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**The World vs. The Web:
The UN's Politicization of the Information Society
Report on the World Summit on the Information Society; Geneva, Dec. 2003**

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Abstract

The UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that took place in Dec. 2003 in Geneva stalled rather than promoted the development of information and communication technologies globally. This is because it became a forum for policy differences to formally widen between governments from developing and developed countries as well as among stakeholders (such as industry, civil society organizations and governments). In lieu of a convergence of ideals, interests, and objectives, WSIS saw their fragmentation. This paper describes the main areas of tension among nations and examines the breakdown in rapport between the civil society groups and governments within the WSIS process. Finally, it explains the consequences of this new politicization of the Internet in the context of an earlier dispute over media resources at the UN in the 1970s, and looks ahead to the Summit's second phase in Tunisia in 2005.

I. Introduction

On the surface, the issue of the "information society" should be one of the least controversial issues in contemporary international relations. Considering that nearly all nations welcome the advent of the Internet for economic development, social progress and entertainment, it would seem that a UN summit on such an intangible theme as the information society should be an occasion for rare harmony in an increasingly polarized world. What's more, that the information society itself is spearheaded by the commercial sector in the form of computers, Internet access and media, it would seem appropriate that governments should view their role in this area modestly.

Yet this was not to be so. Instead, the UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that took place in Dec. 2003 in Geneva will be remembered as the moment when a seemingly unspoken global consensus in favor of the use and utility of the Internet frayed at the level of formal intergovernmental relations.

A number of issues related to the information society have emerged to divide countries, mainly along the lines of the developing and developed world. These disputes -- over human rights, free press, intellectual property, the digital divide and control of Internet infrastructure -- will not be resolved easily. Meanwhile, the UN tried to use the Summit as a forum to increase the participation of non-governmental organizations into its processes, both from industry and groups representing "civil society." This, too, largely failed. The result is that there was probably more goodwill among groups and greater sense of agreement about the information society in the late 1990s before the WSIS process began than now that it is halfway concluded.

The Geneva Summit took two years of planning, with preparatory meetings on every continent (and negotiations over the wording of the final declaration and action plan stretching past midnight in the days before the conference doors opened). Around 60 heads of government attended, as did 11,000 visitors. Organized by the UN's International Telecommunication Union, the Summit was widely viewed as an attempt by that agency to boost its relevance in the Internet era, as its power wanes while the traditional phone system gets diluted in a sea of other communications traffic.

The road to Tunis, where the second and final phase of the Summit takes place in Nov. 2005, will be a long one. The issues that divide nations and private-sector stakeholders are significant, and may actually widen over the next 18 months. The Internet is becoming more contentious, not less, as it develops. This may make it either a pawn in a wider battle in international relations, or a punching bag. Neither would be good for the health of the information society, which ironically promised to transcend geographic borders and the parochial interests of nation-states for an enlightened spirit of global solidarity.

II. Areas of Conflict

When one thinks of the information society, images of computers and telephone wires usually comes to mind. Less so issues like the environment, gender equality or the rights of disabled people. However, these were exactly the sorts of topics that quickly cropped up as WSIS agenda items -- and became points of contention. In one respect, the themes may represent an enlightened understanding of the information society that encompasses more than technology and instead extends to their broadest possible impact on human life. Yet less generously, they may be considered marginal issues that inappropriately over-extend the concept of the information society, and thus are distractions that prevent a deeper discussion on topics that are more central to the theme.

The final declaration raised 67 points and the action plan 29 points, which, like in many UN documents, couches its true meaning in generic language that can be interpreted in numerous ways. That said, four main issues were the focus of contention, and will likely remain sources of tensions.

* **Intellectual Property / Open Source** -- The developing world, led by Brazil, wanted strong language in the declaration in favor of open source software; the US, influenced by industry, notably Microsoft, wanted the inclusion of wording that referred to "different software models" and "proprietary software." Moreover, the US wanted text that specifically called for adherence to existing international IP regulations. The compromise reached was weaker wording on open source and a loose mention of IP laws -- and an agreement that the parties would slug it out in the appropriate forum, which is the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), not WSIS. One critical point: Microsoft is so concerned with referring to IP treaties in the text because they fear the day may come when developing countries treat the WSIS ideals of "the right to information" as carte blanche to declare access to software a matter of national security -- and openly violate Microsoft's software patents just as they have done with patents on HIV/AIDS medications.

