

## WSIS: ARTICULATING INFORMATION AT THE SUMMIT

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**Abstract** / This brief article examines WSIS as a staging of transnational political communication. Playing with the acronym, it explores a number of moments of articulation and contradiction within the WSIS process, including gender imbalance, the politics of the inside and the outside, the space between rhetoric and action, and the lack of media coverage of a media-focused event. It suggests that WSIS is as relevant for western publics as for southern publics, and that the articulation of civil society within WSIS can be seen as the globalizing of radical democracy.

**Keywords** / articulation / civil society / convergence / gender / WSIS

*... their words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city; which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language. Men and women in balloons fly up from the main square and, armed with mops and scrubbing brushes, do battle with the canopy of words trapped under the sun ... the words resist erasure. The oldest and most stubborn form a thick crust of chattering rage ... the dons' ... arguments ... had so thickly populated the ether that they had seen neither sun nor rain for the past five years. (from Jeanette Winsterson's fantasy of 17th-century London, Sexing the Cherry [Winsterson: 1989: 17-19])*

### WSIS: What's an Acronym among Friends?

WSIS is the acronym for the World Summit on the Information Society. There are already various orthographic plays on the very pronunciation of WSIS, some developed by protagonists themselves, which locate it in a longer history of powerful acronyms in the field of international communication. The most obvious is the discursive movement between NIO (EnEyeEyeO) or NWICO (NooWeCoo), that historical moment of the 1970s when arguments about the power of the media, imbalances in information flow and 'media imperialism' wracked the debates within UNESCO and the Non-Aligned Movement. If the focus then was mainly on broadcasting, one of the positive things to emerge from a summit ostensibly on information technologies is some agreement about the significance of convergence and that media and ICTs need to be analysed together. Now, as then, the struggle remains to move away from technologically driven analysis and policy-making towards analysis of the social utilization of forms of communication, their meaning and relevance.

What I would like to do in this brief piece is explore the World Summit on the Information Society as a global performance of political talk, of the staging of different forms and different modes of articulation. For Gramsci, hegemony

is a struggle 'to construct (articulate and re-articulate) common sense out of an ensemble of interests, beliefs and principles' to create ideology (Slack, 1996: 117); for Laclau, hegemony is not so much the ability to impose a uniform conception of the world on society but the ability 'to articulate different versions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized' (Slack, 1996: 117). Perhaps most importantly, articulation plays on the idea of a politics constructed from dissimilar elements, either as part of a dominant class for hegemony (see Gramsci) or as part of the ongoing struggle of different social groups to build a radical and plural democracy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Articulation carries notions of a form of politics but also of its expression, of a theory but also a method. I invoke different moments of WSIS as examples of the processes of articulation of an emergent global politics around the information society.

### **Wee Sis: A Little Context**

Yes, I admit it. I was a Summit virgin. Until WSIS I had never stepped up to the summit, never felt the peak experience, had remained at lower levels of political action. I hadn't even attended the delightfully named PrepCom meetings, although I had participated in and monitored a number of electronic lists devoted to the WSIS process and heard a great deal about them from a number of friends and colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

The setting is Geneva in a dank and dreary December. Palexpo, an extension of Geneva airport, feels like a number of airport hangars connected together, cavernous and cold metallic structures that do not seem full even with 11,000 people milling about. All the hot air of our collective pontification doesn't warm the space. Security is tight as a noose, beyond airport surveillance: electronic picture ID tags which are to be worn all the time; electronic conveyor-belt inspection of all bags and outdoor clothing to enter Palexpo, again to access the general area around the main Plenary Hall and a manual inspection of bags (for possibly 'offensive' printed matter, it appears) for those entering by the Civil Society entrance.

For there are in effect two distinct Summits happening (not to say 11,000 different experiences as each of us meanders along our own path of interest). The first is the formal high politics of rhetorical performance, a Warholian five minutes of fame for kings (Lesotho), presidents (Rwanda, Croatia, Armenia, Finland, etc.), prime ministers (Pakistan, France, Ireland, Tonga, etc.), ministers of information and other lower political pecking orders, depending how (un)important this event is considered to be.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, examination of the different ministries represented, that include Communications, Information Technology and Telecommunications Planning, Foreign Affairs, Interior, Information Industry, Transport, Innovation and Technology, Education, Economics and Labour, Commerce, Energy, Development Cooperation, etc., tells us something not only about the varying governmental structures of global states but also about the wide remit of WSIS with its implications for all these different policy arenas.

