

## Repositioning ORBICOM within UNESCO

Jānis Kārklīņš, Assistant Director-General, Communication and Information Sector, UNESCO

Let me start by thanking ORBICOM for the kind invitation for me to carry on the UNESCO tradition of representing UNESCO on the board of ORBICOM. We value our historical linkage, which goes back to 1994 when UNESCO and Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) saw the need for a global network that would link communications leaders from academic, media, corporate and government circles with a view to providing for the exchange of information and the development of shared projects. Indeed, we must build upon that foundation, and ensure that we become even more relevant to the changing social, political, economic and technological context in which both organizations operate.

It is partly for this reason that we appreciated the visit in early October by the current ORBICOM President, Professor Rosental Calmon Alves. Our meetings with him affirmed the need for repositioning ORBICOM within UNESCO in order for both organizations to obtain maximum benefit from their comparative strengths. I am convinced that our joint actions can help to realize the fundamentals of media development across the globe in the context of the UNESCO Media Development Indicators (MDIs), which seek to affirm:

- A system of regulation conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of the media;
- Plurality and diversity of media, a level economic playing field as well as transparency of ownership of media outlets;
- Media as a platform for democratic discourse;
- Professional capacity-building for media and supporting institutions that underpin freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity; and
- Infrastructural capacity to support independent and pluralistic media.

As I have already noted, our efforts at media development occur in a particular social, political, economic and technological context. As our meeting with Professor Alves demonstrated, there are several key issues that we think require us to jointly enhance our intervention. These include creating the conditions necessary for the development of public service broadcasting (PSB), especially in the developing world; promoting greater access to information and knowledge through public libraries and emerging digital platforms; and fostering media and information literacy as an important component of contemporary knowledge societies. A cross-cutting theme in this regard is how the digital revolution reconfigures our actions with respect to all the three issues mentioned above.

In this vein, I would like to suggest three practical ways through which UNESCO can reposition itself *vis-à-vis* ORBICOM. Firstly, there is need for *greater programmatic* collaboration between ORBICOM and UNESCO. Such collaboration needs to occur more especially at the level of UNESCO field and cluster offices. For example, the UNESCO chairs in communication, with their diverse expertise in the

field of media development, can prove a useful resource to our offices around the world, as they seek to realize UNESCO's global mandate of fostering a free, independent and pluralistic media culture.

Secondly, and related to the above point, there is need for both organizations to identify key activities for which they can undertake *joint fundraising*. In this regard, the ORBICOM network of chairs and the over 250 associate members can work closely with respective UNESCO field offices to define relevant program activities, as UNESCO funds are decentralized to the field and cluster offices. Such a funding opportunity can, for instance, help the chair-holders to realize their own teaching, research and professional potential. Beyond the obvious financial advantage of joint fundraising, such an approach can add programmatic synergy and coherence to the sum of both organizations' activities. To this end, several of our professionals have already started communicating with some of the chair-holders to begin a process of constructive engagement with our African potential centers of excellence and reference in journalism education.

Thirdly, we need to emphasize the importance of *regular interchange* among the UNESCO chairs themselves, apart from the online annual general meetings. Such physical meetings, if tagged to existing UNESCO programmatic activities, could become an important leverage for ORBICOM, allowing for a regular exchange and review of joint activities. As part of this process, ORBICOM might want to explore the possibility of publishing an online journal to share academic contributions made by different chair-holders and associate members. Here, it will be important to develop a tripartite alliance that includes ORBICOM, UNESCO, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and other relevant stakeholders that could result in a kind of a global think tank on research and analysis in the field of communication and media. This is one way through which both organizations can get to know each other even more.

Let me end by encouraging ORBICOM to continue its important work of mobilizing media and communications scholarship and practice by maintaining a vibrant relationship with UNESCO, wherever it is represented. We remain committed to the original aim of cultivating an organic network that can effectively relate academic pursuits to the practical needs of the media and communications industries as well as the information public policy concerns of governments. In the words of Alain Modoux, past president of ORBICOM: "The bridge that ORBICOM has been able to establish between the world of higher education and research, the communication professionals, the communication industry, and the United Nations system, has allowed the network to position and establish itself, in a unique way, as one of the most dynamic and innovative sectors of modern society."