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WSIS, THE NEOLIBERAL AGENDA, AND COUNTERPROPOSALS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY

Thank you for inviting me here, I'm truly honored. First, let me apologize that my presentation will be in English. I'll try to answer questions in Spanish. The title of my discussion is "The World Summit on the Information Society, the Neoliberal Agenda, and Counterproposals from Civil Society." I'll begin with a quick overview of the Summit, follow by describing emerging alternative, parallel, and countersummit plans, and end with a perspective that looks beyond the Summit towards building a real global movement for communication rights.

I. BACKGROUND ON WSIS

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a UN Summit that is being organized by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). The Summit has been constructed according to a so-called 'flower petal' model, with a series of regional meetings feeding into preparatory conferences, followed by a two-phase World Summit: in December 2003, Geneva, a Declaration and Action Plan will be agreed upon, and then in 2005, in Tunis, there is supposed to be a review of accomplishments since 2003 and a renewal of commitments by all the participants [see www.wsis.org]. According to the rhetoric, each 'petal' (regional meeting, preparatory conference, and Summit) is open to 'tripartite participation,' meaning that the governments, private sector, and civil society are all supposed to have a voice. In theory, then, the Summit is a much more open model for a global forum than most UN meetings or bodies. In what sense, then, is it appropriate or realistic to see the WSIS as another instrument consistent with the neoliberal agenda?

To begin with, it is important to understand that the ITU has always served governments and the powerful telecom conglomerates. Originally set up in 1865 to regulate telegraph standards, later radio, and then satellite orbit allocation, the ITU took on the Summit because it has recently been losing power to the telecoms that increasingly set their own rules and to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which was created by the US government to regulate the Internet domain name system. The ITU is now facing heavy budget cuts and is desperate to remain a player in the global regulation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Given the background of the ITU, it's no surprise to find the clearest vision of the Summit as a plank in neoliberalism coming straight from the horse's mouth. Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the ITU, has stated at repeated regional conferences, and I quote:

"Developing policy frameworks for cyberspace to deal with issues of cybercrime, security, taxation, IP protection, or privacy – is something like establishing a new government in the New World. I recall the

early history of the colonial states in the USA or the story of El Dorado in Spanish [sic] America. But cyberspace is an invisible world and much more complex. Its inhabitants are not only individuals but include corporations, governments, and even sovereign states. They require new mechanisms for cooperation. We need a much more stronger [sic] political will to solve the issues than our ancestors [sic] did in establishing a state in their newly conquered territories” [Bucharest, 7 November 2002: available at http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/rc/bucharest/speech_utsumi.doc].

We can see from this statement the imperialist mindset with which the leadership of the ITU are approaching the so-called ‘information society.’ They are not, of course, the only ones with such a vision. The US position is also clear:

1. Crack down on ‘digital piracy’ in the developing world, in order to maximize profits for the US based multinational software and media content conglomerates;
2. Fight so-called ‘cyberterrorism,’ in other words normalize electronic surveillance across the globe and extend the electronic eavesdropping provisions of the USA Patriot Act to the rest of the world. (Of course this already exists in the form of ECHELON, but ECHELON is illegal. The global adoption of an instrument on ‘cyberterror’ would be a terrible step).

The agenda of the private sector mostly overlaps with and informs the position of the US government: ensure the enclosure of the knowledge commons in the form of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) held by corporations, rather than creators, and ensure the liberalization of information and communication systems everywhere [see the contribution to WSIS Content and Themes by the Coordinating Committee of Business Interlocutors at http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/im/content_themes/contributions/ccbi.doc].

To the most powerful actors on this stage, then, cyberspace is a lawless frontier to be tamed and fenced in under the property rights and surveillance regimes. The Summit will envision a rollout of infrastructure across the globe, of course with lip service to universal access, but only under conditions that ensure the maximization of profit for the multinationals and the normalization of the paranoid panoptic pretensions of the USA/UK ECHELON surveillance system. In place of a global knowledge commons, we will have a crackdown on so-called ‘digital piracy’ in the developing world. In place of the emergence of a strong coordinated global civil society, we have the chilling effect of state surveillance apparatus, with the US Empire’s war dogs leading the pack towards Total Information Awareness [now renamed ‘Terrorist Information Awareness:’ see <http://www.darpa.mil/body/tia/TIA%20DI.pdf>].

