

C O N F E R E N C E R E P O R T

**The United Nations and the New Media/Information Age –
Education for the Next Generation of “the People of the United Nations”**

Dates:

Friday, 16 November 2007, 9 a.m. – 9:30 p.m.

Venue:

Wels, Upper Austria, Austria and virtual participation via the Internet (<http://www.acuns.at>)

hosted by:

WWEDU – World Wide Education, Academic Distance-Learning College, Wels/Austria and
Academic Council of the United Nations System (ACUNS)

Background information:

On November 16, 2007, Julia Harfensteller and Henrike Paepcke (UN Studies Working Group) participated in the world-wide colloquium on UN and new media in Wels (Austria), with financial support generously provided by the German UN Association (DGVN). The following report will present the main results this colloquium that was dedicated to the role of the new media and newly established information infrastructure for educational purposes, and how to better communicate the United Nations system to the people. The event was taking place in an innovative hybrid format, combining an on-site event in Wels, Upper Austria, with a virtual occurrence mediated through the Internet. All panels included on-site as well as virtual speakers, thus making full use of the new media potentials for this colloquium.

The colloquium centered on pertinent questions such as: How do new communication technologies and their inherent new opportunities for interaction of people and social communities impact the United Nations' ability to act? What are the new media's consequences for global networking and international community action in forging and realizing global policy initiatives? How can the United Nations system make use of the new media and information infrastructure in order to transmit its ideas and communicate its mission to the youth who will form the next generation of opinion leaders and decision-makers?

In addition to its thematic objectives, the Wels colloquium provided a platform for presenting and discussing newly launched projects in the field of education-focused UN studies as well as relevant database projects. In our presentation of the UN Studies Working Group and its new wiki-based collaboration portal, we demonstrated how new web 2.0 technologies can be used to build a UN Studies community of practitioners and academics world-wide.

I. Introduction

In four panel sessions, 30 virtual and on-site panelists from all around the world presented and discussed the topic of “UN and new digital media” with an on-site audience as well as several hundreds of online participants who watched the live-stream coverage and asked questions through the internet – for over 12 hours. Edward Mortimer, Director of the Salzburg Seminar, was invited as keynote speaker. Prof. Dr. Siedschlag, WWEDU / Bavarian Branch of the DGVN, moderated the conference.

Live internet connections were established with Ghana, Brazil, London and New York, involving several UN officials from UNITAR (Program of Correspondence Instruction on Peacekeeping Operations), the Governance and Public Administration Branch in New York (UN Peacebuilding Portal) and the UN Department of Public Information in New York (Outreach Division). The UN Rapporteur on Torture spoke via video clip. Other UN officials (from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UN Office of Drugs and Crime as well the UN Information Service in Vienna) attended in person. Nasra Hassan, Director of the UN Information Service Vienna, spoke about “Media, Peacekeeping and Civil Society”.

Panelists highlighted numerous functions and tools of new media and depicted problems and opportunities related to the use of new technologies and new media which comprise various tools and ways of communication, such as iPods, MP3s, Video, Internet, CD-R, DVD, and mobile phones. In the following, we will provide an overview about the main functions, challenges and opportunities that were discussed.

II. Major discussion points and findings of the colloquium

1. Functions of new media:

- medium to spread and exchange information on UN related issues
- medium of education and long distance-learning
- medium of organization and coordination (between various stakeholders such as UN secretariat, member states and UN field workers)
- means of activation, mobilization and engagement of civil society
- means of empowerment and participation of civil society
- medium to facilitate access to the UN
- medium to facilitate decision-making

2. Challenges and problems concerning new media and the UN:

- digital divide between developing countries and developed countries (Foster Ofosu).
- repressive governments and human rights violators can use new media to track and reveal civil rights activists who use new media to report about human rights violations (Stephanie Hankey).
- information transmitted through new media is not “objective” and does not meet scientific values such as accuracy and comprehensiveness. For example, the volume of information on UN peacekeeping activities has increased with new media, while quality did not improve (“truth is still the first victim”). Simplistic reporting (“miss-and disinformation”) can damage peace building missions (James Arbuckle).
- with new media new possibilities rise to manipulate information; for example, through internet blogs or smear campaigns (Ian Williams).

