

Cees J. Hamelink: Keynote at the Opening Session of the Civil Society Sector Meeting at the Prepcom 1 for the World Summit on the Information Society, July 1, 2002, Geneva.

The Theme.

The forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society is convened to focus on a contested notion: the Information Society. There is no accepted definition of what the information society is. The meaning of the notion has been seriously challenged and it has even been suggested in the academic literature that the notion bears no relation to current social realities. For some observers it only makes sense to speak in the plural sense about "Information Societies". For others the reference to "society" raises the good old sociological questions of power, profit, and participation: who controls the information society, who benefits from it, who takes part in it? The Information Society means different things to different people: more telephones, or more money, or more regulation, or more empowerment. For all participants in the debate there is the feeling that important social and technical developments confront us with difficult questions and that our societies are struggling to find adequate answers.

The History.

For the third time within 55 years the international community will address in a major way information & communication issues. The first time was the 1948 UN Conference on the Freedom of Information conference in Geneva. The second time was the debate in the 1970s on a New World Information & Communication Order.

These earlier attempts were rather unsuccessful. They caused strong antagonisms and offered no real solutions to the problems they confronted.

The 1948 conference suffered from the emerging Cold War ideological confrontation. It produced numerous resolutions and three draft treaties on Freedom of Information (proposed by the British delegation), the Gathering and International Transmission of News (proposed by the US delegation), and the International Right of Correction (proposed by the French delegation). Only the Right of Correction draft entered into force in 1962 and has since been ratified by eleven UN member states.

The debate in the 1970s produced similar ideological confrontations between East/West and the Third World. It produced the UNESCO-sponsored MacBride Report with many useful recommendations most of which were not implemented and it established an under-funded development assistance programme, the IPDC. It also inspired the departure from UNESCO of two major member states, the USA and the UK.

The Challenges.

According to UNGA resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) the Summit should address "the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society". PrepCom 1 needs to decide which issues the Summit should tackle. In different preparatory documents all the "usual suspects" are cited: equitable access, cultural diversity, digital divide, rural communications, e-commerce, e-government, data protection, security, gender, education.

The key problem evidently is to establish a relevant framework within which all these issues can be debated and acted upon. This is all the more urgent since the socio-economic and political conditions under which these issues should be addressed are not at all encouraging! As a matter of fact they are less amenable to the solution of the "digital divide" through the development of telecom- infrastructures or the access to knowledge than the conditions that

prevailed during the time of the earlier UN efforts. By way of illustration one can cite the case of global and equitable access to knowledge. This laudable proposition is in the early 21st century seriously hampered by the emergence of a strict regime for the protection of intellectual property rights in recent WTO negotiations.

If the WSIS fails to deal with such conditions it will amount to a major exercise in futility. In any case the preparatory process would need to begin with reflection on the following five core challenges.

The Political Challenge.

The Summit and its preparatory process have to be a genuine tripartite arrangement! A series of recent UN world conferences has dealt with a range of critical social issues such as gender, environment, and population. The WSIS is different in the sense that it addresses society as a whole. This Summit is about the shaping of future societies! The way in which the Summit will do this will send a strong signal to the world community about the democratic quality of future information societies. If the present Prepcom 1 fails to accept full inclusion of civil society in its deliberations and decisions, and if there is only consultation, briefing, and discussion, the whole process is a waste of taxpayers' money!

For the WSIS to be effective, citizens need to feel that they are co-proprietors of the eventual outcome: the Final Declaration and the Plan of Action. An outcome that cannot be appropriated by civil society since it had no part in the decision-making will have no credibility for many citizens around the world.

In this context it should be noted that the insistence of several governments on the intergovernmental nature of the Summit and therefore on exclusive governmental decision-making is based on arguments of political convenience. There are no grounds in international law that prevent the Summit and its preparatory process to be genuinely tripartite. It should also be observed that the earlier UN efforts in the information and communication domain largely failed since they remained inter-governmental affairs that left the interests of citizens in the margin!

The Cultural Challenge.

The notion of the information society is embedded in the contemporary technological culture. This is the prevailing way of society's interaction with technology. An interaction which is largely determined by irrationality and irresponsibility and which can be summed up with the help of three metaphors: the Titanic, Cassandra and Dr Frankenstein.

