

Infocommunication Policies¹ at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

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The site chosen for the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), due to be held in December 2005, could perfectly well inspire Hegel's quote from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* about history's propensity to happen twice. Indeed, the Tunis World Summit was developed, with controversies,² 29 years after one of the milestones in the contemporary history of information and communication (hereinafter infocommunication) policies was determined in the international sphere at the same place: the Non-Aligned Symposium on Information which, in 1976, called for the "decolonisation of information" and laid the groundwork for what would inspire the establishment of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) by Unesco at its 1978 General Conference in Paris and recognised by the 33rd United Nations General Assembly that same year³.

The WSIS in its two phases (Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005) presents groundbreaking attributes with respect to strategies for determining world policies in the sphere of information and communication, as it incorporates actors from civil society into the extensive process of carrying out the Summit. It also warrants being recognised as one of the UN events with the greatest ideological charge, in line with the principles that since the 1990s have established the promotion of the project to build the information society.⁴

In this text, I will identify the main guidelines of infocommunication policies promoted within the framework

of the WSIS, its complex preparation process and the main actors involved in that process. These guidelines shall be analysed in comparison with the main areas of developing the Information Society Project.

The concept of infocommunication policies, although usually mentioned in academic texts and political discourses, has to be cleared up to understand this text as a conceptual tool for proceeding to the analysis of the processes and events mentioned above. The concept of communication policies is essential, since, as the MacBride Report said, "it is not possible to understand communication, considered globally, if its political dimensions are not taken into account. Policy – in the most noble sense of the world – cannot be disassociated from communication" (Unesco 1980, 44).

The notion of communication policies ran parallel, in its historical formulation, to that of planning, which meant that in the early 1970s it was associated with three points: the need to guarantee pluralism, democracy and participation; the promotional activity of the State; and the orientation towards regional integration (Quirós and Segovia 1996). The explicit quality of the measures a State adopts in a sector and its links to those applied in other sectors are requisites, according to Capriles (1980), for recognising them as policies. This text uses this definition as a starting point, but from a more open point of view, and identifies information and communication policies to be actions taken by State (or supra-State) organisations that effectively assume organic connections with measures executed in other areas and which reveal an orientation in line with the purposes of each government (or set of governments), even if not expressly formulated.

Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, information and communication policies are understood to mean the strategies and practices of organising, regulating, managing

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and formulating plans and forecasts in relation to infocommunicational activities.

The examination of the evolution of these activities, regardless of whether technologies intervene or not, and the focus on the singular dissemination that has held sway over the past 35 years, makes it possible to observe that a type of organization materialises in each historical and geographic context, with particular actors authorised to manage information and communication according to particular rules and with a particular type of financing and, in general, depending on a model of society. Thus the story of the evolution of infocommunicational activities makes it possible to elucidate the policies inherent to this evolution.

The Policies of the Information Society Project

Conceived by the governments of central countries (the US, the European Union, the OECD and the G7) in the last decade of the 20th century in the context of the dissemination of convergent telecommunications, IT and audiovisual infrastructures, the Information Society Project was also adopted at the end of the 1990s by peripheral countries: the African states had actions aimed at stimulating the “information society” (Van Audenhove et al. 1999) and, in Latin America, the governments of Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile and other countries developed, at different rates and with very unequal results, multiyear programs to promote the information society (Becerra 2003a).

Leaving aside idiosyncrasies in terms of the order of priorities assigned in each country and slight differences between them, the Information Society Project was forged on three main ideas, not exempt for controversy: liberalisation, deregulation and the promotion of international competitiveness in infocommunicational activities⁵, understanding that they would be organised as a global market of increasing importance and impact on the restructuring of production processes and the corresponding generation of wealth in the world.

With a decade of constant development after the first formulations by the European Union (European Commission 1994), the Information Society Project mentions a recently developed set of broad, multiform and mutant

processes: the majority were first conceived after the 1970s. Although there are no broadly accepted definitions about the information society and, as has occurred with the notion of globalisation, there are authors who question the very name, the European Commission establishes that:

Over the past twenty years we have been witnessing a revolution in communication and information technologies the scope of which is much greater than most of us could have imagined. One of the main effects of these new technologies has been the drastic reduction in the cost and time needed to store, process and transmit information. These impressive changes in price relations fundamentally affect the way in which we organise the production and distribution of goods and service and thus work itself. This evolution is transforming work, the structures of qualifications and the organisation of businesses, which introduces a fundamental change in the labour market and in society overall (EC 1996a, 9).

