

BETWEEN A WORLD SUMMIT AND A CHINESE MOVIE: Visions of the 'Information Society'

Yuezhi Zhao

Abstract / In this personal reflection from a non-direct participant, the author compares the visions of the 'information society' at the WSIS with fragments of imagined and lived experiences of such a society in China, which has emerged as an increasingly important player at the global stage. While the author praises the liberal and egalitarian visions articulated in both the state and civil society declarations, she is wary of a technology-driven notion of social progress in the official documents. She also notes how the highly abstract language of the Declaration of Principles glosses over the specific logics of a capitalist global political economy and conceals the complicated and unequal power relationships between the various 'partners' and 'stakeholders' in the global political economy – governments, private corporations, civil society organizations and international and regional institutions. Finally, the author discusses how the complicated alignment of various positions at the WSIS underscores the inadequacy of a simplistic dichotomy between state and civil society and between the North and the South, and raises questions about the theoretical and strategic challenges of addressing issues such as uneven global civil society participation at the WSIS process.

Keywords / China / civil society / communication / information society / WSIS

Is it mere coincidence? At the time the grand visions of states and civil society organizations about the information society were being articulated at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva, the super-wired Chinese urban public were fascinated by a movie centred around a mobile phone, arguably the most personalized and most influential symbol of a rapidly evolving information society in the Chinese context. The movie, *Cell Phone*, directed by popular commercial film director Feng Xiaogang and released at a time of year in China that enjoys maximum cinema audiences, constructs a disturbing, dystopian vision around this particular piece of information technology in a comic form. The film's protagonist, a successful middle-aged television talk show host, uses the mobile phone as a tool of deception in order to manage his personal relationships with an estranged wife and liaisons with two mistresses, employing such tricks as lying, turning off the phone and removing the battery pack to create an 'out of the service area' effect. The film's message becomes clear, and is eventually articulated by another character, who is also using his mobile phone to deceive his wife: the cell phone is actually a 'hand mine', a dangerous and destructive weapon that is detrimental to the sustenance of genuine and loving human relationships. By the end, the protagonist finds

himself burning his cell phone, only to appear in the later scene enticed by a proposal to be the celebrity endorser of an even more advanced cell phone model. Astonishingly high box-office returns and extensive media coverage, including discussion forums involving audience members, emphasize the extent to which this movie strikes a responsive cord among urban Chinese audiences.

The Chinese state is well known for its opposition to civil society participation in shaping the information society and against any commitment to uphold communicational freedom as a basic human right. China's Party-controlled and market-driven media, which are increasingly expressive of the sensibilities of the well-to-do urban population who constitute the bulk of China's 250 million mobile phone users, seem to be completely uninformed about WSIS and the broad issues it raises. Such a situation is especially unfortunate, given the state of media freedom in China and how the Summit might have provided an opportunity for politically active journalists and scholars to advocate for more press freedom in the country. There is virtually no Chinese media report of the debates and proceedings of the Summit. A search on the *People's Daily* website yields a single item about a Hong Kong website dedicated to promoting Chinese culture winning a grant prize at the WSIS, and nothing else. Nor does the official website of the Ministry of Information Industry contain any reference to the WSIS. A search at sina.com.cn, a leading Chinese commercial website, yields a lone newspaper story, published by a Shanghai newspaper aimed at a limited elite audience, on disagreements over internet governance at the WSIS. The official position of the Chinese state is nowhere to be seen in the Chinese web universe. Not a single report in the Chinese web universe deals with the main thrusts of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action. Though the Chinese versions of these two documents are available through linkages to the official ITU site, the Civil Society Declaration, which is only available in English, French and Spanish, is completely out of the purview of the Chinese audience.

If one judges the achievements of the Summit by the extent to which it provides an opportunity for putting important issues on the public agenda, this Summit is completely irrelevant in the Chinese context. Whether it is by deliberate design or by default, the Summit, in effect, did not happen for the Chinese reading public.

