



## From NWICO to WSIS: another world information and communication order?

### Introduction

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*Tunis, March 1976:* the Non-Aligned Symposium on Information prepares a programme for safeguarding national cultures and overcoming global imbalances in information flows and communication systems in order to 'obtain the decolonization of information and initiate a new international order in information'. The mandate came from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Algiers in 1973 which had declared that 'the activities of imperialism are not confined solely to the political and economic fields, but also cover the cultural and social fields' calling for 'concerted action in the fields of mass communication'. The Tunis Symposium's call for a New International Information Order, with mechanisms such as the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool, was endorsed by the NAM Summit in Colombo later the same year. This NAM campaign, supported by the socialist countries, led to an historic media debate at the UN and UNESCO as well as in media professional associations and among communication scholars around the world. The concept of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) became a central element in this debate, with landmarks such as the MacBride Commission (1980) and its well-known report *Many Voices, One World*. The great media debate and its historical experience is well documented in communication literature (Gerbner et al., 1993; Golding and Harris, 1997; Vincent et al., 1999; Carlsson, 2003), but an awareness of its relevance to contemporary communication debates is restricted to a narrow sphere of academia and some non-governmental organizations.

*Tunis, November 2005:* information and communication issues are once again debated in an international forum. The second phase of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), following the

Geneva phase held in December 2003, concludes with formulation of commitments for the future and the adoption of a Plan of Action for Implementation. The aim of the Summit was 'to define a common vision of the information society' and to find ways to overcome the digital divide within the UN Millennium Goals. WSIS, under the coordination of the International Telecommunication Union, has generated a noticeable amount of discussion; it has favoured participation of a broad number of actors, both governmental and non-governmental; it has, furthermore, generated expectations about the need for, and feasibility of finding solutions to communication problems, while at the same time tackling the very nature of communication governance in the 21st century (Padovani, 2004).

Information systems, communication gaps, development divides and the role and responsibilities of national and international actors have been keywords in both processes. Yet it has been surprising to notice how the WSIS developed in the absence of any historical perspective. The present communication context, with its globalizing dynamics, trends towards an 'informational paradigm' and emerging trans-national actors, is profoundly different from that of the 1970s. Yet most of the developments we have witnessed in recent years find their roots in technological, societal and political changes that can be traced back to the time when proposals for a NWICO were debated.

As communication scholars involved and interested in the WSIS process we feel this 'historical gap' is a major constraint (Padovani, 2004). It is not just an innocent neglect but a deliberate omission. In any case, lack of historical depth in facing contemporary communication challenges reflects a dubious tendency to understand such challenges as novelties on the world scene, inviting public institutions to respond with a short-sighted political approach.

For these reasons we believe in the contribution that communication researchers and experts can bring, through their knowledge and direct experience, by looking at the political dimension of international debates. Thus we can better understand similarities and differences in the contexts within which issues have been and are debated. We can identify the continuity in problematic aspects of communication as a central element in societal organization. And we can identify specific interests and power relations that underline contemporary priorities in the shaping of policies.

We have therefore promoted an inter-generational conversation: the richness of a dialogue can be enhanced through the insights and direct experience of those who have been, and are today, among the witnesses

of such historical processes. This thematic issue of *Global Media and Communication* presents contributions from senior as well as younger authors, coming from different geographical and cultural backgrounds (Africa, South and North America, South and North Europe), sharing an interest in positioning contemporary communication debates in the broader picture of global transformations.

Guillermo Mastrini and Diego de Charras offer a broad overview of socio-political transformations that have taken place between the 1970s and late 1990s, suggesting how conceptual shifts reflect changes in the structure of the international system and in the political climate. Antonio Pasquali, through a 'reminder' of the multidimensional role played by the global South in initiating debates around communication, offers a critical analysis of the NWICO experience which opens questions on the position of those same actors in today's debates. Andrew Calabrese reflects on the concept of civil society and the practices developed by the Global Justice Movement, and suggests the need for a reflection on the relation between rights and global societal ethics when discussing communication. Then Claudia Padovani investigates, through the analysis of documents, continuities and especially differences in policy discourses between NWICO and WSIS. The contribution from Gado Alzouma explodes some of the myths associated with the power of information and communication technologies for development, focusing on Africa. Finally, Lisa McLaughlin and Victor Pickard examine the crucial issue of internet governance – one of the key WSIS themes.

