

YouthTube: Empowering Youth Through Independent Media

SUMMARY

Individuals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are harnessing a vast array of new tools to empower youth in developing countries through independent media. Blogs and social networking Web sites allow ordinary users to generate as well as consume content; young audiences can join online or television discussions by sending text messages; and news Web sites can provide a forum for democratic dialogue among people normally unlikely to interact with each other.

Young people represent a large portion of the world population, particularly in developing countries. They also tend to be early adopters of new technologies, which has significant ramifications for the development of independent media.

Yet despite the explosive growth in new media, there has been relatively little discussion of specific strategies NGOs can use to empower youth with independent media. How do youth use media platforms, and what successes have NGOs had integrating youth into development programs? How can stakeholders address the challenges—such as limited access to

technology and low media literacy—of engaging youth through independent media in their work? In presentations and discussions during a workshop held by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), independent media practitioners and youth specialists attempted to clarify trends in youth population growth and media use and access. Participants also discussed challenges and opportunities for empowering youth through independent media.

BACKGROUND

On May 28, 2009, CIMA hosted a discussion at the National Endowment for Democracy on empowering youth through independent media in developing and democratizing countries. Approximately 50 representatives of international organizations, media development implementers, journalists, and others came together to discuss strategies, challenges, and experiences empowering youth with independent media. The discussion centered on the demographics of youth around the world, their use of and access to new media, and engaging youth through media.



Presenters included Carl Haub, Haleh Vaziri, Paul Mihailidis, Cristina Gallegos, Felix Unogwu, and Katherine Kinzer.

The event was divided into two sessions, each consisting of presentations followed by discussion. This report outlines the presentations and discussion in the order in which they occurred.

INFORMATION FOR A NEW GENERATION

Presentations:

Youth Matters: The Demographics of Youth Around the World

Carl Haub, Senior Demographer, Conrad Taeuber Chair of Population Information, Population Reference Bureau

Haub told participants:

- The UN defines “youth” as anyone aged 15-24, but in practice definitions vary among organizations or countries.
- The world youth population is increasing, mostly in developing countries. The growth of the youth populations in Asia and Africa has begun to dominate the rest of the world.
- Many experts have discussed a “youth bulge,” a vague concept that correlates an increased youth population with increased unrest and other problems. In reality, this has not occurred in many countries.
- Yet a large youth population may not necessarily represent an advantage either, particularly if the youth remain untrained.

- There is a vast difference today between population growth in industrialized and developing countries. For example, Japan and Nigeria have roughly the same population, but Nigeria has approximately six times the number of births. The highest birth rates in general tend to occur among women in the lowest wealth quintile.
- More girls are enrolling in schools (relative to boys), but overall enrollment for both has not increased dramatically in developing countries. Only about half of all children in Asia are enrolled in school, while school enrollment is almost universal in Latin America.
- Demographic statistics can provide important context for youth media initiatives; some censuses even ask about television ownership. Caution is due when interpreting figures, however, as definitions of terms such as youth or “middle class” may mean different things in different cultures.

Generation Wired: Access and Use

Haleh Vaziri, Senior Global Media and Communications Analyst, InterMedia

Vaziri told participants:

- On the whole, youth tend to be media savvy, and they use a variety of sources, even media not typically associated with youth.
- Regional divisions along socioeconomic or other lines also shape the media scene and make it difficult to generalize about media use and access. Mobile technology is increasingly common in many

countries; use of non-call features such as SMS are wildly popular in some countries but still fairly low in others.

- New media use in societies that are wired allows rapid creation and consumption of content, but can make young people impatient. Youth demand content that they can both contribute to and consume, but they want it in the moment and while on the move.
- Grabbing the attention of youth represents a particular challenge. Youths' openness to experimentation and tendency to look more favorably on other countries than past generations present opportunities for new media strategies.
- Despite challenges, there are many possibilities for engaging youth in developing countries. Donors must examine their goals and determine where youth would fit into their overall strategies.

Media Literacy and Youth

Paul Mihailidis, Assistant Professor of Journalism, Media Studies and Public Relations, Hofstra University; Director and faculty member, Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change; Director of Media Education Initiatives, International Center for Media and the Public Agenda, University of Maryland

Mihailidis told participants:

- There is a broad definition of media literacy, which is the ability to access, analyze, and produce many kinds of information. Unfortunately,

this broad definition does little to describe the practical purpose of media literacy projects. Aligning the diverse concepts of media literacy used by different stakeholders is a challenge.