This definition makes it possible to organise the multiplicity of treatments of social, economic, political and cultural changes baptised the Information Society. The Information Society Project, as can be deduced from the European Commission quote above, rests on a series of basically technological and economic changes and was reinforced across practically the whole world during the 1990s thanks to the governmental programmes of the information highways (US, see Gore 1994) and the information society (European Commission, see EC 1994, 1996a, 1996b and 1996c, 1997 and 1998; OECD, see OECD 2003).

As the EC quote suggests, the basis of these projects is linked to the technological revolution in information and communication that began in the 1970s, when the genesis of microcomputers was recorded. According to Manuel Castells (1995), a new development model, the informational model, was born in the 1970s under the sail of the technological progress consolidated during a crisis in the Keynesian model in the central countries, as a historic bet for the generation of a new logic for the growth and accumulation of capital.

Other authors, like Claudio Katz (1998) and Armand Mattelart (2002), who partly agree with the causes that formed the basis of the arrival of the new development model Castells spoke of, warn that growing social

segmentation in accessing the goods and services offered in the framework of the information society, as well as being functional to the dominant socioeconomic logic, questions the discourse that promotes the project, given that convergence in information and communication technologies in the wake of liberalising and deregulatory policies has, depending on the production impacts, structural determinations of a social, cultural and economic nature that are regressive.

The logic used to argue in favour of the Information Society Project is the opposite in a number of aspects to that which inspired the NWICO twenty years previously. Where the NWICO denounced imbalances and colonialist hindrances, the information society saw opportunities for exchange and modernisation. Where the NWICO tried to sow the seeds of national communication policies with certain autonomous margins, the Information Society Project saw markets for communication multinationals (Roach 1997). The infocommunicational technologies sector is one of the main focuses of both the NWICO and the Information Society Project, but the latter aspires to accompany and reinforce the technologies without paying heed to the criteria that determine their unequal production, distribution and appropriation across the world.

This explains why infocommunicational policies within the framework of the Information Society Project have been aimed at the dissemination of technologies and favoured the conditions for the builders of infrastructures and suppliers of associated services (which in many cases are the same corporate actors of different ones integrated in companies) to extend the geography of their networks until, like an ingenious metaphor of Borges, the map of the networks matches the map of the world.

The technocentric affiliation of the Information Society Project policies is certified by the funding that State and supra-State organisations like the European Commission assign to R&D entries in IT technologies, which are usually the biggest ones if we use as a reference point the set of resources earmarked to R&D. In the Commission's 6th Framework R&D Programme (2002-2006), for example, the priority area that received the most resources was technologies for the information society (with a budget of 3.6 billion euros out of a total of 13.3 billion). This priority was subdivided into the following areas: research in techno-

logical spheres of priority interest to citizens and companies; communication infrastructures and the treatment of information; components and microsystems; and the management of information and interfaces.

This means that the greatest volume of public investment in research, development and innovation was concentrated on the information infrastructures sector. At the same time, policies were promoted to liberalise services related to these infrastructures, as happened practically right across the Western world in the 1990s with IT and telecommunications⁶, a sector that generally speaking has been first privatised and then partially liberalised over the course of the past twenty years.

The case of telecommunications warrants specific analysis, given that it is the economically most profitable segment of infocommunicational activities (the overall turnover of the fixed and mobile telephone market usually represents at least double that of the whole of the cultural industries put together⁷). Given this economic importance, and to promote sector dynamics, policies were formulated that favoured the appearance of new players with the intention of stimulating development and generating free competition conditions, under the ideological premise of promoting innovation, improved services, the extension of features and, in short, benefit for users⁸.

Despite the broad execution of these policies in different contexts, after two decades (in the first countries to apply them, such as the UK and Chile) and one decade in nearly all the other Western countries, the evidence shows that few new competitors have entered the markets and that their previously monopolistic nature (through to the 1980s or 1990s) has given way to one which could be described as oligopolistic⁹, featuring few players who control essential market variables and continue to cultivate *de facto* barriers to stop new players from entering. It is thus worth reviewing the main ideas of 'liberalisation' and 'deregulation' in the Information Society Project in the light of the configuration of markets that are not very open and which also require a huge amount of regulatory activity on the part of the public authorities to consolidate them.