*The Titanic represents a strong belief in the perfection of technology: the ship cannot sink and it is not necessary to have enough life boats on board. As a result the real risks of technological innovations are not taken seriously. The modern technological culture demonstrates a strong drive towards a risk-free society. This aspiration to achieve a risk-free control of social processes is seriously hampered by the unpredictable, fickle human species. Actually, the human being is increasingly seen as the real risk factor. As a result modern societies develop all kinds of activities to reduce this risk, like the expansive monitoring of human conduct through the ubiquitous camera surveillance and the electronic registration of people's movements. The logical next step in this process is the replacement of humans with humanoid robots.

*Cassandra is the daughter of the Trojan king Priamus who warned the Trojans that there were Greeks in the wooden horse. She was gifted with the ability to foresee the future, but she

was also cursed by Apollo with the punishment that no one would listen to her warnings. This is characteristic of the technological culture: warning voices are ignored. In situations where decision makers experience a new era, a winning mood, and the pressures of time and competition: all traffic lights will be ignored, the dissidents will be silenced and technology choice becomes a matter of flying blind.

*Dr Frankenstein features in the novel written by Mary Shelley in which the doctor who creates a monster flees from his laboratory and is haunted by the monster who challenges him to take responsibility for what he has created. The metaphor raises the critical question about accountability for technological innovation. Who is accountable when things go wrong? Who takes responsibility if we resolve the digital divide and subsequently face insurmountable environmental problems: the exceedingly high levels of global energy consumption, the rate of CO₂ emission from printers and computers and the volume of electronic waste caused by the rapid rate of obsolescence of mobile phones and computers.

The Moral Challenge.

A key question is “how should a decent information society look like?” The only universally available normative framework is the human rights regime. However, this regime is violated around the world and around the clock. Its moral principles are solid enough, but from its inception the international community has made the deliberate political choice to keep their enforcement very weak. There is worldwide generous lip service being paid to human rights, but in fact there is no real serious concern about their promotion and protection.

This is dramatically demonstrated now that after 9/11 in so many countries -with convenient and largely unfounded references to security- civil and political rights are eroded.

The Social Challenge.

The main focus of the WSIS is on “information”. It is disconcerting that -in the preparatory documents - the notion “communication” has practically disappeared. There is a real danger that the Summit commits the same mistake as the UN World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) which in its Final Declaration did not refer to communication, but only mentioned information and news.

Yet, the real core question is how we should shape future “communication societies”. In fact for the resolution of the world’s most pressing problems we do not need more information processing but the capacity to communicate! And, ironically, as our capacity to process and distribute information increases, our capacity to communicate and to converse diminishes. Most presentations of future information societies are based upon flawed assumptions with regard to information. Such as: more information is better than less information, or more information creates more knowledge and understanding, or open information flows contribute to the prevention of conflicts, or more information means less uncertainty, or if people are properly informed they act accordingly, or more information equals more power.

A very popular information myth proposes that once people are better informed about each other, they will understand each other better and be less inclined to conflict. A very attractive assumption but not necessarily true! Deadly conflicts are usually not caused by a lack of information. In fact they may be based upon very adequate information that adversaries have about each other. As a matter of fact one could equally well propound the view that social harmony is largely due to the degree of ignorance that actors have vis-à-vis each other. Many societies maintain levels of stability because they employ rituals, customs and conventions

that enable their members to engage in social interactions without having detailed information about who they really are.

The common assumption is that if adversaries were better informed about each other, it would be easier for them to reach agreement. However, there may indeed be a conflict situation precisely because adversaries have full and detailed information about each other's aims and motives. If disputes are about competing claims to scarce resources (as often is the case) it is unlikely that lack of information is the crucial variable or that dealing with this would resolve the conflict. In reality there are situations in which more information is not better than less information. Moreover, assumptions about the role of information are often based upon a seriously flawed cause-effect model. Information is then conceived as a key variable in social processes and depending upon how it is manipulated certain social effects occur. Social science research has taught us however that information processes do not occur in the linear mode of simple stimulus/response models that propose linear, causal relations between information inputs and behavioural outputs.

In short: We do not need "information societies". We need "communication societies". This implies that we need to learn the art of the social dialogue. This is however an incredibly difficult form of speech. The dialogue requires the capacity to listen, to be silent, to suspend judgment, to critically investigate our own assumptions, to ask reflexive questions and to be open to change. The dialogue has no short-term and certain outcome. This conflicts with the spirit of achievement-oriented societies. Modern societies have no time and patience for dialogical communication. Moreover, the mass media are not particularly helpful in teaching societies the art of conversation. Much of their content is babbling (endless talking without saying anything), hate speech, advertising blurbs or polemical debate.

