Signal to Noise

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The number one problem at the WSIS was noise, both literally and figuratively.

On a physical level, the WSIS was a very noisy convocation. Housed in the enormous, drafty, warehouse-like space of the Geneva Palexpo, noise was a constant irritation for the participants.

Several hundred exhibitors in the ICT4D "fair" created a constant din in the Palexpo, with many exhibition stands featuring blaring music, endlessly looped video presentations, and hundreds of animated conversations echoing throughout the conference center. It was the Information Society as carnival—colorful, surprising, and deafening.

Meeting spaces had no roofs and no soundproofing, with only thin portable walls erected between them. So there was no escaping the cacophony from the exhibition area. Worse still, each meeting had its own amplification equipment, sometimes resulting in an escalating "volume war" as each panel of speakers sought to drown out the amplified sound of the neighboring panels.

I had the difficult task of addressing a group of young people at the "youth corner" of the exhibition hall, where I had to yell at the top of my lungs in order to be heard.

It is hard to imagine an environment less suitable for reasoned dialogue and negotiation.

The WSIS was "noisy" in other ways as well. The din of diverse voices represented in Geneva was sometimes overwhelming, from the polished tones of government diplomats to the angry shouts of protesters to the well-rehearsed pitches of company spokespeople. There were at times a dozen meetings occurring simultaneously, on every subject imaginable from HIV/AIDS education to cyberterrorism. Following even a fraction of the proceedings was nigh impossible.

At one point I found myself observing a conference on community media while at the same time accessing a live Webcast of the official WSIS plenary on my laptop. So with one ear I was listening to an indigenous woman describe community radio in Guatemala, while with the other ear I listened to the foreign minister of Greece speak about e-government.

With so many interests and groups demanding attention, there were few opportunities for groups to listen to each other.

The most glaring example of this was the official "interactive dialogues" organized by the WSIS secretariat. These "multisectoral" dialogues gathered high-level dignitaries from governments, business, and civil society purportedly to discuss important issues in the Information Society. Unfortunately, the meeting times were so tight, and the invited participants so numerous, that each dignitary was only allowed to speak for three minutes! Bringing together these important leaders from around the globe to meet on important ICT issues, and then allowing each of them to speak for only 180 seconds borders on the absurd.

In contrast, one highlight for me was a civil society meeting on the governance of ICTs sponsored by the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. This meeting brought together a range of civil society leaders to widen the discussion on what is typically thought of as ICT governance. Speakers addressed an array of governance issues, including management of Internet domain names, e-commerce, information and network security, intellectual property, and radio frequency allocation.

Most importantly, there was a sincere effort by participants to share experiences and lessons with each other. We shared a common interest in seeing how strategies employed by civil society groups in one forum might be applied to other areas. We listened to each other.

One concrete outcome of the WSIS, besides the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action documents, is the call for establishment of two working groups on the thorny and contentious issues of ICT governance and financing. There are a range of positions on both of these issues, in many cases diametrically opposing ones. Between now and Tunis, we need to find a way to move beyond the cacophony of competing interests. We need to create the conditions for the various actors to frankly and openly express their views and arguments with each other, listen carefully, and come to common decisions.

Creating the ground rules to enable this kind of conversation is key. The modalities employed by the Multistakeholder Dialogues of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) are a good model. The dialogues in the CSD have discarded the typical diplomatic niceties and protocols, and adopted a

more informal and unscripted style of meetings. While there still are, of course, many critiques and problems with the CSD Multistakeholder Dialogues, several important proposals have sprung from these meetings, such as initiatives on eco-tourism and sustainable business practices.

This is just one idea. What is clear is that whatever modalities are employed to move toward the next phase in the WSIS process, we must move beyond the traditional statecentric UN summit format. Otherwise we risk losing the signal amid the noise. ■

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A Tale of Paragraph 4: Stating the Obvious at the WSIS

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Behind every paragraph, line, and even word of the WSIS Declaration of Principles is a story. This is the tale of two lines of Paragraph 4, which read: "Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society."

At the Paris WSIS Inter-Sessional meeting in July 2003, several ad hoc intergovernmental working Groups were set up. Each took a section of the draft declaration, aiming to gain agreement at PrepCom III a few months later. Paragraphs 1 and 1A were taken together. The former was a reaffirmation of fundamental human rights. There were three options for the latter, the third of which began with the sentence: "We recognise the right to communicate and the right to access information and knowledge as a fundamental human right."

The right to communicate is a contentious issue in the WSIS. Some use it as a vigorous expression of support for universal access. The CRIS Campaign uses it as a collective term for all rights associated with media and communication. And there are others still under the influence of the divisive battles in UNESCO in the 1980s, when the right to communicate began as a struggle for more equitable global communication structures and ended up as a battlefield of the Cold War. The Working Group set up in Paris to deal with Paragraphs 1/1A, chaired by Canada, a strong supporter of universal access, called itself the *Right to Communicate Working Group*. Although probably initially unaware of the controversial choice of title, the chair soon realized she had a difficult task ahead of her.

At PrepCom III, a friend alerted me late the night before to the ad hoc Working Group's first meeting. At 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September I7, I showed up. The chair, presumably to circumvent controversy, opened the meeting by excluding from subsequent deliberations Paragraph 1A, Option 3 on the right to communicate, noting—and she had a point—that it was impossible to recognize a right that had no legal existence.

Civil society at that time was allowed 10 minutes for interventions, and could sit through the rest of the meeting as observers. Ill prepared, I mumbled a