Discourse and Course of the Digital Opportunity

The example of telecommunications is also appropriate because the agency that was charged with articulating sector rules and technical standards from the very beginning of the industry, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)¹⁰, is the international organisation behind the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

The ITU interprets the extension of telecommunications infrastructures as a necessary condition for the generalisation of information societies in which citizens can improve their control over affairs of government, benefit from a competitive and dynamic economic environment, access sources of online knowledge, develop abilities linked to the restructuring of the economy, access a wider variety of goods and services of a symbolic nature and have better planning and use of their free time¹¹.

These notions, revitalised with new information technologies and their convergence potential, are a return to diffusionism as a model of infocommunicational policy that divides the technological aspect from those relating to content, uses and practices.

Diffusionism has historically been criticised by social studies from the very gestation of the developmentalist model as a paradigm of technology transfer as a modernisation strategy for Third World countries. Criticism of developmentalist diffusionism deepened in the late 1960s because its main argument left out the social, political, cultural and economic conditions that led whole countries, or social sectors within a particular country, to fail to integrate in the development models established as ideal. The MacBride Report can be analysed from this critical perspective and it is no coincidence that in the 1980s Unesco supported the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), the conceptual matrix to which the developmentalist model responds¹², as a situation of the commitment of the developed Western countries and with the proposal of archiving (or deviating, according to Roach 1997) the attempt to build the NWICO.

The technological determinism of diffusionism rests on the conviction that the diffusion and dissemination of information and communication infrastructures will naturally produce wellbeing and the positive effects which, it is

supposed, infocommunicational technologies bring with them. In that sense, diffusionism serves the interests of the main sector corporations, committed to the marketing of infrastructures and the services that they themselves provide in oligopolistic-type markets. Authors such as Anibal Ford do not believe it is a coincidence that the public and private organisations over which infocommunicational companies exercise a strong influence assume purely diffusionist policies: one example that was clear at the beginning of the 21st century was the G8 Summit in Okinawa, where the Digital Opportunity Task Force (made up of the world's leading telecommunications companies) started the idea of the digital opportunity as a strategy for the creation and consolidation of infocommunicational markets where they could position their voluminous production (Ford 2002).

The calling of the World Summit on the Information Society by the UN, with the direct intervention of an organisation originally conceived with a technical profile, such as the ITU, and the fact it was joined by another organisation created to articulate cultural, communication, scientific and educational policies across the world, such as Unesco, represented the possibility of submitting to critical judgement the dominant guidelines that conformed the Information Society Project, as well as notions linked to technological diffusionism as development strategies. In that sense, the calling of the WSIS in 2001 by the UN General Assembly was seen as an international opportunity to deliberate policies.

The Opportunity of the WSIS

The World Summit on the Information Society is the third intervention agreed upon at the international level that promotes or accommodates (according to the case) the UN on questions relating to information and communication, since its creation in 1945.

In 1948, the UN organised the Conference on the Freedom of Information in Geneva. In the 1970s, in the sphere of Unesco, it accommodated and developed the process (supported in general assemblies and directives, regional meetings and conferences) of building the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), the summary of which was represented by the MacBride Report

(Unesco 1980). Now the WSIS constitutes the third major activity programmed by the UN regarding the debate in international agreement on information and communication.

Called by the UN and led by the ITU, the WSIS was planned in two phases: the first ended in Geneva in December 2003, while the second is due to end in December 2005 in a high-level meeting that will take place in Tunis. Each phase has had preparatory periods and conferences (PrepComs) where the positions of the different actors were organised and set out in 'families' with the aim of advancing in the definition of the positions that would finally be treated in the two above-mentioned meetings.

More than 175 governmental delegations participate directly in the WSIS (indirectly, through the ITU, 191 countries are represented). The state public sector is one of the three divisions of the WSIS. The other two are the private business sector and civil society.

The WSIS organisers often say the summit is a "tripartite (or 'trisectorial') network of policies", alluding to the participation of the three sectors (public, private/business and civil) which led to the divisions. But is there a correlation of forces that approves a tripartite model in the participation of each group? The model defined by the decision-making style (indicative of a policy in this sense) reveals there is not.

In fact, as happens in all UN summits, the decision-making processes that characterise the WSIS are basically intergovernmental, i.e., the actors authorised to make decisions are State ones and only government delegations have the right to vote.

