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Citizen Journalism Opening Up Political Space

Inter Press Service (Johannesburg)

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By Linus Atarah
Helsinki

Anyone with a mobile phone can call a radio station in Ghana now to question a government minister about the promises he made election time.

The communication revolution has broken through the earlier world in which official information was offered through government-controlled radio or television. This has brought greater transparency and accountability in the governance process, says Aida Opoku-Mensah, director of information and communication technologies at the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The role of citizen journalism as a new tool for democracy in developing countries was discussed at a seminar called Tuesday this week by child welfare and international humanitarian organisation Plan, the ministry for foreign affairs in Finland, and the Union of Finnish Journalists (SJL).

"Citizen journalism has not yet been brought to discussions on development policies," Riitta Weiste, director of Plan Finland said at the seminar.

"Today we ask, does ICT guarantee the success of citizen journalism, and what are the challenges to the work and development policies of governments and NGOs? How could we use the tools of citizen journalism in reducing poverty and contributing to democracy?"

"Citizen journalism is the newest version of an old idea that there should be a different interaction between news producers and recipients," said Heikki Heikkilä, senior lecturer in the department of journalism and mass communication at the University of Tampere in Finland. "There shouldn't just be freedom to express oneself per se but also the freedom to participate."

In developed countries with high access to the Internet, citizen journalism is increasingly expressed in activities such as blogging and distribution of content through own-created web sites.

"Journalism has been facilitated by development of new technology of communication that has made publishing so easy and relatively cheap," Heikkilä told IPS.

Citizen journalism has emerged largely because of the need for journalism to revise its working practices in the face of recognition that it has become far removed from people and their everyday lives, Heikkilä said.

In a sharp departure from its past practices, Time magazine at the end of last year awarded its annual person of the year to Internet users.

The basis of the award was that Internet users had grown enormously within the previous year, mainly frequenting sites where people can participate through their own writings or photographs.

In African countries however, citizen journalism still takes place largely within the context of radio broadcasting -- and it is being used to great effect, says Opoku-Mensah.

"The written word is limited, and has been traditionally limited to cities and to a very narrow group of the elite because it is always in English, French or Portuguese -- the language of former colonial rulers," she said. In such circumstances, she said, it is mainly through radio that political discourse takes place in Africa.

"The first impact that hits you is that the political space has become public -- creating transparency and accountability not witnessed previously. Political leaders fear they will be embarrassed if their actions get publicised."

In Ghana, in West Africa, nearly 60 local radio stations have sprung up within the last decade, and are now spread across the country.

The proliferation of the radio stations has come alongside wide availability of mobile phones, Opoku-Mensah told IPS. "It is no longer fashionable for a journalist to sit down and question politicians, because the citizens do it so well."

The marriage between radio and the mobile phone in Africa has also made it difficult to rig elections, she said, because journalists at polling stations can quickly report anything going wrong.

Opoku-Mensah pointed to elections in Kenya and Senegal where the outcome was influenced by active participation of citizens using modern communication technology.

But there is a flipside, said Lewis Friedland, professor at the School of Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin in the United States. "It can be used in a way that siphons off the civic and public content of a good newspaper." Mainstream newspapers and media organisations must actively try to co-opt citizen journalism, Friedland said.

Another consequence can be "hyper-localism" -- an increasing return to content driven by neighbourhood news and people's personal lives, and produced by individuals, Friedland said. "This can happen when local newspapers turn more and more to 'what people want', and avoid covering difficult policy issues."

This trend is starting to emerge in the United States, he said, and warned that it could also emerge in Europe. The populist equivalent of hyper-localism could "lower the content of journalism as a whole," he said. "Even though the trivial can co-exist with the serious, it is problem worth taking note of."

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