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**Activist Media in Global Governance: Inputs and
outputs at the World Summit on the Information
Society (WSIS)**

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1. Introduction

Global policy and regulation processes are no longer the exclusive domain of governments. In the age of global governance, business and civil society are increasingly included in policy deliberations and are influencing global decision-making. Even community, alternative, and activist media – usually conceived as fringe media around the edges of big mainstream media and catering only for specific tastes – are gradually becoming a global force. Many of them are recognizing the effects which the global governance sphere is having on their work and are starting to make their voices heard on the policy level. As a major United Nations conference on information and communication issues, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has provided a prominent platform for these media to discuss proposals for an alternative vision of communication governance and to test their proposals in a global policy forum. This paper will follow activist media in their interventions into, and activities around, the WSIS summit. It will look at the spaces, particularities and effects of participating in the WSIS process, and it will analyze thematic inputs and objectives.

A closer look at the WSIS scenario reveals that there are very different actors which may qualify as ‘activist media’, ranging from large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and networks with considerable resources and policy experience, to small grassroots groups without any of that. Furthermore, there is a fragmented web of concepts to describe the media we are looking at in this paper – community, alternative, autonomous, radical, tactical, and citizens media, to name but a few.¹ A narrow understanding of the term would position ‘activist media’ somewhere close to autonomous and tactical media and assume small-scale voluntary projects with horizontal and participatory organizational principles and an experimental background, focusing on empowerment, skill-sharing, and on transmitting “an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing 2001: v). In this paper; I will use this definition as a base but I will extend this perspective to include the activities of a wider range of non-commercial/non-governmental/civil society-based media.

In section 2, I will outline current trends in global communication governance, setting the background for an overview over the WSIS process in section 3. Section 4 will illustrate the structures and spaces which activist media have used to participate and intervene in summit processes, while section 5 will look at the policy proposals they have contributed to the thematic debates at and around WSIS. Section 6, finally, will draw conclusions as to the extent, the strategies, the successes, and the future perspectives of the involvement of activist media in global governance.

¹ see, for example: Rodriguez 2001, Downing 2001, Couldry/Curran 2003, Langlois/Dubois 2005, Garcia/Lovink 1999. Elsewhere I have used the concept of ‘Civil Society Media’ as an umbrella term (Hintz 2004).

2. Global Communication Governance

2.1 Global Governance

In the state-centered world of the past two centuries, international relations was an intergovernmental affair. Sovereign states represented the basic units in the international system, and ‚international governance’ was based on inter-state diplomacy.

However from the late 1980s, an accelerating increase in cross-border flows and in global integration changed the global political landscape. The environmental crisis drastically proved the interconnectedness of the world as well as the permeability of national borders. In the economic sphere, international division of labour has deepened, and globally integrated production chains have emerged. ‚Multinational’ enterprises, combining a home base with overseas subsidiaries, are transforming into globally integrated ‚transnational’ corporations. Symbolic forms, languages, and cultural patterns are equally spreading around the globe, greatly aided by new information technologies, the Internet, and the spread of transnational media corporations. Similar forms of culture are emerging in different and previously unconnected parts of the world, and the global migration streams are increasingly overcoming the persistent barriers of national borders.

With ‚globalization’ – as these developments have been termed – the world has experienced a „time-space compression“ (Held/McGrew 2003:3). The constraints of distance and time on social organisation and interaction have been eroded, and actions in one locale increasingly have consequences for ‚distant others’. In terms of political organization, interconnectedness is restricting the choices made by states. The actual control most states possess over their territory becomes limited, and some authors are already recognizing an end of the Westphalian system of states (Messner 2003:3). The question is: How to govern the world under the condition of globalization?

The concept of ‚global governance’ has emerged as a response to this challenge. It differs from a notion of ‚government’ which implies the direct capacity of political leaders to steer society, and focuses instead on systems of rules and interdependent problem-solving by a diversity of actors on a diversity of policy levels. It encompasses self-organizing networks and webs of policy-making fora, in which control is dispersed and capacity for decision-making and implementation is widely distributed, and which thus have „transformed sovereignty into the shared exercise of power“ (Held/McGrew 2003:11).

The specific characteristics of global governance are a) the participation of new actors, particularly from business and civil society, b) re-distribution of spaces and policy layers between local and global, and c) interaction and cooperation between different actors and layers. Even though the concept is based on a ‚global’ approach, it does not just transfer policy-making from one level (nation-state) to the next (global), but it involves „systems of rule at all levels of humanity “ (Rosenau 1995:13).

