

THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY Setting the Communication Agenda for the 21st Century? An Ongoing Exercise

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The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was held in Geneva, 10–12 December 2003. Over 10,000 delegates, from all over the world and different sectors of society, gathered in the spaces of Geneva Palexpo for three days of debates, conferences, formal and informal meetings, rituals of diplomacy and electronic story telling. Geneva was the end of an 18-month preparatory process and an intermediate stage of the WSIS, as a second phase will be organized in Tunis, in November 2005.

Governments, intergovernmental organizations, business entities and civil society groups have been involved in an exercise that can be read in different ways. It has been a political and a media event. It has made the connections between technology, culture and society visible. WSIS also offered an opportunity to redefine the conceptual boundaries of issues that are crucial to societal transformations at the beginning of the 21st century. It is therefore meaningful to attempt a critical evaluation, starting from some basic questions: where did WSIS come from? What really happened in Geneva? Did the Summit achieve anything at all? Do the final documents that were adopted, the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action, offer new insights and visions? What are the stakes in the second stage of the process? Finally, is WSIS relevant to communication scholars?

To answer this last question we can start considering the WSIS as a communicative event. Its aims were the ‘definition of a common vision of the information society’ and the production of written documents that clearly state such a vision and the path to achieving it. These have been elaborated over time through political negotiation and stakeholders’ contributions, through discussions and consensus-building efforts. All negotiation, inside and outside the official process, has implied choices in terminology and topics: what should or should not find a place in the document, what should be mentioned and avoided, what definitions should be used, what meaning for concepts. In spite of the fact that the WSIS outcome is not a binding agreement among states, those documents are agreed-upon written texts that contribute to the creation of a semantic space, a ‘world of words’.

WSIS can also be considered a communicative event because it has proven crucial for governmental interests to be made explicit, alliances to be built and different visions to become visible. According to Baylis and Smith (1997) 'Intergovernmental organizations provide focus for global politics. . . . They become distinct structures for political communication.' A high-level political summit called by the United Nations, with the participation of a number of intergovernmental as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations, should therefore be seen in its own right as a 'structure for political communication'.

WSIS was also a media event, though maybe not in the traditional sense of mainstream media being interested in reporting on statements, controversies and outcome. Mainstream media were actually quite silent about WSIS. Nevertheless I suggest that media events, in the era of integrated technologies, should be considered in a different way. New media and communication technologies offer the opportunity to develop forms of alternative mediated communication. Thus, the huge amount of information that has been gathered and shared and the modes of communication that have been activated through the various websites and mailing lists and, more interestingly, through the networking modalities of civil society actors, have been transmitted and reproduced in different places and languages. Thousands of people, in their local contexts, have been able to follow the discussions and, in many cases, to contribute in defining the conceptual boundaries of issues, cooperating from a distance with those who were operating inside the WSIS, thus linking local and global.

Finally the WSIS was a communicative event about communication. Visions of the information society can only be developed if information, communication and knowledge are addressed together; if technology infrastructures and media contents are debated in the wider framework of global communication and media systems; if new critical social and cultural issues raised by the transformations in technology are fully recognized as part of the agenda.

Throughout the process a number of catchwords emerged, among them connectivity, development and digital divide. I suggest that 'convergence' should be added as an underlying conceptual nexus: convergence not only in technology, but also in policy-making, actors' orientation and discourse. WSIS has offered a window of opportunity to collectively refine the political agenda for communication, for policy-makers as well as for other 'stakeholders' and scholars: a content-oriented agenda, but also a process-aware agenda. For this reason, analysing WSIS requires focusing both on the content issues that have been faced, debated or marginalized, and on the procedural aspects, the overall political outcome that parallels the final written outputs.

In terms of content we should notice how the agenda was slowly expanded. Starting from the technologically determined and infrastructure-oriented issues that were indicated in the early documents (those prepared by the secretariat¹ but also, for instance, the first contribution from the European Union²), two years of debates, at different levels in different settings, have produced an agenda that is articulated around the interrelation of knowledge, information and communication; based on the recognition of non-governmental actors as stakeholders who should be directly involved in building the new society and

in its governance; grounded in the idea that technologies should be considered not as ends in themselves but as means in the information society. Human rights, access to knowledge, the crucial role of education; the possible failures of the market and the need to reaffirm the principle of universal service; the need for regulatory mechanisms within a globally liberalized context: all these issues have found their way into the discourse (not necessarily agreement or a solution . . .) – a discourse that also has opened to the more controversial topics of security and surveillance, the relation between traditional media and new information technologies in a pluralistic environment, and the necessity to define mechanisms to finance existing divides.

