

## **WSIS: Can the International Community Learn from History?**

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In her book *March of Folly* the late historian Barbara Tuchman<sup>1</sup> analyzed human history as the persistent pursuit of courses of action that are contrary to the collective interest. She demonstrated that politicians in particular are insensitive to learning from their errors, "...to recognize error, to cut losses, to alter course, is the most repugnant option in government" (1985: 481).

In 2003 the international community addressed for the third time within 55 years in a major way information and communication issues. This raises the question whether the third exercise – the WSIS – can learn from past mistakes. The two earlier attempts were rather unsuccessful. They caused strong antagonisms and offered no real solutions to the problems they confronted.

### **The Freedom of Information Conference**

Early in its history the United Nations put the issue of freedom of information on its agenda. In 1948 the United Nations Conference on the Freedom of Information was convened at Geneva from 23 March till 21 April. Fifty-four countries were officially represented and, on the initiative of the UK, professional news people were also included. The conference produced numerous resolutions and three draft treaties on Freedom of Information (proposed by the British delegation), the Gathering and International Transmission of News (proposed by the US delegation), and the International Right of Correction (proposed by the French delegation).

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Tuchman (1985). *The March of Folly*. London: Sphere Books.

Eventually only the French text became a convention but with only a few ratifications. As the US delegation had taken the initiative to commit the United Nations to the US concept of freedom of information, the Soviet Union and its allies were put in a reactive position. They responded to the US proposals for a free flow with demands for regulation. They were a minority in the United Nations bodies and most of their motions to qualify the free flow standard were defeated. This demonstrated the emerging Cold War antagonism.

At the conference there were confrontations between those who advanced a largely liberal-economic position in defense of newspapers and news agencies, and those who challenged this as sanctioning of commercial monopolies and propagandistic practices. Serious objections were made by the Soviet Union against a concern for the freedom of information that was exclusively based upon commercial claims. The Soviet Union Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko, claimed that the proposed freedom of information was in fact the freedom of a few monopolies. The doctrine of the free flow of information obscured, in his opinion, the interests of bankers and industrialists for whom Wall Street represented the summit of democracy. The Soviet Union also claimed that the freedom of information could not mean freedom for fascist propaganda. Other delegations equally stressed the need to prevent the establishment of news monopolies under the guise of freedom. Some nations, such as Yugoslavia, drew attention to the wide disparities in available means of mass communication and claimed that freedom should be linked with the standard of equality.

The only constructive outcome of the 1948 conference was the formulation of what became Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the international standard provision on free speech.

### **The Roaring Seventies**

The second time the United Nations became heavily involved in information and communication issues was in the 1970s with the debates on the New International Information Order (NIIO) which in 1978 was re-baptized as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

This demand expressed the Third World concern about disparity in communication capacity along three lines. There was concern about the impact of the skewed communication relations between North and South on the independent cultural development of the Third World nations. Then there was concern about the largely one-sided exports from the North to the countries of the Third World and the often distorted or totally absent reporting in the media of the North about developments in the South. A third line of concern addressed the transfer of media technology. On balance it was concluded in the early 1970s that preciously little technology had been transferred and that by and large only technical end-products had

been exported from the industrial nations. This was often done under disadvantageous conditions so that in the end the technical and financial dependence of the receiving countries had only increased.

As from its Algiers summit in 1973 the Non-Aligned movement continuously articulated its position of strong support for the emancipation and development of media in the developing nations. UNESCO became the most important forum for this debate.

In the end the debate did not yield the results demanded by the developing countries. Their criticism of the past failures of technical assistance programmes was answered by the creation of yet another such programme: the International Programme for the Development of Communication. The programme would from the outset suffer a chronic lack of resources.

The debate in the 1970s also produced the insightful MacBride Report that offered many useful recommendations for the improvement of world communication. Most of these recommendations were not implemented by the international community.

Moreover, in 1981 there were clear indications that the opponents of the Third World demand for a new information order had not yet been satisfied and by 1983 two major member states, the USA and the UK announced their withdrawal from UNESCO.

In the effort to maintain a fragile international consensus the UNESCO General Conference began to erode the original aspirations of the NIIO proponents and shifted from the need to establish a regulatory structure to the new order as “an evolving and continuous process”. (Paris, General Conference, 1982, res. 3.3). Gradually UNESCO withdrew support from all research, documentation or conference activities intended to contribute to the establishment of new information order and moved towards a “new strategy” (for the Medium-Term plan 1990-1995) with an emphasis on the free flow of information and the freedom and independence of the media, priority to operational activities, and importance of information technology.

The concerns about the North/South information-communication disparity may have found almost universal recognition in the international community, but the concrete accommodation of these concerns was seriously contested. In the end, the international community lacked the political will to deal with cultural and technological dependency and with the improvement of the technical conditions for news production and the free circulation of educational and cultural materials.

