

process presents a tremendous opportunity to overcome reservations and start collaborating, not only with governments, but with the private sector.

A Bold Idea for the Road Ahead

The concerns we at bridges.org had when first hearing about WSIS and its objective to include “all voices” were proved correct. If African civil society wants its voice heard at the international level, it needs to organize itself, collaborate, build consensus, and use the media effectively to communicate its positions. At the same time, if the international community really is interested in African civil society’s perspective, it must more wholeheartedly support society’s efforts to participate.

Looking ahead to Tunis, there is enough time to address some of these problems. To ensure African civil society’s effective participation, why not create an alternative WSIS—either as an independent element of the WSIS process (there were many such events and parallel tracks in Geneva) or as a separate process. This could be used to collect the views of civil society and present them in a way that it will be difficult to ignore—by using the media effectively, by presenting a collective position on the issues, and by demonstrating a willingness and ability to participate in the international debate in a constructive manner. The people of Africa need a voice of their own, and African civil society must be there to represent them. ■

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On Research and the Role of NGOs, in the WSIS Process

*Divina Frau-Meigs*¹

Having participated in the drafting committee (Content & Themes) as focal point for the education and research family, and more specifically, having submitted the final points of the literacy, education, and research sections, as well as contributing to public domain issues, my analysis of the WSIS process bears on two sets of results. One is the renewed place of research; the other is the increased legitimacy of the role of NGOs within the ranks of other civil society actors.

On Education, Research, and the Public Domain

A general consensus has formed around education. The official document and the civil society document both extol it as a principle and as a need. Because it seems the most democratically acceptable for all, there has been no heated debate over it, contrary to other issues, such as human rights or Internet governance. However, the two documents are in fact divided over a common value. While nation-states tend to instrumentalize education for the creation of an efficient labor force, civil society sees education and literacy as a means to build life-long autonomy and collaborative exchanges. Civil society considers education on a continuum of knowledge, consistently connecting it to related issues of access, capacity-building, community-based solutions, public domain commons, linguistic diversity, and pluralistic approaches to cultures.

The Perils of Ignoring Social Sciences Research

Contrary to education, research—the pillar upon which any new construction of knowledge rests—has been neglected in the debate, or rather, in the official view of nation-states, when it is mentioned, it relates to R&D in the industrial perspective of applied and hard sciences, basically connected to utilitarian technological advances and product development. The soft sciences have been consistently neglected in the process. This can be explained partly because they have no apparent link with information technologies, partly because they

1. *In spite of my institutional involvement in the WSIS process (as Deputy Secretary General of the International Association for Media and Communication Research and as focal point for the education and research family), this paper reflects only my personal views.*

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are “dangerous”: research, especially in the fields of diffusion of innovations and social uses of media and technology, can be critical of the all-technological approach. The results show that unless a certain technology meets a local demand and offers a solution to real problems it is not adopted. They also confirm that, if adopted, technology will be adapted: the most interesting social uses of technology are rarely foreseen by engineers. The relationship between pornography and any new technology is troubling and irksome for many, but it is a sign of the adaptability of technological innovation once it is in the hands of a variety of users. Yet, most nation-states coming to the Summit were only interested in acquiring the latest technology (IPV6), with a view of rationalizing governmental functions only (including surveillance and monitoring of citizens).

Social sciences are critical of buzzwords and they can but express doubts about the so-called Information Society. When words are still the cement of action, of negotiation, of declarations of principles, when words are supposed to convey solidarities between countries in a globalized world, pondering them can be worth the time. The civil society document reflects this careful weighing of the meaning of the words that bind us, by systematically replacing *information* by *knowledge*, by associating *information* with *communication*, by adding an *s* to society, thus acknowledging the diversity of cultures.

More disturbingly, social sciences research underlines the difficulties of articulating information, expertise, and know-how at the local level. The data show how difficult it is to realize fast digital advantages and dynamics for the populations in need or marginalized worldwide. While most research extols the potential of the technologies for the empowerment of individuals and communities alike, it also underlines uncertainties about the social outcomes, the real needs, the failures, and the risks. Research insists that the effective use of information and communication technologies in relation to the social environments in which they are being implanted and tested still need to be documented and evaluated, even before new forms of technology are developed or “pushed” as inevitabilities on some communities. Without addressing these issues, the digital divide will never be bridged. Knowledge societies will fail if no self-supporting system for culturally appropriate learning and research practices is established, in these areas for which the information and commu-

nication technologies hold out, paradoxically, the greatest promise for material and humanistic gains.

Researchers during the WSIS process have helped civil society reassess the modifications introduced by globalization and by technological possibilities for empowerment. They have been able to inject in the global debate an alternative model for research and technology, different from the traditional R&D model of the industrial age. This industrial model, which served the Western world for 200 years, relied on stable scientific disciplines, with their borders clearly marked, with their maps of knowledge and their hierarchy of content, with their strict selection of scientists and engineers at the entrance-level, with their own sets of evaluations, standards, and intellectual property laws. This inherited model, which has accompanied the spread of nationalism, tends to favor some European countries, the United States, and Japan, with a balance of power tilting toward international corporations headquartered in these nation-states.