Yet a network policy structure is only emerging step-by-step. The Commission on Global Governance, in 1995, still regarded states as the main actors and the United Nations (UN) as the „central mechanism“ for facing the challenges of the future (Commission on

Global Governance 1995:8). The world conferences of the past decade, starting with the Rio summit on environment and development in 1992 and representing the most prominent approach to global governance, took place within the UN framework and thus were still based on state-organized ‚inter-national’ multilateralism. For the time being, states are retaining their dominant position in global policy processes, even though their role is changing from a sovereign ‚ruler’ to an „interdependency manager“ (Messner 2003:17) which is increasingly „embedded“ (Held/McGrew 2003:13) in webs of global interconnectedness and of new emerging players.

2.2 Civil Society

One of the main challenges of global governance is how to achieve legitimacy. In a confined state-centered world, legitimacy was based on elected national parliaments. However with global multilateral decision-making structures increasing, the corridors of power are wriggling out of the embrace of democratic accountability. The share of decisions taken externally, beyond the space of democratic legitimation, is increasing, and so the concept of democratic self-determination is seriously compromised

As traditional representative democracy is put into question, there are calls for an increase in public participation in global decision-making to develop forms of „global democracy“ (Kjaer 2004) and „cosmopolitan democracy“ (Held 2003). At their centre is the recognition of the crucial role of ‚civil society’ in developing new forms of accountability. The term civil society, as it is used here, encompasses the non-state and non-business sector and is typically formed by non-governmental and non-profit associations and initiatives. It comprises a wide variety of actors, from neighbourhood associations to labour unions, and from eco-activists to consumer lobbies, and so it is characterized by a diversity of approaches and objectives (Kaldor 2003). Yet the diverse strands of civil society tend to agree on the need for participatory social and political organization and for an extension of democracy at all levels of governance (Dawkins 2003).

Since the Rio summit in 1992 when some fifty thousand activists participated in summit proceedings, civil society has been an integral part of global politics. Its democratic function has been emphasized consistently, as it can make decision-making processes transparent and therefore accountable to a global public. Yet its role goes far beyond that of a passive watch dog. It is influencing inter-governmental negotiations, setting policy agendas, and in some global policy fora new forms of ‚multi-stakeholder’ governance are emerging as a collaborative process involving all ‚stakeholders’ – usually governments, business, and civil society.²

However these forms of „neo-corporatism“ (Messner 2003:16) only involve certain sections of civil society – usually the large non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Grassroots groups, social movements, fluid networks, and many other civil society associations without hierarchical structure, legal status, and sufficient funding, are left out

² Kjaer (2004) highlights the World Commission on Dams as an example.

of the governance equation.³ This means that wide sections of civil society are marginalized, and that those who participate in global policy processes may become part of elite-driven governance models rather than democratizing them. Repeatedly, splits have occurred between those (large NGOs) who engage with global institutions in an effort to trigger reform, and those (grassroots activists) that fundamentally oppose elite-driven policy processes in large unaccountable organizations (Wilkinson 2002).

2.3 Communication Governance

The distinction in „old“ and „new“ governance models (Kjaer 2004:10) also fits the communication sphere. For several decades, UN organisations, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) played the lead role in regulating cross-border communication flows. Yet in the past decade, business and, to a lesser extent, civil society have entered the arena, for example as ‘sector members’ of the ITU and as the prime movers in the new Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). With increasing interventions by these actors, communication governance, too, has moved beyond pure inter-governmental processes and towards an interdependent network of multiple actors and venues (Raboy 2004).

Large civil society networks such as the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC) have begun to intervene in global policy processes on behalf of their members and to participate in new multi-actor governance. However, many smaller actors, including most activist media, continue to lack channels of intervention, as they struggle with precarious legal status, funding, organizing, and the day-to-day work of media production. Suspicion towards elite-driven governance processes and a focus on technical bypasses around political challenges add to their exclusion.

This does not mean they are ignored on the policy level. During the UNESCO debate around a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), the role of “group and local media” (MacBride et al. 1980:55-57) as well as the importance of alternative communications for social movements were recognized. UNESCO and other international organizations have funded numerous community media projects. Yet the past two decades have seen an ideological shift towards the neoliberal trade paradigm, assigning a central policy role to trade-/business-institutions, strengthening a globalizing media industry, and favouring market- and industry-dominated regulatory mechanisms (Girard/Ó Siochrú 2002). In this environment, global regulation limiting media ownership concentration and ensuring public service and community-based media alternatives seems to be beyond any realistic expectation.

