister or policy-maker to speak at the meeting and engage in debate with the members. It may also be useful for members to meet men and women who contribute to programmes, for example as producers, performers or writers because this always helps them to gain an understanding of how programmes are made and the constraints under which the broadcasters work.

(v) Publishing an newsletter

Information, obtained by one of the means described above, should be communicated to the membership as soon and as frequently as possible, and any responses should be carefully considered so that the opinions expressed by the Committee are truly representative. A newsletter, whether in print or delivered electronically, can serve as a vehicle for news about members in different locations, their particular concerns and their activities. It is an opportunity to share opinions, news and experience, for example in ways of recruiting new members or in fund raising.

The editor will need to be carefully selected and briefed in order to ensure that (a) the newsletter is produced to as high a standard as possible – it should be remembered that it will probably be the main communication tool with members and quite likely with the outside public also – and that it reflects the views of the membership and executive committee, *not* of the individual editor.

(vi) Government and other public consultations

It is a growing practice in some countries for government, regulators and broadcasters to consult the public in advance of new policy proposals. Consultation may take the form of open public meetings or documents requiring a written response by a particular deadline. In either case it is important that considered responses are returned based on the known views of the membership. Responses should also be made publicly available as this will

increase the transparency of the group's governance and, if well-argued and presented, will build respect for the group.

(vii) Frequency of meetings

It is important at an early stage to reassure the broadcasters that the aims of the new group are not confrontational. 'Marching' on the broadcaster's headquarters with a list of demands rarely achieves any good and is much more likely to provoke a determination to resist them at all costs. The conduct of broadcasting operations, often under constraints of different kinds, some of which may not be immediately apparent, is difficult in any society, and the purpose of the group should be to persuade the broadcasters that dialogue and perhaps support from the group offer one way of making their task easier. Meetings between the group and senior managers should develop into regular occasions, either between the broadcasting managers and the group's officers but also if possible with a larger number of group members. Trust and respect from both sides is all-important.

(viii) Social events

Although it may be unrealistic in some communities, opportunities may exist and should be sought if possible for members to pay visits to broadcasting installations – for example, studios, transmitters and research facilities – which will contribute to their understanding of how broadcasting operations are organised and financed. On other occasions it may be possible to hold social or semi-educational events in conjunction with, say, a particular broadcast. These might take the form of a social gathering, possibly with a related talk, before an outside broadcast such as a concert or sporting event. They may also take the form of a series of lectures; or alternatively, climate permitting, of a special event such as the 'Picnics in the Park' organised by the Friends of the ABC in Australia. At these rallies, held outdoor in the summer, Friends of the ABC come together to meet, share ideas, see exhibitions and hear specialist speakers: activities which help to build the cohesion of the group and at the same time to increase members' understanding of the practical and political issues involved in running a state funded public service broadcaster.

## **E. Conclusion**

Each country, culture and society will seek to find its own solution to the problem of creating a dialogue with its broadcasters and other policy-makers. These guidelines are based very much on the experience of Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) which was formed in 1983 and is the leading advocate of the citizen and consumer interest within broadcasting in the UK. They have served us well and have helped VLV to gain respect in the industry and in government. We find that more and more groups are approaching us for help in setting themselves up. Our experience is that it is not easy, particularly in regard to funding. It is however, essential to retain independence of action and not to be perceived as serving one particular interest or section of society. In this it is important not to provide an excuse for easy labelling, and not to allow the group to become dependent

on one source of funding or to be captured by a particular clique. Independence, plurality and democracy in decision-making are the key to gaining respect and recognition.

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All that remains to be done is for groups of citizens in different parts of the world who are interested in and concerned about the media, and who believe in the efficacy of dialogue, to get together, form associations of readers, listeners and viewers, and establish links with media organisations, as well as regulators, in their respective contexts. The next step would be to establish regional and global alliances with similar groupings in different countries and continents.

A media movement initiated and directed by citizens could well change the world into one where, to paraphrase the words of India's poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, the mind is without fear and the head is held high, knowledge is free, the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls, and the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit. "Into that heaven of freedom," he wrote, "let my country awake." Make that the world.

END

**Ammu Joseph**  
April 2005

RELATED, USEFUL WEB LINKS:

Voice of the Listener and Viewer, UK

<http://www.vlv.org.uk>

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, Canada

<http://www.friends.ca>

Institute for Broadcasting Economics, Germany

<http://www.rundfunk-institut.uni-koeln.de>

Center for International Media Action, USA

<http://www.mediaactioncenter.org/>

Free Media, USA

<http://www.freemedia.org>

Free Press, USA

<http://www.freepress.net/>

Media Channel, USA

<http://www.mediachannel.org/>

Media Access Project, USA

<http://www.mediaaccess.org/programs/diversity/index.html>

Media Alliance, USA

<http://www.media-alliance.org/>

Indymedia, USA and elsewhere

<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, USA

<http://www.fair.org/>

Poynter Institute, USA

<http://www.poynter.org/>

AlterNet, USA

<http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/>

Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, USA

<http://www.wifp.org/>

Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Philippines

<http://www.cmfr.com.ph/>

Media Institute of Southern Africa

<http://www.misa.org>

Gender Links, South Africa

[www.genderlinks.org.za](http://www.genderlinks.org.za)

The Hoot, India

[www.thehoot.org](http://www.thehoot.org)

Media South Asia Project, UK

[www.mediasouthasia.org](http://www.mediasouthasia.org)

Independent Press Councils

<http://www.presscouncils.org/>