The Regulatory Challenge.

An effective dialogue cannot take place between people whose lives are threatened, who are not free to speak or to assemble, who have no means of expressing their voices, who cannot speak in confidentiality and privacy, or who are denied basic forms of education and cultural participation.

Therefore, the WSIS would make a real difference if a human right to communicate would be formally recognized. This right to communicate does at present not exist as a provision of international law. The adoption of a Universal Declaration on the Right to Communicate should be the key outcome of the WSIS. This means that the international community would decide to combine existing and new standards into a coherent document to be signed by governments, representatives from the private sector and civil society organisations.

As early as 1969 Jean d'Arcy introduced the right to communicate by writing, "the time will come when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will have to encompass a more extensive right than man's right to information...This is the right of men to communicate".

The motivating force for this new approach was the observation that the provisions in existing human rights law (like in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) were inadequate to deal with communication as an interactive process.

The recognition of a right to communicate is essential if global governance of "communication societies" should be inspired by human rights concerns.

A Universal Declaration on the Right to Communicate would contain provisions on several human rights, on acceptable limitations of these rights, and on a mechanism for effective implementation.

The essential human rights of the Declaration would be:

***INFORMATION RIGHTS such as :**

- The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- The right to hold opinions.
- The right to express opinions without interference by public or private parties.
- The right of people to be properly informed about matters of public interest.
- The right of access to information on matters of public interest (held by public or private sources).
- The right to access public means of distributing information, ideas and opinions.

***CULTURAL RIGHTS such as:**

- The right to promote and preserve cultural diversity.
- The right to freely participate in the cultural life of one's community.
- The right to practise cultural traditions.
- The right to enjoy the arts and the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.
- The right to the protection of national and international cultural property and heritage.
- The right to artistic, literary and academic creativity and independence.
- The right to use one's language in private and public.
- The right of minorities and indigenous people to education and to establish their own media.

***PROTECTION RIGHTS such as:**

- The right of people to be protected against interference with their privacy by the media of mass communication, or by public and private agencies involved with data collections.
- The protection of people's private communications against interference by public or private parties.
- The right to respect for the standard of due process in forms of public communication.
- The right of protection against forms of communication that are discriminatory in terms of race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin
- The right to be protected against misleading and distorted information.
- The right of protection against the systematic and intentional propagation of the belief that individuals and/or social groups deserve to be eliminated.
- The right of the protection of the professional independence of employees of public or private communication agencies against the interference by owners and managers of these institutions.

***COLLECTIVE RIGHTS such as:**

- The right of access to public communication for communities.
- The right to the development of communication infrastructures, to the procurement of adequate resources, the sharing of knowledge and skills, the equality of economic opportunities, and the correction of inequalities.
- The right of recognition that knowledge resources are often a common good owned by a collective.
- The right of protection of such resources against their private appropriation by knowledge industries.

***PARTICIPATION RIGHTS such as:**

- The right to acquire the skills necessary to participate fully in public communication.
- The right to people's participation in public decision making on the provision of information, the production of culture or the production and application of knowledge.
- The right to people's participation in public decision making on the choice, development and application of communication technology.

What Can Civil Society Do?

- First: to lobby effectively for its inclusion in the preparatory process. Merely to be consulted should not be good enough!
- Secondly: to work towards the adoption of the right to communicate. It is important that is done with the greatest degree of unanimity.
- Thirdly: to ensure that Civil Society positions are representative for civil constituencies and that there is an intensive process of exchange with these constituencies.
- Fourthly: to use the WSIS as a unique opportunity to raise people's awareness about the urgency of information and communication issues. If future "communication societies" are to become inclusive, open and democratic societies, citizens around the globe should realize that the quality of public communication determines the quality of their common future!

Conclusion.

The involvement of groups and individuals that represent Civil Society is particularly essential to the Summit. Civil society is the constant reminder that the shaping of future societies should be inclusive, democratic, transparent, and accountable. A strong presence of civil society also implies that the discourse shifts from users and consumers to citizens. The key challenge is to ensure that citizens -their rights, freedoms and responsibilities- should guide the outcome of the Summit.