While the presence of the State thus conforms the vital organ of the WSIS, the private business sector has little significant presence but agrees with the general formula of the agreements, documents and statements. Finally, civil society as represented at the WSIS had a lot less influence in the first-phase conclusions, although it had to overcome unfavourable internal and external conditions (which I shall mention further on).

The main topic at the WSIS is how to expand information and communication infrastructures by promoting the Millennium Development Goals¹³ approved at the UN Millennium Summit in the year 2000, with the commitment to "turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and being further marginalized" (WSIS 2004a, 2).

The principles of an "inclusive information society", according to the WSIS Declaration of Principles approved in Geneva, are to extend access to infrastructure and information and communication technologies, as well as information and knowledge; promote ability; reinforce trust and security in the use of ICTs; create a favourable environment in all areas; develop and extend ICT applications; promote and respect cultural diversity; recognise the role of the media; treat the ethical dimensions of the information society and encourage international and regional cooperation (WSIS 2004a, 3).

The WSIS documents contrast with the theses that distinguished the second stage of the international determination of infocommunication policies in the 1970s and which were summarised in the MacBride Report. Indeed, the issues emphasised in that document (one-way flow of communication, transnationalisation, concentration and consequent need to articulate communication policies and culture to achieve a more just and balanced world stage) are taboo topics at the Summit, which is keen to accept talk about the propagation of technologies so dear to the diffusionist paradigm, but which explicitly omits questions about content and policies.

The symbolic charge of the MacBride Report operates on the WSIS agenda as the land of the 'not-possible', in an interpretive framework that weighs the conflictive ingredient that the 1980 document assumed: an ingredient that shows the peculiar nature with which the report was deciphered after the ebb of positions that favoured the democratisation of international communications of the 1980s. The device of silence is summarised in the MacBride Report but covers all the aspects which that document summarised as well as those it was not in a position to diagnose, such as free software.

In the official WSIS documents, all references to communication have been avoided, any mention of human rights with regard to communication and information played down and moderated and the arguments from civil-society organisations about the concerns of the globalising context eliminated. The WSIS has also failed to gather the contributions of civil society aimed at articulating the ability to produce (and not just consume) information on the part of the different countries in the world, as well as promote diversity, protect the participation of marginalised groups,

promote the use and construction of free and open software codes, promote laws that guarantee the development of stable and fair working conditions and the protection of people's private lives by governments.

The concept of communication, in its negotiated, interactive and interacting acceptance, agreed upon and continent of diverse actors, summarises the essential taboo of the Summit. It is clear that if we review the official declarations, the omission of the term 'communication' at a world summit that aims to be state-of-the-art with regards information is an elementary statement.

All of this led to a number of controversies in the heart of civil -society organisations, as well as public warnings from all the civil-society representatives at the Summit to the other actors (governments and business) about the dichotomy that could be glimpsed between providing for the contributions of civil non-governmental organisations or removing the legitimacy of civil society from WSIS pronouncements if they were not included.

On the other hand, the government delegates to the WSIS mostly supported diffusionist principles, from which one can deduce appeals to support policies "favourable for stability" and which would attract "more private investment for ICT infrastructure development but also enable universal service obligations to be met in areas where traditional market conditions fail to work" (WSIS 2004a, 4). The private business-sector delegation also agreed with the trend reflected in the documents issued by the WSIS, which emphasise the role of market forces in a type of partnership with the public sector.

In fact, the International Chamber of Commerce assumed the representation of the private business sector and acted true to its principles in each of the declarations it made, even though it was not decisively involved with the WSIS because it considered the ideal spheres for defining the terms under discussion to be the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). However, the private business sector was clear and precise when it came to speaking at the WSIS. For example, at the World Electronic Media Forum it recognised a declaration by the World Broadcasting Union which postulated the importance of the commercial media in conserving the plurality of news sources (World Broadcasting Unions 2003).

For their part, the civil-society actors present at the WSIS overcame their heterogeneity to reach agreements where they criticised the issues that dominated the Summit:

The strategy for the 'information society' on which the WSIS has been based largely reflects a narrow vision whereby ICTs mean telecommunications and the internet. This strategy has marginalised key issues related to the potential development inherent in the combination of knowledge and technology and thus conflicts with the broader development mandate stipulated in Resolution 56/183 of the United Nations General Assembly (WSIS 2003a)¹⁴.