What eventually emerged from all the political commotion was a very modest and inadequate form of multilateral cooperation on the issue of mass communication development (through the IPDC). Discord remained on fundamental principles and a general unwillingness in the rich regions of the world to provide a type of assistance that would resolve the problems that were already in 1961 reported by UNESCO.

Participation in world communication requires that actors have access to the technologies that make cross-border movements of data, information and knowledge possible. Given the stark disparity in communication capacity between the industrialized countries of the North and the Third World countries, there has been (since the early 1950s) considerable concern about Third World acquisition of communication technology.

The 1970s debates did nothing to meet this concern. No binding and effective multilateral accord on the international transfer of technology was reached. Declarations, resolutions, programmes of action and draft codes of conduct were produced but all without effective implementation measures.

### **The Essential Challenges**

If the WSIS is to demonstrate that the international community can learn from the mistakes of the past, three key challenges will have to be met.

#### *The Technological Challenge*

The notion of the Information Society is embedded in the contemporary technological culture. This is the prevailing way of society's interaction with technology. An interaction which is largely determined by irrationality and irresponsibility and which can be summed up with the help of three metaphors: the Titanic, Cassandra and Dr Frankenstein.

- The Titanic represents a strong belief in the perfection of technology: the ship cannot sink, and it is not necessary to have enough life boats on board. As a result the real risks of technological innovations are not taken seriously. The modern technological culture demonstrates a strong drive towards a risk-free society. This aspiration to achieve a risk-free control of social processes is seriously hampered by the unpredictable, fickle human species. Actually, the human being is increasingly seen as the real risk factor. As a result modern societies develop all kinds of activities to reduce this risk, like the expansive monitoring of human conduct through the ubiquitous camera surveillance and the electronic registration of people's movements. The logical next step in this process is the replacement of humans with humanoid robots.

- Cassandra is the daughter of the Trojan king Priamus who warned the Trojans that there were Greeks in the wooden horse. She was gifted with the ability to foresee the future, but she was also cursed by Apollo with the punishment that no one would listen to her warnings. This is characteristic of the technological culture: warning voices are ignored. In situations where decision makers experience a new era, a winning mood, and the pressures of time and competition: all traffic lights will be ignored, the dissidents will be silenced and technology choice becomes a matter of flying blind.
- Dr Frankenstein features in the novel written by Mary Shelley in which the doctor who creates a monster flees from his laboratory and is haunted by the monster who challenges him to take responsibility for what he has created. The metaphor raises the critical question about accountability for technological innovation. Who is accountable when things go wrong? Who takes responsibility if we resolve the digital divide and subsequently face insurmountable environmental problems: the exceedingly high levels of global energy consumption, the rate of CO<sub>2</sub> emission from printers and computers and the volume of electronic waste caused by the rapid rate of obsolescence of mobile phones and computers?

#### *The Moral Challenge*

A key question is “what should a decent information society look like?” The only universally available normative framework is the human rights regime. However, this regime is violated around the world and around the clock. Its moral principles are solid enough, but from its inception the international community has made the deliberate political choice to keep their enforcement very weak. There is worldwide generous lip service being paid to human rights, but in fact there is no real serious concern about their promotion and protection. This is dramatically demonstrated now that after 9/11 in so many countries – with convenient and largely unfounded references to security – civil and political rights are eroded.

#### *The Social Challenge*

The main focus of the WSIS is on “information”. Yet, the real core question is how we should shape future “communication societies”. In fact for the resolution of the world’s most pressing problems we do not need more information processing but the capacity to communicate! And, ironically, as our capacity to process and distribute information increases, our capacity to communicate and to converse diminishes.

Most presentations of future information societies are based upon flawed assumptions with regard to information, such as: more information is better than less information, or more

information creates more knowledge and understanding, or open information flows contribute to the prevention of conflicts, or more information means less uncertainty, or if people are properly informed they act accordingly, or more information equals more power.

A very popular information myth proposes that once people are better informed about each other, they will understand each other better and be less inclined to conflict, a very attractive assumption but not necessarily true! Deadly conflicts are usually not caused by a lack of information. In fact they may be based upon very adequate information that adversaries have about each other. As a matter of fact one could equally well propound the view that social harmony is largely due to the degree of ignorance that actors have vis-à-vis each other. Many societies maintain levels of stability because they employ rituals, customs and conventions that enable their members to engage in social interactions without having detailed information about who they really are.

The development of “communication societies” implies the need to learn the art of social dialogue. This requires the capacity to listen, to be silent, to suspend judgment, to critically investigate our own assumptions, to ask reflexive questions and to be open to change. Such requirements conflict with the spirit of achievement-oriented modern societies where people have no time and patience for dialogical communication.

#### **Epilogue: to be continued**

If one critically assesses the outcome of the WSIS Geneva phase in 2003, the conclusion has to be that the international community failed to live up to these three challenges. However, the WSIS continues and the Tunis phase provides another chance to prove Barbara Tuchman wrong.