What the process has also revealed is the cultural conflict even within the industrial model, as some members of the world of computer science and research have joined the ranks of civil disobedience, questioning the monopolistic practices of multinational corporations. These corporations are still dealing with old-economy standards, masterminding the control of resources, often with people with legal corporate training rather than scientific training. On a rhetorical level, the economic benefits due to the “invisible hand” permit industrial corporations to identify their interests with the economic interests of the world—past, present, and future—with no evidence that any particular policy of theirs coincides with the general interest at all. Not proven as such, interesting outcomes may emerge from the margins . . . or from within.

The Alternative Agenda

Information and knowledge-based societies and economies challenge the old geography and the stability of established power. Scattered in its various sections and subsections, the civil society document offers an alternative model of R&C (Research and Collaboration), whose various components have only recently gelled into a coherent whole. Its key elements point to the sustainable spread of prosperity beyond material goods and their market reproduction, to include knowledge and a better functioning

of the world society. Civil society proposals underline the need for:

- community-based self-supporting systems for culturally appropriate learning and research practices, with built-in maintenance programs and upgrading capacities;
- e-learning extensions and long-distance education transfers, complementary to traditional educational resources and methods, in combination with community media, in a local context of media pluralism and linguistic diversity;
- open, collaborative, and self-organized publishing models in hard and soft sciences and for software production;
- capacity building that focusses on learners' competence at all levels of education and training, by encouraging the free flow of knowledge and by recognizing the central role and multiple functions of libraries and schools;
- public domain preservation, participation, and enhancement, to be achieved by convincing content producers to be active participants in the open-access paradigm of knowledge, along the lines delineated in a variety of documents and initiatives (Budapest Open Access Initiative, Berlin Declaration, Creative Commons, Open Courseware Initiative, etc.);
- transparent evaluations of global barriers to knowledge and education, by looking beyond technological obstacles and solutions at legal and institutional restrictions that cause overly restrictive and corporate-dominated commercial distortions (such as intellectual property laws and international standards and patents);
- new designs of degree and diploma accreditations, even when dealing with international or regional educational agencies, granted by local legitimate entities, in keeping with their expectations of content and practices.

On the Role of NGOs, Past and to Come

The role of NGOs in this proposal of an alternative agenda for research has been essential. This role of soft-yet-firm civil disobedience was not accepted as legitimate in the beginning of the process (and remains under question at this point). Their representativity was questioned, especially when compared with more organized actors of civil society as de-

finied by the United Nations (which include municipalities, trade unions, etc.). Older collaborators with the nation-states, such as the corporations of the private sector, also objected. Doubts were expressed about the capacity of NGOs to organize, to master different approaches and appreciate the stakes, to resist the temptation of secession or withdrawal from the process altogether, and to gather the resources sufficient to reply almost instantaneously to official documents. Yet at the very locations of the negotiations, in Geneva and Paris, NGOs found themselves in the position of direct interlocutors of the nation-states.

The Uses and Limitations of the Information-Communication Paradigm

NGOs were in fact able to test the information-communication paradigm as a reciprocal space and a temporary zone of shared knowledge and collaborative work. They were able to use the structuring capacities of their networks to consult with their base and reach over large distances, in spite of some shortcomings, mostly due to language barriers. They were slightly overwhelmed by the final stages of the WSIS process, which required a significant presence in Geneva, but this difficulty was abated by the then-familiar use of the e-mail lists and also their knowledge of their reciprocal positions and the general guidelines and benchmarks they had adopted.

So, the Internet technology—adopted and adapted as a relational collaborative space by NGOs—succeeded. The capacity to mobilize real people through virtual communication, to create interaction, was made possible by a certain congruence between cause, medium, and network. It allowed NGOs to protest on the spot, to lodge complaints and requirements, and to participate in a constructive way, though they could only claim to be a nonrepresentative but operational sample of global public opinion. This was not per se an experience in direct participatory democracy. It was rather an experience that showed that the Internet could work as a public forum, though the nation-states would like it to remain the common carrier it currently is. By locating forums in traditional national capitals or international venue sites such as Geneva, the nation-states have the perception that they can control both electronic and real exchanges more easily, but this strategy partly backfired on them.

Ironically then, technology served NGOs in their

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capacity to organize civil society. For NGOs—real networks in their own right—the technology enhanced the capacity for mobilization, exchange, and debate, as well as evaluation of the different steps of the WSIS process. It has allowed them to evaluate the role of communication within the political process, between mediation and mediatization. In some cases, paradoxically, it has also allowed NGOs to protect the sovereignty of the states against their own tunnel vision, their tendency to accept interpretations of national sovereignty as interpreted by their inheritors, the transnational corporate world.

