

WSIS, communication and global governance

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The World Summit on the Information Society has opened a new phase in global communication governance and global governance generally. The WSIS process (including both official and parallel activities) has identified the problematic issues in global communication, indicated the range of views on how to deal with them, provided various blueprints of what should and could be possible in the way of solutions, and gingerly explored ways of dealing with these questions in the future. To that extent, WSIS has crystallized a new paradigm in global governance in which information and communication issues are central, and in which new actors, particularly those rooted in civil society, will be increasingly involved. This is good news for democracy even if it must be taken with a large grain of salt.

The global governance environment in communication (as in much everything else) is based on the interaction and interdependence of a wide array of actors and policy making arenas. Needless to say, power is not equally distributed among actors, and some sites of decision-making are more important than others. National governments still wield tremendous leverage both on the territories they govern and as the only legally authorized participants in international deliberations. Here again, the disparities are enormous but in all cases, national sovereignty is no longer absolute. Multilateral bodies, transnational corporations, and international treaties powerfully constrain the role of every nation state. Global governance is increasingly referred to as a multi-stakeholder process. The WSIS experience has transformed this framework most notably by sanctifying the place of civil society as an organized force in this process.

WSIS is the third attempt by the United Nations system to deal globally with information and communication issues. In 1948, in the optimistic climate of the post-war era, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights spelled out, for all, what the great revolutions of the 18th century had struggled to obtain for Europeans and Americans: that the capacity to seek, receive and impart information is a basic human right. In the 1970s, in the post-colonial climate of the cold war, the non-aligned nations sparked a debate on a 'new world information and communication order', drawing attention to such questions as the inequalities in north-south information flow, the cultural bias of technology and the lack of communication infrastructure in the so-called third world. 1948 was a moment of consensus, but the debates of the 1970s were fraught with conflict, as is well known. Both had something in common, however: an exclusive reliance on states and governments as legitimate actors or porte-parole for people.

WSIS promised to be different. Conceived and launched in 1998, WSIS arrived in a context marked by buzzwords such as technological convergence and globalization. The politics of WSIS was marked not only by consensus and conflict among the world's governments, but by a larger

politics of definition, pitting governments against nongovernmental actors, namely NGOs and other civil society associations. In the immediate wake of the Geneva phase of WSIS, most observers agree that it was civil society that kept the debate on track, re-introduced the crucial elements left unresolved or unrealized in 1948 and the 1970s, and organized itself responsibly to put forward a vision truly reflective of the interests of the world community. If civil society had not reared its difficult head at WSIS, it would have had to be invented.

On the eve of the announcement of WSIS, the metaphor of the 'information society' signified a certain type of social design – even if no one really knew what it meant. Civil society mobilization, however, has permitted the emergence of an alternative metaphor, that of the 'communication society',¹ based on values such as human rights, social justice, participation, shared resources, solidarity and sustainable development. It is thanks to the insistence of non-government activists that the WSIS official documents pay at least minimal lip service to such basic notions as freedom of expression, cultural diversity, media pluralism and the centrality of communication as 'a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization'.²

Influencing the outcome

The end of the first phase of WSIS in Geneva on 12 December 2003, marked the end of a long process that began five years earlier, at a plenipotentiary conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Huge efforts were invested in this undertaking. The different parties – civil society, private sector, governments and intergovernmental organizations – all battled to influence the results according to their own respective visions and, especially, interests.

With more than 11,000 registered participants, WSIS fit into the mould of recent UN summits. But this was the first world summit to tackle issues of communication policy and governance. The spread of digital technologies – which summit organizers characterized as a 'revolution'³ - and its social, political economic and cultural impacts, were sufficiently important for the ITU to plunge into organizing the summit on a grand scale.

Certain governments found themselves in the midst of controversies. Hostile to the participation of civil society, countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China found themselves at odds with the liberal democracies. China notably struggled (ultimately in vain) to exclude any reference to media and human rights from the official texts. Attempts were made to subordinate the accepted universal right to freedom of expression to that of national governments to exercise sovereignty in this area. The United States insisted on making information security a central point.