The narrow vision that prevails at the WSIS with regard to ICTs as denounced above has stopped many of the initiatives promoted by civil society from prospering. In the first phase of the Summit, in Geneva 2003, the Declaration of Civil Society to the WSIS entitled *Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs* (Civil Society WSIS, 2003b), which was unanimously approved at the civil society plenary meeting of December 2003, underlined that "our voices and the general interest we collectively express are not adequately reflected in the Summit documents".

One of the most commonly used (and accepted) terms in the WSIS, i.e., *access*, could be useful in framing civil society's position within the organisation. The concept of access presents multiple approximations. One, very well explored by the researchers who advocated the NWICO and national communication policies in the 1970s (Capriles 1980), is that which refers to the passive reception of messages and data and which is not linked to that of *participation* (which supposes influence in the taking of particular measures).

The partial conclusions of the WSIS and the role of civil society could be interpreted in relation to the access that civil representatives and organisations have and also to the impossibility of achieving effective participation which would allow them to impact the general course of the events, documents and policies the arise from the WSIS.

Civil Society at the Summit

Many civil-society representatives at the WSIS and

researchers like Selian (2003) believe the tripartite nature which was sought to be imprinted on the Summit is rhetorical, since the sphere of decision-making comes nowhere near containing the dynamics of the actors from civil society and the agenda is instead dominated by private-sector interests with telecommunications and IT businesses.

The participation of civil-society organisations presents different points worth analysing: on the one hand, the representativeness of the people who attend these types of meetings that articulate the notion of *world governability* in the name of civil society is very relative. On the other hand, the most powerful NGOs in the most developed countries usually have a leading role in detriment to organisations based in the peripheral countries where more than two-thirds of the planet's population lives (of the accredited civil-society organisations, most are from the northern hemisphere). Furthermore, in some cases, the presence of civil-society organisations at the Summit contributes to promoting and awarding representativeness to people who in some cases do not have it in their countries of origin. Finally, Chock (2003) emphasises that private non-profit civil-society organisations have been accepted as members.

The conjugation of these problems linked to the presence of civil society at the Summit is not new, but responds to the logic of action of non-governmental organisations and civil society in different world summits, as occurred at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit of 1992. Selian has calculated the number of NGOs that have participated in UN world summits and conferences in the past decade and points out that the 481 NGOs listed at the WSIS are very few compared with the number accredited at the Earth Summit (2,400 organisations), the World Conference of Women held in Beijing in 1995 (5,000 organisations) or the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 (737 organisations).

The members of the civil-society delegation at the Summit had to fight the markedly technology-based narrow vision of the public and private-business sector representatives. That is why civil society at the Summit established a coordination body (the Civil Society Bureau) with the aim of articulating the work of the different families of non-governmental organisations and also to act as the coordinator for governments and the private business sector.

However, in the definition of the Summit agenda, the participation of civil society has been subordinated: "Of the 86 recommendations made by civil society, 49, i.e., more than 60%, were totally ignored. Only 12 recommendations can be found, although rewritten, while the rest disappeared into general formulations," says one civil-society organisation (quoted by Selian 2003). Alain Modoux, former assistant to the Unesco director-general for Information and Communication, says the States have blocked the participation of civil society, "condemned to play the role of observer" (2003).

Beatriz Busaniche, a member of the Civil Society Bureau during the first phase of the WSIS, says that although civil society was able to achieve the inclusion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a basis for the information society in the Summit Declaration, "at the same time, the agenda was quite closed". One example, she says, is "the work presently being done by the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), which has on its agenda issues that are far removed from the government of the internet, which is why many civil-society organisations are trying to remove them, without achieving absolutely anything". One of the most controversial aspects of the WGIG relates to the US's role in the authorisation and administration of internet names and domains and the resistance of many government and private-business actors to accept the approach of orienting the discussion about internet governability towards "the human rights of freedom of expression and privacy ... openness and transparency" (Burch 2005).

Situations of conflict at the Summit are settled on the basis of the interests of the most powerful actors, says Busaniche, as "there are major disparities within civil society itself and, obviously, when it comes to dialogue, governments prefer dialoguing with the NGOs that are most similar to them"¹⁵. The NGOs most similar to them are those that centre the basis of their claims on issues of access and infrastructure, in line with the positions of the government and private-business divisions and their diffusionist emphasis (in fact, as we can see, organisations that should belong to the private business sector were admitted as part of the civil-society division). There was also a good acceptance for calls of inclusion from social segments and sectors with difficulties in accessing infocommunication technologies

due to questions of gender, age or different abilities.