However, cracks in the neoliberal paradigm have recently emerged, and one may speculate just how long this paradigm will persist. Economic breakdowns in East Asia

³ ... even though they may be as fully ‚globalized‘ as, for example, the network People’s Global Action which has initiated several ‚global days of action‘.

and Latin America, the anti-/alter-globalization protests, and calls for robust global commons and global public goods by international organizations have all questioned neoliberal policies, and have opened spaces for alternative concepts. We may be entering a vacuum in which neoliberalism has been demystified, while a new paradigm is not yet in reach. In this situation, the global discussion space of a world summit, can set discourses, create moral obligations, and set the framework within which future governance can be ‘thought.’

3 The World Summit on the Information Society

3.1 Structure, Discourses, Outcomes

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has been the first UN summit dealing exclusively with information and communication. Its objective has been to develop a common understanding of the information society and a common response to challenges such as the digital divide. The first half of this two-part summit took place in Geneva in December 2003, the second half will follow in Tunis in November 2005.

The two-year preparatory process for WSIS1 led to the adoption of two official summit documents: the Declaration of Principles (WSIS 2003a) and the Plan of Action (WSIS 2003b). The thematic framework ranged from Internet governance to education, from cultural diversity to security aspects. The main conflicts revolved around finance mechanisms to bridge the digital divide, frameworks and approaches for Internet governance, intellectual property rights (IPR) and free/open source software, human rights, media governance, and information security. The regulatory framework emphasized market-friendly, liberalized environments, with public-private partnerships as a primary strategy, though several sections (e.g., WSIS 2003a, para 23 and 26) also argued the importance of public services and the public domain.

The second phase, leading to WSIS2, focused on the two issues unresolved at WSIS1: finance and Internet governance. A Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (TFFM) reviewed financial mechanisms to bridge the digital divide, while a Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) developed proposals for enhanced administration and regulation of the Internet. Both debates uncovered deep divides between Northern governments – proposing an intensification of market-led approaches and a central role for the business sector – and Southern governments – favouring strong state interventions.

3.2 The Media Debate

Organized by the ITU, a UN specialized organization concerned primarily with technology and infrastructure, the WSIS focused on an ‘information society’ discourse which left little room for traditional media and media content. Media appear only towards the end of the Geneva Declaration (Article 55 of 67) and the Plan of Action (Article 24 of 29). Yet the media debate represented one of the major lines of conflict during WSIS

negotiations. A prominent emphasis on the right to freedom of expression and the role of media as independent, un-controlled actors were opposed by governments interested in media control – particularly China – but defended by the Swiss delegation and a vocal media and journalistic lobby. Governments with strong ties to national media corporations, led by El Salvador, opposed measures limiting media concentration and refused any mention of community media.

The final version of the Declaration reaffirms freedom of the press and information, and calls for pluralism and diversity in media. However, it does not support these aims with concrete measures, such as limiting ownership concentration or supporting non-commercial media. The control interests of some governments even led to opening backdoors for censorship by calling for “appropriate measures (...) to combat illegal and harmful content.” Any mention of community and other non-commercial/non-governmental media was deleted at the final stages, except for a call to “give support to media based in local communities” (WSIS 2003b, Article 23j).

3.3 Civil Society Participation

Based on a declared ‘multi-stakeholder’ approach, civil society and business were invited to participate fully in summit processes.⁴ However the reality of this supposedly ‘new kind of summit’ looked fairly conservative. Those sections of civil society not formally set up as NGOs (with hierarchical structure, legal status, and sufficient funding) had difficulties overcoming even the hurdles of registration, let alone full participation, and those civil society actors that made it to the preparatory conferences were increasingly excluded from the negotiation process and saw themselves relegated to the role of ‘observers’.

Yet the civil society actors participating in summit processes initiated a vibrant culture of debates around the WSIS themes, set up administrative and lobbying mechanisms and organized a variety of side-events at the summit itself.⁵ Thematic caucuses and working groups were formed and developed input statements for the negotiation process.⁶ Shortly before the WSIS1 summit, the civil society network responded to its continuing exclusion and to the thematic deficiencies of the summit by withdrawing from the lobbying process and instead drafting the alternative summit declaration “Shaping Information Society for Human Needs”.⁷ It criticizes privatization and monopolization of knowledge and emphasizes the global commons, community media, free software, human rights, privacy, and participatory communication. It thus calls for a people-centered “communication society” rather than a technology-focused and business-oriented “information society” (Ó’Siochrú 2004).

