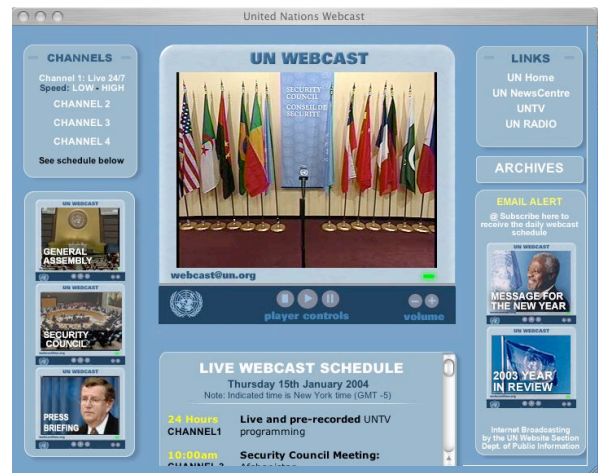


E-democracy and the United Nations:

Using Information Communications Technologies to Increase Access to Information and Participation within the UN System



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Table of Contents

Main Recommendations	next page
Introduction	1
Defining E-democracy	5
UN and Access to Information	13
UN and Participation	25
Repression	39
Conclusion	47
Appendix I: E-democracy in the Negotiating Texts of the WSIS	53
Bibliography & Selected Websites	58

Figures:

UN website, Coalition for an ICC website	24
UNICEF website, UNESCO website	37
WTO website, European Union website	38

Abbreviations

CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
CPSR	Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development
DPI	Department of Public Information
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EU	European Union
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICT	Information Communications Technologies
ILO	International Labor Organization
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
ODS	Official Document System
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Childrens Fund
WAI	Web Accessibility Initiative
WHO	World Health Organization
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society
WTO	World Trade Organization

Key Recommendations

Encourage Innovation. UN agencies and offices should be provided with incentives to experiment with consultative and participatory processes online. It should be recognized from the start that there are few immediate financial benefits to these ICT-empowered consultations, but in the longer term they can result in better-formulated policy, increased public support, and a more “open” work culture at the UN.

Establish Partnerships. There are enormous advantages to partnering with established civil society networks, as the World Bank and the WTO have done, to develop interactive online fora and other consultative processes. Civil society networks have richer connections to grassroots constituents and a wider range of actors (young people, the elderly, those in rural areas) than do most UN agencies. At the same time, private sector companies can be substantial sources of technical and financial support, if steps are taken to avoid conflicts-of-interest and “bluewashing”¹ effects.

Combine Virtual and Physical Meetings. Consultative and participative technologies often work best not as replacements for, but as enhancements of, existing “real world” relationships. Discussion boards and e-mail listservs can assist in the follow-up and implementation of agreements reached in face-to-face negotiations.

Enhance User-Friendliness of the UN Website. The United Nations site should be designed to be easily navigated by a wide range of users, from high-school students to diplomats. The goal should be more user-driven design, where users can make their preferences known and have the most important information delivered to them when they log in to the site.

Use Radio More Effectively. As the most widely available information and communication technology, the importance of traditional radio can not be overemphasized. The UN’s radio broadcasting capacity should be expanded, in conjunction with internet radio broadcasts, to at least a one hour show produced every day, along with radio broadcasts of the daily press briefing with the spokesperson of the UN Secretary General.

Addressing the Digital Divides. Given the various aspects to the Digital Divide, a narrow focus on infrastructure development or e-commerce will do little to reduce the divide. Development plans must take into account gender, generational, geographic and economic factors. On the other hand, the multi-faceted nature of the problem should not prevent targeted funding toward vulnerable groups that can have multiplier effects beyond that group, such as ICT education of poor girls in rural areas or enabling web access for blind people.

Expand Mandate of Rapporteur on Opinion and Expression to Include Online Speech. There are mechanisms within the Commission on Human Rights that deal with censorship issues, in particular the position of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The rapporteur’s mandate should be expanded to include internet censorship, receiving reports and complaints from NGOs around the world and conducting online “visits” to websites of governments where physical visits are not possible. This would emphasize that the internet is not a “rights-free-zone” but in fact is covered by the existing international agreements on the freedom of expression and access to information.

¹ I.e. Giving UN approval to questionable corporate practices.

Develop New Resources to Support New Mechanisms. Finding the financial resources to support more distributed, collaborative ICT tools at the UN is a big challenge. In principle, these multi-sectoral collaborative networks should be supported by all participating actors, in whatever ways they are capable of. These contributions might be in the areas of expert assistance, staff secondment, physical and technological resources, or financial support. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that financial sponsorship or support is not linked to representation or votes within a collaborative policy process.

e-Democracy and the United Nations: Using Information Communications Technologies to Increase Access to Information and Participation within the UN System

Introduction

The Information Society affects all aspects of our lives, in particular how individuals become more informed and engaged in political processes... an increase in citizen participation in elections and public discourse through information and communication technologies will contribute to a better and healthier democracy. The Internet, mobile communications, and other forms of direct democracy need to be reinforced with the involvement of civil society, the media, and political organizations at all levels – from local communities to national governments and international networks. There is a clear need for more open, multi-level deliberation, leading to the creation of a new global public space that will allow a system of progressive global governance to function effectively.²

- George A. Papandreou, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Greece, World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 10 December 2003

The wheels of diplomacy turn slowly. In the classical, Westphalian view of diplomatic negotiation processes, a relatively small number of state-appointed diplomats meet in closed sessions, physically isolated from the myriad pressures and influences in their home countries, and convene over long stretches of time on issues of common interest or concern.