The event is opened by Kofi Annan, and for the most part, the South sends

its big-wigs: Mugabe speaks, and Mubarak, and Khatami. The nuances in the articulation of positions are fascinating, and often take unexpected turns. For example, Khatami speaks of delegating power to the people and placing the 'empowerment of human beings at the forefront of our efforts';<sup>3</sup> Ahern, the Irish prime minister, talks of drawing authority and strength from the people. The US and UK hardly bother. The US is represented by John Marburger III, a presidential envoy – and Microsoft – while the UK sends the Minister for E-Communications and Telecommunications of the DTI, Stephen Timms.<sup>4</sup> Marburger is keen to reduce WSIS to an 'algorithm of technology-based innovation' based on an infrastructure of science, skills and a 'nurturing environment for entrepreneurial fulfillment', a disconcertingly apt example of hegemony as compact articulation of different elements rolled up into math-speak.

This protocol summitry plods on for three days solid, 193 speakers in an order apparently decided by choosing lots, so that most of the time the Plenary Hall that can probably seat 3000 is quite empty, with just a few nationalist faithfuls sitting in to hear the speech of their particular head of state or political master.

## Wise is – Civil Society

Geneva is the culmination of three years of preparatory meetings orchestrated initially by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which gave the process a technologicistic slant from the start. What makes the WSIS process special is that for the first time in UN history, non-governmental organizations are participating alongside governments and the private sector. The aim is to incorporate a multi-stakeholder, consensual approach (reflecting the interests of governments, the private sector and civil society) in all deliberations.

The second (almost parallel) summit, held in rooms dotted around the enormous facility, comprises the livelier presentations and discussions of the various strands of civil society. Divided into numerous caucuses, working groups and 'coordinating spaces', the civil society debates run the gamut of legal, economic, developmental, political, organizational and cultural topics covered by the wide rubric of 'information society'. Among the most lively was a World Forum on Communication Rights organized by the CRIS (Communication Rights in the Information Society) Campaign, which argues that a wider and deeper understanding and support for human rights, including communication rights, are needed in addition to existing rights such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At various points in the WSIS process, it seemed as though the multiple stakeholders of civil society could never even find ways of talking together, let alone reach consensus. But working with respect and real civility, articulating and working on their differences, a Civil Society Declaration of 21 pages was endorsed at a final plenary meeting and presented to the WSIS as a challenge to the formal Summit Declaration. The Summit Declaration, prepared before the meeting, maintains a technologicistic orientation towards the information society and places huge faith in information technologies as tools of

development; it is the voice of hegemony, setting the frame of discussion for the next two years. The unprecedented and unexpected alternative declaration by the civil society groups was a direct challenge to that hegemony and a powerful articulation of a different vision of the information society. In comparison with the formal Declaration, the Civil Society Declaration (see Documentation Section at the end of this issue of *Gazette*) develops a more extensive understanding of rights specific to the information society; argues technological solutions must be appropriate to local needs; that cultural and linguistic diversity must be preserved; and calls for guarantees for media pluralism as well as avoidance of excessive media concentration. Other key issues include debates about whether ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) or a new intergovernmental body should direct internet governance; about intellectual property rights, especially in the new digital environment; and about free and open software. The latter issue received huge support in that the open Cybercafe area of the Summit was driven by free software, allaying many fears about its complexity and user-unfriendliness.

## **We Seize! Politics**

One might suppose that between a politics of top-down development policies as formulated by global donor agencies and articulated by some southern heads of state and a bottom-up mobilization and participation of civil society might lie a middle-ground of encounter. But a summit is obviously not that space. It was radically divided into two different events, two different categories of participants, two constituencies talking past each other. And that was just *inside* the event!

