

Concept document for the Digital Citizens' Indaba 2011

Theme: Freedom of Information and Digital Citizens

Date: 19 September 2011

Venue: Cape Town International Convention Centre

1. Background and objectives

The main objective of the Digital Citizens' Indaba (DCI) is to bring together digital activists, (digital) media practitioners, online industry experts and civil society representatives, as citizens who try to empower themselves and their community using new media technologies.

The purpose of bringing them together is to enable this empowerment to take place through participation in debate about the state of digital media, information sharing and skills transfer using experts in the field. The DCI was established after it was recognised that – given its focus on digital media and journalism – Highway Africa (HA) could do more to encourage digital media take-up by non-journalists, thereby ensuring that citizens have a digital voice too.

Besides panel discussions the DCI also offers workshops to its participants, ensuring that each digital citizen returns home with both newly acquired knowledge *and* skills. DCI furthermore encourages local participation in their event. During the fifth DCI in 2010, 20 citizen journalists from Grahamstown were invited to take part and produced a poster exhibiting their work.

DCI through the years

The first DCI was held in 2006, which took place immediately before the HA Conference in Grahamstown. The second DCI in 2007 attracted high-level speakers and participants, these included Africa's foremost bloggers Ory Okolloh and Daudi Were. While the first DCI focussed on blogging in Africa, subsequent DCI 's focussed on a broader array of digital technologies used to promote citizen involvement, such as Web 2.0, mobile media and microblogs.

The third DCI in 2008 carried the theme 'Technology for the Digital Citizen', which complimented HA's overall theme of 'Citizen journalism, journalism for citizens', while maintaining its focus on citizens rather than journalists. This DCI focussed on questions of appropriate technology, and concentrated on the technologies that have proven to empower Africa's digital citizens.

The fourth DCI in 2009 focussed less on technology questions, and more on the social appropriation of technology. This event had the theme 'Digital Civil Society and Journalism in Africa', and focussed on the explosion of digital media use at civil society level, and its impact on mainstream media reporting. It explored linguistic diversity in the blogosphere, gender and digital media, civil society use of mapping tools and technologies used for social change.

The fifth DCI in 2010 had the theme 'Africa's underdevelopment: Digital Citizens Speak Back', and explored the role of citizen journalists in debating the state of Africa's development, and factors impacting on underdevelopment. The DCI examined the role citizen journalists can play in making

information available on natural resource exploitation on the continent, as well as in disaster situations. The development benefits of mega events such as the 2010 World Cup were also debated.

2. Theme of 2011 DCI: Freedom of Information and Digital Citizens

The past year has been a momentous one for digital citizens worldwide, with online tools like Wikileaks being used to release masses of sensitive data into the public domain. Wikileaks's release of diplomatic cables and documents on the Iraq "War on Terrorism" exposed diplomatic and military agendas in great detail, and the site has been lauded as a model for fighting corruption. At the same time the site also earned the wrath of many governments, in particular the US administration, who have accused it of threatening national security and even the lives of those named in leaked documents. Some governments have censored the site, and the owners of country level domain names for Wikileaks have been harassed. Companies such as PayPal and Amazon.com also severed ties with the site in the wake of the diplomatic cables fallout. The African continent wasn't left untouched, though, as several African political leaders were embarrassed by the Wikileaks diplomatic revelations.

The Wikileaks saga has raised serious questions about how free the internet actually is, and what measures need to be taken to ensure online freedom of expression. A related set of questions is whether the internet is governed in a manner that ensures freedom and security for its users. Wikileaks' activities have also raised fascinating questions about the relationship of journalists to online publishers and sources, and the possibilities and pitfalls of partnerships between the two. This year's DCI will probe both questions, and their relevance for Africa.

The diplomatic cables revealed the extent of corruption in Tunisia's government, which may well have been an aggravating factor in the revolution that swept the country early in 2011. Since then, revolutions spread across North Africa and the Middle East, leading to the removal of leaders in Tunisia and Egypt. Online social networks played a key role in these revolutions. Activists used Twitter to announce protests, Facebook to organize them, YouTube to 'broadcast' them, and Flickr to document them.

At the forefront of this were tech savvy young people, who are meant to be the most advantaged and employable citizens of the information society. Yet many have found themselves relegated to the margins of this very society through unemployment. The DCI will use the revolutions to raise questions about the nature of transformational change brought about by digital (online, social and mobile) media, and how inclusive the information society actually is in Africa. The uprisings also raised debates whether these are Facebook or Twitter led revolutions, leading to questions about the perceived versus the actual role of technology in social change. The DCI will explore these questions too.

Communications networks have been censored in an attempt to quell the protests. In the case of Egypt, the internet was shut down. In Cameroon, MTN shut down Twitter SMS after it was ordered to do so by the government. The conduct of network providers and governments has raised questions about how committed they are to the principles of freedom of information and network neutrality. In response to greater attempts to control the flow of communications, cyberactivists have also played an increasingly important role in promoting the free flow of information, defending

the right to anonymous free speech: a right that is increasingly under attack in the era of greater network surveillance. With these issues in mind, the DCI will explore ways of defending digital media freedom in times of social conflict.

Some of the questions to be dealt with include the following:

- Is network neutrality a reality in Africa, and if not what needs to be done to guarantee network neutrality?
- What are the responsibilities of network service providers to ensure the freedom and neutrality of the internet, especially in repressive countries?
- Under what conditions, if any, should national security and personal safety trump freedom of information?
- How central are social networking tools to the protests in Africa?
- What role can and should digital media play in Africa in facilitating access to information, especially information on malgovernance, corruption and other abuses of power?
- How can the safety of whistleblowers be guaranteed?
- How inclusive is the African information society?
- What role can cyberactivists play, and what can they do, in promoting freedom of expression and information?
- What kind of internet governance is needed to ensure the communications rights of its users?
- Are online and mobile tools replacing, enriching or compromising journalism?
- Are journalists doing enough to defend digital media freedom, including the freedom of their sources?

DCI will explore these questions through a series of panel discussions and workshops with experts, eye-witnesses and digital citizens while at the same time ensuring there's enough time too for knowledge and skills exchange through socializing – as citizens should.

3. Venue & Participants

This year the DCI will not take place in Grahamstown, but at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, close to Cape Town's city centre and V&A Waterfront. This was decided by HA management for logistical reasons. DCI is part of HA and agreed to, for this year only, move to Cape Town as well. Additional costs of the venue are covered by HA.

Accommodation ranges from B&B's, guest houses and hotels to backpackers. The Indaba is open to bloggers, podcasters, vodcasters, mobile reporters, citizen journalists, new media practitioners, new media students, online industry experts and civil society representatives. All participants can visit the website (www.dcindaba.com), follow us on Twitter (@DCIndaba) and receive our newsletters through dcindaba@gmail.com.

4. Parallel and linked events

- Highway Africa Conference, 17 & 18 September 2011
- Pan African Conference on Access to Information in Africa (PACAIA), 19 September 2011