

WEB-BASED COMMUNITIES AND THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: ALTERNATIVES AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

The development of an Information Society is a topic of growing concern in government, academic, and popular circles throughout the world. However, just how to recognize an "Information Society" and what its defining characteristics are remain major issues of concern. The on-going World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in the spirit of the European Union, is helping to define the nature of an Information Society for the world community. WSIS, however, paints a technologically deterministic picture of an Information Society, which is focused nearly exclusively on information and communication technologies (ICTs). In addition, oppositional, grassroots voices to WSIS see this vision of an Information Society as rooted in the interests of techno-capitalist globalization. This paper argues that the definition of web-based communities (WBCs) as components of the new Information Society must take these understandings of WSIS into consideration. An Information Society that is defined by dominant corporate interests and is a part of neo-liberal ideologies of globalization must be contested for emancipatory, grassroots, and community-level conceptions of an Information Society to emerge. WBCs can play a role in resisting the Information Society of neo-liberal globalization, mainly through the powerful networking potential of ICTs in facilitating global grassroots mobilization. WBCs have the potential to organize strong international, grassroots coalitions to help generate alternate definitions and conceptions of an Information Society. However, the reality of the global digital divide, and barriers to participation in an ICT-intensive Information Society remain pertinent issues that need to be overcome, and should not be overlooked in discussions about WBCs.

KEYWORDS

WSIS, Information Society, WBCs, Globalization, Development

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in human societies is undoubtedly one of the defining features of our present-day world. ICTs have become incorporated into all levels of human organizational endeavors, and have had a large impact on the ways humans communicate. The most obvious recent example of an ICT innovation's enormous transformative power has been the development of the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) over the last decade. The Internet and WWW have helped facilitate numerous forms of activities, including the development of web-based communities (WBCs).

The prominence of information in today's society has led various scholars and leaders to claim that we now live in a new "Information Society," a society where "information" dominates new modes of social organization. This movement to a "new society" is by no means a claim without debate, however. The shift to an Information Society has been framed by some in the context of a "continuity vs. discontinuity" (Schement and Lievrouw, 1986). In other words, debate exists between the notion of an Information Society that is a fundamentally new form of social organization, or is just a continuation of previous modes of social organization. The continuity/discontinuity argument, further articulated in the work of Information Society theorist Frank Webster, is an important one. This importance stems from the fact that the continuity/discontinuity argument opens up a whole new area of critical discourses on the Information Society concept.

This distinction in thinking over the creation of an Information Society is not quite a simple one, however. A wide difference in thought exists within each camp, as different theorists place varying degrees of importance on information technologies and activities in shaping the modern world. In addition, theorists are approaching the growing "informatization" in society from various disciplines such as economics, sociology, and communication, thus affecting how they view this societal transformation. Webster (2002) further elaborates on this distinction in Information Society theory by seeing it as a separation between those who endorse the idea of an information society, and those who regard informatization as a continuation of pre-established relations. Some of the major theoretical schools that advocate a new form of society are post-industrialism, postmodernism, flexible specialization, and the informational mode of development (Webster, 2002). On the other side of the debate that stresses continuities of established relations are theories of neo-Marxism, flexible accumulation, reflexive modernization, and the public sphere (Webster, 2002). All these theories provide a context for the understanding of the information revolution happening in today's world.

In terms of a global attempt at framing the Information Society, the United Nations (UN) is currently involved in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). WSIS can be viewed as an expansion and continuity of the European Union idea of the Information Society, as it is using this idea for the larger "world community," and is focusing on ICTs and infrastructural expansion. This summit, co-sponsored by the UN, in conjunction with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), is taking place in two phases. The first phase took place in Geneva in December 2003, and the second phase will take place in Tunis in

November 2005. Among the stakeholder groups attending the summit are members of government, the private sector, and civil society participants. The first phase of the summit set forth a *Declaration of Principles* and a *Plan of Action* of the “Information Society,” both standard documents of UN-sponsored conferences. WSIS is part of the ongoing Information Society debate, as it is structured on the UN summit model, a post-Cold War phenomenon first inaugurated in 1992 with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The second phase of the summit will take place in Tunisia in November 2005, where it is hoped progress on meeting their first phase goals and follow-up will take place. WSIS is the first UN summit that is taking place in two phases.

In the case of the UN, its role is that of a facilitator in the creation of a “people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society” (Declaration of Principles, 2003). The theory behind the summit is to make information technology work in furthering human and social development, as well as to achieve the UN’s Millennium Goals. The UN and ITU, in sponsoring this summit, are acknowledging that a new form of information society currently exists. Much of the terminology and thinking behind the summit is influenced by the European Union, which has focused on developing an Information Society that is geared towards connectivity to ICTs and a deregulated telecommunications sector. For instance, the EU has developed a “three-pronged approach” to the Information Society that focuses on stimulating research on ICTs, restructuring traditional services through ICTs, and the development of a regulatory framework that promotes deregulation (EIS, 2004).

