



For the right to communication in the Information Society

We all have the right to express ourselves, to be listened to, to be acknowledged, to present ourselves with dignity, and the right to reach and access information from different sources. Everyone should be able to see one's own world in the mist of data globalization.

Paper presented by Olga Beatriz Gutiérrez at OURMedia III Network Conference, Barranquilla, Colombia, May 19-21, 2003.

Communication is everyone's right
and it should be practiced and claimed.

The spaces for the right to communication in Colombia
should be filled with citizens' arguments and proposals.

In Colombia we got to learn about the CRIS Campaign like good things are usually known about: by chance. It was while surfing on the Web, stationed as we are in the Third World, that we learned about the Summit and the Campaign. Suddenly and paradoxically, we realized that it was a civil society organization the one which had connected to the world long before the Government had. The day after our finding, we called different government offices only to find that none of them knew either about the World Summit or the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society -CRIS.

World Summit on Information Society and Knowledge	Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society – CRIS
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<p>The World Summit on the Information Society is an initiative of the United Nations (UN) coordinated by the International Telecommunications Union (UIT) to reflect upon the radical transformations that will take place in an industrial world that will become more and more a society which relies on data changing our ways of living, learning and working as well as the way governments interact with different communities.</p> <p>The process involves three participants: governments, the private sector and civil society. There is a Summit Secretariat within which a section will be working to encourage Civil Society's participation.</p> <p>The Summit will be held in two stages: the first will take place in Geneva from December 10 to 12, 2003, and the second in Tunis in 2005.</p> <p>The expected result is the drafting of two main framework documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A Declaration of major ethical principles and rules that will guide the different agents whose task will be to create the Information Society. 	<p>MISSION:</p> <p>"To help build an Information Society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation, and social and economic justice all inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional outlooks.</p> <p>The World Summit on Information Society offers an important forum to promote the aforementioned objective. We aim to broaden the Summit's agenda and goals, especially concerning media and communication issues. Besides, we expect to encourage participation of a wide range of civil society groups in this process".</p> <p>The CRIS Campaign intends to restate the Summit's concerns and to place Information Society within the framework of communities' needs and proposals, understanding communication as a fundamental right. More than the simple issue of gaining access to technology, it is a problem of development, participation and the exercise of communication rights. We want to build an inclusive society that respects human rights and pluralism.</p>
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<p>-A flight plan stating the operational priorities and specific measures that should be implemented by both southern and northern nations so that everyone can equitably benefit from the new opportunities related to the information society.</p>	
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A couple of months later, everything was back to normal and the Ministry of Communications was in charge of the international consulting processes for due participation on the Summit's preparatory meetings (Prepcoms) as well as establishing its posture as a nation. Meanwhile, we began establishing our own contacts worldwide, downloading documents and socializing with regions.

Planeta Paz, the institution that first boosted the Campaign in Colombia, organized several events in the second semester of 2002. In such events, Planeta Paz, as part of its communication work with popular sectors of the Colombian society, submitted information on the World Summit, the Campaign and some hints as to how to join both events as well as creating a national process. However, it was only up until 2003, after working with popular social sectors, that organizations from other sectors were invited to join a team with the explicit purpose of promoting the Campaign throughout the Country.

The main concern behind the idea of inviting different sectors to join the campaign CRIS-Colombia is to create a group, as wide as possible, of organizations, institutions and individuals who share the concept of communication as a right and then have a national debate that takes into account the proposals of the social agenda on communications, proposals which later should be capable of bearing some weight on public policy definition. Rather than producing extensive reference

material, CRIS Campaign's purpose is to obtain the Colombian population's support in order to protect this right as well as making proposals for the kind of communication we want in this country. The Campaign's responsibility is focused on regional teams to promote debate and hear proposals from the local regions.

The idea is to deliberate but having negotiation and action in mind; to participate with proposals and from a position of strength when discussing the future legislation for radio and community television broadcasting, mass media and the practice of journalism. Another purpose is to promote community organizations such as associations, leagues, and media supervisors capable of acting as genuine interlocutors of government, public and/or private institutions that manage and affect the management of public affairs. Ultimately, the World Summit framework and the Campaign constitute an excellent pretext to understand the state of media 'communication' in Colombia and build processes of citizen empowerment.

What are the Campaign's Goals?