II. ON THE ‘INCLUSION’ OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Does all this mean that the WSIS agenda is entirely set by the wealthy nations and the private sector? Can it be dismissed as yet another tool of neoliberalism? It's not so simple. For one thing, the most powerful nations and the multinationals have been fairly uninterested in the entire Summit process, sending low-level representatives, if anyone, to preparatory meetings. They seem to be mostly ignoring the WSIS, focusing on other forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to push the privatization of information and communication systems.

At the same time, there have certainly been positive developments within the Summit process. There have been head nods to civil society participation, formal accreditation for NGOs, and small openings for crafting official UN language. The supposed goal of 'bridging the digital divide,' while at best a naïve formulation that obscures the underlying economic divide that increases as a result of neoliberal policies, is still a positive ideal, and we should welcome a stated commitment by governments to achieve universal access. There is language encouraging governments to adopt Open Source software (although this will be blocked for the most part by the US and the private sector.) There is language that emphasizes attention to power inequalities, gender, youth, indigenous, migrants, and other marginalized peoples. We also might expect some funds to be made available for development communication projects as a result of the WSIS action plan; at least a few of these projects will likely be well conceived and implemented and will bring access, tools, and skills to underserved populations.

However, the negative experience so far is also clear: civil society has been shut out of the process, civil society and the private sector have been formally lumped together, and there are few funds for participation by people from the 2/3 world (global South, plus poor and marginalized peoples from the North). The WSIS is shaping up to be an ineffective talk shop with no teeth. That may turn out to be a blessing, since human rights are not at the core - crucially, the Draft Declaration section on infrastructure is informed instead by the trickle-down neoliberal vision cloaked in the language of 'enabling market environment' and 'public-private partnership,' code words for the privatization of information and communication systems [see the Draft Declaration, section 6, at http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsispcip/td/030721/S03-WSISPCIP-030721-TD-GEN-0001!!PDF-E.pdf].

To be fair, the whole question of 'civil society' participation has been complicated by the decision to allow individual private firms to register as civil society participants, in addition to their representation by delegates from trade associations (and often, by the government delegates as well.) While Canada, Australia, some African countries, and the EU have all pushed for 'civil society and private sector' contributions in the form of working papers, China and Pakistan blocked this proposal during both PrepComs. While some countries may be trying to shut out civil society in order to avoid discussion of internal human rights violations, the conflation of the private sector with civil society also resulted in some more progressive national delegates opposing the meaningful inclusion of 'civil society' on the valid grounds that this would open a back door to greater corporate influence. It is sometimes difficult to sort out which instances of exclusion are due to careful planning by the ITU Secretariat or by national delegates, and which are due to bumbling Secretariat inexperience in dealing with civil society. The upshot, though, is clear: civil society has been marginalized and excluded at every step of the way.

III. ALTERNATIVES

In response, a variety of groups have already begun planning alternative, parallel, countersummit, and protest activities around the WSIS:

- **European Independent Media Centers, NoBorder Network:** These groups met in April (along with delegates from the CRIS campaign) to discuss an alternative conference the weekend before WSIS, to bring together political and media activists, artists, and cultural workers. They envision a space where “the antiglobalization movements meets the tactical media movement,” and will facilitate skillshares and tactical media laboratories before and during the Summit, with radio, TV channels, and web coverage. They have issued a call to ‘refuse and resist war and infowar, border management and digital rights management, restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of communication’ [<http://www.geneva03.org/moin.cgi/GenevaCall>].
- **US Media Activists:** In the USA, the Summit has not really been on the agenda. The press has completely ignored it, the private sector is only sending low-level representatives so far, it’s unclear how involved the Bush administration will be, and the social movements and media activists who do work on communications have all been focused on the June 2nd Federal Communications Commission decision to allow further consolidation of US media systems in the hands of corporate conglomerates [see <http://www.reclaimthedia.org>]. Still, some activists and organizations are trying to build on the momentum of the campaign against media monopoly to educate US activists, advocacy groups, and policymakers on the global implications of US communications policy, and to link the domestic issues to the international movement for communication rights.

For example, **Free Press Media Reform Network**, an umbrella organization that hopes to link policymakers with grassroots media activists, will hold their formative conference in Madison, Wisconsin, in November 2003. While the focus will be on US media policy reform, the organizers are interested in making links to the global communication rights movement. They will include an international strand within their conference that may include discussion of the WSIS and alternatives, possibly generating input to events in December [see www.media-reform.net].