This paper will briefly discuss the details of an analysis of WSIS, and its consequences for better understanding the Information Society concept and the role of WBCs in the Information Society. WBCs are often mentioned as manifestations of the Information Society, but if they only reinforce some of the technologically deterministic and neo-liberal aspects of the Information Society, other alternate, liberatory conceptions of WBCs may be lost. This paper argues that WBCs have the potential to organize strong international, grassroots coalitions to help generate alternate definitions and conceptions of an Information Society. However, the global digital divide, and barriers to effective use of ICTs remain highly pertinent issues when discussing WBCs, especially when the “Information Society” is being increasingly defined by access to ICTs.

2. BODY OF PAPER

2.1 Analyzing WSIS

The UN's efforts to sponsor WSIS and highlight the importance of ICTs and their potential role in development are admirable. On a positive note, the UN has helped bring attention to a subject that is of growing importance in the world today. In addition, attempting to create an agenda focused on using ICTs to help all segments of the world's population, especially poor and marginalized peoples, is a noble endeavor. Despite these good intentions and efforts, however, WSIS Geneva leaves behind an unsatisfactory legacy in the *Declaration of Principles* and *Plan of Action*.

It is understandable that summit documents make large generalizations, and serve merely as "vision" statements to help inform policy. Despite this fact, however, both the *Declaration of Principles* and *Plan of Action* paint a wholly utopian picture of an "Information Society" that grossly oversimplifies and generalizes a complex issue and social phenomenon. WSIS is framing debate on an issue where no clear consensus exists; their vision of an "Information Society" is based mainly on ICTs, and is technologically deterministic in outlook. It is in general agreement that information industries and ICTs are important in today's world, but the WSIS "Information Society" serves to "fetishize" ICTs and technology, promoting technological determinism, simplistic answers, and perhaps even wrong solutions.

A glance at both documents gives one the impression that ICTs have the potential to do away with many human problems and sufferings. This is hardly the case; however, if ICTs are used as one part of a holistic strategy of poverty alleviation, then an important step forward will be taken. WSIS even acknowledges that ICTs are one set of tools in development, but the impression created by their framing of the "Information Society" is that ICTs, if only implemented properly, will transform the world and bring peace and prosperity.

On a broader philosophical note, one can question what authority the UN and "world community" have in declaring that we all are living in and want to further build an "Information Society." In fact, whether or not we are indeed living in this new society, and its fundamental nature, are still being debated. But the UN has already decided on what this "Information Society" will be, and justifies the legitimacy of its framing and definition by referring to a "common vision." The effects of WSIS in terms of addressing the "digital divide" will be seen in how national governments, and the World Bank and IMF respond to its recommendations.

WSIS has made a positive step in raising the profile of ICTs in development, but its simplistic, technologically deterministic framing of the Information Society and global digital divide debates may have negative consequences down the road.

2.2 Critical Approaches to the Information Society

In addition to the critique that WSIS is framing a technologically deterministic Information Society, Webster (2002) brings in additional critiques of the socio-economic framework of the Information Society concept. For instance, in *Theories of the Information Society*, Webster emphasizes the development of the Information Society in an environment of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization, where global capitalism has greatly extended its reach and is the “only game in town.” Webster is of the opinion that the Information Society concept is tied in with corporate, techno-capitalist interests. Webster continues his exploration of the Information Society in the edited volume entitled, *The Information Society Reader* (2002). Webster argues in this volume that the Information Society concept in fact may be irrelevant. He states this case by arguing that the Information Society concept is often ambiguous as to whether it addresses issues of technology, cultural changes, or socio-economic factors. Different theorists place different degrees of emphasis on these technological, social, economic, and cultural factors. However, Webster still places his major critique on the techno-capitalist origins of the Information Society, and what he describes as its roots in Taylorism and instrumental rationality.

A strength of Webster’s argument is how he places questions of an “Information Society” in a political economy perspective, arguing that the information revolution is intimately tied in with structures of power and the logic of consumer capitalism. The EU Information Society’s emphasis on markets and “general competition law” lend some credence to Webster’s central argument that the Information Society idea is about continuing a process of capitalist expansion and free markets. The European Union’s framing of the Information Society had a major impact on the development of WSIS, and the socio-economic atmosphere of neo-liberal economics and deregulated markets must therefore not be ignored when analyzing WSIS.