However, works related with the right to communication (enshrined by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights) were rejected, along with copyright, patents and a critical approach to the media sector. There “was also strong lobbying from the private sector to prevent any mention of free software”, says Busaniche, who added, “It must be said the fact that the official documents recognised the existence of free software and exclusive software is a step forward”¹⁶.

The Declaration of Civil Society stresses that “communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and a foundation of all social organisations” and that “every person must have access to the means of communication and must be able to exercise their right to free opinion and expression, which includes the right to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Civil Society WSIS 2003b). The ability to produce and not just receive information makes the communication process, in the view of the civil-society division at the Summit, an essential and unalienable right and relates it to some of the conclusions and final recommendations of the MacBride Report¹⁷.

However, the Plan of Action that officially enshrined the first phase of the WSIS presents a list of goals reduced to issues of connectivity and access, understanding this to be the mere ability to receive messages (WSIS 2004b). The encouragement of formulating ‘national cyberstrategies’ (sic) in the Plan of Action should not be read as a recognition of the autonomy of states and countries that participate in the summit, because it specifies that cyberstrategies should get the private sector to participate in particular projects of developing the information society in local, regional and national plans (WSIS 2004b, 3).

Some of the initiatives from the first phase of the WSIS, such as the creation of the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF)¹⁸ to reduce imbalances in the expression understood by the dominant perspective at the summit to be the *digital divide*, reveal problems with diffusionist policies based on market mechanisms as guarantees of development: everything indicates that the WSIS will finally promote a declaration favourable to the creation of the DSF, to be funded by a 1% levy on public bids for digital goods and services, coming

from the profit margin of the vendor. The profit margin of the vendor arises from the price of the service, which is borne by the users, and so, as Mastrini and de Charras (2004) warned, the cost of the DSF shall be indirectly assumed by consumers.

Sally Burch from the CRIS (Communication Rights in the Information Society) Group says, “The Fund is intended to support mainly community ICT initiatives, including training, content and other aspects; but it is not intended to solve the major telecommunications infrastructure projects.” (Burch 2005). Mastrini and de Charras (2004) compare the DSF with the International Programme for the Development of Communication developed in the time of the NWICO, underlining that, with all the limitations shown by the IPDC, at least it was borne by the participating States on the basis of a contribution percentage to the UN system.

The distance that separates the official Declaration of Principles (WSIS 2004a) and the Declaration of Civil Society (Civil Society WSIS 2003b) is obvious. The distance expresses the displacement of the political guidelines adopted in the framework of the Information Society Project with respect to the areas that started the phase of calls for the establishment of a just, free and balanced order of communications in the world and which the MacBride Report represented.

By Way of Conclusion

Twenty-five years after Unesco approved the MacBride Report, the UN convoked, for the third time in its history, a deliberation space around the diagnosis and design of international policies for the infocommunicational sector with the realisation of the World Summit on the Information Society.

Although the inclusion of civil society in the Summit aims to consolidate a tripartite model of action in the design of policies in world summits (governments/private corporate sector/civil society) which is new in the framework of international discussions on communication policies, the WSIS displays the limitations and conditioning factors that appear when someone aims to influence the agenda that controls the organisation of an essential sector in the structure of contemporary societies like that of infor-

mation and communication technologies.

In effect, the WSIS certifies the metamorphosis of the world agenda about infocommunication policies, if we take as an indicator the strategies and actors identified for the development of the sector by the official documents approved at the first phase in Geneva and ratified by the known positions on the eve of the second phase which will conclude in Tunis in November 2005. The tendency of the WSIS to trust in the dissemination of technological infrastructures as a way to “reach the goal of integration in the digital sphere” and give rise to “universal, sustainable, ubiquitous and accessible access to ICTs for all” (WSIS 2004b, 3) contrasts with the orientation of the NWICO on communication policies, which focused both on content and infrastructures.

The strategies proposed by the WSIS should be emphasised as the continuity of the political guidelines drawn up by the Information Society Project. Technological diffusionism occupies an essential place in the design of these policies, enshrined to private activity, notably that linked to the telecommunications and IT infrastructure and services sector, as the privileged actor in the dissemination of technology.