It is, of course, a very different matter if one evaluates the achievement of the Summit by the very fact that such an event happened at all and by the face value of the documents it produces. Although no specific solution was, or probably even could have been arrived at, it is significant that issues such as internet governance are being raised as a global public issue. The Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action articulate an inclusive, people-centred and developed-oriented vision of the information society (see Documentation Section at the end of this issue of *Gazette*, where these documents are reproduced). Given the tremendous challenges the Summit faced in finding a common language among governments with vastly different positions on a number of contentious issues, the final official declaration is surprisingly supportive of human rights, communicative freedom and social justice. This is particularly apparent from the perspective of someone who had just returned

from a trip to China, where I found myself outraged at how a senior communication scholar in Beijing had to expurgate any reference to the 'western' notion of 'freedom of the press' in her research report on the Chinese media. Given the strong forces of opposition from some quarters against an emphasis on issues of freedom and human rights in the official discourse, the fact that such language appears in unequivocal terms in the final documents is certainly an achievement. Although the immediate impact of such documents in a country like China is negligible, such documents may eventually serve as important symbolic weapons in future struggles over control of information and communication inside China. Indeed, when I first read the Declaration of Principles on the ITU website, I was tempted to forward it to my besieged academic colleague in Beijing, hoping that perhaps she can argue to the powers that be that the Chinese state, after all, affirms its 'commitment to the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information' on behalf of the Chinese people at this important global forum.

Nonetheless, despite the strength of its human rights and social justice discourse, the limits of the official Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action are not hard to see. Underlying the dominant vision for an 'information society' is a linear notion of technology-driven progress. Despite the emphasis on technologies as means, rather than ends, and the socially embedded nature of technologies, there is certain reification of these technologies and their advantages to human development are simply assumed and celebrated. The abstract language of the documents glosses over the specific realities of a capitalist global political economy dominated by transnational corporations and the accumulation imperative of private capital. Such discourse conceals the complicated and unequal power relationships between the various 'partners' and 'stakeholders' – governments, private corporations, civil society organizations and international and regional institutions. It also legitimates and entrenches two decades of neoliberal economic policies at the national and global levels that have seen the rapid development of information and communication technologies on the one hand, and growing income gaps both within and between countries and profound social and cultural crises on the other.

The issue is not that the benefits of information technologies are unevenly distributed. As Graham Murdock and Peter Golding observed, 'far from being a universal movement changing everyone's life for the better, the "digital revolution", mounting evidence suggested, was adding to the advantages of the privileged while systematically excluding the poor and the marginalized' (Murdock and Golding, 2004: 244). Instead of focusing on social transformations aimed at overcoming barriers to human development created by existing political economic structures and unequal power relations, the Summit foregrounds the deployment of technologies as a solution to existing problems. This is a false solution that treats the symptoms, rather than the root causes of the problems. To put it rhetorically, if a capitalist society is by definition profit centred and it operates on the logic of exclusion, how is it possible to build a people-centric and inclusive information society on the basis of global capitalism?

Needless to say, the technological solution fits in well with the agenda of

both transnational information technology suppliers in search of new market opportunities and developmental states seeking technocratic solutions to political, economic and social problems. Although the language of human rights and freedoms does not appeal to the ears of authoritarian governments, the main thrust of the Summit is not new to developmental states like China, which has already committed to a technologically driven vision of development and prioritized information technologies as the 'key link' in its developmental strategies. In this sense, the Summit's official documents offer few new insights. The rhetoric of 'information society' and the discourse about how the rapid progress of these technologies opens new opportunities for development are already all too familiar. Within this context, one can argue that the dystopian movie *Cell Phone* offers a fresher perspective on the cultural dimensions of information technologies. It foregrounds human relationships, and most importantly, it refuses to subscribe to a linear notion of technology-driven social progress and a simple correlation between access to information technologies and sustainable human relationships. As the experience of the cell phone empowered individuals demonstrated, connectivity alone does not guarantee one's quality of life.

While overcoming the digital divide is a desirable objective, the official documents say nothing about the micro-sociology and cultural contexts of connectivity and access. It is one thing to champion access as a global principle, it is quite another to understand the social and cultural contexts of access. As the Civil Society Declaration states clearly, universal access 'implies addressing diverse realities experienced by distinct social groups . . . and privileging local or targeted solutions'. My own personal experience is illustrative in this context. Realizing that my 11-year-old nephew in a rural village in China had no access to a computer at his school, I immediately reached for a privatized solution to the problem in my recent visit: to purchase a computer for him. Yet, I had to retreat from this idea after taking into consideration his family context. The reality is, my nephew, like many of his peers in rural China, lives with his ageing and illiterate grandparents, while his parents operate a small business in a place several hundred kilometres away, and it is simply financially and logistically impossible for my nephew to attend school there. The prospect of leaving an 11-year-old boy playing with a computer without competent parental supervision and technological support was highly unsettling for me. No amount of Digital Solidarity Fund – even if it is made available – will be able to provide the favourable social and cultural contexts of access.