3. Opportunities.

- new media can help UN Human Rights Rapporteurs in the field; for example, human rights violations can be recorded by video and serve as evidence to put violators under pressure (“a photo of a tortured prisoner tells more than a 10 pages report”) (Manfred Nowak).
- new tools of communication can help to shed light on invisible dimensions of the UN such as “the UN as public civil servant”, by making the work of public civil servants more visible (John Mathiason).
- video advocacy promotes grassroots education (Sameer Padania); in general, new media facilitate UN education all over the world.
- new media offer better ways to centralize information and access information. For example “hybrid digital libraries” contain a variety of sources besides written documents such as virtual classrooms (Veronika Bauer).
- new media offer new possibilities for human rights activists to better and faster spread information and organize activities and activists: “digital advocacy” is realized for example through blogs from prisons, student videos on youtube or mobile phones; live reporting, documenting, mobile monitoring – videos by normal citizens or organizations such as greenpeace, activities can be posted immediately (Stephanie Hankey).
- new media is a tool of civil society and the new “social conscience of the world” (Nasra Hassan); possibilities of new technology activate and empower users (Sameer Padania).
- new media can accelerate the flow of information between the UN and field workers or the UN and member states (Manfred Nowak).
- new technology is inexpensive and easy to use (John Mathiason).

- new technologies facilitate humanitarian decision-making; ReliefWeb is a so-called “community of practice” that provides an online tool for disseminating reliable information timely and on a 24-hour basis (Mark McCarthy)
- social media holds a huge potential for the UN: with its “mobilization power” (UN values), it allows for mass engagement around main UN issues and offers a good way for the UN to engage with an active constituency; it is particularly well suited to mobilize the youth: the UN could serve as an incubator for projects that sustain youth initiatives and give famine, torture and other global / UN issues a face on the internet (Dan McQuillan).

III. Conclusions and outcome

The colloquium offered both a comprehensive overview as well as highly informative discussions about the many problems, challenges and opportunities with regard to the UN and new digital media – all of which will improve to the work of the UN Studies Working Group which uses the wiki technology to build a strong, international UN Studies community.

Based on the many examples for projects in the field of education, information and advocacy about the UN, participants came to the joint conclusion that new technologies and new media are useful and low-cost tools to better communicate the UN's work and foster education about the UN, by providing a broad range of services such as fostering participation and interaction or mobilizing the youth. Participants warned, however, that new information and communication technologies (ICT) should not be mistaken as offering an *automatic* solution to major global challenges such as enhancing cultural diversity and understanding. Moreover, it was agreed that new media and technologies will not make “old-fashioned” media and face-to-face meetings obsolete. The colloquium's hybrid format was well suited to not only discuss but also demonstrate “live” such limits and potentials of new technologies.

All in all, participating in this conference was a unique experience that allowed us to contribute our experience with the wiki technology, to emphasize the need for UN Studies and to share best practices with international experts from all sectors (NGOs, UN, government, media). Furthermore, the discussions provided us with crucial input and feedback that will enhance our efforts to promote research and teaching about the UN – a goal that we share with the DGVN.

Therefore, we would like to thank the DGVN for their generous support which enabled us to travel to Wels, present our project and exchange views with an international audience in a high-tech and future-oriented setting.

Berlin, November 27, 2007

Julia Harfensteller und Henrike Paepcke

IV. Annex

Conference Program

09:00-09:30 a.m.

Opening addresses

09:30-10:00 a.m.

Keynote address

Edward Mortimer, Director, Salzburg Seminar

“The UN and the New Information Age”

10:00-12:00 a.m.