This type of approach is promoted as the ideal one, on the premise that the dissemination of infocommunicational infrastructures will favour modernisation and development and overcome imbalances which, in the semantic way of thinking that prevails at the WSIS, are reduced to the expression *digital divide*.

Access is one of the few notions that survived the shipwreck of the NWICO agenda, although given a new significance: in the framework of the WSIS, access means bringing infocommunication technology infrastructures closer. Other key concepts, such as *participation*, *democratisation*, *de-monopolisation* or *decolonisation*, have been absent from the debates. This absence is due to a specific attempt to avoid the treatment of issues, which, because of the weight they have had in deliberations about infocommunicational policies in the past, could be considered true taboos. The biggest taboo surrounds the term *communication*, prudently avoided in the Summit’s official declarations.

The right to communication, which involves the right to communicate and be communicated to, i.e., the principle

that Sweden and France introduced into international communication policies in the 1960s, is another principle eliminated by the WSIS.

The displacement of Unesco¹⁹ in favour of the ITU as the sphere of diagnosis and regulation of international communication policies, which was swiftly observed in the 1980s as a direct consequence of the MacBride Report (Reyes Matta 1984 and Schmucler 1984), is patent in a Summit which in turn confirms the guidelines of the Information Society Project (liberalisation, deregulation and competitiveness) as guiding principles.

The ITU was the agency chosen by the UN Secretary-General to organise the WSIS because of the organisation’s technical profile, despite the fact that in the past decade it was an active promoter of the internationally agreed-upon strategy of privatising telecommunications. The choice of the ITU as the host of the Summit is in keeping with another ideological premise of the Information Society Project: the political subordinated to the presumably neutral sphere of the technical, as if that was not, in short, an essentially political option.

Understood as strategies to organise, manage and regulate the sector, communication, information and cultural policies reveal the determination of the socioeconomic context in which they are formulated: the distinctive communication policies of the WSIS, 25 years after the MacBride Report, are offshoots of the world order that emerged in the 1980s and expanded in the 1990s, with references to the processes of globalisation and the dissemination and technological convergence of infocommunicational technologies. This has provoked the change in the world order of information (Carlsson 2003), just as the questioning of the established economic order in the 1970s led to a debate on the information and communication order that it was part of.

The problems that arise from the diagnosis of the MacBride Report could easily have inspired the WSIS agenda 25 years later. The concentration of cultural industries and the configuration of oligopolistic markets,²⁰ the effects of the internationalisation of infocommunication activity, the threats about cultural diversity and informational pluralism contained in the infocommunicational order, the relationship between the media and education and questions relating to censorship and self-censorship that

were put forward as essential questions in the framework of the NWICO are today expelled from an agenda that seeks to build information societies supported by increasingly powerful technology and infrastructure markets.

Civil society, whose participation backs the possibility of an intervention space for a collective subject without a profit motive that does not (necessarily) present organic links with the suppliers of infocommunicational infrastructures and services, has managed to introduce into the WSIS references to basic human rights as an essence of the Information Society Project. However, the heterogeneity of the civil-society actors and the lack of clear spaces to impact the summit's general agendas have tempered a great many of the initiatives it has promoted.

In the light of the diffusionist paradigm in communication policies supported by the public and private corporate actors at the WSIS, the multiple voices that the MacBride Report hoped to shore up in an increasingly interconnected world continue to be part of the unresolved problems, rather than the displayed solutions, in the international panorama of communication.