- 1- To influence as a civil society in public policies related to Communication in Colombia.
- 2- To contribute to the reflection on the need to change excluding communicative practices both from mass media or any community programming which could be repeating similar patterns or that simply neglect their duty.
- 3- To strengthen the networks of organizations and individuals committed to democratic and inclusive communication in Colombia and worldwide.
- 4- To participate in the debates of the World Summit on the Information Society presenting the civil society organizations' proposals.

What has the CRIS Campaign done in Colombia?

The idea of starting a CRIS Campaign in Colombia, linked to the CRIS World Campaign, began with the seminar *Construir país desde la Comunicación* (Building a Nation from Communication), summoned by Planeta Paz in August 2002, with the support of the United Nations Office for Human Rights and UNIMEDIOS - Universidad Nacional. The seminar was attended by popular social leaders from more than 40 organizations and had the support of well known communication analysts with experience in Colombia. Its purpose was to work three main themes: Globalization and communication, Democracy and communication and The right to communications. Germán Rey and Doris Reniz contributed with speeches on the process of developing awareness and criteria among social sectors.

The Forum for the Right to Communication was held in October 2002 with the participation of media analysts, the United Nations and community media representatives. The Forum focused on the spectrum of TV coverage and its consequences when building the Country's human rights imaginary.

Last March, a national seminar-workshop was held to continue the series *Construir país desde la Comunicación* attended by 50 social leaders from different regions. A brief on the 'World Summit on the Information Society' and the 'CRIS Campaign' was read. Previews of the Campaign's organizational proposals for Colombia and possible work topics for the regions were discussed. The creation of cross-section regional committees was suggested. Such committees should involve the academic community, popular social sectors, journalist and cultural associations and anyone sharing the Campaign's proposals on communications as a building block for the creation of democracy and the development of human rights.

Every region designed a communication strategy to develop each team's work and agreed to consult other sectors to proceed with the Campaign following each region's specific characteristics.

In Bogotá, an inter-institutional committee has been created where different sectors of society are represented. Academics, students, popular social organizations, community action boards, community radio stations, alternative communication media and communicators' organizations among other groups participate and, as an official observer, the Ombudsman's Office.

How is the CRIS Campaign developing in Colombia?

The organization in the country consists of a decentralized network with an inter-institutional working committee which promotes and supports activities and spreads information through regional committees that are at the moment being put together and through some communication tools that the Web has enabled.

Three Campaign electronic bulletins have been issued through the Web and the first formal printed bulletin is currently being prepared. We expect to increase the scope of action and participation and create a national debate with high regional participation.

In some regions social, university, and student organizations representatives have met this year to discuss community communication experiences stirred by the Campaign process and are thinking of creating regional committees. The latter aim to express common concerns regarding the communication practices in our country in order to build an agenda and highlight the importance of the right to communication.

Eight main topics have been proposed in Colombia to generate debate: Democratization of Communication; Citizen and community media; Social Control; Communication, culture and diversity; Communication as a Right; Communication, conflict and peace; Communication, globalization and power, and Information and Communication Technologies.

The statements produced during this stage of the CRIS Campaign-Colombia will help as an input for the Campaign debates at a general level to gradually build a collective position as a civil society to be put forward in the World Summit on the Information Society and Knowledge.

Participation of institutions such as the Ombudsman's Office, as an observer, has backed civil society's participation and opened institutional debate spaces such as the 13 ombudsman audiences which will be held in the regions this year... yet another space now open to participation, where citizens may express their concerns about media and information.

This kind of processes may lead us to transform communication practices and bear upon the Information Society, not only from the technology point of view, but content and information management wise where there must be space for everybody.

COLOMBIA PROPOSES EIGHT TOPICS

1- DEMOCRATIZATION

By democratization we mean equal access to communication in a world where diversity of information, opinion, and culture is more and more manifest. In our country, mass media has been gradually concentrated in fewer hands. In Bogotá there is only one national newspaper. Big mass media companies consolidate a globalized discourse in which popular sectors go unnoticed. To democratize information and power in media means to strengthen public opinion.

2- CITIZENRY AND COMMUNITY MEDIA

New community media are being increasingly created in this country in order to promote development among their citizenry. Any community will find in these

media a great opportunity to create and funnel their leadership around social change proposals. Unfortunately, practicing community journalism in the midst of conflict and a non-pluralist society has left a huge number of journalists either censored or murdered.