- The ability to consume media critically is only one part of media literacy; the other is understanding the value of media in a democratic society. As access to information grows, it becomes harder to distinguish between an understanding of media and an understanding of citizenship.
- A forthcoming CIMA report by Mihailidis maps media literacy programs for youth and young adults throughout the world. The study finds that the most successful projects are those that empower individuals to become active, engaged citizens.
- The challenges to media literacy education are many. The concept often is poorly understood by decision makers and accordingly is given low priority. Public schools can also be hard to penetrate.
- The use of media is increasing in most parts of the world, but the infrastructure that aids understanding of how to use it is not keeping pace. Media literacy education should be seen as a rising global priority.

Discussion

Participants highlighted examples of good projects they had come across. Vaziri said that research both before and after implementation is central to documenting success.

On the topic of media literacy penetrating entrenched institutions, Mihailidis said that in the developing world, media literacy is more focused on civic responsibility. He added that educators dwell more on the printed word and less on new media, which can be more widely used, especially among students. Mihailidis also mentioned that a number of centers in developing countries implement independent media literacy programs outside of schools.

Participants also discussed the difference between increased media use and increased access to information. Several participants pointed out that while access to new media is a fundamental first step towards increased media freedom and civic engagement, political will is also necessary. Vaziri said that engaging political leaders is a good way to reduce some of the risks in less free countries. She also recommended beginning development projects with a needs assessment, or at least consulting experts.

Several participants also discussed infrastructure challenges, such as providing inexpensive bandwidth to remote areas. Another participant expressed concern over the potential for dictators to co-opt the term “media literacy” with a definition that suits their own interests. One participant related this concern to the larger problem of government obstruction of media development projects. The best way to overcome barriers, Vaziri said, is to engage political leaders from the beginning.

ENGAGING YOUTH THROUGH MEDIA

Presentations:

Global Voices, Young Voices

Cristina Gallegos, UNICEF Voices of Youth Coordinator, Gender, Rights and Civic Engagement Section

Gallegos told participants:

- Approximately 46 percent of the world is under the age of 25. As youth are early adopters and agents of change, UNICEF tries to engage them using low-bandwidth tools for the Internet and mobile messaging.
- **Voices of Youth** (<http://www.unicef.org/voy/>) is UNICEF’s Web site for young people. Its mission is to provide a safe space in which youth can explore issues related to human rights and social change, as well as develop their awareness, leadership, community building, and critical thinking skills through active participation with peers.
- **UniteForClimate** is a new initiative that aims to create a sustainable system with an online platform similar to Facebook. It encourages youth to share their own projects and advocate ideas locally and globally.
- Roughly 1.5 billion people have Internet access, but about 4 billion have mobile phone subscriptions. UNICEF’s Mobile Solutions focuses on Africa and connects the cellphone to an online platform where UNICEF engages members by posting questions.

Youth, Conflict, and Media

Felix Unogwu, Children and Youth Specialist, Search for Common Ground

Unogwu showed videos of the programs that Search for Common Ground (SFCG) produces for communities affected by conflict or violence:

- In Burundi, SFCG used common appreciation of Bob Marley among Hutus and Tutsis to encourage rebel leaders of both groups to work toward peace by using a video message from Bob Marley's son.
- Under SFCG's Golden Kids program in several African countries, youth volunteers are taught the basics of journalism, including how to interview, deal with sensitive issues, and include multiple perspectives in radio programs. One youth reporter in Sierra Leone, a former child soldier, interviewed other former child soldiers with the aim of gaining community acceptance for those who wanted to return home.
- Unogwu witnessed the impact of this program personally in Liberia, when a Golden Kids group suggested he mention the topic of sexual molestation in his meeting with a government minister who had neglected to include it in the five-year youth strategy. Following this suggestion, the minister included the topic in the strategy.

Talking with My Generation: Connecting Youth

Katherine Kinzer, Program Coordinator for YouthActionNet, International Youth Foundation

- Today there are many types of social media. What used to require six types of media can today be accomplished with a single device—a cellphone.
- YouthActionNet's work highlights the need for cross-fertilization. If a

project involves a Web site, the organization also makes it accessible by mobile phone and incorporate podcasts that can be heard online and broadcast on traditional radio. It is also a mistake to neglect radio in favor of newer technologies, as it already has tremendous penetration.