To render the sense of the conversation, the final part of this introduction has been conceived as a dialogue in itself, aiming at defining the boundaries of the framework within which the different voices contributing to this issue can be appreciated. Claudia Padovani poses questions which she has kept asking while following closely the WSIS preparatory meetings, the two phases of the Summit, as well as attending and organizing WSIS-related events. They reflect the personal experience of a communication scholar interested in global transformations who has witnessed a historical period while being involved in the process as a citizen, and came to realize that individual experiences and their sharing can be among the most meaningful legacies between past and present. Kaarle Nordenstreng responds to the questions with his experience as a participant in the great media debate since the late 1960s, both as a scholar and a representative of professional media associations.

**CP:** Some observers say that WSIS just happened. There was no clear vision behind the call for a high level meeting about information in 1998, nor about the expected outcomes. Yet in the course of the process we learned that different agencies, the UN, ITU, the Swiss and Tunisian governments as well as others, had their own agendas in promoting the Summit. Moreover WSIS was the last of a series of global gatherings through which attention has been focused on several aspects of global transformations; information and communication being the last one and possibly the least publicized among the general public. How would you describe the main differences in the political context that lead to debates in the 1970s in comparison to the present time?

**KN:** The political context is drastically different. In the 1970s the world was divided both along an East–West and a North–South axis. The Cold War division separated the capitalist countries of the West from the socialist countries of the East, although each side was far from a uniform bloc – both had dissidents of various kinds. True, the worst tensions and threats of nuclear war were reduced by the emerging East–West *détente*, with landmarks such as the ‘Helsinki Accord’ of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1975, but still the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact constituted a clear and present political danger for the USA and NATO – and vice versa. On the other hand, the developing countries, with their political organization NAM, constituted a strong voice of the South, placing the North on the defensive, especially after the oil crises of 1973 and 1979. And in the political world of communication the East and the South were ‘natural allies’, placing the West very much on the defensive and rendering the UN organizations including UNESCO relatively hostile to the Western side. This was an explosive situation where NWICO not only represented communication policy issues, but a geopolitical balance of forces in the global arena in general. Today the East–West divide is mostly gone and the North–South divide is in the throes of neo-liberal ‘solutions’, while the NAM is marginalized and the multilateral UN weakened by US-led bilateral relations.

**CP:** If we are to identify the major issues that characterized the WSIS process by referring to the keywords that made up its discourse, we should say that information technology, convergence and connectivity have set the stage for the Summit, thus promoting the idea that technology and infrastructure would in themselves contribute to the realization of the UN Millennium Development Goals. But if we look at

the issues that have become controversial in the debate, such as the governance of the internet, the need for financial mechanisms to overcome digital divides and the whole rhetoric about the multi-stakeholder approach, we find that challenges for the information society call explicitly into question the political dimension. How would you describe the way in which the relation between technological developments and political aspects was dealt with at the time of the NWICO? How did this influence the topics and tone of debate?

**KN:** Indeed, WSIS is predominantly built on an information technology approach, and this is naturally too narrow and shallow for any serious analysis. NWICO was quite the opposite, with predominantly a political approach. However, this political approach does not qualify as a model for replacing a one-sided technological approach. The debate of the 1970s was mostly over-politicized; political considerations dominated so much that little room was left for cool analytical reflection. Hence we should not reduce the issues to either politics or technology but aim for a balanced analytical approach where politics and technology have their proper place along with other relevant factors. So I admit that it is intellectually counterproductive to be too political (as we typically were in the 1970s), but by the same token I insist that it is equally counterproductive to be obsessed just by technology (coming from the land of Nokia I call this the 'Nokia syndrome').

**CP:** WSIS has been widely publicized as the first time in history when a formal and open invitation was issued to non-governmental actors (NGOs) to participate in a UN summit. Evaluation of this has been varied, depending on whether they came from more institutional voices or from those very constituencies which were supposed to be fully involved in the negotiation process. Empirical research has also shown that the influence which non-governmental actors can have on a formal process like WSIS is higher in the initial stages in comparison to final negotiation phases. Moreover, the actual impact seems to be more the result of informal contacts with governmental representatives than an outcome of formal input. Since you have closely followed the role of NGOs in former debates, could you indicate what were their expectations and goals for being involved, which initiatives and modes of action were more effective and if you see any similarity with the WSIS experience?