Information is a commodity that is carefully guarded among a small number of state actors. Inputs are received from a fairly manageable and stable number of reliable sources. “Rapid” communications with the national authorities take place over cable communiqués, where diplomats receive “instructions.” And key players in governments usually have adequate time and procedures for absorbing information and making intelligent judgments.

In stark contrast, the world is increasingly being run on “Internet Time.” Decision-making by necessity may involve a wide range of actors, receiving inputs from a number of sources, both official and unofficial. Urgent problems may need immediate attention, analysis and responses.

How does one reconcile traditional diplomatic processes with “just-in-time” decision-making? What is the UN’s function in a world where civil society organizations by the

² ITU Website, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/geneva/coverage/statements/greece/gr.html>

thousands are seeking entry into policy-making? In short, in a globalizing, cacophonous, wired world, what does the United Nations need to do to remain relevant?

This paper focuses on the programs and activities of the United Nations in two key areas: access to information and participation. An “e-democracy” analysis is applied to the United Nations, examining the information and communication architecture of the UN with a view toward enhancing the transparency, accountability, and participatory nature of the organization. Also included herein is an examination of some of the anti-democratic, repressive uses of information and communications technologies (ICTs) around the world and how the United Nations can respond to these destructive applications of technology. It concludes with a vision of the United Nations as a “policy server” that distributes information and guidance to a network of state, civil society and private sector actors who collaborate together on seeking global policy solutions that none of them can find alone.

Since the beginnings of the United Nations, there have been calls from many corners for the enhancement of the democratic nature of the organization. From intellectual giants such as Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein to grassroots movements around the world, a myriad number of proposals, plans and visions have been put forward to move toward a more democratic United Nations system. These reformist schemes range from incremental, administrative changes, such as the expansion of the rights of civil society organizations in UN fora, to fundamental, structural changes to the architecture of the UN system, such as the addition of a UN parliamentary assembly or elimination of the right of the veto in the UN Security Council.

In recent years, with the end of the Cold War, there has been renewed attention to the “democratic deficit” of the United Nations and other inter-governmental institutions. Anti-globalization movements and UN reform organizations are bringing new energy to a debate that has never really ceased.

What is getting less attention is how the very nature of democracy itself is being questioned and revised by the introduction of new information and communications technologies. From the local to national levels, governments and civil society are employing these new technologies to enhance and strengthen the connection between citizens and their governments. This movement toward “e-democracy” is gaining more and more attention from government agencies, scholars and political activists worldwide.

But what about international institutions? Given the great distance between global institutions and citizens around the world, information technology appears ideally suited to bridge the communications gap that otherwise would be nearly insurmountable. Can ICTs help close the “democracy gap” between everyday citizens and the United Nations? Can traditional diplomatic processes evolve to be more open, multi-sectoral and participatory? These are the questions that this paper attempts to address.

For the purpose of this study, particular aspects of e-democracy are examined as they apply to the United Nations system. E-democracy as a concept is usually applied to governmental authorities, from the local to the national levels. The United Nations is not a government or governmental agency. But the UN does have limited functions that are analagous to governmental ones, in particular in the areas of public policy-making, norm setting, legal

adjudication, and public service provision. So an e-democracy analysis of the UN *primaefacae* appears to be a legitimate endeavor.

The two aspects of the United Nations emphasized in this study are access to information and public participation. These two aspects form the basis of integrating an informed citizenry into any decision-making body. Access to information is necessary for the citizen to know about policies that effect them, to understand the options available, and to be able to gather the background information necessary to make an informed opinion. Public participation is necessary for citizens to be able to make their voice known to relevant authorities on a particular policy. Together access to information and citizen participation form the two-way communication loop of democratic accountability.

One purpose of this study is to examine the current information and communication reform process currently underway within the UN system in light of its implications for increasing the democratic nature of the organization. In this sense, it is hoped that this paper serves as a useful tool for framing these issues for the UN Secretary General, the Department of Public Information and the UN Committee on Information.

Beyond this process, it is also hoped that this paper can contribute to the negotiations of the World Summit on the Information Society, an inter-governmental conference taking place in two-phases, in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in November 2005. Not enough attention has been paid in this process to the important questions surrounding e-democracy and international institutions use of ICTs, a gap which this study endeavors to address. The Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action from the first phase of the Summit in Geneva make only brief and vague references to the role of ICTs in enhancing democratic governance.

Lastly, and most importantly, it is hoped that this paper can in some small way help bring together the somewhat autonomous networks of organizations working on global governance and UN reform issues on the one hand and those advocating e-democracy, communications rights, and more democratic ICT governance on the other.