Notes

- 1 The concept of infocommunication as used in this text is noteworthy for its analytical utility, because it refers both to the growing industrialisation of information, culture and social exchanges and the role played by the communication technologies that go hand in hand with social and cultural changes. The concept of infocommunication establishes the articulation between economy, communication and culture.
- 2 The choice of Tunis as the seat of the second phase of the WSIS sparked many complaints because it is a country where the freedom to inform and be informed is restricted.
- 3 At the 19th General Conference in Nairobi in 1976, Unesco had approved its contribution to the establishment of a new international economic order, adopted by the UN two years previously in New York, which denounced “the domination and dependency” of the order in force at the time. The first of a series of intergovernmental conferences on communication policies was held in San Jose (Costa Rica) in 1976 under the auspices of Unesco and called for “fairer criteria for exchanges among nations” (Hamelink 1985). With this history, at the 20th General Conference in Paris, Unesco approved a resolution that emphasised “the obvious need to put an end to the developing world’s dependence in the fields of information and communication” and considered that “the imbalance in information flows is increasingly more noticeable in the international sphere, despite the development of communication infrastructures” and so “approved efforts aimed at establishing a New World Information and Communication Order that was more just and balanced” (Unesco 1977 and 1979).
- 4 For further information on the foundations of the Information Society Project, see Mattelart (2002), Bustamante (1997), Becerra (2003a and 2003b) and OECD (2003).
- 5 These main ideas are the ones that the very organisations interested in the Information Society Project emphasised as a model (European Commission 1994).
- 6 One exception to the rules of the privatisation and liberalisation processes of telecommunications in the West can be found in Uruguay. This South American republic presents an interesting antithesis to the discourse that promotes sector liberalisation, based on the supposed inefficiency of the State when it comes to managing economically profitable services: Uruguay continues to have a State-run monopoly over its fixed telephone market without it having hurt the quality or growth of the sector.
- 7 The cultural-industries sector comprises the phases of production, publication and distribution of audiovisual content (radio, free-to-air and pay TV, films, records and CDs) and publications (press, books).
- 8 ‘Ideological premise’ is described as the free-market doctrine that inspired the liberalisation of infocommunication markets executed in the 1980s and 1990s in the same sense that Tremblay speaks of when he questions the very name of the information society (Tremblay 1996).
- 9 The oligopolistic nature of the infocommunication markets is one of the features most commonly studied by the communication theorists, and some authors, such as Robert McChesney (2002), Juan Carlos de Miguel (2003) and Nicholas Garnham (2000), show that their concentration is not a type of new illness, but an inherent feature of the way they work.
- 10 Originally created as a technical body linked to the beginning of the telegraph (it was founded in 1865 as the International Telegraph Union and 20 states were members), the ITU is today an international organisation in the UN system that works as a stage on which to determine policies between member state governments and the private business sector that produces and distributes infocommunicational infrastructures. There are no representatives of civil society in ITU decision-making. Hamelink (1997) says that after the 1980s, the function of the international business community rose as the central influence in forums like the ITU and GATT (WTO)
- 11 Among the many empirical studies that respond to these hypotheses that correlate wellbeing with the dissemination

of infocommunication technologies, I would like to mention those of Frissen and Punie (1997), Punie et al. (2003) and de Nie et al. (2004).

- 12 The virtual failure of the IPDC can be analysed on the basis of its developmentalist and diffusionist determinations linked to a “pragmatic, de-ideologizing” approach (Fasano Mertens, 1984) and the conservative offensive undertaken in the 1980s by the Republican government of Ronald Reagan (Reyes Matta 1984) in its two consecutive presidential terms. For his part, Hamelink (1997) complements this explanation by arguing that the IPDC’s lack of resources was one of the reasons for its failure, together with the inability to transform itself into a truly multilateral form of technical assistance.
- 13 The WSIS Declaration of Principles includes “the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world” (WSIS 2004a).
- 14 The document entitled *Essential Reference Points of Civil Society for the WSIS*, from which this paragraph is taken is, as the name suggests, a working text with reference points, about which the speakers of the civil society delegation present at the WSIS have not reached a full consensus.
- 15 Personal correspondence.
- 16 As above.
- 17 For example, recommendation 29 of the Report says access should be facilitated to the media “both of creators and of the diverse groups at the base of society, so they can express themselves and have their voice heard” (Unesco 1980, 442) and the recommendations referring to the “democratisation of communication” (52 to 54) were along the same lines.
- 18 The DSF was created in the framework of the first phase of the WSIS at the proposal of Senegal, Nigeria and Angola.
- 19 The mutation of Unesco over the past 25 years has not gone unnoticed. From being the sounding box for the then powerful (although heterogeneous) Movement of Non-Aligned Countries in its strategy to diagnose, regulate and challenge international communication and cultural policies (Carlsson 2003), Unesco acknowledged the departure of the US and the UK in the 1980s when it initiated a turnaround represented by the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the “New Communication Strategy” (NCS) after 1988. With the NCS, Unesco aimed to overcome and forget the decade in which the New World Information and Communication Order was released.
- 20 Within a framework of concentration among major multimedia conglomerates never before seen in history in terms of their size and geographic scope, the WSIS recognises the media for “their important contribution to the freedom of expression and the plurality of information” (WSIS 2004b, 13).

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