**KN:** One cannot directly compare different processes, but in general it is

natural that NGOs can be more influential at the beginning than at the end of the process, though informal influence is crucial throughout the process. But I would not put the question in terms of formal/governmental vs informal/non-governmental influence. I would rather look at the substantive issues and the positions of various actors towards them. Often it is more effective for the NGOs (often including activist researchers) to work through governmental delegations (in which they may even have a seat); what matters is the end result and not which party is recorded as the presenter of a position. It is naïve to see governments as intrinsically worthy of suspicion and NGOs as by definition benevolent; both can be good or bad depending on the position at issue. As I put it in an epilogue to one of the media and globalization books, 'a demonization of the state effectively eliminates the democratic aspirations of ordinary people, which after all, constitute the leitmotif for a state in original theories of democracy' (Nordenstreng, 2001: 158). Referring to the NWICO history, I continued:

Given the libertarian bias held even by many leftist media intellectuals, it was relatively easy to construct the big lie that NWICO promoted state control (such as licensing of journalists). A demonized notion of the state travelled so well that many professional and academic experts failed to see that while opposing state control and supporting media freedom they were in fact subscribing to a corporate initiative, conspicuously directed against democratic interests. (p. 159)

On the other hand, the state should not be glorified, either. Sometimes NGOs have a large potential for influence – typically when the governments are very divided or compromised – and on such occasions it is crucial that there is a broad coalition of NGOs to take the initiative. This happened for example at UNESCO during the preparation of the Mass Media Declaration of 1978 and also the MacBride Report of 1980. On the other hand, the follow-up to these documents also divided the NGO community so that its relative importance declined in areas such as professional ethics and the protection of journalists.

**CP:** Critical analyses, such as those we collected in this issue of *Global Media and Communication*, are useful in developing a thorough understanding of issues, interests, power relations and visions of the future that are involved in social and political processes. This has been the case with investigations conducted in the late 1970s as well as of contemporary analyses. However, it has been observed that sometimes they are much stronger in identifying problems than in indicating ways forward. Building on the experience and the evaluation of the NWICO debates,

what would you suggest as relevant aspects to keep in mind, to turn critical understanding of information and communication in contemporary societies into the definition of alternative viable solutions?

**KN:** First, I would refer to my previous answer and reiterate that too much politicization tends to both reduce critical understanding and hamper practical action. The NWICO story shows that a promising beginning may turn into a fruitless political shadow play which effectively blocks even small reforms. In this respect the WSIS provides still a promising platform, with all parties involved in a more or less businesslike dialogue. Information and communication matters are politically quite sensitive, and it is all too easy to let them explode into a paralysing controversy – which is always a trick for those who may prefer to kill the whole exercise. On the other hand, there is no point in pursuing hollow diplomacy, resulting only in formal compromises. The official WSIS outcome from Geneva 2003 (Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action) suffers from this disease of diplomatic consensus, but I would not condemn it totally. After all, it shares elements with the Civil Society Declaration. The latter naturally goes much further in offering a consistent approach to an inclusive information society and it is important that it was done as a relatively uncompromised position. Unfortunately it has not received enough attention in the official follow up towards Tunis 2005. In fact, the first practical action is simply to promote this Civil Society Declaration and expose its profile in comparison to the other official documents. Taken together, these documents contain more than enough alternative solutions to overcome problems of the present order. All stakeholders should just take them seriously and look for ways to contribute in their respective spheres.

**CP:** One final question concerns communication scholars and researchers. WSIS has been a communicative event, though it has not been widely communicated outside UN circles. It has been dealing with information and communication and has contributed to refining a plural agenda for the future. Knowledge societies are supposed to be spaces in which citizens will be able to communicate, interact and participate. But this risks remaining only rhetoric if transformations, challenges and political solutions are perceived as highly technical issues far removed from the public. Public awareness about communication issues has been perceived as crucial for decades before WSIS. How can communication research activists contribute to developing a more general awareness, in relation to the challenges and potentialities of communication and information processes?

KN: Well, this is the 'what is to be done' question for media scholars today. My first answer is simply to address the general call for all stakeholders made above to the specific target group of researchers and educators of the field. We all should get acquainted with the WSIS documents, including the Civil Society Declaration, and take at least preliminary positions about them. No teacher, student or researcher should pass the WSIS by as something just for politicians or diplomats; every respected communication scholar should know its main substance and make at least a passing reference to it in his/her writings at this time. Naturally I don't mean just affirmative praise but solid scholarship, which by its nature should always be critical. WSIS is a perfect case to prove that communication scholarship is living in this world and that accusations about an ivory tower are false.

My second answer to the question on how communication scholars can contribute is to repeat the above emphasis on a historical context – warning against 'presentism' – and on a balanced approach, without a one-sided focus on technology any more than on politics. An important role for the scholars is to serve as watchdogs of the technocratic debates and policies, which tend to forget history and the complexity of social processes.

My third answer finally is to cultivate a meta perspective on the information society by reflecting on its research as done, for example, by Frank Webster (2004). Also, I invite others to join me in placing such specialities as global media and communication studies in an overall history of the field and to reflect upon the disciplinary marriages between ICT and traditional media studies (Nordenstreng, 2004).

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### Biographical notes

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