Section One of this paper introduces “e-democracy” as an analytical framework, defining it as “the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors... within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage.” The related topics of stakeholder accountability, “e-government” and “teledemocracy” are discussed in this section.

In Section Two, the issue of access to information at the United Nations is addressed. The United Nations is undergoing an important reform process to enhance the public information it provides via myriad media. The various channels the UN is currently employing to spread its message, from radio to television to webcasting, are described. This section concludes with recommendations on how the UN can implement its information services to best enhance the democratic nature of the organization.

Section Three addresses participation at the United Nations facilitated by ICTs. Examples of innovative practice in other international bodies, and the few examples from the UN system, are presented. Included are a few recommendations on how the UN can incorporate more participatory, collaborative, interactive technologies into its ICT strategy.

Section Four proceeds with a discussion of the darker aspects of ICTs, and their challenges to democracy worldwide. The dangers of the various “digital divides” along gender, geographic and economic lines are addressed. Examples are given demonstrating how governments are using ICTs to diminish rights to information, privacy, and other civil liberties. And the larger issue of the governance of the internet is explored. The section closes with suggestions of some ways the United Nations can respond to these challenges.

The paper concludes with a vision of a more open, collaborative, multi-stakeholder United Nations facilitated by information technology. The analogy of the United Nations as a “policy management server” within a distributed system of “client” actors is presented.

Defining E-Democracy

The application of modern communications technologies to democratic governance has been given several names: “teledemocracy,” the “electronic republic,” “virtual democracy,” “digital democracy,” “deliberative democracy,” “emergent democracy” among others³. These various terminologies share many common characteristics, varying from the more utopian to more pragmatic approaches. For our purposes, this paper employs the term with the most widespread and active usage: *e-democracy*.

It is important at the outset to establish that information and communications technologies, like most scientific innovations and discoveries, are value-neutral. Atomic energy, DNA research, lasers, even the printing press have both socially beneficial and destructive applications.

Communications technologies in particular have long been touted for their supposedly benevolent properties, from the invention of the telegraph, to the radio, telephone, and the television.⁴ The Internet in particular has been linked to democracy for a number of reasons. First, has to do with the very structure of the internet itself as an open protocol that supports sharing of information and data and has no fixed hierarchical structure. As one paper issued from the Queensland government in Australia noted:

The Internet is not inherently democratic, but it can be used for democratic purposes... The characteristics of the Internet which support e-democracy include : timeliness - the opportunity to participate in debates as they happen; accessibility - participation is less limited by geography, disability or networks; and facilitation - individuals and groups can access information and provide input which previously has often been restricted to organizations which had the resources to respond to government.⁵

What most of the literature on this subject contend is that information and communications technologies have the *potential* to be used for democratizing, socially beneficial applications. As Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, noted in an article on Opendemocracy.net:

The Internet can facilitate the ability of citizens to gather information about campaign issues, to mobilize community networks, to create diverse coalitions around policy problems, and to lobby elected representatives. It also has the potential to foster dialogue and consultation between citizens and government, between citizens and political parties and between groups of citizens, by which government and social

³ See for example Lawrence Grossman, *The Electronic Republic* (Viking Press, 1995); Scott London, “A Comparative Look at Two Models of Public Talk” *Journal of Interpersonal Computing and Technology* Vol 3, No 2, (April 1995), pp. 33-55; and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>

⁴ See for example Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-Line Pioneer* (Berkley Pub Group, October 1999).

⁵ *E-Democracy Policy Framework* (Queensland Government, 2001).

representatives seek to understand people's needs, and in which citizens seek to contribute actively with their knowledge.⁶

Similarly, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights notes in a recent study paper:

ICTs have the potential to make government more accessible, to make decision making processes more open and to reduce the distance between authorities and individuals as well as to provide the means for people with similar claims to group together and organize. This helps promote the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs - the basis of a democratic Information Society.⁷

Conversely, the internet has a darker potential as well, for undermining democracy and diminishing human rights. This will be explored in the last section of this paper.

• e-democracy defined

E-democracy (an abbreviated form of “electronic democracy”) in this light can be seen as the intentional application of information and communications technologies to enhance the democratic character of a governance structure. One oft-cited definition is from e-democracy advocate and researcher Steven Clift:

E-democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, citizen/voters) within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage.⁸

The Queensland government of Australia defines e-democracy as “the convergence of traditional democratic processes and Internet technology.”⁹ UNESCO describes e-democracy as “the use of ICTs with the aim of providing increased opportunities for citizen participation and involvement in the decision-making process in order to meet growing citizens’ expectations.”¹⁰

Some scholars emphasize that e-democracy does not supercede or replace more traditional democratic systems. For example Kenneth Hacker and Jan van Dijk in *Digital Democracy : Issues of Theory and Practice* describe e-democracy as “a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC [computer-mediated communications] instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional ‘analogue’ political practices.”¹¹ In this sense, e-democracy is not revolutionary by evolutionary, expanding the tools and channels of traditional democratic practices.

⁶ Koïchiro Matsuura “Cyberspace, democracy and development,” on Opendemocracy.net, (January 2003) <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-8-85-915.jsp>

⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Background Note on the Information Society and Human Rights,” October 2003.

