UN ENTERS THE NEW INFORMATION AGE

Real-virtual world wide colloquium on the "The United Nations and the New Media/Information Age – Education for the Next Generation of 'the Peoples of the United Nations'" successfully concluded last Friday, 16 November 2007

Even after more than 12 hours of live video Internet discussions among 30 participants on five continents grouped in four panels dealing with research, human rights, peacebuilding, and communicating with youth, it was still not clear whether the UN had fully grasped the potential of the new digital media.

The Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) and World Wide Education (WWEDU), an academic distance-learning college, based in Wels Austria, had organized on 16 November a Web-based conversation with an audience estimated in the hundreds about the benefits and dangers of the new information technology. Connections were established with UNITAR (Program of Correspondence Instruction on Peacekeeping Operations), the Governance and Public Administration Branch in NY (UN Peacekeeping Portal), UN Department of Public Information (Outreach Division), UN Rapporteur on Torture (via a video clip) in addition to officials from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UN Office of Drugs and Crime, as well as the Director of the United Nations Information Service in Vienna, who came through snowstorms to the digital conference center in Upper Austria.

In his opening address, Alexander Siedschlag, director of research and development at WWEDU and chair of the local organizing committee, pointed out the overall aim of the colloquium: to seek out new ways of placing the work of the United Nations on better informational foundations as well as better communicating the United Nations system to the public." Siedschlag then went on to illustrate this objective: "We, the peoples of the United Nations" – this is how the preamble of the charter of the United Nations starts. And, we the peoples of the United Nations are determined, as the preamble goes on, to, among other things, reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, as well as to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples."

"It is evident", Siedschlag continued to explain, "that the new media and the information age itself open up many new opportunities and can provide new methods 'to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims', as the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations ends." But this principle media and information potential for good "needs clarification – as well as it needs critical assessing its limitations and possible unintended negative effects", as Siedschlag concluded.

The presentations and discussions were opened with a keynote speech by Edward Mortimer, the former speechwriter of Kofi Annan, who stated that while the new information technology is one of the drivers of globalization and also reduced travel expenses (plus airplane pollution), it did not have the same magic as old-fashioned face-to-face "in aisles" communications. He revealed the origins of one of Annan's original concepts of "frog leaping" – developing countries need not go through all the stages of development, as exemplified by the mobile phone – was a misreading of one of Mortimer's speeches. It was

later revealed that although Kofi Annan had a face book entry the current Secretary-General does not. Ian Williams from the Guardian said the UN was starting to let bloggers into the building (Inter City Press was a particular investigative "thorn") but bemoaned the loss of standards and that original material produced by journalists was reproduced on various sites without compensation. James Arbuckle, a Canadian peacekeeper with a great deal of experience in various UN and OSCE missions, also felt that misinformation could be spread faster and said the basic principles of getting the facts right and doing no harm remained as valid as ever.

Dan McQuillan from Internetartizans and Amnesty International, on the other hand, argued that the new social media had a tremendous mobilization power (of UN values) and for establishing social action networks. Examples of bikers in Sao Paulo monitoring the police with mobile phones, a prisoner in Cairo maintaining a blog, student demonstrations on You Tube, and live videos from Greenpeace actions were sent by Stephanie Hankey, the Director of the Tactical Technology Collective, which supports human rights NGOs in developing countries. Another video clip was sent by Ethan Zuckerman, from Harvard University project, who has set up a blog "Global Voices" among social justice NGOs. The UNIS director referred to internet bloggers and illegal radio stations as the "social conscience" of the world. Sameer Padania, from the path breaking organization, Witness (which has promoted videotaping for human rights advocacy and protection for twenty years), announced a new HUB for the better retrieval of human rights materials on the web. The 35,000 entries related to "torture" and the 1.5 million entries related to the United Nations on You Tube were later cited by Michael Platzer.

The challenges of interesting youth in the UN were honestly dealt with by Gregor Waldhauser of the Austrian Academic Forum for Foreign Affairs who indicated that young people are cynical about the traditional "one-sided" media. Ingrid Lehman from the University of Salzburg, revealed, from a five-nation university student opinion survey, that there were quite different opinions about the United Nations in Austria, Middle East, and the United States but also the sad fact that only 16% knew the founding year of the UN. Axel Wuestenhagen spoke of the deplorable state of teaching about the United Nations in Austria. Niko Jilch described the project to establish a Cyber School Bus in German. Mathias Kettemann, from the University of Graz, described two human rights projects which established clear links between more democratic multi-stakeholder discussions and developed information societies . While Veronika Bauer, from the European Training and Research Centre , (from her sick bed in Graz) informed the virtual conference of the efforts to survey the digital human rights libraries. Professor Wolfram Karl from the Austrian Centre of Human Rights at the University of Salzburg chaired the session on human rights and suggested there were different notions of privacy between young people and adults. Bill Yotive from the UN Global Teaching and Learning Project described the various efforts the United Nations was making to reach youth (text messaging, live videochats, discussion forums).

The most exciting demonstrations of the new technologies came from the contributions from Brazil and Ghana. John Mathiason of Syracuse University said the new technology opened the world for new forms of academic exchange – 50 students can attend one seminar from 50 locations worldwide. Foster Ofosu from the World Wide Web University described the distance learning that they were already undertaking in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East via the new technologies. Vivian Attah from the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Information related the efforts being made in Africa to connect institutions, individuals and NGOs in 80 countries – withVoIP, video conferences, internet, CD-R, DVDs, and iPods. The Distance Learning Center runs 75 training sessions for 3,500 participants. Gay Rosenblum

Kumar from the UN Peacebuilding Portal described her platform for discussions among hundreds of NGOs dealing with peacebuilding and gender issues in Africa and the plans to expand to other regions and topics. The 20 separate courses offered by UNITAR through "blended media" (booklets, CDs, downloads, internet interactions) to 8,000 peacekeepers annually was described by General Tim Ford from Australia (via a video clip) and live by Harvey Langholtz, the proud Director of the program. The Project Manager of the ReliefWeb, Mark McCarthy, spoke of how the UN uses the new technology to coordinate relief operations, which is particularly useful not only for small NGOs who wish to assist in emergencies but also media, research institutions, and for empowering people.

The follow-up was discussed by Henrike Paepke and Julia Harfensteller , the co-chairs of the ACUNS UN Studies Working Group which has established a Wiki Portal for scholars and teachers of UN related topics and the seminar that will be organized at the annual conference in June in Bonn. Paul Linnarz of the Deutsch Welle concluded the colloquium by listing the benefits of the new technology – rapid access to information, network building, participation, digital democracy, alternative sources of information – but it can not replace old-fashioned media, he said, nor face-to-face communication.

The participants lucky enough to have been in Wels were able to enjoy a walking tour, sponsored by the City of Wels of the old Roman capital of Noricum, which was the crossroads of several civilizations during the first centuries of the first Millennium – just as Wels was on a cyber scale during the world wide colloquium last Friday, at least for one day.

Further documentation is available at http://www.acuns.at.