

## Special Issue Introduction

# The World Summit in Reflection: A Deliberative Dialogue on the WSIS

### Michael L. Best

The Sam Nunn School of  
International Affairs  
Georgia Institute of  
Technology  
781 Marietta Street, NW  
Atlanta, GA 30332-0610  
michael.best@inta.gatech.edu

### Ernest J. Wilson III

Center for International  
Development and  
Conflict Management  
University of Maryland  
0145 Tydings Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-7231  
ewilson@cidcm.umd.edu

### Colin M. Maclay

Berkman Center for Internet  
& Society  
Harvard Law School  
Baker House  
1587 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
cmaclay@cyber.law  
.harvard.edu

There is no single World Summit on the Information Society, but rather many Summits with unique attributes and implications that vary depending on the eye of the beholder. While we can state objectively that the events that occurred in Geneva in December 2003 (and the many preparatory meetings that led up to them) were convened by the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) and organized in part by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and that it was the largest global meeting on the Information Society (or whatever term of choice), it gets fuzzy after that.

The assertions are as numerous as they are divergent. Was civil society finally participating in a UN World Summit process or were nongovernmental participants marginalized? Was it all just a power play by the ITU or was there real balance between UN family stakeholders, country delegates, and civil society? Were the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action the key results or was the real engagement outside the plenary sessions? Was the Summit an overblown waste of resources or a significant step toward a new model of multisectoral collaboration that will reconfigure participation in the new global regime?

Similar debates raged even among our close friends and colleagues, and unable to reach a consensus, we decided that one contribution to the process would be to help create meaning around the WSIS by seeking diverse views and exploring the resulting discourse. Due to the core role of the developing world in the WSIS, rampant cyberbole, and the dearth of rigorous academic analysis and self-evaluation in the field, we agreed that *ITID* was an appropriate venue to host this global process of reflection.

Slowly realizing that there were almost as many distinct views as there were delegates, we set out to represent as many of them as possible, from nations wealthy and poor, sectors public and private, disciplines technical and social, insiders and outsiders, and many other categories.

To achieve the goal of giving a platform to different voices required not only a substantial effort to drum up submissions, it required an equally thoughtful consideration of which to publish. We started by mining the delegate list for e-mail addresses to announce the Call for Papers, posted it in various places online, and passed out hundreds of flyers in Geneva. The instructions were simple: either a short editorial reflection on the Summit or a relevant longer research piece, with no requirement to have attended the event in either case. While we didn't specify the language, our communication was in English.

We were overjoyed to receive more than 125 submissions from around the world. Then we were confronted with the difficult task of deciding which to publish—how to balance the need for diversity in ideas, back-

## WORLD SUMMIT IN REFLECTION

ground, and context, while ensuring the highest quality.<sup>1</sup> We chose as best we could, in some cases reluctantly deciding not to publish good submissions that overlapped with others, or we felt might have overrepresented certain views or groups.

We are pleased to include a strong pair of traditional research articles, as well as 35 Forum pieces. Hans Klein begins the issue by offering the reader a balanced overview of the WSIS by separating its institutional form from content, and seeking to understand its outcomes. Derrick Cogburn gives critical insights into civil society participation in the WSIS

process as suggested by analysis of online communication.

The Forum pieces are divided into Overview, Context, and Setting; Critical Themes; Normative Frameworks; Voices and Participation; Globalization and Development; and Outcomes and Paths to Tunis. We conclude with a brief look at WSIS by the numbers. Our assignment of the essays to one section or another is not meant to be perfect, and the papers as a whole do convey the bold range of ideas and arguments.

---

1. As a matter of fact, this editorial process was so interesting—and challenging—that we made a short audio program from it, available at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/audio/WSIS>.