⁸ Steven Clift, *The E-Democracy E-Book: Democracy is Online 2.0* (2000).

⁹ *E-Democracy Policy Framework* (Queensland Government, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ UNESCO, e-Democracy web page, (March 2003), see <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/>.

¹¹ Kenneth Hacker and Jan van Dijk, *Digital Democracy : Issues of Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2000), 1.

From another perspective, e-democracy can be seen as a return to the roots of democracy, the Greek agora, a common public space in which citizens¹² could openly discuss political issues, receive important news and information, and vote on new laws. E-democracy advocates seek to expand the scope of the agora from the local to the international levels using these new technologies of communication and information dissemination.

• e-government

A more general, related term that needs some clarification is “e-government.” The lines between e-government and e-democracy are not always very clear, with several areas of overlap. For example, the ICT and development consortium InfoDev defines e-government as: “the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to transform government by making it more accessible, effective and accountable.”¹³ The International Institute for Sustainable Development confuses the issue more by equating e-government with e-business, defining e-government as:

a form of e-business in governance and refers to the processes and structures pertinent to the delivery of electronic services to the public (citizens and businesses), collaborating with business partners and conducting electronic transactions within an organizational entity.¹⁴

For our purposes, e-government is differentiated from e-democracy in its emphasis on government service delivery and maximizing government agency efficiency and cost-savings through the use of information and communications technology. By contrast, e-democracy initiatives often do not result in greater government efficiency or cost-savings, often lengthening the policy-making process and introducing new costs into the governance process.

In addition, e-government focuses on the governmental structures and official procedures facilitated by ICTs, whereas e-democracy emphasizes the relations, networks, and communities formed among citizens and between citizenry and public policy-makers. E-government is about efficiency, e-democracy is about empowerment.

• beyond e-voting

Typically the principal activity that characterizes democracy is the free and fair election of government representatives to express the will of the citizens. In the e-democracy arena, the media typically focus narrowly on electronic voting or “e-voting” as the principal democratic activity done online. Most reporting focuses on the technical and political problems surrounding voting online or using electronic vote-counting systems.

However elections are only one aspect of a democratic system. A democratic system has a wide range of key components, including: an active civil society; a body of protected rights

¹² Or at least male, free, land-owning citizens

¹³ *E-Government Handbook for Developing Countries*, InfoDev, 2002.

¹⁴ Michiel Backus, “E-governance in Developing Countries,” *IICD Research Brief* .1 (March 2001) 1

and freedoms including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and a free press; the rule of law; free and fair elections; and a “culture of democracy.” As Sergio de Mello, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted “most have come to realize that democracy is as much about what happens between elections as it is about what happens during them.”¹⁵

Most e-democracy theorists and advocates de-emphasize the importance of e-voting. For Stephen Clift, voting is the “white bread” of the democracy sandwich, while the actual issues are the “meat”:

The key is to not limit our view of democracy online (also referred to as digital democracy, e-democracy, politics online, e-governance etc.) to just voting and elections. Voting online is a small part of the full democracy online agenda.¹⁶

Related to e-voting is the concept of “teledemocracy.” This is the view that ICTs should be used to ascertain in a structured and regular manner the “opinion” of the people on various subjects and use that as a guide for public policy. One of the first politicians to call for this was Texas billionaire Ross Perot, in his bid for the United States Presidency in 1992. Perot spoke in favor of developing a “virtual town hall” where citizens could make their views known to the government on key issues using online chats and webpolls.

This “teledemocracy” concept has been mostly rejected in recent years by e-democracy advocates as too simplistic and limited. Many question the validity of instant, unreflective polling on public policy subjects requiring study and deliberation, like public health care, foreign policy and electoral reform. Critics note that teledemocracy would simply continue and extend the “politics of the poll,” replacing political leadership for up-to-the-minute web surveys.

On a similar note, global democracy advocates often limit their consideration of the democratization of the United Nations to different procedures for voting for their representatives in the organization, such as through some kind of Parliamentary Assembly or People’s Assembly. One effort seeks to create a virtual “e-Parliament” that would bring together national parliamentarians around the world into a virtual parliamentary space. This effort has been discussed extensively in other CURE publications.¹⁷

Suffice to say that, in the current geo-political climate, the possibility of any kind of direct election of representatives to the United Nations seems quite remote. While the various proposals should continue to be studied and discussed, there are many other avenues toward creating a more inclusive, participative, and just global system that need to be pursued as well. To focus myopically on only one aspect of democracy – elections – while ignoring the other important components seems a poor strategy.

• **stakeholder accountability**

¹⁵ Sergio Vieira De Mello, “Holistic Democracy: The Human Rights Content of Legitimate Governance” (Speech delivered at the Seminar on the Interdependence between Democracy and Human Rights, Geneva, 25-26 November 2002), 3

¹⁶ Steven Clift, *The E-Democracy E-Book: Democracy is Online 2.0* (2000)

¹⁷ Mendlovitz, Saul, and Barbara Walker, eds. *A Reader on Second Assembly & Parliamentary Proposals*. Wayne, New Jersey: Center for UN Reform Education, 2003.