* **Free Press/Human Rights** -- China, Cuba, Vietnam and others wanted to tone down the language over human rights and freedom for the media, while the US and Europe wanted stronger wording. The compromise is that the text refers to pre-existing charters (i.e. the Universal Declaration on Human Rights) but doesn't try to put forward ideals that seem to be stronger. Keep in mind that the UDHR itself is regularly violated, so the controversy here is somewhat inane. The interesting point is that, according to officials involved with the discussions, the US didn't fight for language calling for complete freedom of information -- the reason being that now, unlike in the past, it sees a usefulness for censorship of Internet content beyond political hot-button issues like pornography; i.e. content such as bomb-making instructions or the ability for terrorists to communicate.

* **Digital Divide** -- The developing world, led by Senegal, called for a new fund to overcome the digital divide, to be paid for by first world companies and countries. The US, Europe and Japan balked, noting the fund's potential for corruption and that the plan overlaps existing digital divide programs (an OECD report issued to coincide with the Summit identified over 30 multilateral initiatives). The Summit's Action Plan established a voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund, and a study on the idea of a more elaborate fund to be issued prior to the Tunis Summit in 2005. There is a great irony here: Almost every national leader from the developing world in their formal remarks highlighted his or her country's extraordinary record in Internet usage -- Senegal's president himself mentioned that in some years the

country saw 300% growth -- which seemed to dilute the urgency for new Western financial aid.

* **ICANN** -- The administration of the domain name system, performed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), was the biggest source of controversy at WSIS. Developing countries expressed opposition to ICANN, arguing that it is an form of US or Western power over the Internet. They argue that it strips them of sovereignty over their country-code domain name on one hand, and an owed broader influence over how the overall system should work, on the other. Notably, it marks the first time many countries have formally expressed a view on the domain name system in a public forum. Also, many countries didn't seem to substantively understand the issue other than shallowly, sometimes incorrectly, and in the narrow context of basic opposition to US power. Essentially, ICANN became the victim of a far wider discontent with US unilateralism in other foreign policy matters. The outcome of the Summit is that the UN will convene a task force to define what's meant by "Internet governance" (an important first step since the very nature of the term misleads governments into thinking unless they do it, it's not being done), study the issue and make recommendations in time for the Tunis summit in 2005.

The ICANN controversy warrants a fuller treatment than is appropriate in this overview. That said, it bears remarking that this is a serious dispute and it is only going to get more complicated. As a first step, governments are calling for sovereignty over their country-code domains, something that although acceded in the US government's 1998 White Paper that established policy for private-sector Internet management, ICANN has been reluctant to institute fully. The problem is that in achieving this basic goal, governments may try to garner more -- greater power over the domain name system itself. Such a bid would unravel the entire ICANN "experiment." It would mean governments themselves would manage the core infrastructure of the Internet, in the same way as the ITU today coordinates the global telephone system. The US and other Western countries are wary of this approach since UN agencies tend to impose bureaucratic processes and politicize issues that could place a drag on technical innovation for Internet technology, as well as thwart the inherent openness of the medium.

These disputes among governments are fairly typical of UN summits; perhaps it underscores the degree to which technology is a mainstream matter that it should be treated like a political football and kicked about, and offline political issues grafted upon it. More novel is the way that the UN itself has had to modify its processes to account for non-governmental actors, which are the undisputed motor of the information society around the world. In that domain, too, the Summit generated substantial tensions, which is the focus of the next section.

III. Civil Society

Once a sideshow, always a sideshow? The WSIS process was intended to highlight the UN's outreach to non-governmental institutions. Yet those groups, which have complained of second-class treatment at other UN events, left the Summit expressing frustration at the way they were treated and their interests addressed.

Indeed, in the case of industry, it for the most part refused to participate. The lowest turnout among attendees was from the business sector (and no CEO from a major technology company attended save for the head of Nokia, a Summit sponsor). Moreover, rather than engage organizations representing civil society, the Summit enraged them. From the preparatory meetings before the event to the treatment of organizations at the Summit -- and even the architectural layout of the venue -- civil society participants were marginalized both ideologically as well as physically by governments.

This lack of dialogue, and thus lack of consensus, led civil society organizations to reject the Summit's formal declaration and issue their own alternative document. The disgruntlement by civil society organizations that was apparent at the end of the third official preparatory committee meeting (PrepCom3) in September (on issues such as advocating community media, open source software, intellectual property rights, and gender rights, etc.) did not ease in the autumn prior to WSIS, although civil society concerns were not wholly ignored in the way some martyrs of the process would like to argue. At PrepCom3, Natasha Primo from the Association for Progressive Communication -Women's Networking Support Program stated, "The information society described in the document is characterized by uniformity, technocracy and bargaining. It lacks any vision that is people and citizen centered: there is little or no mention of the poor, workers and marginalized groups including indigenous people, refugees, people with disabilities."