Intellectual property rights pitted certain developing countries such as Brazil and India against the leading industrial economies. So did the question of funding the bridging of the digital divide. Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade vigorously promoted the idea of a 'Digital Solidarity Fund' which captured the imagination of participants (aided by a slick television advertising campaign on CNN Europe during the week of the Summit) but did not convince the governments

that would be called upon to pay. The Senegalese plan for a fund based on an automatic check-off on sales of ICT products rebuffed the governments of the US, the European Union, Canada and Japan. A compromise emerged in favour of a voluntary plan, and the issue was referred to the second phase of the Summit slated for Tunis in 2005.⁴

In general then, there is no clear funding mechanism provided for the proposals contained in the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Action Plan. This is clearly a failure and evidence of a flagrant lack of political will on the part of governments to take the necessary steps towards a genuine implantation of the principles adopted by the Summit. The president of the Summit preparatory committee, Adama Samassékou, having himself declared that 'the funding of concrete actions will be the first measure of success of the Summit',⁵ this reversal is even more significant with respect to the expectations raised by the WSIS agenda.

The current regime of Internet governance was another issue seriously challenged by countries concerned about the US government's role as overseer of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). This complex question was also referred to Tunis.

Considering that the two issues considered critical by governments – Internet governance and the extinction of the digital divide – were pushed off to Tunis, then clearly little was accomplished from a governmental point of view. But the Summit seems to have nonetheless provided international diplomacy with a lexicon for speaking about the information society and a shopping list of issues it encompasses.

Vision, choice and difficult steps

Can one actually talk about an 'information society' without anchoring it in at least some fundamental notion of communication? Amazingly, that is precisely what the WSIS attempted to do, until civil society became involved in shaping the agenda.

Reading the official government declaration and the civil society declaration side by side is instructive. Both mobilize a generous rhetoric, but the official declaration masks the important cleavages that marked the intergovernmental process while the civil society document provides a vision, makes choices and suggests some difficult steps that need to be taken. The official declaration sloughs over the chasm on human rights, for example, where civil society places human rights at the centre of its program. The government declaration, like so many before it,⁶ deplores the widening gap between rich and poor where civil society actually names a solution: the rich must pay.⁷ Both are consensus-driven documents, but the first reflects the agreement to simply remain silent, and therefore immobile, on contradictory issues where the second is the result of negotiation and compromise in the quest to move forward.

The handling of governance issues in the two documents provides an essential clue to the different approaches. The government declaration tried to address the issue of the enabling environment for ICTs but in the end had to pass the buck on the crucial area of Internet governance to a working group which will report back to the Tunis phase of the Summit. Civil society meanwhile, named an assortment of agencies already involved in international ICT governance and called for public monitoring and analysis of their activities in the interest of greater transparency and ongoing participation in policy development.

That said, the nature of civil society involvement in WSIS – and by implication, in the future of global governance – should not be idealized. It needs to be deconstructed and understood. The story of civil society involvement in WSIS needs to be written and analyzed and that work is now underway. But there can be no question that the creation of an autonomous, open and inclusive structure, the WSIS Civil Society Plenary, and its production of the Civil Society Declaration – despite their shortcomings – provide a model for the blending of issues and process which should inspire all those who are thinking about possibilities for a new global politics, not only in communication but in global affairs in general.

WSIS is the first UN summit where civil society was officially invited to be a participating partner – although understanding of what such ‘partnership’ might mean was highly contentious. Many saw this as a fabulous opportunity, and they were disappointed. But the rules and parameters of global governance have shifted as a result of WSIS. Obviously, official decisions continue to be negotiated in intergovernmental structures. But the gains made by civil society will resonate. For the first time since the creation of the UN, a formal structure was created for inclusion of civil society; the establishment of an official ‘Civil Society Bureau’ made up of representatives of civil society organizations participating in the Summit creates a precedent in international relations.

The autonomous structures created by civil society participants themselves, meanwhile, form the basis of a new model of representation and legitimation of non-governmental input to global affairs. Importantly, civil society maintained a high degree of cohesiveness throughout the preparatory process and was able to mobilize and gather together disparate resources in order to produce strong and high quality input reflecting a wide consensus. Culminating in the Civil Society Declaration entitled *Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*, the collaboration of dozens of disparate groups in this process remains one of the key successes of WSIS.

