

World Electronic Media Forum gets under way

What is the role of electronic media in the digital age? The World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF) took a close look at this role today. Over the next two days, broadcasters and decision-makers from around the globe will grapple with the key issues ? economic, ethical and civic ? confronting public and private media practitioners. WEMF will present messages to WSIS through UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Shashi Tharoor, UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, pointed to two main concerns - the "content divide", and issues surrounding freedom of expression. Whether we look at television, radio or the Internet, what passed for global media, remained, in reality, the media of the developed West, where most of the world's Internet hosts reside, he said. "Access to the Internet is growing but is of little value if the bulk of the information that it reveals is in a language you don't understand or if it fails to deal with life and death questions that affect your family or your society," he noted. Turning to press freedom, Mr Tharoor acknowledged that Internet, the "medium without a passport" posed challenges to all governments as they sought to find a legal environment that fostered freedom of expression without trampling on other legitimate rights.

Robert Rabinovitch, CEO of Radio Canada, stated that value, choice and speed were the new mantras in a world where the consumer was king. But only public broadcasters could afford to take the risks that private broadcasters could not: content should contribute to culture, social responsibility and ultimately democracy. Ihron Rensburg, President of South African Broadcasting, also argued to strengthen the pathfinding role and editorial independence of State broadcasters and thereby combat narrow nationalism. Guillaume Chenevière, President CMRTV, advocated a broadcasters' code of conduct for ethical standards.

Discussion also focused on the role of the media in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Jose Maria Ocampo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, underlined that the digital divide was not simply a matter of how many computers were connected to how many networks; it had to do with the training needed for individuals and communities. Promoting the MDGs involves increasing pro-development knowledge and skills. The Director of the Swiss Development Agency decried the media of the developed world, which forgot the "killers of development" such as conflict, HIV/AIDS and economic inequities.

At a press conference on the stakes of the Tunis phase of WSIS and the World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF), Mr Tharoor stated that freedom of the medium was in everyone's interest. The idea of an Internet Governance Forum was gaining ground and, if invited by Member States to do so, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stood ready to play "whatever role" was required to assist the process. Finally, on funding, Mr Tharoor said that digital solidarity primarily depended on the willingness of Member States to lift poor countries out of the digital divide. The Digital Solidarity Fund launched by developing countries to engage community-level action is a positive step forward.

World Electronic Media Forum calls for urgent international action to protect journalists

Today, the World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF) asked UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to convey to the international community one key message: the need to improve the security and physical integrity of journalists, media staff and associates in situations of armed conflict. The Forum invited the Security Council to adopt a resolution ensuring that killings of reporters will be punished as a grave form of war crime.

In the WEMF panel on "Safety of journalists in zones of conflict", panelist after panelist presented horror stories about killings and intimidation of journalists in various parts of the world.

Speakers referred to the feeling of "defeat" by several journalists after a number of their colleagues had been killed in Iraq without proper investigation, and one remained in jail without explanation. Others emphasized the need to publicize threats against journalists.

Melinda Quintos de Jesus of the Philippines? Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility noted that most journalists killed in her country were working for radio and television.

Roberto Morrione of Italy?s RAI News 24 network said that deaths of journalists were transforming the war in Iraq into an "information desert", with many journalists taken out of the country or relying on indirect sources because of the risk of being abducted or killed.

Prof. Ridha Najar of the Tunis-based African Centre for Journalism Development encouraged the international community to adopt a convention that would recognize killings of journalists as war crimes.

Aidan White, Secretary General of the International Federation of Journalists, presented a draft resolution that his organization, along with others, hoped the UN Security Council would adopt. This resolution would refer cases of systematic killings to the International Criminal Court. "This issue has been debated for much too long," he said, urging the UN to adopt a coherent plan of action "to investigate those countries that refuse to investigate" on the murders of journalists.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications Shashi Tharoor, who chaired the session, noted that 2 004 was the worst year on record, with 129 deaths recorded in 34 countries. "Indeed, in many of these cases, it seems journalists were deliberately targeted," he said.

Receiving the WEMF?s Message for transmission to WSIS, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the United Nations defended as a matter of principle freedom of expression and of the media. "It is my hope that such freedoms will receive a boost from holding a Summit here in the Arab world, where the number of websites and satellite television networks is multiplying and where many people are yearning for greater freedom and more accountable governments."

The UN also defended the rights of journalists to be free from intimidation and harm, Mr. Annan said, adding "I will continue to press governments to uphold their

responsibility both to create conditions in which journalists can do their jobs safely and to bring to justice those who commit crimes against them."

The world needed electronic media even more to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals, he said. Broadcasters had been instrumental in galvanizing international support in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan. "I urge you to find the words and images that will draw attention to the daily tsunami of poverty, hunger, disease and environmental degradation."

In an earlier session, WEMF discussed the *media's function in preserving cultural diversity and fostering a dialogue among civilizations. Discussion hinged on corporate versus independent media, and the North-South content imbalance.*

Habib Chawki Hamraoui of the Arab Broadcasting Union lamented the distortion in the media's presentation of information. Since ten countries monopolized information, they could "bombard the world with confrontational values," he said. He decried the fact that Western programmes were devoid of ethical or educational content. Dominique Wolton of the French research institute CNRS agreed that the media should act as a tool of political conscience; today extremists killed others in the name of culture.

Shirazuddin Siddique of BBC Afghanistan, on the other hand, was a living testament to the positive effects of the media. The BBC World Trust had helped create the soap opera "New home, new life" on the everyday concerns of Afghans, such as landmine awareness or taking part in national elections. He said the programme had helped preserve Afghan culture, despite the fragmentation of war and repressive Taliban rule. Today, Afghanistan could boast 300 newspapers, four media outlets and a competitive news market: the country "would no longer accept government propaganda," he asserted.