There has also been discussion of a 3rd **Break the Media Blackout** event. Organizers from the media arm of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign are interested in a US conference to take place the weekend before the Summit, parallel to the alternative activities in Geneva that are being organized by the IndyMedia Centers and NoBorders Network and hopefully linked to them. They envision

poor people's organizations meeting with media activists for skillshares and hands-on tactical media labs as well as education on the global communication rights/media justice movement. They hope to create some kind of statement or message to be delivered in Geneva [see <http://www.kwru.org/conference> for information about the 2002 Break the Media Blackout Conference].

Some discussions have also begun around parallel activities in **San Francisco** and in **Austin, Texas**.

- **World Forum on Communication Rights:** Perhaps most exciting, the Communication Rights in the Information Society [CRIS: <http://www.crisinfo.org>] campaign has proposed the launch of a World Forum on Communication Rights. To be held the second day of the WSIS, December 11th, this Forum is conceived not as a one-time event but as the expression of an ongoing process. The first World Forum on Communication Rights will aim to 1. create a Declaration on Communication Rights, with reference to and synthesis of past declarations; 2. provide examples of violations and successful implementations of Communication Rights; 3. create a Set of Actions. The World Forum on Communication Rights will deal with the public domain and alternatives to IPRs, the public sphere and media, the closure of the internet, the promotion of Free/Libre Open Source Software, governance innovation and grassroots communications technology [see <http://www.crisinfo.org/live/index.php?section=2&subsection=2&id=32>].
- **World Social Forum:** In Porto Alegre, participants in the 'media, culture, and counter-hegemony' strand agreed that a countersummit would be important, alongside continued 'inside' participation [see <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/190.htm>]. In addition, a discussion has been growing around the possibility of a **Thematic Social Forum on Communication Rights**, perhaps to take place in 2005 as an alternative to the Phase II WSIS meeting in Tunis.

This last proposal takes us to the most important point: if WSIS is best thought of as an organizing opportunity, rather than a forum we can really participate in or a body that will have real power, what are we organizing towards in the long run?

IV. BEYOND WSIS: BUILDING A GLOBAL MOVEMENT FOR COMMUNICATION RIGHTS

For those of us trying to build a global movement for communication rights, WSIS is most useful as an agenda-setting event, organizing impetus, and news hook, not as a democratic forum where our concerns will be addressed. It is an opportunity to strengthen the links between the anticorporate globalization (global justice) movement and the fight against wholesale privatization of information and communication systems, or the fight for communication rights. The global justice movement can't proceed without tackling this area; and of course,

communication rights can't be won if the movement stays within a relatively small circle of NGOs, media activists, and academics.

To that end, WSIS can be thought of as a potential catalyst for us to develop our own global organizing process and structure around communication rights. As MJ Kim has pointed out, the corporate sector has their own agenda: they are focused on IPRs and privatization of ICT infrastructure, and they lobby hard in every venue¹. The US has its own agenda, focused on surveillance and cyberterrorism, and they will also lobby hard everywhere. These powerful actors constantly venue-shift, taking the battle from national legislatures to multilateral agreements, from the WTO² to WIPO, from the FTAA to ICANN. The global justice movement needs its own space to develop a communications agenda, in order to take the fight to each institution, body, and process, and to the streets in front of each as well. In a way, we need our own version of the ITU – an international forum where the network of networks can develop a progressive agenda on communication rights, with concrete measures and plans of action. WSIS is an opportunity to launch such a forum; to bring together different generations of media activists, strengthen our networks, and voice clear opposition to both state and corporate control of media and communication systems.

To that end, social movements and media activists who are trying to decide whether to engage with WSIS at this point should consider how to best use the event to their advantage, but not get bogged down in spending most of their resources trying to influence the official Declaration and Plan of Action. At the same time, we need to be very clear: It would be shameful to sign on to the Declaration and Action Plan as they are unfolding at this point. By the end of PrepCom 3 we should have a clear counterproposal that denounces the privatization of communication systems, the airwaves and satellite orbits, and the fruits of human creativity and knowledge, demands the removal of the neoliberal language from the Declaration and Action Plan, and threatens a walkout of the Summit itself if these conditions are not met. [They will not, of course, be met.]