On the other hand, it is necessary to check that the community media are in effect complying with the mission they have been created for. The community media do not always work with a democratic journalistic criterion: often, their microphones are only open to certain sectors and discriminate others. It is necessary to create a broad social debate so policies and guidelines about community media guarantee freedom of expression and fulfill a real social function.

3- SOCIAL CONTROL

By social control we mean the possibility of power control available to those who have sway over the management of public matters in communication, whether they are state or private enterprises.

Communication and information are understood in a two-way sense, not only as a topic for communicators, journalists and people involved in media, but also for citizens, users or receptors of this information. The concept of citizenship is examined to see whether it is considered or not as actual participation in communicative processes. Citizens should take active part when dealing with information, both when producing or receiving it. They should not be satisfied by playing the role of a passive receptor, they should not cut off themselves from their community but, on the contrary, express themselves so that information becomes plural and democratic.

4- COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND DIVERSITY

The values that society somehow reproduces through the media somehow perpetuate exclusion and discrimination stereotypes related to gender, sexual orientation, and social, political and cultural differences.

How to guarantee that information reflects cultural, ethnic, regional, ideological and opinion diversity, whenever doing so might seem to contradict the tendency to homogenize, unify, standardize, when usually it is expected that everyone should wear the same shoes, the same clothes, like the same things and eat the same hamburgers? How to guarantee such an important element as diversity in the globalization era?

5- COMMUNICATION AS A RIGHT

Communication is a fundamental right of human beings, and as such it is ruled by the same principles behind the conception of those traditionally considered rights, such as life, health and education. The right to communication defends information as a public asset, as well as the use made of the electromagnetic spectrum, which belongs to everybody, regardless of who manages it. It is important to put into use all the mechanisms and tools of internal law and international legislation from the United Nations and Inter American Systems to demand the right of communication in our country. The right to freedom of expression and the right to truth are being violated in Colombia.

6- COMMUNICATION ,CONFLICT AND PEACE

The armed conflict in our country has increased the vulnerability of all media, especially the community media. Frequently, the media under pressure by the armed actors of the conflict, are forced to restrict their programming, or even to temporarily or definitely shut down. These pressures have left a large number of journalists death, again particularly within the community media.

However, in spite the fact that the conflict has severely damaged the right to freedom of speech and the right to truth, there is also a dynamic in the community that promotes organizations that help construct the social tissue and democracy by innovating the media and spreading the people's voices, their ideas, their wishes, and claims. The Colombian armed conflict permeated all 'communication' in the country.

7- COMMUNICATION, GLOBALIZATION AND POWER

Since mass media ownership is in the hands of a few, data homogenization, and the social construction of political and cultural unanimism is favored. Very often, the interests of those exerting the power in the media go against the simple interest of providing information for the sake of public welfare. Mass media tries to make us all see from the same point of view, tries to makes us all speak the same discourse, and leave whoever is different in the dark.

In this regard, we wonder about the role the State should play in relation to information fairness and equity. Governments have always tried to control the media, but not to guarantee freedom or access to it. Instead, governments usually restrict and censors it. Who should have the control of mass media? What kind of bodies should exist at the international level with this end?

Colombia applies the same model as the one imposed on information by the neo-liberal globalization where an information supremacy of private monopolistic media, itself grouping different kinds of communication media and corporations, takes place providing all the communication services such as cable television and cellular telephony.

The Campaign's responsibility in this issue is to propose alternatives to strengthen citizen and community media, and watch over the actual existence of a public communication service to be provided in the Country.

8- INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Information and Communication Technologies in the World Summit on the Information Society are the core for economic development in the countries. At the moment, the concern for the 'digital gap' is one of the main factors when considering differences among the countries. For the CRIS Campaign, and of course, for the Colombian chapter, the use of technologies should allow the protection and enjoyment of human Rights around the world. Thus, the relationship between technology and human beings is established in terms of citizens, not users or consumers.

Some themes to be worked in order to make practicable proposals from Colombia include equal access, free software, the design of appropriate programs based on communities' features and needs, and the use of technologies to produce data traffic of multiple media that highlights the plurality of opinions and spurs a real collective construction.