Implicit in most conceptions of e-democracy is a stakeholder orientation toward democracy, rather than the more traditional “member” orientation. The widely supported “AA1000” accountability index defines stakeholders as:

...those groups who affect and/or are affected by the organization and its activities. These may include, but are not limited to: owners, trustees, employees and trade unions, customers, members, business partners, suppliers, competitors, government and regulators, the electorate, non-governmental-organizations (NGOs) / not-for-profit organizations, pressure groups and influencers, and local and international communities.¹⁸

From this perspective, institutions have a responsibility not only to their members or supporters, but also to those groups and individuals who are affected by the activities of those institutions. This broadens the range of actors to whom an institution is accountable. This stakeholder perspective: “embeds institutions within the wider world, challenging institutions to recognize their relationship with and responsibility to the environment.”¹⁹

This concept is an important part of e-democracy because the inclusive, consultative processes of e-democracy are intended to bring a broader range of voices and perspectives into the policy-making process. A basic assumption of the stakeholder orientation is that public policy-making is improved through consultation with those groups and populations effected by or concerned with a given issue area.

A central tenet of the stakeholder orientation is that individuals and communities who are effected by an organization’s actions should be able to hold them to account. According to the One World Trust, in their *Global Accountability Report*, the decisions that inter-governmental organizations, transnational corporations and international NGOs make “affect all of our lives in many different ways – from determining global financial standards to deciding the fate of the world’s refugees.”²⁰ And thus their activities need to be accountable to those most impacted by these organizations.

These institutions are made accountable through the on-going monitoring and participation by their stakeholders. Accountability is not just seen as an end-stage process, but something that is ongoing and dynamic. Stakeholders are encouraged to be involved at all stages of an organization’s decision-making in order to ensure that the organization is responsible for its actions.

As will be noted later in this paper, the stakeholder orientation has become increasingly accepted within the United Nations system.

• access to information

¹⁸ Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability, Paper, 1999, *AccountAbility 1000 (AA1000) Framework*

¹⁹ Simon Burall, Hetty Kovach, and Caroline Neligan, *Global Accountability Report I: Power without Accountability?* (London: One World Trust, 2003), 3

²⁰ Burall, Kovach, and Neligan, *Global Accountability Report I*, 3

One of the central principles of e-democracy is the importance of access to information. Indeed, the power of the Internet is its ability to make available vast quantities of information at the click of a mouse.

The availability of citizens to freely access public policy-related information is widely recognized as a central aspect of democracy. As Catinat and Vedel emphasize:

...the exchange and free movement of information has always been a key element in democracy. As democracy means a system in which people make the basic decisions on crucial matters of public policy, the citizens in a democracy, as the ultimate decision makers, need full or at least a lot of information to make intelligent political choices.²¹

Or more succinctly, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression wrote in his 1995 report that “freedom will be bereft of all effectiveness if the people have no access to information. Access to information is basic to the democratic way of life.”²²

Several international agreements and resolutions support the right to access information, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

At the same time, there is an inherent tension in governance bodies between the need to control information and their responsibility to disclose information. As Donald Lenihan notes:

Top-down management in large bureaucracies (private or public), requires centralized control over “messaging,” such as communication of the strategic plan or the various responsibilities of different parts of the organization. Too much information or the wrong kind of information circulating throughout the organization can create serious problems. Modern governments have organized around this principle for two hundred years. Knowledge is power. As a result, governments are often hierarchical, secretive and controlling about information that is regarded as sensitive.²³

This culture of secrecy is one of the significant barriers to the adoption of new government procedures that would make public information available using ICTs. Adopting “access to information” ICT programs in government agencies often involves intensive internal management and organizational changes.

At the same time, in an increasingly information-rich environment, governments have a critical responsibility as guarantors of accurate and unbiased information. During election times, and other crisis points in governments, people often complain of “information overload,” which can get in the way of informed and well-reasoned decision-making. For particularly polarized issues, such as immigration policy or military spending, there may be many voices competing for the public’s attention, from well-funded industry lobby groups to

²¹ Catinat & Vedel, in *Digital Democracy* (London: Sage, 2000) p. 184-5

²² United Nations, 1995. *Report of Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression*

²³ *Realigning Governance: From E-Government to E-Democracy* (2002), 26

various media outlets, talk radio hosts to billboards. Governments, in this light, are not just producers of information but increasingly seen as trusted “filters” of information.

The internet is uniquely suited to meeting access to information concerns. Jan Van Dijk and Kenneth Hacker opine that the “greatest achievement of digital democracy at the time of writing is the offer of better opportunities for information retrieval and exchange.”²⁴ They note that the Internet frees citizens from the more limited, pre-programmed traditional media sources provided by television, radio and newspapers, while offering a wide variety of information sources and perspectives on any subject imaginable.