If a walkout does become necessary, it should not take place at PrepCom3 but should be delayed until the Summit, since it is a card that can only be played once and will make a much greater impression in December– the PrepComs are not newsworthy, the WSIS December meeting may be to some degree. There, as many civil society organizations as possible (and if possible, national delegates as well) should stage a walkout on the second day – from WSIS to the World Forum on Communication Rights. In one possible scenario, this

¹ The Coordinating Committee of Business Interlocutors (CCBI) has recently released a statement with a 6-point program: "1. Focus on Information Society Building Blocks; 2. Recognize the Importance of Pro-Competitive Policies and Private Sector Investment; 3. Link ICT investment to economic development, social growth and poverty reduction; 4. Incorporate Measuring and Accounting tools in Summit pronouncements; 5. Prescribe National ICT Strategies; 6. Acknowledge the critical role of Business in the Future of the Information Society" [http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/im/content_themes/contributions/ccbi.doc].

² For example, at the WTO ministerial meeting in Cancun in September, the US will try once again to overturn what is now known as the 'cultural exception' and bring the audiovisual sector into the WTO [see the US proposal at <http://docsonline.wto.org/DDFDocuments/t/S/CSS/W21.doc>]. If successful, this will mean the elimination of national funding for content production and of quotas on foreign content. Activists are already planning a day of tactical media skillshares combined with policy education, to take place just before the ministerial and train the assembled movements in how to report on their own days of action during the meeting.

would be a highly visible, physical movement of people from one venue to another. Others argue for a less 'confrontational' style; a kind of open invitation to the parallel forum.

A brief point about the possibility of more confrontational tactics: at the moment, it doesn't seem necessary to try and shut WSIS down, in part because the Declaration and Plan of Action is still very unclear, and also because it probably won't have much impact. It seems more important to articulate our own vision and strengthen the foundation for our own movement. On the other hand, the symbolic significance could change: especially if Bush attends, it would be worth amplifying confrontation to take a stand against US imperialism in all its manifestations – military, economic, informational - and for communication rights and media justice.³

Regardless of the actual form of the walkout, the first day of the Summit should be used to make the intention clear to the full assembly – if possible, one of the Civil Society speaking slots on the first day should be used to announce the demands, the parallel process, and a post-World Forum on Communication Rights press conference. That press conference should provide statements not only from representatives of those in attendance, but also videotaped or live remote statements from key civil society groups, social movements, and figures from around the globe.

Finally, all of the opportunities provided by the Summit notwithstanding, we need to remember that the key decisions about privatization of audiovisual content in the near future will be taken elsewhere, for example at the WTO in Cancun in September, where proposals have already been introduced by the USA, Switzerland, and Brazil⁴ to liberalize the AV content industries. Interventions at the WTO and WSIS could be keys to galvanizing a strong communication rights movement.⁵ This movement can then intervene in other processes.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up: the Summit has thus far excluded civil society. We can't let the ITU, powerful nations, and the private sector use civil society to give a stamp of legitimacy to a thinly veiled neoliberal agenda of privatization of information and communication systems, privatization of common resources like the electromagnetic spectrum and satellite orbits, erosion of the knowledge commons, and the elimination of communication rights. Rather than boycott the Summit, though, we should participate, using WSIS as an organizing opportunity to develop our own

³ A note here about the term 'media justice,' and the question of racism in the media: media racism should be central to media justice movement, just as environmental racism was central to the emergence of the environmental justice movement (Art McGee has pointed this out). Use WSIS to launch an international media justice movement, led by people of color. (Conference on Racism and Communications, as part of WFCR?).

⁴ By the way, I believe the proposal from Brazil came from the old administration, and someone should lobby the Lula administration to retract it. The Brazilian proposal is available here: <http://docsonline.wto.org/DDFDocuments/t/S/CSS/W99.doc>.

⁵ I don't know whether audiovisual content or other aspects of media and communications systems will fall under the FTAA; if so, that's another important space to intervene.

alternatives, strengthen our own vision and plan of action for demanding communication rights, and linking this movement to the global justice movement.

I think it's a waste of time to spend our efforts at WSIS, or at the World Forum on Communication Rights, hammering out carefully crafted statements line by line. We should approach it as a moment for political theater and an organizing opportunity, which means thinking about ongoing initiatives that can be launched there. We should think about emerging from WSIS with the basis of an organizing structure for a more democratic Forum of our own. The World Forum on Communication Rights is a step in this direction. A Thematic Social Forum on Communication Rights / Media Justice, possibly to be held in 2005 in counterpoint to the second phase of WSIS Tunis, could be another step on the long road to communication rights for all. Thank you.

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