What we have at this stage is a ‘plural’ agenda: infrastructure, access, capacity building, trust and security, enabling environments, ICT applications, cultural and linguistic diversity and the ethical dimension of the information society, with all their implication and challenges, are the main chapters of the official agenda.³ But we should also take into consideration the plurality of documents that were developed alongside the official ones, and presented to the Closing Plenary on 12 December, which show the richness and complexity of stakeholders’ positions.⁴ Finally the very idea of plural ‘information and communication societies’ has been affirmed.⁵

We can also say the agenda is ‘in progress’: Tunis will not only be the occasion to review and evaluate the results of putting the Plan of Action into practice. A number of controversial issues have been postponed, such as Internet governance and financing solutions to the digital divide. Governments are expected to respect their commitments, while non-governmental actors are already planning strategies to develop their input efforts into an impact exercise. Meanwhile awareness has risen and efforts are being made, in local spaces, to enlarge the public debate on these issues. Will the agenda go public?

In terms of outcome, WSIS can be seen as a process of governance itself, since interaction among different actors and different institutional levels has been one of the most interesting aspects. Governments have shared the stage (though, not unexpectedly, on an equal footing) with intergovernmental organization and business entities, but also with women, young people, indigenous peoples, coalitions and advocacy groups and local authorities. A plurality of voices and faces have come together ‘from different continents, cultural backgrounds, perspectives, experience and expertise, acting as members of different constituencies of an emerging global civil society . . .’ (preamble to the Civil Society Declaration, see Documentation Section at the end of this issue of *Gazette*), to talk to each other and be heard.

WSIS has nevertheless demonstrated that the ‘multi-stakeholder approach’ is not a model yet. Different stakeholders have entered the process with their own expectations, their own language, their own cultural and organizational backgrounds and traditions; with their own visions of information societies and of political international processes. Dialogue was not easy and convergence, in this sphere, is not an inevitable consequence. It will be interesting to follow the developments to see how stakeholders will get ready for the second phase; if Tunis will offer another (more, less) participatory space and if this model will be developed in other spaces of governance, at different levels.

A number of other issues will need to be addressed if WSIS is to be remembered in the history of global governance transformations. Civil society still is a controversial concept, though inside WSIS there were attempts to define its boundaries. Can the literature on transnational relations offer insights towards a more sound conceptualization? Local authorities have emerged from the World Summit of Cities and Local Authorities in the Information Society, held in Lyon on 4–5 December 2003, as potentially important actors: will they have a better recognized role in the second phase? Business entities have been ‘visibly absent’, compared with other actors: how should this be evaluated in the overall process? It will also be interesting to see how young people, who have put into the process unexpected ideas, energies and action, will be able to push their discourse further.

Finally, there is the relation between WSIS and geographical contexts. Views and proposals were collected in regional reports from regional conferences and were compiled into documents. In the end, programmes and initiatives will touch again on regional, but also national and local, territories. We should then listen to this plurality of voices and languages; look at the colours of cultures; understand the expectations of peoples and traditions.

Communicating WSIS is about all this. What we have collected in this special issue of *Gazette* is precisely a number of voices, short essays and immediate reflections, that shed some light and colourful insights on the WSIS, with the aim of telling the story and indicating ways for further reasoning. Thanks to the words of scholars and activists who have been involved in the process in different ways, we can not only assess the results from Geneva and forecast developments towards Tunis. We can open the agenda to the public debate. I thank them all for their writings and for having contributed to making WSIS a space of dialogue.

Notes

1. WSIS/PC-1/DOC/4-E, ‘Proposed Themes for the Summit and Possible Outcomes’.
2. WSIS/PC-1/CONTR/3-E, ‘The UN World Summit on the Information Society: The Preparatory Process. Reflections of the European Union’.
3. A useful summary and reference to the follow-ups of Geneva can be found on the website: www.WSIS-online.org
4. I refer to the CS Declaration, the Lyon Declaration, the Indigenous People Declaration and Action Plan, the Declaration on Accessible Information Society, the Swiss Coalition Declaration and Action Plan, the World Electronic Media Forum Report.
5. ‘Information and communication societies’ is the formula adopted in the Civil Society Declaration ‘Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs’ (available at: www.geneva2003.org/wsis/)

Reference

- Baylis, John and Steve Smith (1997) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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