

FORUM

“digital divide” simply reflects the political, social, economical, and cultural divide among and within nations.

There is still a long road ahead to harmonize civil society aspirations of building information and communication societies that are people-centered, inclusive, and equitable, and as the Civil Society Declaration states, “where development is framed by fundamental human rights and oriented to achieving a more equitable distribution of resources,” and to have them realized. ■

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Time To Discuss Core Values of the Information Society?

Stephen Hicks

As an academic member of the Center for International Legal Studies and a mere observer of the WSIS proceedings, I found the proceedings on the whole inaccessible and lacking focus on the essential issues around the formation and adoption of values for cyberspace. My comments begin with some personal experiences, from which I draw inferences and their implications for Tunis.

The Summit's organization did not support its lofty goals. The atmosphere of armed guards, entourages, screened enclaves, the trade fair, and the distribution of position papers and advocacy of every conceivable interest group was more consistent with a carnival than a conference, and the informality undermined the importance of the occasion. The number of sessions, concurrently held, the lack of clear publication of their participants and content, and especially their lengthy duration, all converged to become a deterrent to participation and a disincentive to processing the very information the Summit was supposed to share.

I was excited by the prospect of a political agenda instead of the usual academic discourse, but the difference I hoped for did not materialize. The fact that politics is about making decisions that affect the real world was obscured by the presentation of the Summit as a forum—even a diversion—from the politics. Interactions between the much-vaunted triangulation of governments, corporations, and civil society seemed invisible, and the compromises over language for public pronouncements, Statement of Principles, or the Plan of Action for Tunis did not appear to be for public edification.

The inaccessibility, the informality, the invisibility furthered the illusion of the Summit as groundbreaking, although it was unexpectedly routine and predictably confrontational. The focus was on privacy, access, control, returns on investment, and so on. Everyone was acutely aware of what was at stake. In fact, “stakeholders” became a code word for everyone, as if being there were a guarantee of participation, as if political society, were synonymous with civil society, or order with the state. The openness of this important agenda became a metaphor for its closure at the first stage of the WSIS.

The Summit could have benefited from a more

academic orientation. I have read very thoughtful contributions to the “prepcoms” in which topics such as the institutional complexity of the summit process, the historical significance of information technology, and the theoretical nature of international order have been considered. Some frankness about these basics would have raised the level of consciousness about the process and contributed to the feeling of achieving something, especially for those stakeholders without a say or a vote. In particular, apart from jargon about the “digital divide,” the uniqueness of the opportunity facing the world today of distributing such a valuable resource as information, was barely in evidence.

Some analogies about the appropriateness or otherwise of other historical times might have proved illuminating. Virtual reality echoes with our exploration and exploitation of outer space, of Antarctica, of the “undiscovered” lands of sea traders. The struggle for control is easily compared to that of the pope and the emperor for the inner space of spiritual “man” or “his” civil nature. The values at stake are cast in the language of liberalism, capitalism, and democracy, as if the industrial revolution were repeating itself. The polarization of individual freedom and legal control is framed by our modern preoccupation with rules, systems, and processes. In different ways panels on each of these academic theses would have brought to light some hidden assumptions or unexamined premises in the positions of governments, private enterprises, and civil society.

With such analogies in mind, I think the WSIS could have escaped its own confining premises. A new dimension has opened up. It is a reality that idealism now is normal. To dream is less than visionary—it is necessary. Therefore, what was most obviously missing from the discourse of the WSIS was the most basic realization that the mode or manner or medium of the constitution of norms for virtual reality needs to be explicated. Throughout history, normativity, whether in the form of dogmatic demand systems, creeds of belief, or personal value systems has been the driving force of exploration and exploitation. This is the work to be done now before Tunis; that is to ask: What is the value of cyberspace or virtual reality, how are our values for it to be constructed, what should they be? Only then will we be able to ask who can supply or frustrate them.

Before we value autonomy, or information, or returns on investment, which anyway are anachronistic, we must evaluate the example of people and the expectations they generate, the reciprocity, compromise, and sacrifices they make, and the whole dynamic of the constitution of norms of order already taking shape around us. We will learn then not only what is possible and why some things are impossible—which we already know—but also by what name to call them and how to undo or rework them.

In one sense this is only the clash of civilizations, of social and liberal democracy, of authoritarianism, tribalism or religion, but in another sense the revolution in information technology forces us to confront our responsibility for history in the making and undertake an examination of what we are doing, if not before we do it. The way to do this is to examine the very way norms of order are constituted.

The challenge for Tunis is to have the WSIS examine the constitution of the society that information is delivered to by new technologies. ■

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