

# Communication Rights in the Information Society: The CRIS campaign

Whose information society?

The Information Society, we are told, is upon us. The promise is for a knowledge-based society, yielding untold dividends for education, health, development, democracy and much more. Seamless networking and knowledge flows from major centres to village hut, and back again.

The reality, if current trends continue, might be very different, the dream might become a nightmare

- The fruits of human creativity – from academia to media, from indigenous medicines to music – are being privatised, ownership concentrated into the hands of a few, and access restricted to those who can pay.

- The airwaves, for radio, television and telecommunications, are being sliced up and sold to the highest bidder.

- The Internet, once a promising new public sphere, is increasingly commercialised and controlled;

- The media, sanitized and homogenised, sell consumerism to people, and people to advertisers.

Many fear that behind the current drive toward the information society is the relentless expansion of corporate control, stifling dissent and manufacturing consent. Global corporate interests are firmly in the driving seat, with governments relegated to referee between monoliths wrestling for the greater share of spoils. Scant attention is paid to international regulation and the implications for people and social development.

Yet people worldwide are also forging a new vision of the information society, one with human rights at its core. New forms of media and networking tools are being used to build global communities from the local level, to share knowledge, amplify marginalised voices, organize political action, empower participation, and sustain and celebrate cultural and intellectual diversity.

We must choose, and then build, the information society we want. Will it be one that suits the corporate elites, but excludes the majority? Or one that sustains and expands sustainability, human rights, and people's dignity? The right to communicate is a universal human right, underpinning and serving all other human rights. The emergence of the information society must see this right extended and reinforced this right to the benefit of all.

### The summit

Many UN summits have been held, the Rio Earth Summit and the Beijing Women's Conference among the most prominent. There is now to be a UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in Geneva in December 2003 and Tunis in 2005. It aims to 'develop a common vision and understanding of the information society ... and to draw up a strategic plan of action for successfully adapting to the new society' (see <http://wsis.itu.int>). Civil Society must take the lead, articulating a vision of an information society with people at the centre.

### CRIS mission

The CRIS campaign – Communication Rights in the Information Society – was launched in November 2001 by the Platform for Communication Rights, an umbrella group of international NGOs active in media and communication. For CRIS, the Summit is a means, not an end. The issues we face are much larger than can be addressed there, but it offers a promising starting point.

Our vision of the 'Information Society' is grounded in the Right to Communicate, as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities.

Crucial to this is that civil society organisations come together to help build an information society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social and economic justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

The World Summit on the Information Society offers an important forum to promote this objective. We aim to broaden the WSIS agenda and goals especially in relation to media and communication issues, and to encourage the participation of a wide spectrum of civil society groups in this process.

#### CRIS themes and actions

Setting human rights at the centre of an information society means working across a spectrum of areas. CRIS focuses on themes that can directly affect people's lives, such as:

- Strengthening the public domain, ensuring that information and knowledge are readily available for human development, and not locked up in private hands;
  
- Ensuring affordable access to, and effective use of, electronic networks in a development context, for instance by innovative and robust regulation and public investment;
  
- Securing and extending the global commons, for both broadcast and telecommunication, to ensure this public resource is not sold for private ends;
  
- Instituting democratic and transparent governance of the information society from local to global levels;
  
- Tackling information surveillance and censorship, government or commercial;
  
- Supporting community and people-centred media, traditional and new.

CRIS creates a space for civil society to reflect, to network, and to act on the information society through three pillars of action:

- Raising awareness, educating, stimulating debate on key aspects of the information society as it relates to human rights and development;
- Facilitating and encouraging mobilisation of civil society around these issues, to act in a variety of fora at different levels;
- Drafting, consulting and refining civil society positions in relation to the WSIS, and advocating and lobbying for their implementation.
- In practical terms, this includes producing briefing papers, interactive web resources, running and participating in seminars, sharing information, lobbying and advocacy.

#### What you can do

CRIS is an open campaign, drawing together existing groups and activists. It is organised around working groups, with thematic groups focusing on specific issues, and national and regional chapters supporting local activity.

CRIS is an initiative of the Platform for Communication Rights. CRIS campaign members include organizations and individuals committed to the promotion of communication rights and the Right to Communicate as a means to enhance human rights and the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities.

The founding members of CRIS are listed below. To join CRIS please contact us at [act@crisinfo.org](mailto:act@crisinfo.org) and/or visit the web sites: <http://cris.comunica.org/> <http://www.comunica.org/>

#### Organizations

- African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET)

- Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI)
  
- Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (ALER)
  
- Association for Progressive Communication (APC)
  
- Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires (AMARC)
  
- Catholic Media Council (Cameco)
  
- Centre of Community Networking and Information Policy Studies (CCNS)
  
- EED International
  
- European Communication Research Consortium (ECCR)
  
- Global Community Networking (GlobalCN)
  
- International Women's Tribune Centre
  
- InterPress Service (IPS)
  
- MediaChannel

- PANOS Institute
- Peoples Communication Charter
- Rede de Informações para o Terceiro Setor (RITS)
- VECAM
- World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)

#### Individuals

Jeff Chester; Michael Eisenmenger; Warren Feek; Regina Festa; Bruce Girard; Margaret Gallagher; George Gerbner; Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron; Michael Gurstein; DeeDee Halleck; Cees Hamelink; Mike Jensen; Wolfgang Kleinwächter; Robert McChesney; Kaarle Nordenstreng; Seán Ó Siochrú; Claudia Padovani; Valerie Peugeot; Marc Raboy; Bob Scott; Claire Shearman; Sara Stuart.