Undoubtedly, civil society participation in the Summit and the articulation of a progressive civil society vision are among the most important achievements of the WSIS. Inevitably, the Summit also revealed profound divisions and inequalities in participation. In addition to the divisions between the rich North and poor South, and the different visions between state and civil society, there was a notable antagonism between governments of the global South, ostensibly representing a majority of the world's underprivileged population, and the civil society organizations that claim to represent the interests of the general public, especially the global poor and underprivileged. This is a dynamic rather new to the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality in global communications. At

the time of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, communication issue oriented civil society organizations were few and the most divisive line was drawn between the West and third world states.

The official incorporation of civil society as a player in the global Summit is undeniably path-breaking. The diversification of positions and players underscores the inadequacy of any simplistic dichotomy between state and market, the public and the private, the official and the unofficial, and the North and the South. However, the new theoretical and strategic challenges posed by such a situation are profound: if authoritarian governments in the South are unable to truly represent the interests and inspirations of their own population, what is to ensure that there is indeed a genuine global civil society at the Summit, given that participation by civil society organizations across the globe is by no means even, especially given that countries such as China do not even have any independent civil society organizations? Is any form of strategic alliance possible between progressive civil society organizations and developing country states that have legitimate concerns over issues such as internet governance and intellectual property rights? Or have scholars and international civil society activists moved from an earlier generation's idealization of the third world state as a force of resistance against western domination to a potential cynicism towards any progressive potential on the part of many southern states?

The issue, of course, is not so much about whether the Civil Society Declaration is grounded on a thorough analysis of extremely uneven global conditions and has universal appeal. China's disenfranchised social groups – from laid-off workers to overtaxed farmers to the school children and poor women in depressed rural areas – for example, would no doubt find the Civil Society Declaration extremely attractive. Indeed, many of them would agree that they could not have articulated such a grand vision more eloquently. Yet it remains a challenge for civil society organizations with the luxury to participate in a Summit like this to connect themselves to social struggles in a country like China, where access to information and means of communication is a life and death issue. While there is every reason to make the Chinese state, or for that matter, any other authoritarian state, the main enemy of global civil society, it is extremely important for the global civil society to not only acknowledge the uneven nature of its participation but also to move beyond a single anti-authoritarian stance and try to come up with proactive strategies to reach out to non-state actors in authoritarian societies.

The civil society's stress on a communication, not just information, society, is highly significant. So is the insistence on a notion of communication as fundamental to human development and an integral part of concrete political, economic, social, cultural struggles, rather than the market-driven delivery of commodified products and services by the world's information industries. Here again, concrete social realities defy any preconceived notion about which medium, what information, and what form of communication is relevant, empowering and liberating. In certain areas of rural China, for example, the most empowering, and even subversive, communicative activity has been organized around the voluntary dissemination of official Party policies with

regard to agricultural taxation, most provocatively in the form of reading central Party documents through loudspeakers in public markets and other public spaces. How could Party documents and loudspeakers, symbols of a top-down model of communication and information dissemination in the Chinese historical context, serve as instruments of popular empowerment in the contemporary setting? The answer lies in the fact that local officials have violated these policies in their taxation practices. Consequently, the propagation of these policies provided the farmers with a powerful means to challenge local officials and defend their own economic interests. The relationship between such communication activities and autonomous civil society formation is also very interesting. Unofficial farmers' unions, for example, have emerged in some central China areas on the basis of groups formed specifically to communicate official documents to farmers, often under the harassment and even violent repression of local officials. Within this context, communication is not only at the core of social contestation and the struggle for economic survival by local farmers, but also the basis of social organization and autonomous civil society formation. Imagine how such experience could enrich the civil society experience at the WSIS and what these Chinese farmers have to say about their perspective on information and communication.

The distance between visions of 'information society' articulated in Geneva – be it the official vision or the civil society vision – and the snapshots of imagined and real experiences from the Chinese corners of the global 'information society' appears vast. So are the social and cultural disjunctions between the fictional characters in the movie *Cell Phone* and the farmers who risk physical violence and jail sentences to communicate official Party documents inside China. Precisely because of this, the ideal of a people-centred, inclusive and equitable global 'information society' becomes all the more important.

Reference

Murdoch, Graham and Peter Golding (2004) 'Dismantling the Digital Divide: Rethinking the Dynamics of Participation and Exclusion', pp. 244–60 in Andrew Calabrese and Colin Sparks (eds) *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century*: Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Yuezhi Zhao is an associate professor at the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Canada. She is the author of *Media, Market, and Democracy in China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), and a co-author of *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998). She is currently writing a book on communication and power in China and co-editing *Globalization, Media, Democracy: Public Communication in the Era of Pan-Capitalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

Address *School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6. [email: yzhao@sfu.ca]*