2.3 Grassroots Globalization, WBCs, and Resistance

Castells (1996) argues that technological transformation is at the heart of globalization, but the definition of globalization that is most often met with resistance in the public is the one that is enmeshed with

capitalist hegemony, increasing transnational corporate power, and the policies of neo-liberal institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Some of the critiques against WSIS have come from civil society organizations, which have viewed WSIS as part of this same kind of corporate, hegemonic globalization. In “Theorizing Globalization” (2002), Douglas Kellner argues for a critical theory of globalization that discusses transformations in the world in a dialectical framework, distinguishing between progressive and emancipatory features, and oppressive and negative attributes, as well as noting contradictions and ambiguities. His approach blends an understanding of scientific and technological revolutions, as well as the global restructuring of capital, avoiding extremes of technological and economic determinism. Although acknowledging that new technologies are often used to reinforce dominant hegemonic capitalist interests, his critical globalization theory leaves room for contestation and struggle, as new technologies also have the potential to promote greater democratization and social justice.

It is precisely at the grassroots level where alternative voices to the issue of ICTs and development are formulated. This discussion thus far has talked about some of the less emancipatory features of the Information Society; however, the use of the WWW in developing WBCs focused on grassroots alternatives to WSIS has been a major development. For instance, the main alternative voices to WSIS come from civil society, represented mainly by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and many of these organizations have websites and well-developed online networks that help mobilize international activities. Some of the primary civil society organizations voicing opposition to WSIS are “WSIS? We seize! (www.geneva03.org),” “World Forum on Communication Rights (www.communicationrights.org),” and the “Digital Opportunity Channel (www.digitalopportunity.org).” All of these organizations have a presence on the WWW, and have significant issues with the representation of civil society voices at WSIS and how WSIS is framing the Information Society debate to strengthen corporate interests and the hegemony of global capitalism. The World Forum on Communication Rights is a coalition of international NGOs that had a one-day event alongside WSIS. As stated on its website, its three main goals are: 1) To demonstrate and document the importance of communication rights for people and communities in an emerging information society, 2) To contribute to the emergence and understanding of a coherent concept of communication rights,

and 3) To generate cooperation in promoting the concept, recognition and realisation of such rights.¹ The main problem it sees with WSIS is too much of a focus on telecommunication and internet related issues, viewed from a technical perspective and a narrowly construed development agenda.²

The Digital Opportunity Channel is a website produced as a joint effort by oneworld.net, and the Digital Divide Network, organizations that are both involved in social justice and technology issues. Focused on issues of ICTs and development, this site offers links to a multiple range of development and technology related topics. The Digital Opportunity website also has a link for a special section entitled, “Special Coverage: Information Society and WSIS.” This special section features coverage of WSIS and a background on the summit from a civil society perspective. Like the World Forum on Communication Rights, the Digital Opportunity Channel critiques how the framing of the information society debate fits into a scheme to perpetuate existing power relations between the North and the South. In fact, civil society organizations have had reservations about using the term “information society,” as they feel it is too narrow of a term to take into account the hopes and opportunities of developing country populations.³ Alternative terms civil society organizations prefer are that of a “communication society,” or “knowledge society.”⁴ With these terms, civil society groups feel more of a dialectic and empowering understanding can be created, as an “information society” definition may represent too much of a “one-way” transmission of information.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some of the debate surrounding the Information Society, and some current international understandings of the Information Society. There is much disagreement about the exact nature of an Information Society, but it is generally agreed that ICTs and the notion of “information” are becoming more central to the functioning of society. WSIS has evolved out of a European Union conception of the Information Society, and is linking ICTs and international development. Addressing the global digital divide and using ICTs for development are good ideas; however, the technologically deterministic focus of WSIS is

¹ Available at: www.communicationrights.org

² Ibid

³ “WSIS and Civil Society: A Backgrounder.” Available at: www.digitalopportunity.org/article/view/65050

⁴ Ibid

not useful in creating real, substantive change for many parts of the developing world. In addition to the critique of technological determinism, critics such as Webster argue that the roots of the Information Society lie in corporate techno-capitalism and neo-liberalism. Oppositional voices to WSIS coming from civil society also criticize the neo-liberal and techno-capitalist influences on WSIS.

WBCs can take many forms, and the mobilization of grassroots voices opposed to the framing of WSIS can be considered a form of web-based community. WBCs, as manifestations of an “Information Society,” also have the potential to contest and re-form notions of an Information Society. These grassroots voices argued for more representation of NGO’s in the development of a more “people-centered” Information Society. However, WSIS still was highly influenced by representatives of national governments and techno-bureaucrats. Thus, the work of WBCs in mobilizing grassroots, international coalitions opposed to dominant interests remains a challenging task. In addition, WBCs, by their very nature, require ICT-literate and proficient user groups to take full advantage of them. Therefore, investments in education, and barriers to access and effective use of ICTs must always be kept in mind when discussing the impact and effectiveness of WBCs.

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