⁴ UN General Resolution 56/183 of December 2001

⁵ At the initial stages, the CRIS campaign – an NGO platform on communication rights – served as the main force to mobilize civil society interventions and to facilitate self-organizing.
<http://www.crisinfo.org>.

⁶ <http://www.wsis-cs.org/caucuses/html>

⁷ <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/573.htm>

Within the network of civil society caucuses, the Media Caucus was the main body for advancing media interests. In addition, some media groups (from a 'wider' definition of 'activist media') established the Community Media Working Group (CMWG), while others joined different caucuses and working groups. Others, especially those from a more 'narrow' understanding of 'activist media', refused to participate in summit processes and, instead, organized events around the summit.

4. Participation of activist media

4.1 The Media Caucus

Established as a follow-up structure to previous collaborations between large broadcasting unions, the Media Caucus was composed of public service broadcasters, commercial TV and radio networks, media associations such as the World Association of Newspapers, media-related NGOs such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa, press freedom organizations such as Article 19 and the World Press Freedom Committee, professional associations such as the International Federation of Journalists and individual media researchers. Delegates from AMARC brought a strong community media voice into the caucus debates, complemented by a few activists from Indymedia and other activist media groups.

Thematically, the caucus highlighted content vice versa technology, and called for worldwide implementation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) on freedom of expression. It emphasized the rights and freedoms of media organizations and journalists as the primary producers and distributors of content, and it had some success in strengthening these points in the summit documents. Further objectives included media pluralism, universal and affordable access, cultural diversity, and the protection of the rights of online media workers. Yet criticism of media concentration was vague, failing to advance specific anti-monopoly laws. Community media were recognized in principle but were confined to the edges and niches of the media sphere, "serving traditionally disadvantaged groups" and requiring "legally established ... non-profit" status.⁸ Concrete proposals for supporting community media as well as other civil society-based media were blocked, particularly by the representatives of commercial media.

In light of human rights violations in the WSIS2 host country Tunisia, community media representatives accepted the narrow agenda of the Media Caucus, opting to participate in a strong alliance to advance freedom of expression and to establish community media as an accepted partner in the international media environment. Others were less prepared to agree to the shortcomings of the caucus. After all, its thematic vision was at odds with the media reform agenda which many civil society-based media have developed at the World Social Forum and elsewhere: limit media concentration, open up traditional media for public participation, make media more responsive to society at large, and advance

⁸ <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/231.htm>

interactive communication by everyone, as opposed to safeguarding the information monopoly of media organizations and professional journalists (Hintz & Milan, forthcoming). Furthermore, the caucus' 'multi-stakeholder' arrangement allowed commercial interests to use designated civil society space to further their interests.⁹

4.2 The Community Media Working Group

With the caucus being dominated by the interests of bigger, mainstream media, and with community/activist media being marginalized in numbers and in content, the latter created the Community Media Working Group (CMWG). The group produced separate lobby documents and position papers, yet many of its members continued to engage inside the Media Caucus, positioning the CMWG rather as a sub- than a counter-group.

The concept of 'community media' was used partly because of the relative acceptance of the term in previous policy fora, and partly because of the composition of the group. Initiated and led by AMARC, the CMWG was largely composed of representatives of community radios, and of NGOs working with community media. At times, there was a small but active contingent of participants from radical activist media from, for example, Indymedia and Deep Dish TV, to diversify the otherwise mostly community-oriented structure and agenda.

Within the ICT-focused policy environment of the WSIS, the CMWG served as a strong advocate for traditional media, such as radio and print, which continue to be the main channels of information for the vast majority of the world population. It had less to say, though, about 'new media' and Internet governance, even though for many activist and even community media web-based distribution of content plays a significant role.

Other defining characteristics of activist media, such as interactive information exchange, non-hierarchical structures, critical content and participation of non-professionals were reflected in CMWG statements, but not always given priority. Critique of the prevailing media system was largely absent, with the CMWG focusing instead on strategic interventions into the negotiation process to get community media recognized in the WSIS documents. While this approach reflected the dynamics and necessities of a UN policy process, helped to forge alliances with other media in the Media Caucus, and was also based in well-founded caution towards state-led interventions into the media sector, it failed to embed the CMWG within a wider media reform movement and to make it attractive for a wider set of actors beyond a community media perspective.

