

Globalization and Information Society

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The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has opened a new phase in global communication governance and global governance generally. The WSIS process 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 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, are increasingly involved. This is good news for democracy even if it must be taken with a large grain of salt.

Global governance is based on the interaction and interdependence of a wide array of actors and policymaking 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, although national sovereignty is no longer absolute. Multilateral bodies, transnational corporations, and international treaties powerfully constrain the role of every nation state. Global governance is therefore increasingly referred to as a multi-stakeholder process. The WSIS experience has transformed this framework most notably by recognizing the place of civil society as an essential partner in this process.

It is no coincidence that this issue has crystallized in the sphere of communication. 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.

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 autonomous, open and inclusive structures, such as the WSIS Civil Society Plenary – 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 United Nations 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 United Nations, 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 in some form.¹ 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 Forum² and the ICT for Development platform³. Finally, an entirely parallel set of activities were organized under the heading of WSIS? WE SEIZE!⁴, 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.

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.

¹ 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>

² See <http://www.wemfmedia.org/>

³ See <http://www.ict-4d.org/Marketplace/en/default.htm?languageId=en>

⁴ See <http://www.geneva03.org/>

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 United Nations 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 for 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 public policy on a world scale.