For example, in March 2001 a terrible explosion at an elementary school in southeastern China killed about 50 students and injured scores more. The Chinese authorities immediately issued a statement that the explosion was caused by a madman who attacked the school with explosives. However soon after concerned Chinese parents began to share information via e-mail and on bulletin boards about the cause of the explosion and what the government was doing about it. These internet exchanges of information were instrumental in the Chinese government admitting that the school was being used for the manufacture of fireworks, which was the true cause of the explosion.²⁵

How does an organization test whether or not their website provides sufficient access to information? The Global Accountability Project suggests a comprehensive set of questions for an organization to use in assessing the level of information disclosure on their website:

- Is a description of the objectives, targets and activities available?
- Are evaluations of main activities available?
- Can the public identify all key members of the organization?
- Is there a public record of the number of votes each member holds?
- Is a meaningful description of key decision-making bodies available to the public?
- Are individuals on the executive body publicly identified?
- Are the agendas, draft papers and minutes of both governing and executive body meetings available to the public?
- Is there an information disclosure policy available which clearly states the types of documents the organization does and does not disclose, stating the reasons for non-disclosure?
- Are annual reports publicly available and do they contain externally audited financial information?
- Is the above information available in the languages of those with a stake in the organizations?²⁶

The next important question is, what happens to the information once it is released? That is the subject of the next section on public participation.

²⁴ Kenneth Hacker and Jan van Dijk, eds., *Digital Democracy : Issues of Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2000), 214

²⁵ Nina Hachigian, “Chinese 'Web Worms' Find Their Own Sort of Truth ,” *Pacific Council on International Policy* (9 May 2001)

²⁶ Simon Burall, Hetty Kovach, and Caroline Neligan, *Global Accountability Report I: Power without Accountability?* (London: One World Trust, 2003), 6

• public association and consultation

Once a citizen has information, what does he or she do with it? The other main aspect of e-democracy relate to the interactive, multi-channel nature of ICTs, in contrast to the one-way, broadcast model of traditional media. The ability of citizens to engage in citizen-to-citizen “horizontal” dialogue and citizen-to-official “vertical” dialogue is for many the essence of online democracy. Many view one of the principal strengths of the Internet is that it reduces and often eliminates the limitations of distance and time on meetings and discussions, as demonstrated by the popularity of instant messaging, chat rooms and discussion boards.

Since the beginnings of democracy, scores of scholars and researchers have noted that a principal attribute of democracy is the existence of associations and groupings of citizens around various issue areas and concerns. Alex de Toqueville’s observations about the early American society and the plethora of civic associations are well-known by now. Beyond the governmental structures and legal apparatus of democracy, it is the presence of an active civil society, including religious organizations, labor unions, student groups, local business associations, and volunteer agencies that form the complex network of democracy.

In cyberspace, the natural extension of civil society is the creation of hundreds of websites, e-mail lists, discussion boards and weblogs by citizen’s groups around the world. Several approaches emphasize the need for citizens to assemble in a “virtual commons” or “agora” where ideas, positions, proposals and public needs can be discussed, deliberated and debated by a wide range of civil society. Democracy advocates seek to develop this more engaged, informed, and networked vision of citizenship as an answer to the conception of the individual as merely a consumer or spectator.

Beyond the “horizontal” citizen-citizen interactions of an online public space, the main strength of e-democracy is its potential to introduce a greater range of actors into the policy-making space. That is, ICTs can enable more consultative, participative mechanisms for policy-making, bringing together a wide range of actors from anywhere in the world.

While the various experiments in online consultations multiply, measuring their impact on actual policy making is difficult. Van Dijk and Hacker remark that:

...there is no perceivable effect on decision making of institutional politics at this moment. Here we touch on the third claim of digital democracy: assumed impact on decision making... neither private nor (semi-) official Internet debates seem to have any impact on political decision making at the time of writing.²⁷

Thus the e-democracy perspective emphasizes a stakeholder approach to governance, access to information and public association and consultation. Now that we have defined the basic parameters of the e-democracy framework, we can look at the United Nations and its ICT policies and structures.

²⁷ Hacker and van Dijk, eds., *Digital Democracy*, 216

United Nations and Access to Information

*Harnessing strategically the power of information and communication technologies will serve as an accelerator and enabler to the realization of the Organization's goals and commitments. The Organization itself will need to enhance its capacity to create, share and disseminate knowledge and be able to function efficiently and effectively in the emerging knowledge-based world economy.*²⁸

-- UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

*CNN is the sixteenth member of the UN Security Council.*²⁹

-- Madeleine Albright, Former United States
Ambassador to the United Nations

What information is released to which audiences is inherently a political decision. Given the various political sensitivities of different Member States of the United Nations, the channels of information coming out of the United Nations have typically been quite narrow. Thus, access to meetings, the publication of official documents, and management of the public communications from the United Nations are tightly controlled.

As various stakeholders in the organization seek to participate in the UN, access to information becomes more and more important. Often simply producing enough paper copies of the many official documents at UN conferences and summits becomes a serious financial issue once hundreds of civil society organizations³⁰ began attending and demanding access to documentation. At the same time, access to meetings has become an increasingly difficult issue, with many conference rooms in the UN not designed to accommodate hundreds of observers from civil society. At summits and world conferences complicated ticketing systems often have to be developed to try and accommodate all the organizations that wish to be present in the plenary meetings.

