

## Recognizing Cultural Diversity as a Dynamic Force in Cyberspace

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Far from the madding crowd of the recent World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), one asks: "Why? What's the purpose of this frenzied rush to agree on principles and action? Is it the imperious need to 'bridge the digital divide' or is there something else that we all missed?"

On a tone of disarming simplicity, Argentina's Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Daniel Filmus, explained that WSIS's central theme was *la diversidad cultural* (cultural diversity) from which all other considerations must indeed flow. Furthermore, cultural diversity is, by nature, political and requires all stakeholders, whatever their perspective, to react to issues of diversity as either consumers of the product of diversity or as producers of diversity. From that point forward, one must be prepared to delve into a nest of technical, business, social, legal, and regulatory issues, most of which have the potential to become extremely divisive when one considers the wide range of vested interests among actors striving to "bridge the divide." Within what legal framework will they act? Will they do so ethically?

Truly, we are witness to the emergence of a new world order where cultural imperialism may well retreat in the face of the universal need to recognize and dignify diversity. The recognition of cultural diversity in cyberspace is, in fact, an opportunity for world citizens to structure a new environment where the rules of creaky industrial capitalism may no longer apply, where we may have to redefine power relationships and the very nature of "cyberproperty" and "cyberrights."

In this sense, the concepts of intellectual property and rights have necessarily taken on new meaning in a cyberworld where the creation and transfer of knowledge occur in a diversified global environment whose previously accepted "rules" are in flux. It has taken the world community some 10 years to realize that the process of globalization under the aegis of the American industrial complex has not produced homogeneity but rather familiarized us with greater diversity and an extended range of cultures (Featherstone, 1993, 169). It is in this context that UN organizations such as UNESCO are now at-

tempting to define new conditions that will apply to global access to information, unfettered intercultural communication, and the sharing of knowledge on a scale never before experienced in the history of humankind.

The WSIS process and the December 2003 declarations of both UN member states and civil society have, in fact, underscored the need to rethink the information, communication, and knowledge framework which heretofore has more often than not been an impediment to international development and deepened the "digital divide." To paraphrase Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig, we must now turn these concepts on their heads if we are truly to bridge the divide and bring developing nations up to the level of an international standard, while at the same time respecting their rights and their distinct languages and cultures (2003). In other words, development must become incremental, building on knowledge bases that form part of an international commons.

This more open approach to bridging the digital divide will require some degree of resolve since the tone set at PrepCom1 echoed the thinly veiled desire of the International Chamber of Commerce, private-sector entities who were given a voice in the WSIS process, and certain UN member states whose foreign policies often seemed more in tune with a strategic business development plan for the IT sector conceived under the "old" rules of commercial engagement. Notwithstanding the representations made by civil society from the outset, the society targeted for development remains an "information" society. In the words of Sergio Marchi, the Canadian Ambassador to the World Trade Organization, developed nations will "disseminate" information and knowledge to developing nations in an attempt to "bridge the digital divide." (Marchi, 2003, 2) It is precisely against this neocolonial attitude that civil society had tried to work throughout the build-up to the December 2003 Summit; there is a sense that the process has failed and that the final outcome will serve more to defend the international business interests of the developed world than to give rise to a new order of open communication, freer flows of information and knowledge creation, and (re)creation liberated from the fetters of the industrial age and colonialist concepts of property and intellectual rights.

So, was the purpose to reinforce the extant order

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or to revolutionize information, communication, and knowledge in a new social order by putting developing nations on a more equal footing with former colonial powers and their hegemonic cultures and languages? Was the purpose to secure greater freedoms in totalitarian states and authoritarian regimes or to make empty declarations that would allow many states to continue their policies of information control, filtered communication, and censored sources of knowledge? The final declaration in the eyes of many did not go far enough to allow international organizations such as the United Nations to support new approaches to development which respect today's real diversity and provide a roadmap leading to the equitable development of knowledge, communication, and Information Societies that truly respect human rights and freedoms.

As we look forward to Tunis in 2005, all stakeholders must reflect on the recognition of diversity as a dynamic. Tunis will provide a unique opportunity for countries, international organizations, the private sector and civil society to undertake actions which will go beyond vacuous declarations. The official recognition of this dynamic will also constrain authoritarian regimes, such as Tunisia, to prove their resolve to engage in an open process that respects cultural diversity, plural bases of knowledge, open cybercommunications, and free access to information. If Tunisia, which tended to avoid issues of rights and freedoms leading up to and throughout the Geneva Summit, cannot set itself as an example of the new order, the chances of bridging the digital divide will be slim indeed. ■

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## ICTs and the World of Work: Weaving a Bright New Fabric or a Tangled Web?

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Labor is too often excluded from discussions about the Information Society. It is, however, one of the critical components. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing not only people's actual work environments, but also the way labor markets operate. These technologies are modifying the competitive environment of firms in most industries and countries in the world by altering information asymmetries in the markets for goods, services, and labor. ICTs are also contributing to a reduction in transportation and transactions costs which, in tandem with globalization, are increasing the commerce of goods and the trade of previously localized services. Such transformations are in turn promoting outsourcing and subcontracting, which encourage the creation of complex supply chains. Outsourcing can lead to industrial restructuring with losses in employment in some sectors and growth in others; these results in changes to the configuration of the labor force as demand for specific competencies shifts, altering wage and employment structures and often increasing inequality.

The Geneva WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action seem to be guided by two implicit assumptions. The first is that improved access—both in terms of availability of services and reduced usage costs—will reduce inequality. The second is that only positive outcomes can result from the adoption of ICTs. Unfortunately, neither of these two assumptions is true. This paper explores these assumptions that shape the Geneva Plan of Action and suggests important aspects that should be addressed in the upcoming Tunis phase of WSIS.

Access to ICTs leverages or amplifies firms' and individuals' existing endowments. Enterprises and individuals that lack the know-how to implement ICTs are at a disadvantage and must invest heavily to catch up. However, while the laggards are catching up, the endowed individuals and enterprises continue to progress. It is indeed extremely difficult to leapfrog the knowledge acquisition processes. It should therefore be self-evident that ICTs are, inherently, sources of inequality. Policies that exclusively