Just as other civil society working groups seeking to advance human rights and citizen participation and following a potentially oppositional agenda, the CMWG meetings

⁹ Media giants such as Time-Warner, Sony and Vivendi are members of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) – the leading actor of the business sector which represented a further separate 'stakeholder' in addition to civil society. Through the separate channels of the Media Caucus and the ICC, commercial media achieved double representation in the summit process.

during the second WSIS phase were heavily attended by Tunisian delegates “who can be reliably expected to report back ... to the host country government”¹⁰ and who regularly interrupted discussions. Strategic debates and consensus-building was rendered almost impossible due to obstructive tactics applied by the Tunisian government.

4.3 Outside WSIS

For many grassroots activist media, participation in summit processes has neither been a practical possibility, nor a particularly attractive option. Following the process actively has required the time to take part in long preparatory meetings, the financial means (or the support from a large organization) to pay for travel and accommodation, and the patience and skills to deal with UN diplomacy. Furthermore, many of them reject global summits and other international institutions as illegitimate bodies to regulate (and thus to control, repress, and appropriate) communication processes which have often been developed bottom-up by members of civil society. Participation, according to that view, means to legitimize an otherwise illegitimate process.

Around the WSIS1 summit in Geneva, a number of spaces were set up by civil society actors to discuss WSIS themes and intervene in summit processes from outside. Media activists were at the heart of these efforts. The most distinct of these spaces was *WSIS?WeSeize!* – a series of events in the city centre of Geneva, including a conference, a video stream, a media laboratory, and protest actions, all organized by a loose network of autonomous media groups, Indymedia activists, hackers, shareware developers, and grassroots campaigners, called the *Geneva03 Collective*. *WSIS?WeSeize!* served as a space to voice radical critique of neo-liberal global governance and business-led information/communication policies. Participants celebrated a culture of non-hierarchical association, non-commercial creativity, experimenting and skill-sharing. Geneva03 rejected the WSIS’ “rhetoric of inclusion” as a “smokescreen” to “mystify the continuing use of information to protect and advance the interests of global capital”.¹¹ Rather than influencing the official process, they opted for autonomously developing communication concepts ‘from below’.

At the edges between inside and outside, further side-events assembled activists and advocates and provided public spaces to discuss their experiences and propagate their views. The *World Forum on Communication Rights* and the *Community Media Forum* were organized by civil society groups participating in the summit, yet they criticized its shortcomings and focused on its blind spots. *WSIS?WeSeize!* participants interacted through these events with NGO representatives ‘inside’ the summit process, while some of the ‘insiders’ came ‘out’ to, for example, join the media lab and acted in solidarity with those ‘outside’ through press releases. The embryonic stages of a multi-level strategy emerged, in which fundamental criticism, public pressure and protest ‘outside’ linked up with strategic policy interventions ‘inside’.

¹⁰ Report on CMWG meetings by Steve Buckley, 2 October 2005

¹¹ <http://www.geneva03.org>

The actual degree of exchange was limited, due to organizational problems of WSIS?WeSeize!, the busy schedule of those inside the WSIS compound, and the persistent political and cultural differences between media activists and policy advocates. Representatives of ‘community media’ and of major NGOs largely remained ‘inside’, while those identifying as ‘autonomous’, ‘alternative’, and ‘tactical’ media remained ‘outside’. Activities were not sufficiently linked up, so that, for example, the radio stream set up by community radio activists in the summit building had no connection with the video stream from WSIS?WeSeize!. Many possibilities for cooperation were not exploited, but the first steps towards cooperation were taken.

5. Proposals for a policy framework

5.1 The CMWG: Interventions in the negotiation process

The right to freedom of expression according to Article 19 UDHR represents an important foundation of any governance framework favoured by the community and activist media actors that gathered within the CMWG. However, while traditional mainstream media (implicitly or explicitly) apply this right primarily to ‘content providers’, thus focusing on press freedom on the producer side and the right to information access on the consumer side, activist media embed freedom of expression in a wider set of ‘communication rights’ which include participatory production and interactive distribution of content and which therefore seek to prevent a monopolization of information rights by mainstream media.