On the other hand, the United Nations has a reputation for providing relatively unbiased, reliable information on a variety of subjects, from global refugee flows to meteorological data. As the sources of information increase, and people's ability to access those sources becomes more sophisticated, demand for the kind of trustworthy information that the United Nations provides increases as well.

²⁸ Kofi Annan, "Information and Communication Technology Strategy," United Nations, Report, 2002, 12

²⁹ David Bollier, *The Rise of Netpolitik: How the Internet Is Changing International Politics and Diplomacy* (Washington DC: Aspen Institute, 2003), 6

³⁰ In this paper, the terms "civil society organization" and "non-governmental organization" are used interchangeably. Much research has already been conducted to delineate the nuances between the two terms, but for the purposes of this study, they are roughly equivalent.

• managing information

The UN is in the midst of a process of reform of its information and communications activities. The UN Secretary General in his 2002 report “An Agenda for Further Change” indicated the fundamental reforms he planned on instituting at the UN’s Department of Public Information (DPI). First, he called for the consolidation of the sections of DPI into three units focused on Outreach, News and Media, and Strategic Communications. In addition, he urged the “rationalization” of the existing network of United Nations Information Centres around the world around “regional hubs.”³¹

The UN Department of Public Information is the principal UN office responsible for the public information and communications activities of the organization. One of the largest departments in the UN secretariat, it employs around 750 staff people.

The total budget for DPI for the 2002-2003 period is US\$147,107,600, or \$73,553,800 per year, about 6 percent of the total UN budget of \$1.3 billion. Of that total, \$25,224,950 is allocated toward “news services” including the UN website, UN radio, UN television, and support for the office of the spokesperson for the Secretary General.³² The remainder is divided among the UN’s library services, “strategic communications,” outreach and administration. The Secretary General in his report on the information and communications strategy of the United Nations noted that

this level of expenditure as a percentage of the overall budget is very low, compared to other large information-intensive organizations. For example, the World Bank spends approximately 11 per cent of its overall regular budget equivalent on ICT. Particularly in the area of humanitarian coordination, information and communications technology requirements have been supplemented by voluntary contributions.³³

The relatively modest amount of this figure is important to keep in perspective. The sum of \$146 million is about what Morocco and Brazil each budgeted to upgrade rural roads in the last five years of the 1990s, or what the Massachusetts Port Authority allocated recently to add a new baggage-screening system to Logan International Airport.

On the other hand, the Department of Public Information outnumbers other important units of the United Nations. The peacekeeping department, by comparison, employs about 600 people at headquarters managing tens of thousands of peacekeepers and locally employed people abroad. UNICEF runs its international network with just over 200 people in more than 150 countries.

DPI coordinates the “messaging” of the UN to the public through the UN Communications Group, which once a week brings together representatives from the various UN offices and agencies to meet on public information issues. The overall objective of the Group is “to develop a cohesive and unified voice for the United Nations system.” With the enormous

³¹ Kofi Annan, “Strengthening of the United Nations: an Agenda for Further Change” United Nations, Report, 2002

³² “Proposed Programme Budget for the Biennium 2004-2005; Part VII Public information; Section 28 Public information,” United Nations, 2003

³³ Kofi Annan, “Information and Communication Technology Strategy” United Nations, Report, 2002

range of issues and concerns, as well as competing mandates, within the UN system and its various sub-agencies and subsidiary bodies, developing a “unified voice” is an incredibly daunting task for DPI.

The United Nations uses a variety of communications technologies to get its message across to the world, from print to radio, television and, of course, the internet.

- **radio**

Radio is the most widespread ICT technology in the world, available cheaply and ubiquitously in every country of the world, from urban centers to the most remote rural communities. People who are illiterate or less educated can easily access radio. Radio receivers are inexpensive to purchase and do not require even a regular source of electricity, since they can be powered by batteries, solar energy, and even human-power.³⁴

The United Nations produces one 15-minute radio program every weekday in the six official UN languages, plus Portuguese and Kiswahili. Radio stations around the world can broadcast the program “live” when it is released (5:30pm, GMT) or later, free of charge. The program focuses on international news and current affairs. DPI also produces weekly or monthly taped programs in six official and seven non-official languages (Bangla, Bahasa Indonesia, French Creole, Dutch, Hindi, Turkish and Urdu).

Based on UN statistics, the UN radio programming reaches an enormous audience, estimated at a minimum 133 million people every day, 26 million alone with the Chinese language broadcast.³⁵

Barbara Crosette notes that the actual effective listening audience for UN radio is more limited than the numbers indicate:

The daily U.N. radio program, in the six official U.N. languages, can cover some but not all of the day's news, given its early release time. Who hears it? Well, because shift work is not allowed at U.N. radio, Asians generally don't, because the news is too late the first day and stale the next. African stations cannot always use the news broadcasts because their slow Internet systems make downloading too time-consuming, if there is any Internet access at all. In some cases, radio engineers must telephone African stations to deliver programs manually over phone lines.³⁶

It would cost an estimated \$1 million for the UN to upgrade to a more effective contemporary radio service. There is widespread political support for the UN's radio programming, with governments from the North and South, regardless of political orientation, supportive of the UN's continued development of its radio capacity.