- When assessing assistance projects, organizations should look beyond traditional concepts of democracy and governance projects. Rich activity in other spaces, such as health and environmental issues, will encourage an involved and active citizenry.
- Involving local youth activists from the start is important, as they are often media-savvy and knowledgeable about the risks and rewards of their activities. They are also likely to be already engaged in projects similar to those that NGOs want to implement. The programs also can be bolstered with additional resources.
- Governments can more easily censor individual companies' emails or Web sites than bigger sites such as Facebook. In Egypt, domestic companies advertise on Facebook, which has made the government reluctant to block it completely.
- New media present myriad opportunities. Cellphones, for example, will only get cheaper. It is important, however, not to "take out the people" and treat new media as a panacea for every development issue.

Discussion

Participants discussed the difference between community radio and commercial radio, noting that community radio differs from commercial radio in terms of its interactivity with local communities. Kinzer said that youth are involved in both mediums, sometimes using any opportunity that presents itself to engage.

Participants also discussed the challenges of attracting the attention of youth. Kinzer stressed the importance of reframing the issue from “How can we draw youth away from social networking sites?” to “How can we establish a presence on social networking sites to connect with youth where they already are?”

The discussion also touched on harder-to-reach audiences, such as communities that have low access to new media and those who may be outside the educational system. Kinzer mentioned the possibility of engaging with youth groups on the ground, who are already engaged in projects with their at-risk counterparts. Unogwu highlighted as a strategy the selection of topics that are engaging and relevant to youth. He gave the example of a call-in radio program in Sierra Leone about sexual health that has succeeded in reaching people outside the educational system.

One participant asked if some communities’ lack of new media capabilities might have benefits such as forcing the youth to get more involved in their local communities. Kinzer pointed to projects such as interactive street theater or short wave radio, which may reach communities that are not online.

Participants also discussed how to use new media to build a sense of community among users. Kinzer said that many NGO staff start

out with the opinion that social networking tools are too hard to learn, but she argued that this is not necessarily true. While there are no specific workflow models for engaging with new media, staff who are interested and willing to devote half an hour a day to spreading the organization’s online presence can go a long way, she said.

Unogwu also noted the importance of selecting the correct medium. Many of the contexts in which SFCG works are plagued by violence, and citizens lack computers, roads, and even electricity. In these situations, new media alone are not the ideal means of reaching anyone, including youth.

Kinzer suggested engaging mobile providers to try to negotiate fee-free text messages for socially beneficial programs.

GOING FORWARD

Over the course of the afternoon’s presentations and discussions, broad agreement was reached on several points:

- **Context is crucial.** Social, economic, and political conditions specific to a particular locale can influence media use. Lack of infrastructure may be a key barrier to access. Population growth also differs in industrialized and developing countries, and even among socioeconomic groups within a country. This can make it difficult to use lessons learned in one context directly in another, and it underscores the importance of developing familiarity with each local context.
- **Multiple media platforms maximize engagement.** Projects that aim to empower youth with independent media should take advantage of multiple media

platforms to address differences in media access and use. Neglecting radio, for example, is a mistake in societies where it already has the most significant penetration. In other societies, cellphones and Internet may offer youth the most autonomy in selecting media with which to engage. Getting a message out in multiple platforms is key to successfully engaging youth on a large scale.

- **Research enhances outcomes.** Needs-assessment is an important step in planning and implementing successful projects that empower youth through independent media. Even informal, on-the-ground research may reveal local initiatives that already are working toward the same goals that an organization plans to address. Consulting and cooperating with experts or other

local stakeholders can assist in assessing risks and rewards and in avoiding duplication of efforts.

- **NGOs should work with new media, not against it.** New media create myriad possibilities for freedom of thought and political expression, and youth are seizing on these new opportunities. Internet cafes, for example, facilitate the pursuit of private endeavors in public spaces. Reaching out to youth in spaces in which they already are engaged may be more effective than trying to draw them away from those platforms to an organization's own Web initiative. Though navigating the multiple tools that become available every day can seem overwhelming, a daily effort to whittle can go a long way towards building an organization's Web presence.

*Summary by: Katie Rice
CIMA Staff*

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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