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Free Media: Creating Media Alternatives to State Control and Corporate Hegemony.

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AMARC is the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, an international membership organisation for the defence and promotion of community broadcasting. AMARC groups together more than 3000 community radios worldwide through direct membership and national federations. Although its headquarters is in Montreal, the regions with the largest numbers of members are Latin America and Africa. Latin America is really the birthplace of the community broadcasting movement dating back to the radio stations of the Bolivian tin miners in the 1940s. Today there are thousands of community broadcasters across the Americas. More recently, through the 1990s, community radio has taken off across the African continent. In Asia and the Pacific we are beginning to see a breakthrough in several countries. In Europe we have had community broadcasting for many years in western Europe, although probably the first community radio station was Radio Student, in Slovenia, started in the 1960s.

AMARC has a clear sense of the political priorities for the community broadcasting sector. We want to see recognition of community broadcasting and its right to exist and to broadcast without interference. We want to see allocation of frequencies in the present analogue spectrum and on future digital broadcast channels. We want to see economic support for the sector through independent funding mechanisms.

There are a number of political strategies that can be deployed to achieve these objectives. The first, and the traditional means, has been direct intervention and appropriation of the airwaves. In certain times and countries this has been a highly effective approach particularly where there is a legal or regulatory loophole or a political vacuum. On the other hand radio broadcasting is as easy to close down as it is to set up. A more stable existence requires some level of legal and political support. National campaigns for legal reform and the recognition of community broadcasting have therefore sprung up based on public interest demands and the right to freedom of expression. Increasingly these are now supplemented by international strategies for the defence and extension of the space for community and alternative media.

Since this is an international gathering we should look especially at how we can campaign more effectively at the international level. Typically international campaigns can be of a reactive nature or of a proactive nature. Reactive campaigns are most often in defence of community and alternative media where their right to freedom of expression is under threat. We have seen this most recently last week when, on Thursday, 7 October, two servers of the Indymedia network were seized in London resulting in the closure of 20 Indymedia websites, several streaming radio stations and some free software exchange sites. This event appears to have involved the collaboration of legal authorities in three or four countries and represents an extraordinary assault on the freedom of expression. By the following day the incident was being widely publicised by Indymedia activists and by networks like AMARC and CRIS. This week a campaign was launched calling for a full investigation and the return of the servers with their data contact intact. On Wednesday the servers were returned. We are still seeking explanations as to what took place.

Proactive campaigns, on the other hand tend to be more long term. These include efforts to gain political statements in support of community media from international meetings and institutions and work to achieve recognition of community media within international norms and standards particularly those on media pluralism and the right to freedom of expression. We can also include international campaigns here that focus on particular countries. For example, the next World Summit on the Information Society will be held in Tunisia in 2005. Tunisia is a country with a poor record on human rights particularly freedom of expression. There are very few independent newspapers, no independent broadcasters, the Internet is systematically censored and freedom of association is severely restricted. International freedom of expression organisations will be putting the spotlight on Tunisia in order to seek improvements and to support the development of community and alternative media. One of the scheduled speakers, Sihem Bensedrine, who can not be with us today, is a writer and editor for Kalima an on-line political magazine, produced by Tunisians but censored in Tunisia where it is limited to Samizdat publishing methods – photocopied distribution through friends and supporters.

Sometimes we can seek to turn reactive campaigns into pro-active campaigns. Supinya Klangnarong, a communication rights activist who will be speaking at a main plenary session this evening, is the Secretary General of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform in Thailand, an organisation which has played a key role in promoting community media development. Earlier this year Supinya was sued for criminal defamation for speaking out about the intricate connections between the Prime Minister of Thailand and the Shin Corporation, a giant communications company with extensive interests in broadcasting and telecommunications. The campaign in support of Supinya's right to speak out against excessive concentration of communications power and influence can also be assisted by calling for the abolition of Thailand's unacceptable laws on criminal defamation.

Finally I want to focus on the purpose of the European Social Forum and the World Social Forum in bring together different social movements. Communication rights is a social movement concerned with the public interest in our communications environment. We are twenty years younger but we can compare it with the environmentalist movement.

We are struggling to defend and extend the creative commons in the face of the commodification of information and knowledge. We are resisting the privatisation of the airwaves as radio spectrum is coming to be sold like land and real estate. We are seeking to plant and to nurture some beautiful media flowers in a field of genetically modified corporate media crops. We are campaigning to keep media and culture outside of the grasp of the World Trade Organisation and to defend and promote cultural and linguistic diversity in the same way that others have campaigned for the protection of biodiversity.

What makes the communication rights movement especially important is that not only are we building links with other social movements but we are also creating media which themselves give voice to the new social movements.

What can each of us do to build this movement? Everyone in this room has a role to play in our struggle. We have to start in our own communities. Get involved in a local community media project. Set up a new alternative media initiative where none yet exists. Build links and joint campaigns with others at the national level for recognition and access to spectrum and resources. Work together in international networks like AMARC and the CRIS campaign to defend and extend the space for community and alternative media in the face of the global communications corporations. Build awareness, understanding and strategies for the recognition of our right to communicate.

Together, from the local level to the global, we can build a new social movement for communication rights. A movement that can redefine the priorities for our future communications environment and show “another communication is possible”.