One problem remains: the nagging feeling that NGOs tend to represent less a global public opinion than segments of the global population that are sensitive to issues of dependency and access, even if they belong to the middle class and are part of an intellectual elite (in ways trade unions or peasant coalitions are not). This was apparent in the functioning of the drafting group, more on the basis of coalitional tacit “trust” than formal mandates from their respective NGOs or even their families and causes. It was probably reinforced by having to take a position on an agenda mostly set by the nation-states and by writing on single issues, a practice that cannot produce the maximal level of implication and endorsement. Single issues also imply underlying issue networks and issue participants. They tend to blur the global picture and the general interest. This confirms, if need be, that nobody can expect technology alone to create participation and direct democracy. The political implication of citizens is of the essence and those motivations are not technological, they are social.

One failure is worth pondering. NGOs have failed to get the attention of the general media outside the WSIS process, before and during the Summit, even if they effectively used media repertoires and strategies and communication skills within civil society. This can be explained partly because it was not part of the media agenda to deal with a subject so close to the quick, partly because NGOs remained guarded from journalists and other media operators. They have experienced to their own detriment in the past that such partial entities can represent their views with their own professional biases. They have learned to avert the increasing tendency of institutional media to represent views offering progressive proposals for change in negative ways. And yet they do need to broadcast their ideas in the mainstream of national populations.

The Role of Researchers in NGOs and the WSIS Process

The role of the research community, taking into account the soft and hard scientists and also the input of some socially aware and responsible computer researchers and professionals, has been as providers of complex explanations and long-term understanding of competing views of the technological world. This role will not diminish, as our societies become increasingly global and as the need for systems of global conflict resolution and for shared knowledge, the so-called “world governance,” is expanding. The researchers helped NGOs and other civil society actors to articulate their views and to organize their participation, more painfully probably than the private sector and other stakeholders because of their own self-imposed double-bind of respecting pluralistic views and yet couching them in an all-encompassing language acceptable by all.

As a result of the WSIS process, the debate within the research community has been relaunched about its capacity to react fast and to make a difference. Researchers have come to the realization that they must keep working at a double task: maintaining a cool distance from events, yet providing compelling thoughts to feed to the NGOs and to governments. They have the responsibility to make sure their informed point of view penetrates the global public space, so that their community remains engaged in the national and international debates. They have already taken the risk of engaging in proposals of models for action, in open procedures that must be constructive and not only critical of institutional and economic logics.

The current situation shows a bipolar situation for researchers: they work within institutions inherited from the industrial age paradigm, which endures in spite of increasing malaise, and they are activists in entities that are fragile, as all NGOs are, depending for their survival on voluntary work and financial contributions from committed membership. Rethinking their practices and modes of production of knowledge, they must take full advantage of information and communication paradigms of power. They stand divided, between the weightiness of their scientific real-life activities and the lightness of their digital online activities, which give visibility to their alternative views. Both stances are necessary, none are free or easy or cost-effective. What is sure—and quite exhilarating—is that they are not in a configuration of “more of the same.” They are in

the process of reinventing their professions and their modes of exchange.

At this stage, the end of part I of the Summit and the beginning of part II, it seems clear that civil society has planted the seeds for alternative and competing views on research, education, and technology. Some hybridization process is at work among traditional, industrial, and national forms of knowledge production, not yet obsolete and still efficient, and new forms that appear as viable alternative models for the production and exchange of knowledge. Potential changes, for the future, will come from this dialogue, at times painful, at times fruitful, among the corporate sector, the governmental world, and the civil society actors. In this tripartite collaboration, NGOs have surprised the international community at large by the force of their proposals and their capacity to stay in the process. Some of their language and their claims, already appropriated by nation-states, are probably going to be institutionalized, hopefully toward more cultural pluralism and a more diversified use of media and technologies for the building of knowledge societies.

Another kind of hybridization is appearing between promoters of direct participation and promoters of political representation. Some actors have weakened, such as trade unions and political parties, but others have gained strength—NGOs, for instance—to the point that some governments, such as the United States, have felt the need to create an NGOwatch (via the American Enterprise Institute, www.ngowatch.org), to monitor the lobbying efforts of these new actors. These trends show the need to strike a new balance between the power of civil society actors, the nation-states, and the private sector. Hence, in spite of current resistance from the corporate world, there will probably be a shift in favor of a new balance of intellectual properties as a common ground for individual creators to protect their works and for civil society users to benefit rapidly from their contributions. The ingenuity of solutions that must to be found is also exemplified in the movements for digital checks and balances and for the transfer of Internet governance, away from proprietary private hands.

The new balance will strike a *modus vivendi* between political mediation and technological mediatization, and some actors will suffer more than others. The NGOs most capable of federating, not simply around single issues but around general inter-

est issues, in association with related social movements, will be the most likely to push their vision and foster social change. It is essential that these tendencies do not lead to the privatization of public space nor to the erasure of global public issues. NGOs must stand watch, as the new tripartite governance in the making cannot simply model itself on a corporate organization of functions, powers, and knowledge production. More political and social awareness must be produced at the level of the WSIS in the years to come, even beyond stage II. The process is far from finished; its best institutional use so far has been the possibility for NGOs and researchers to test the strength of their ideas, in the interest of the broadest possible civil society. ■

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