Outside, yet another parallel process was happening, a politics of contestation – which ironically confirmed the importance of WSIS even as it challenged its legitimacy. The Geneva03 Collective, under the banner ‘We Seize!’, were critical of the neoliberal logic of WSIS, which they declared a failure before it opened, and wanted to reveal the ‘dirty side of the info-society’ dominated by ‘the big money men . . . rogues and info-bandits’. They organized a space elsewhere in Geneva to teach people about open and free software and about alternative media, organizing around the mantra ‘Don’t criticize the media, become the media’. Yet many people involved with community and alternative media were civil society delegates to WSIS.

Summits are essentially talk-fests, festivals of articulacy, as well as powerful moments of persuasion, or articulation of different positions and attempts to reach agreement. The politics of being inside or outside the process perhaps hinges on the different audiences for the activities: those outside trying to reach out to ordinary Genevans, ordinary citizens and talk with them; those inside, often themselves ordinary citizens, were carrying a message from the grassroots up the global political chains to decision-makers and policy-wonks at national and transnational levels. The relationship between the WTO and the World Social Agenda gatherings has manifested a far simpler and cleaner divide between the formal debate of states and the private sector and its contestation by civil society. WSIS operated with a more complex two-tier system,

where there was actually considerable overlap between the civil society participants inside and outside the process. How such politics will develop for Tunis is unclear.

## The Gender Caucus: Why, Sis!

From the start of the WSIS process, the Gender Caucus was one of the best organized, dynamic and efficient. With some of the same organizations and sometimes even the same individuals who had been active in the Beijing process towards the 1995 World Summit on Women, many women's organizations in the field of media, information technologies and development have now been active for well over two decades and have well-developed global-local networks and info-tech practices (see Sreberny, 2003). The Gender Caucus materials on the web instructed people on how to introduce WSIS issues into local discussions, what the key issues were and, always and crucially, how to link issues around information technologies to wider issues of social, economic and political development (Sreberny, forthcoming).<sup>5</sup>

There were lots of women at Geneva – not least among the GKN (Global Knowledge Network) award winners ([www.globalknowledge.org](http://www.globalknowledge.org)). The rhetoric of the Summit Draft Declaration of Principles affirmed that the development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, that information society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes, and towards that end 'we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end' (Declaration of Principles, article 12; see the Documentation Section).

But the gender issue is just one lens through which the weighty rhetoric of summitry is punctured by its own practice. For all the talk of 'gender mainstreaming', where were the women?

## We Sees Gender Invisibility

Of the 193 ministerial-level speakers in the formal plenary process, there were 25 women, about 13 percent.

Given the sheer volume of print material available, it's hard to take any particular piece of paper as emblematic of the WSIS process or its Geneva moment. But a glossy silver magazine, *WSIS 2003*, produced by the ITU with an opening statement by Kofi Annan, was distributed to all delegates. It includes 31 articles by 34 named contributors, but only four of these are women (and one piece is the now-obligatory article on women written by a woman). Another glossy programme is that of the World Electronic Media Forum (WEMF), supported by the World Broadcasting Union (WBU) of the regional broadcasting unions. The WEMF was, in Kofi Annan's words on page 3 of the programme, 'a platform for leaders of the world's media to address the many issues raised by the new global media environment' ([www.wemfmedia.org](http://www.wemfmedia.org)). The publication included the 'Broadcasters' Declaration' with its proposition that communication is not simply about technology but 'should also involve

understanding, tolerance, respect and inter-cultural enrichment' and support for 'freedom of expression, freedom and pluralism of the media and cultural diversity'. It then itemized all the WEMF's activities in Geneva and provided photographs of all the plenary speakers at its various sessions: 56 photographs of which six were of women. Three high-level round-tables had 15 women among 96 speakers, while UNESCO held a High-Level Symposium on Knowledge Societies where two out of 20 speakers were women. And so on.