Panel: “UN Studies and Distance Learning/Education: New Technologies for Research & Teaching”

Moderator: Michael Platzer, Visiting Professor, Global Media,
Bond University/Australia

Foster Ofosu, WWEDU – World Wide Education, Wels/Austria

“Long Distance Learning in Developing Countries”

Henrike Paepcke/Julia Harfensteller, UN Studies Working Group, Berlin/Germany

“The Wiki Portal of the UN Studies Group”

Axel Wuestenhagen, former Director, United Nations Information Center

“Registry of UN Studies in Austria”

Veronika Bauer, European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy/Institute of
International Law and International Relations, University of Graz/Austria

“Survey of Digital Human Rights Libraries”

John Mathiason (virtual panelist), Syracuse University/USA

“Examining the UN System Using International Public Sector Management Methods”

12:00-01:00 p.m.

Lunch break

01:00-03:30 p.m.

Panel: Human Rights and New Information Technology

Moderator: Wolfram Karl, Director, Austrian Human Rights Institute, Salzburg and University of Salzburg/Austria

Manfred Nowak (video), Director, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights, Vienna/Austria
“Potential of New Technology in the Work of UN Rapporteurs”

Stephanie Hankey (video), Director, Tactical Technology Collective (UK/India)
“Human Rights Defenders and Digital Advocacy”

Ethan Zuckerman (video), Harvard University/Global Voices
“Connecting Social Justice NGOs”

Sami Ben Gharbia (virtual panelist), Global Voice Online
“Digital Advocacy: Netizen Watch Dogs”

Matthias C. Kettemann, Institute of International Law and International Relations, University of Graz/Austria
“Human Rights in the Information Society: The Results of Two Projects at the University of Graz 2003-2007”

03:30-04:00 p.m.

Coffee break

04:00-06:00 p.m.

Panel “New-Media Mediated Peace Building & Societal Development”

Moderator: Walther Lichem, former Director, UN Department, Austrian Ministry Foreign Affairs

Alexander Siedschlag, Director, Center for European Security Studies, WWEDU – World Wide Education, Wels/Austria and CEO, German United Nations Association, Bavarian Branch
“Conflict Transformation in Information Society”

Nasra Hassan, Director, United Nations Information Service Vienna

“The Media, Peacekeeping, and Civil Society”

Harvey Langholtz, Director, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Program of Correspondence Instruction on Peacekeeping Operations (UNITAR POCI)

“Distance Learning on Peacekeeping from UNITAR POCI”

Mark McCarthy, ReliefWeb Project Manager, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Geneva/Switzerland

“ReliefWeb and the Role of Information in Humanitarian Response”

Tayza Thuria (virtual panelist), Burmadigest

“The Use of Mobile Phones, Video camcorders, and Internet in the Recent Demonstrations in Burma”

Ian Williams, correspondent Nation and Guardian, Deadline Pundit Blog, (virtual pannellist)

“Covering the UN with a Blog”

06:00-07:00 p.m.

Dinner buffet

07:00-08:30 p.m.

Panel “Communicating with Youth – New-Media Perspectives for Teaching the UN System”

Moderator: Wolfgang Luef, German Weekly Newspaper “Die Zeit”, Vienna office/Austria

Carmel Mulvany, UN Department of Public Information/ Bill Yotive, Global Teaching and Learning Project. Education Outreach Section, Outreach Division, UN Department of Public Information

“Connecting with Youth”

Ingrid Lehmann, University of Salzburg/Austria and former director, UN Department of Public Information

“Youth Perceptions of the United Nations”

Gregor Waldhauser, Vice President, Austrian Academic Forum for Foreign Affairs
“The Difficulties of Communication with Austrian Youth on Global Issues”

Niko Jilch, Kurier Daily Newspaper, Vienna/Austria
“The CyberSchool Bus in German”

Michael Platzer, Visiting Professor, Global Media, Bond University/Australia
“‘Serious news’ Carried on MTV, You Tube, and Comedy Channel”

08:30-09:00 p.m.

Round Up and Next Steps

Paul A. Linnarz, Deutsche Welle, Bonn/Germany

09:00 p.m.

Farewell address by the organizers

Venue information, video conferencing method and registration form

<http://www.acuns.at>

Local organizer

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