The differences between the Civil Society Declaration to the WSIS entitled "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs," issued first on December 8, and the official Declaration of Principles by the WSIS Plenary issued on December 12, are not immediately discernible. However, those deeply involved in the process see the departure from shared governing principles and values quite starkly. The divergence lies in the classic issues of contention: the official declaration calls itself 'people-centred' and pays homage to Article 19 of the UDHR, but not nearly to the extent that civil society places the human being at the

heart of the information society. The civil society version is geared specifically toward the realization, fulfillment and improvement of human rights and development of all people from a social justice standpoint. While the official declaration did indeed become more human-centered, it did not touch upon issues of equitable distribution of resources and the necessity of applying a social justice framework.

Furthermore, the official WSIS Declaration recognizes communication as a fundamental and central social process, but not the way that civil society explicitly endorses the right to freedom of opinion and expression – one that they extend irrespective of national borders. The official Declaration has, however, addressed some of the issues that were initially in dispute by incorporating literacy, education and research more munificently through other parts of its text, as well as bringing slightly better mention of skills (other than ICT) necessary for empowering an active citizenry. The final Declaration is also modified with references regarding the role of WSIS to help attain objectives and commitments made at previous global summits and meetings.

The civil society document exposes the significant shortfalls in the WSIS Declaration to emphasize the rights and freedoms of the citizenry in the context of freedom of movement, association, privacy and expression. The other disappointment to many civil society entities was the failure of the Summit Declaration to include the proposal for the digital solidarity fund, and to make significant strides away from being typecast as prioritizing infrastructure over social impact on global polities and economies.

Yet if the substance of the debates left the civil society institutions wanting, the summit's very structure exposed existing rifts, from the rather symbolic architectural design of the venue to the actual proceedings. These intangible factors of UN Summits are often not recorded since they don't leave a paper trail, yet they are as important as the official meetings since they set serve as the context for either friendly or frustrated dialogue among stakeholders.

Consider, for instance, that civil society organizations were structurally cordoned off from the area where the governmental plenary meetings were held. Access to these areas was exclusively limited to government delegates and selected private sector attendees; only a few civil society delegates were able to acquire passes to enter. Rather than being treated as partners, the divisive design as well as the hierarchical access underscored the lower regard that the governmental organizers seemed to hold for the private-sector and civil society stakeholders.

The actual architecture of the event symbolized the inequality: governments were in front and above, civil society organizations in small, compartmentalized

cubicles where the din of one session would interfere with another (a fitting mirror of the anarchy of activist organizations in the real world, alas...), while industry and private groups were one floor below. This layout – governments on top, business below, and Civil Society in a sophisticated shantytown-like flea market – was not conducive for dialogue among different groups or within the civil society caucus. Nor was the fact that the WiFi Internet access, often free at many industry conferences, was priced exorbitantly high and was extremely difficult to set up. This is especially ironic considering that the civil society groups in particular use the Internet to coordinate their actions – they live the information society, yet were unable to participate in it at a summit centered on the very topic.

Meanwhile, the concurrent panels, forums and debates hosted by civil society organizations and business were divided across a large matrix of makeshift classrooms were difficult to locate, being alternatively lined up, numbered or lettered (only occasionally in a coherent order). As for the proceedings, they offered a stark juxtaposition of different cultures, not only in the substance of the discussions but in terms of the audiences they drew. In one room, such as the e-democracy panel chaired by Greek Minister Papandreou, the attendees all wore suits and ties, while in a nearby hall, with an Indian journalist calling for a more formal right to communicate, the audience wore jeans and sweaters.

Yet the most revealing tension among the stakeholders appears in the treatment of the civil society groups. Several civil society members claimed to have been challenged at the security gates as they brought documents in to the forum, while others were actually arrested after demonstrating outside. Of course one might question the utility of such protests when the opportunity for participation was open to all organizations that applied, and it was reiterated throughout the Summit that civil society participation at WSIS was not equivalent to endorsement of it. Still, it would be appropriate to note the obvious hypocrisy on the part of WSIS organizers in censoring or filtering written materials at a Summit on the *Information Society*.

IV Conclusion

The World Summit on the Information Society is often referred to by proponents in flowery terms, as an unprecedented moment in history when governments around the world are coming together to acknowledge the power of the Internet and our mutual interconnectedness. Yet like so many other attempts to understand the Internet, this view is shortsighted. Looking back a few decades provides insight on the politics of the information society today.

In the 1960s, the classic East-West divide became complicated by the addition of a North-South dimension, and one of the main areas of focus turned out to be media. Predictably, the debates converged along the lines of the ideological standoff between the capitalist and communist world, with the West in support of “the free flow of information” and the East in favor of greater national control.. By the 1970s, newly independent, non-aligned states sought to reform the international system. One aspect of their demands were predicated on the struggle to keep up with the pace of innovation in communication technology (particularly with the appearance of satellites), to critically question the nature and direction of information flows, and to bridge divides that were accentuated as world markets developed.