There are two important points to make here about gender politics. One centres on the profound contradiction within the WSIS process, where the gap between the expressed intentions around gender equality and the actual embodied speakers or writers who are overwhelmingly male is quite startling. For all the material in circulation that talked of gender-mainstreaming, the comparative invisibility of women in the formal, dark-suited affair (where African women in traditional costumes, like some of their African brothers, stood out as beacons of colour) was profound. Gender politics matters at the simple level of numerical representation on panels and in debates (what's wrong with 50/50?) and because women, whether informed by the politics of experience or by feminist theory or both, would also bring different perspectives to bear in *all* the debates and not just those that specifically focus on gender. Beyond a declaration of gender equality and empowerment of women, the articulation of gender-mainstreaming, Tunis needs to make this commitment visible, a real practice. (It's much harder to 'count' the civil society process but also not so necessary because of the evidently high and significant participation of women.)

The other issue centres on the tensions between WSIS and the 'real-world' politics of gender where the ongoing lack of gender balance in the political sphere, in media decision-making, in business, in academe around the world challenges the rhetorical gesture towards gender-mainstreaming. It means there are fewer women in positions of power and responsibility to call upon. It means conference and panel organizers have to work harder. It means that the internal WSIS space of the articulation of gender equity means little if this is not actualized outside WSIS in all these other spaces. But conversely, it makes the space of summitry, which is after all 'only words', a space where gender equity *could* be played out.

### **Wot's this WSIS?: Mediated Ignorance**

The number of websites, blogspots, daily columns, photographs and amount of radio and video streaming coming out of Geneva was enormous. At times, it seemed as if every participant was being interviewed by every other; indeed, almost 1000 people were registered as journalists. That material has doubtless percolated through the networks and lists of groups and organizations already interested in WSIS, and one might hazard that those are predominantly based in the South. However, as an ordinary reader or viewer in the West you would never have known that a summit was even taking place, let alone what its deliberations were or its outcomes.

While most past summits (Beijing, Rio, Cairo, for example) have been

significant media events, offering remote participation and promoting global awareness (Klein, 2003), it is profoundly ironic that the one summit that insists on the centrality of the media to information or knowledge societies and articulates the age of media and informatic convergence, was studiously ignored by mainstream media. WSIS was mentioned only when it could be connected to another, more obvious, political issue. Thus there were stories about Mugabe's presence, including his stay in a vastly expensive presidential suite by Lake Geneva while Zimbabwe's GDP has fallen by a third in three years (Cowling, 2003); and stories about the encounter between Mubarak and Khatami which has led to an exchange of visits and a thawing of the stony relationship between the two countries. Yet beyond that, the British public at least remains profoundly ignorant of the WSIS process because the British media have not found ways of informing them about it. This is despite the fact that Greg Dyke, then director-general of the BBC, was a virtual participant in a session of the WEMF (prevented by fog from attending in person), Nick Gowing of the BBC chaired a session and other British journalists were present. The disjuncture between the level of interest and involvement in WSIS of the global South and that of industrialized countries is palpable, and reinforced by the public silence maintained by the big media. The obvious implication is that, in the absence of rioters and tear gas, the media pass by much of serious global politics.

Again there is an echo of the NWICO process in the 1970s, when a key southern player, Masmoudi, the Information Minister of Tunisia (and present in person at WSIS), raised the political stakes by demanding a free and balanced flow of information. Even before Geneva, the demand for a fund to reverse the digital divide and support digital development had been rejected by the US, EU, Japan and Canada, without any public discussion in those countries; articulated forcefully by President Wade of Senegal, there actually seems to be some rethinking on this point, with discussions about a 'voluntary' Digital Solidarity Fund and a digital solidarity 'agenda' included in the final documents. Western audiences need to better understand what role information might play in the development process, why freedom of expression matters in processes of democratization in the South, and what a digital fund might provide.

The contradictions are obvious. At the moment, when many western governments, particularly those of the US and Britain, keep returning to the benefits of future democracy to justify the death and destruction in Afghanistan and Iraq, western media can hardly be bothered to tell their audiences what WSIS is all about.

Where is there more or better democracy, in the West or the South? Where is civil society more active, in Britain or in Uganda, where key elements of the Gender Caucus, such as WOUGNET,<sup>6</sup> are based? Those concerned about erosions of civil liberties and media concentration in the North need to be better connected to those in the South struggling around these same concerns.