Media pluralism has equally been at the heart of CMWG concerns, but again there is a significant difference in interpretation. The Media Caucus’ narrow notion of ‘pluralism’ is extended to include not just a variety of outlets and content providers but a diversity of actual content, opinions and societal groups represented in the media. Strengthening the role of a third media sector alongside the existing public service and commercial media is advocated as the prime means to add diversity to the media sphere. This third sector is to be participatory, self-organized, and under community control. Typically using traditional technologies, it serves as the main channel for large parts of the world population to access information, particularly in the Global South.¹²

These media, urges the CMWG, need to be supported and promoted by establishing a secure legal basis in both national and international law, by opening broadcast licenses and allocating radio and satellite spectrum to non-commercial media, and by offering public funding.

A reform of both the allocation and the governance model of communication channels should involve reserving a fixed percentage of radio frequencies and satellite channels for community and non-profit broadcasting. In addition, airwaves and orbital paths should be recognised as a public resource to be allocated in the public interest. Spectrum should be

¹² <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/229.htm>

publicly owned, governed in a transparent way, and thereby secured as a global commons.

Regarding possible financing schemes for community/non-profit media, the CMWG has called for the establishment of a Community Media Fund “to support new community radio development and community media content”, particularly in the Global South and for disadvantaged communities, as a targeted way to bridge the digital divide. With the theme of finance at the centre of the second WSIS phase, this fund became a focus of CMWG interventions during the preparation for WSIS2.

5.2 WSIS? We Seize! and beyond: Agenda for a different ‘information society’

In contrast to the strategic interventions of the CMWG into the ongoing negotiation process, responding to the various stages of government negotiations with specific proposals to strengthen community media, those media activists outside the official summit process did not care too much about the exact wording of the official documents. They challenged both the structure and the content of the summit by setting up alternative spaces of debate and activity that did not seek to run ‘counter’ to the summit but rather to take place ‘instead of’ the summit.

The prime motivation was to gather media activists, software developers, cultural workers, etc, who had, according to Geneva03, generated the ‘information society’ which government and business delegations inside the summit discussed and sought to control. Information society, so goes the argument, has been the result of collaborative experiments by activists, researchers and technological experts, and it will continue to evolve that way, regardless of the attempts of governments and big business to control this process. The media laboratory and the video stream exemplified how committed people are developing ‘information society’ on an ongoing basis.¹³ So the first challenge that WSIS?WeSeize! threw at the summit was a procedural one, questioning the very approach to governance on which the WSIS was based.

The second challenge was thematic. WSIS?WeSeize! served as a space for debates on critical issues that were left off the WSIS agenda but that, according to Geneva03, were crucial to understand the further development of information society: information wars and propaganda, surveillance and information control, the privatization of ideas through trademarks and copyrights, autonomous media infrastructure, citizen-based peer2peer and wireless networks, openness as strategy and methodology, hacking techniques, and the links between freedom of communication and freedom of movement.¹⁴

In preparation of the second WSIS summit, a loose network of Indymedia activists, led by Indymedia Beirut, discussed a similar list of issues that they thought should be at the

¹³ This claim was supported by the fact that the only free public wireless network at or around the summit was set up by media activists at WSIS?WeSeize!, and the latter’s use of online methods to support and document activities was generally far advanced compared to those used at the summit

¹⁴ <http://www.geneva03.org>

heart of any debate about ‚information society’. The list includes the issues of censorship and freedom of expression, repression of media activists, precarious working conditions and exploitation of information workers, support for locally appropriate technology, and, again, the inevitable connection between free communication and free cross-border movement of all people.

The media group EclécticaDV – whose members participated in WSIS?WeSeize! – is planning to present the new DVD „Datafighters“ at the Tunis summit. The DVD will deal with similar issues and focus on copyleft culture and knowledge commons, grassroots and autonomous media practices, casualized information work, and threats by surveillance and infowar techniques.¹⁵

None of these initiatives seeks a place at the negotiation table in current governance processes, but all of them attempt at influencing the discourses around ‚information society’. With a recurring list of themes and debates, activist media have contributed to an agenda-setting towards an alternative thematic and structural framework of communication governance. For the time being, this agenda proposal is only addressed at other civil society entities. Statements discussed at WSIS?WeSeize! were submitted for inclusion in the civil society alternative declaration¹⁶ but not in the official summit documents, and the Datafighters DVD is likely to be presented at a civil society side event rather than the official Tunis summit. However, the discussion and consensus-building process on policy issues within the wider civil society networks will clearly be influenced by these interventions.

