

Session Outcome Document

WSIS Action Line C9: Milestones, Challenges and Emerging Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development

UNESCO

Wednesday, 29 May 2024

09:00–09:45 (UTC+02:00)

<https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2024/Agenda/Session/155>

Key Issues discussed (5- 8 bullet points)

20 CHALLENGING YEARS OF MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS' CONTRIBUTIONS AND INNOVATION TO MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

The session focused on WSIS Action Line C9, which addresses the pivotal role of media in shaping the Information Society during the last two decades. Some of the key issues discussed:

- The emergence of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies, has created new pressures on media, as well as how people consume media, impacting all elements under AL C9.
- The need to reframe the definition of “media” as “entity working based on journalism ethics and professional rules”; “social media” is not “media” and “all content producers” are not journalists.
- Online disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and Technologically Facilitated Gender-Based Violence can have negative impact on Freedom of Expression.
- How laws, such as blasphemy, criminal defamation, sedition or censorship laws restrain media and a free and vibrant information society, and how this risk has increased in the digital age with the adoption of new types of legislation, including cyber-libel, cybersecurity and “fake news” laws.
- Information technology affects the safety of journalists (particularly women journalists), including legal harassment laws – from sedition to censorship – that have long been used to punish journalists and suppress media freedom with surveillance

and disproportionate penalties. Some legal frameworks that protect journalists are not enforced.

- Safety of journalists, particularly women journalists, has decreased over the last 20 years, with on-line violence rising and leading to more physical violence. Some legal frameworks that protect journalists are not enforced.
- Technological Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) affects women and vulnerable groups and AI can reproduce biases and amplify stereotypes.
- Crisis of credibility of the journalists due to disinformation and hate speech. Difficulties for journalists in monitoring the digital environment due to lack of resources and reduced access to platforms data.

Towards WSIS+20 and WSIS beyond 2025, please share your views on the emerging trends, challenges, achievements, and opportunities in the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines to date (5-8 bullets)

- News media's traditional business model is at a breaking point. Media outlets have been forced to cut down on staff or close, with a loss of revenue to digital platforms.
- There is a declining trend in the killing of journalists except in war zones. Impunity for crimes against journalists remains very high.
- An increase in detentions and new types of attacks of journalists online and through surveillance as well as the misuse of legal systems (SLAPP).
- Increase in Technological Facilitated Gender Based Violence affecting Human Rights of women and vulnerable groups.

Tangible outcomes (such as key achievements, announcements, launches, agreements, commitments, figures, and success stories (3-5 bullet points))

- The relevance of the Windhoek+30 Declaration on press freedom, describing information as a public good. The Declaration calls upon all governments to create positive enabling environments for freedom of expression and access to information, online and offline, in line with international guarantees of these rights.
- 140 different media laws, including some frameworks related to access to information have been adopted although not all are enforced, or with different levels of enforcement.
- The sector has organized itself: creation of the Global Forum for Media Development, Media Freedom Coalition, Information and Democracy Initiative for examples, to advocate for more protection and support to journalists and media.

Actionable plan and key recommendations (2-5 points)

- Consolidate political commitment for massive Investment in Media and Information Literacy worldwide.
- There is a need for Digital Platforms regulations and change of approach from a business model to a public interest model (see UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of the Digital Platforms).
- Advocate that the UN Pact for the Future includes clear and solid references to the protection of journalists and media actors, freedom of expression, the right to access reliable information
- In line with the Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred adopted in 2012 in Rabat, States should review existing laws or develop, through public participation, legislation on hate speech to meet the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality, and establish or strengthen independent judicial mechanisms to ensure that individuals may have access to justice and remedies when suffering harms related to hate speech.
- States should decriminalize defamation and other offences that may impose disproportionate penalties on journalists and media, and adopt legislation that tackled strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).
- States should impose a moratorium on the sale, transfer and use of surveillance technologies and, in the meantime, conduct human rights impact assessments when using, selling or transferring such technologies.

Suggestions for thematic aspects that might be included in the WSIS Forum 2025 (one paragraph)

For the WSIS Forum 2025, a thematic focus could be on the evolving landscape of media and information, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities posed by digital transformation, keeping in mind that the word remains a hybrid place (off-line and on-line), and the imperative of safeguarding human rights in the digital age and in the “real world”. This includes addressing the crisis facing traditional news media business models due to revenue losses to digital platforms, exploring innovative solutions to ensure media viability, private



and public supports to public interest media, and examining the dual trends of decreasing journalist killings in non-war zones but increasing online harassment and legal threats. The forum should also focus on the rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, its impact on human rights, and strategies to protect vulnerable groups online. Furthermore, advocating for global investment in media and information literacy (MIL) is crucial to empower citizens, counter misinformation, and foster informed public discourse. The discussion should insist on the adoption and enforcement of media laws, compliant with international human rights standards, as well as on the creation of enabling environments for freedom of expression and access to information. Reinforcing international declarations, such as the Windhoek+30 Declaration, and combating hate speech through comprehensive strategies aligned with the Rabat Plan of Action are also essential. Finally, developing actionable plans and commitments, including a proposed UN Pact for the Future, will address emerging challenges and leverage opportunities for a more inclusive, informed, and resilient global information society.