## Academics and WSIS Wissenschaft

For some academics, rejecting 'the information society' and still intent on trying to precisely define the lineaments of *an* information society, or even refuting

the premise that such a thing exists at all, the Summit was an exercise in futility: 'How can we meet about something we can't define?' Others, however, rolled up their sleeves and became involved, helping to produce clearer articulations of arguments, diffusing blockages on a sticking point by finding a deft and different formulation of the argument. In a talk-fest, those whose practice is talking should, and can, be useful.

Often, the academic view was too abstract or too complex. Indeed, one of the biggest difficulties with coming to grips with WSIS is not that there is too little information but that there is too much: countless websites where huge amounts of documentation are posted, countless reports and publications, numerous books, etc. The most useful researchers seemed to be those with specific remits: clarifying the arguments about intellectual property rights in the digital age, for example. Or those who can offer an analysis of the nature of the process, as distinct from its content, like the very clear analysis by Klein (2003) about the politics of summitry. There is clearly huge scope still for academic research. We often lack good syntheses of specific bodies of research material, including the key relationships between the availability and use of ICTs and social and economic development. We lack precise and usable definitions of many terms. We need critical interrogation of the WSIS texts to analyse the real points of agreement and of conflict. There is great scope for national researchers to read the statements by heads of state in relation to the real state of media and ICT development, human rights, gender-mainstreaming, etc. in their specific locales; many of those public statements may turn out to be hostages to political fortune.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, there are the crucial issues about governance, about how and through what forms of organization any of the lofty sentiments and verbal declarations will be rendered into policy documents and actualized in practice, at national and transnational levels.

If ever there was a moment for pedagogic and popularizing interventions, it is now. Instead of moaning that we don't even know or agree on whether there is an 'information society', we could be teaching, researching, writing popular columns in the press and making television programmes about the process and its core arguments. We should be realistic about what can be achieved and what not, but also explain why it is important that debates linking communications with social development are taking place at all. This is the role of academics and intellectuals: to find public spaces and educative moments when such arguments can be articulated. Many of 'our' own western populations are not well connected, not well educated, and not aware of the potential that connectivity can bring them. In many ways, the West needs WSIS as much as the South.

Yoshio Utsumi, the secretary-general of ITU, has said that 'the Summit is a process, not a product'. The emergence of civil society as a powerful force shows the comparatively open nature of the process. That is not to say that hegemony is broken, but merely to say that hard work and application and the clever articulation of different positions brought about a grassroots consensus that hadn't seemed possible at the start, and has made the civil society caucuses a force to be reckoned with at the global level of policy-making. The terms of the debate have been shifted. New antagonisms have opened up, within and outside the WSIS process. Examples, perhaps, of the global extensions of the



processes of 'radical democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The 'thick crust of . . . rage' (Winsterson, 1989) might lift and let in some light. The next two years to Tunis are the time of further refinement of arguments, clarification of demands, articulation of positions. Summits may be all about words, but the words have consequences.

## Notes

1. I would particularly like to acknowledge discussions with Claudia Padovani, Frank Morgan, Marc Raboy, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Divina Frau-Miegis and my comments here draw upon those conversations.
2. The full list of plenary speakers can be found at [www.itu.int/wsis/geneva/coverage/archive.asp?lang=en&c\\_type=pl](http://www.itu.int/wsis/geneva/coverage/archive.asp?lang=en&c_type=pl)
3. Most presentations were available in print form in Geneva. All quotations here come from the texts of the plenary speeches, unless indicated otherwise.
4. A text by Timms was circulated, although the list of speakers acknowledges His Excellency Mr Nicholas Thorne as head of the UK delegation.
5. My remit for this piece was to focus on gender issues; other criteria of discrimination such as race, age, language and geography need to be recognized in their own right as well as recognizing that these often work to reinforce gender inequality.
6. WOUNET is the Women of Uganda Network (<http://www.woungnet.org>). The WOUNET website was selected as 2003 AISI Media Award and a 2003 World Summit Award winner.
7. See already, in relation to Khatami's speech, the comments by Hossein Derakhshan, 'Censor This: Iran's Web of Lies', 22 January 2004 ([www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)).

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