6. A new actor in global governance?

The WSIS has created a momentum for activist media to get involved with media policy debates and to contribute to communication governance processes. It served as a platform for media organizations with considerable policy experience (AMARC, in particular) to advance their inclusion in global governance, and for activist groups with little or no policy experience to enter the level of global decision-making for first time. Divides between different types of civil society-based media persisted, with those organized as ‚community media’ and as NGOs participating in summit processes and those identifying as ‚autonomous’, ‚alternative’, ‚tactical’, and in most cases also ‚activist’ media remaining outside.¹⁷ While the former were entirely consumed by the ‚realpolitik’ of UN processes and strategic negotiations, many of the latter refused to see any value or necessity in following the summit process.

¹⁵ <http://www.electicadv.net>

¹⁶ The section on Infowar, particularly, was drafted by members of Geneva03.

¹⁷ The conceptual challenges for policy intervention have been further elaborated in Hadl/Hintz (2006).

Yet borders have become fluid and constituencies often overlapped. Indymedia people participated in the CMWG, small and radical community radios appeared at the NGO-led Community Media Forum, while the Venezuelan media organization Aporrea participated in WSIS?WeSeize!. In an attempt to transcend the “predictable spheres of influence” (Calabrese 2004), different types of media connected towards a double strategy of participation inside and pressure from outside. So the WSIS has helped to bridge boundaries between media actors with different strategies and thematic focuses. These new coalitions have been continued at post-WSIS projects, such as the European Forum on Communication Rights in London 2004.

A common set of proposals, approaching a coherent alternative governance structure, is far from reality. Even the CMWG programme has often resembled an arbitrary mixture of ideas rather than a defined and complementary system. Demands on spectrum regulation and on financial support mechanisms have changed with the composition of the group, the life-span of proposals has sometimes lasted only for their use in a particular document, and the proposals of the CMWG have not always fitted the far-reaching media reform agenda developed at the Social Fora and other civil society networks and spaces. The absence of a generally agreed framework of proposals created a vacuum filled by the specific knowledge and preferences of those present at meetings.¹⁸ The connection with the – equally heterogenous – agenda of the media activists of Geneva03 et al still has to be developed. However, through the debates in and around the summit process, different perspectives on prime themes of global communication policy are slowly converging and can become an important basis for future involvement in communication governance.

As far as the WSIS itself is concerned, the results of the interventions by the CMWG and other activist media networks have been weak. Commitments to freedom of expression and media diversity were confirmed, both after long struggles with hostile governments, but these represented the only little gains. Communication rights had been temporarily accepted in the drafts of the WSIS documents but were later reduced significantly, and the CMWG proposals regarding enabling country-level legislation for community media, a reform of spectrum allocation, and the establishment of a community media fund were all ignored. On the issue of IPR and free software, the Brazilian government managed to balance the US agenda of expanding IPR, but a fundamental review of IPR, as the media activists at WSIS?WeSeize! had propagated, has been beyond reach. Support for privacy rights and for citizen-/community-based communication networks was not widely spread amongst governments either. This will come as no surprise as a policy framework which goes beyond the state-market nexus and which is based on bottom-up processes is not likely to appeal to the powerful players amongst states and business, as it challenges prevalent modes of control.

However, the defeat in the official WSIS negotiation process contrasted sharply with the events and public discourses around the summit. At WSIS1, numerous side-events including even the parallel mainstream media summit, the World Electronic Media

¹⁸ This argument has been developed further in Hintz/Milan (2005).

Forum, celebrated the practices of grassroots/citizens/activist media. “Create your own media – make your own voice heard” was repeated in many summit-related debates as a prime strategy to bridge the information divide. Other issues, such as IPR and financial mechanisms, were equally discussed widely. So if activist media failed to leave their mark in the official documents, they raised their profile in the discourses around the summit and around information society.

These ‘indirect’ effects should not be underestimated. WSIS has achieved hardly any binding agreements, instead it has been a platform to discuss the priorities and guiding principles of communication governance, and so its primary role has been to structure the discourse on information and communication. This discourse is likely to influence future policy processes substantially, and thus also the framework of the activities of activist media. Intervening into this policy discourse has set a starting-point for influencing the policy framework within which these media operate and for developing a common understanding of that framework as well as its possible alternatives.

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