These matter culminated in the late 1970s and early 80s into proposals called the “New World Information and Communication Order” (NWICO) and debated at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Among the items it called for was a subsidy by Western media companies to foster media resources in developing countries and the ability of states to control the information flow in their territories – an ironic precursor to WSIS’s calls for a Digital Solidarity Fund to reduce the digital divide and the notion of national sovereignty to justify censorship.

The current disputes suggest that the central issue that NWICO exposed three decades ago have not disappeared in the Internet age, and in fact may have even become extenuated. The Internet has not remedied the concern over who owns communication infrastructure, as well as the politics of access and connectivity in the developing world.

Looking ahead to the second phase of WSIS in Tunis in Nov. 2005, one can expect the conflicts to become more intense as national positions, previously unformed, become more entrenched. It certainly will not soothe matters if the Tunisian government and others try to enhance the diplomatic status of the Summit by proposing that governments sign a formal Charter on the Information Society, an idea that has been circulated. This would likely take policy differences that today are mere hairline fractures in international relations and expand them unnecessarily. Areas of conflict that could otherwise be addressed over time and in bilateral settings may get be commingled with broader foreign policy interests, where they’re less likely to get resolved smoothly.

This places special importance on the process leading up to WSIS 2005, which will entail a new series of PrepCom negotiations, as well as the UN studies on Internet governance and the digital divide. These are opportunities for consensus and confidence-building that should not be squandered by any side. One reason why a formal Charter has been floated for the Tunis phase is because of the low

turnout among Western leaders in Geneva – no major Western head of state attended save for France, and the US sent a relatively low-level delegation. If the US in particular ignores WSIS, it will setback potentially positive global discussions and could lead to a backlash by the developing world against the US that could jeopardize its interests in areas such as ICANN. Ironically, that might mirror history in a way that no one benefits from, if the NWICO dispute is any guide.

The conflict at UNESCO in the 1980s became so fractious that it led the US to pull out of the Paris-based body for two decades, only to return in October 2003. What's more, just as UNESCO was criticized for inefficiency and being a shade too politicized in their role in NWICO, so have the intentions, agenda and role of the ITU at WSIS come under fire. That said, time may be the best balm to calm tensions. Consider that efforts to establish the concept of a "right to communicate," a phrase coined in 1969, were introduced by Sweden at the UNESCO General Conference of 1974. Nearly thirty years later, an entire forum of panels entitled the "World Forum on Communication Rights" was sponsored by the group Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) at WSIS, and led by a coalition of international civil society organizations.

If the world hasn't changed so much as we think notwithstanding the advent of the Internet, the Communication Rights in the Information Society group at WSIS underscores one important way in which it has: In terms of the role of non-governmental organizations. In the 1970s, debates over media were mainly the domain of state-to-state relations; today, the WSIS process is dominated by the idea of multiple stakeholders and shared authority. This is an important evolution, since by acknowledging the relevant parties we can address interests pragmatically. The question, as always in international relations, is how we work together. Despite the interconnectedness of the Internet age, such accord cannot be taken for granted.

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For More Information

Below are links to a number of source materials, essays and articles on the WSIS summit:

Official Information:

- WSIS site -- <http://www.geneva2003.org>
- ITU's WSIS site -- <http://www.itu.int/wsis/>
- ITU site -- <http://www.itu.int>
- UN site -- <http://www.un.int>
- WSIS Declaration and Action Plan – http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi-en-1161%7C1160.asp

Formal Participants:

- Civil Society group sites
<http://www.wsis-cs.org/>
<http://www.wsis.info/>
<http://www.openWSIS.org>
- Industry
Business@WSIS (organized by the International Chamber of Commerce) -- <http://www.businessatwsis.net>

Scholarly Writing and Interesting Articles:

- “The World Summit on the Information Society & Civil Society Participation: New Configurations for Global Public Policy Formation” by Audrey Selian – (forthcoming online)
- Interview with Milton Mueller (Syracuse University), “ICANN, WSIS and the Making of a Global Civil Society - Part II”
http://www.circleid.com/article/388_0_1_0_C/
- “Understanding WSIS: An Institutional Analysis of the UN World Summit on the Information Society” by Hans Klein
<http://www.ip3.gatech.edu/research/WSIS.pdf>

Media

- IHT op-ed by Matthew Hindman and K.N. Cukier of NCDG -- <http://www.iht.com/articles/120995.html>
- The Economist -- http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=2288724
- Daily WSIS Blog -- <http://www.dailysummit.net/english/archives/categories/links/index.asp>