Civil society had to struggle hard to maintain a minimally acceptable degree of participation. Official meetings were open or closed according to the unilateral decision of government delegates, and the real impact of the numerous contributions of civil society remained weak. An informal study done in September 2003 by a volunteer group of researchers showed that 60% of the proposals of civil society up to that time had been completely rejected, 15% were sort of taken into account, and 25% had made it in to the then-current working documents.⁸ In order to achieve such results, civil society had to develop a sophisticated series of networking activities. Alongside the activities within its own autonomous structures, necessary for establishing positions and achieving consensus, civil society lobbied friendly government delegations and was thus able to influence the outcome in certain targeted areas. It also organized its own side events in Geneva, including *The World Forum on Communication Rights*, *The Community Media Forum*, *Media*

Liberties in the Information Society, as well as participating in several events of the World Electronic Media Forum⁹ and the ICT for Development platform.¹⁰

Finally, an entirely parallel set of activities were organized under the heading of WSIS? WE SEIZE!,¹¹ an alternative event organized outside the Summit complex, thus marking not only a geographic but also an ideological distance from the Summit proper. Put simply, the organizers of WE SEIZE! rejected the social, political and economic premises on which the debates and discussions surrounding WSIS were based. They proposed instead to reimagine the role of communication in the organization of society.

Developing a communication society

So, despite its disappointment in the tangible outcomes – to be expected – civil society has already moved towards a new paradigm and has begun to articulate a new conception of society based on communication between human beings. It is not a question of building a more equitable information society, but of developing a communication society, reviewing structures of power and domination that are expressed and sustained through information and media structures.

Independently of the official outcome of the Summit, the great achievement of civil society remains the great degree of coordination between the entities making it up, the development of networks, expertise and common projects, exchange of ideas and particular ways of doing things, as well as articulation of an alternative discourse within the respectable and visible framework of a high-level UN meeting.

The civil society declaration adopted unanimously at the plenary session on December 8, 2003, is thus more than a political document outlining a set of principles; it is the concrete manifestation of a long process that could lead to a profound change in the ways in which non government actors can influence international relations. It is an accomplishment that can reassure civil society in its quest for a more effective role in the sea changes currently taking place in global governance.

In short, the WSIS experience has put information and communication firmly on the global agenda and has also opened a space in which to explore new ways of dealing with global issues. This bodes well for the democratization of communication and its use as a vehicle for human development.

The WSIS process has shaken the status quo of global governance. It should be seen as a laboratory experimenting with a new distribution of power involving emerging as well as established social forces. WSIS is above all a space of confrontation between opposing communicational paradigms. The opposition to the current dominant model has been reorganized

in a new political space where civil society is called upon to be increasingly present. WSIS exemplifies, therefore, the important trends emerging in global governance, encouraging civil society to participate more actively in defining a new global public sphere and to integrate more deeply to developing transnational public policy.

This article summarizes the main conclusions of a report on civil society involvement in WSIS, by Marc Raboy and Normand Landry, entitled *La communication au cœur de la gouvernance globale*, available on-line at <http://www.lrpc.umontreal.ca/smsirapport.pdf>. Parts of this article have also appeared in *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, vol. 66, nos 3-4, June-July 2004.

Notes

1. The WSIS Civil Society Declaration actually favours the term 'information and communication societies'. Click [here](#) for pdf.
2. WSIS Declaration of Principles, Article 4. Click [here](#) for pdf.
3. 'We are indeed in the midst of a revolution, perhaps the greatest that humanity has ever experienced.'
4. Official WSIS web site, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/> . Reference deleted in February 2004.
5. The Senegalese president did not leave empty-handed, however. Following up on the generally more progressive tone set at the Summit on Cities in the Information Society, the municipalities of Lyon and Geneva pledged a total of 600 000 Euros to launch the fund, and numerous NGOs also committed themselves to support the plan. See World Summit of Cities, Draft Declaration of Lyon, 2003. Available on-line.
6. 'Sommet de l'information, la mésentente s'installe.' *La Tribune de Genève*. 28 September. Available on-line . (Author's translation.)
7. See for example, G8, Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society, 2000. Available on-line at <http://www.dotforce.org/reports/it1.html> .
8. Or, as the editor of *Le Monde diplomatique* put it in his editorial on WSIS, the world immediately needs 'a formidable technological Marshall plan' (Ignacio Ramonet, 'Le nouvel ordre Internet', *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2004, p. 1. Available on-line [here](#) .
9. 'Does Input Lead to Impact? How Governments treated Civil Society Proposals in Drafting the 19 September 2003 Draft Plan of Action.' 24 September 2003. Available on-line at <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/467.htm> See <http://www.wemfmedia.org/>
10. See [here](#)
11. See <http://www.geneva03.org/>

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