³⁴ For example, the “Ranger” radio developed by the Freeplay Foundation will run for 35 minutes after 30 seconds of turning a hand crank. <http://www.freeplay.net>

³⁵ “Committee on Information Report on the twenty-fifth session” United Nations, Report, 2003

³⁶ Barbara Crosette, “Ahead of Information Summit, U.N. Should Examine Itself,” UNWIRE (28 July 2003)

- **television / video broadcasting**

Television is the second most common broadcasting technology, available anywhere there is electricity and a satellite dish or antenna.

The UN produces regular television programs, which are made available for free to broadcasters around the world. The three current UN television programs are “World Chronicle,” an interview-format program; “UN in Action,” a documentary series on various UN topics; and “Year in Review” which summarizes the main international political developments of the year. The “UN in Action” and the “World Chronicle” are also viewable online as archived web broadcasts.

In addition, DPI provides for media outlets around the world television footage of key UN meetings, such as the General Assembly main sessions, open Security Council meetings, and special commemorative events, such as the release of the Millennium Report by the UN Secretary General in 2000.

The United Nations also produces occasional videos on a variety of subjects, with over 100 in active circulation. The subject matter ranges from small arms (“Armed to the Teeth”), to the aftermath of war (“Legacies of War”), human rights (“Human Rights in Haiti”), Palestine, sustainable development, and women’s rights. Other UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNDP produce their own topical videos which they make available to broadcasters and the public.

In addition, there is a live local cable broadcast of official UN meetings in progress which is transmitted to the offices of Permanent Missions to the UN in New York. This broadcast is not accessible to the general public.

- **website**

The United Nations launched its website on the World-Wide Web in June 1995. The initial UN website presented very basic information on its structure and activities in English only. Since then, the site has been expanded tremendously, particularly during an extensive site re-design in 2000, incorporating content in the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). Currently the website includes rich graphics, photos, links to hundreds of public documents, and audio and video webcasts of meetings.

The UN’s website technical support comes from the Information Technology Services Division, which is part of the Office of Central Support Services, while the website content is managed by the UN Department of Public Information. Other UN specialized agencies maintain their own websites, semi-autonomously from the UN secretariat. (Ironically, the Department of Public Information is one of the few UN offices that does not have its own public website.)

Specifically, the News and Media Division of DPI is responsible for the UN website, special conference websites, UN daily news broadcasts via the web. The News and Media Division also assists other UN departments in the provision of web information in other languages other than English and the webcasting of UN meetings and events.

There are differences of opinion on the UN's website. The site re-design completed in 2000 was a clear improvement in the content and structure of the site. The United Nations website in 2003 was nominated for a prestigious "Webby Award" in the Government and Law category.³⁷ (The "Webbies" are the internet equivalent of an Academy Award in the entertainment film industry.)

Indeed, every year the number of "hits" to the UN website increases, indicating the level of utility and relevance of the site. The Secretary General noted that the United Nations web site had reached a milestone on 5 February 2003, when it recorded more than 10 million accesses during a 24-hour period. In contrast, the site had received 11.5 million accesses during the entire year in 1996. (The corresponding figure for 2002 is 1,695 million, or 1.7 billion accesses.)³⁸

The website is not without its critics. As one commentator noted, the site "is difficult for outsiders unfamiliar with the organization's structure to navigate" and continues:

Decades of documents may appear in no chronological sequence. Finding as high-profile a body as the Commission on Human Rights takes work. After several attempts, I gave up trying to locate the World Summit on the Information Society at un.org. I had to go to www.itu.org, the site of the International Telecommunication Union, a sponsor of the meeting. How many ordinary interested citizens would know that?³⁹

Ambassador Cristian Maquieira, representative of the government of Chile, criticized the user-friendliness of the website:

On efforts to better disseminate information, unfortunately, the Organization's Web site had been redesigned on the assumption that users were well trained and highly equipped... While that might be the case among members of the academic community in developed countries, the Web site did not take into consideration individuals or school users relying on home computers. From the perspective of a typical user, the new Web site was complex and required powerful equipment for rapid access.⁴⁰

Many member state criticisms of the website note the strong preference for English and French language on web pages and documents made available on the site. Ambassador Roberta Lajous, deputy representative of Mexico, noted:

As it has become noticeable in recent meetings regarding the Internet, organized this year in the United Nations by the Economic and Social Council, "only a tenth of the world population speaks English, but at present 80% of the contents in the Web are in this language." For this reason, it is troubling to find out similar, and sometimes even

³⁷ See http://www.webbyawards.com/main/webby_awards/nominees.html

³⁸ Kofi Annan, "Reorientation of United Nations Activities in the Field of Public Information and Communications" United Nations, Report, 2003

³⁹ Crosette, "Ahead of Information Summit, U.N. Should Examine Itself."

⁴⁰ UN Department of Public Information, "UN Information Department Should Be Proud of Achievements in Face of Limited Resources, Committee on Information Told at Opening Meeting" United Nations, Press Release, 2001

larger figures, in the use of English with respect to the other languages, in the content of the public information material that the United Nations makes available. An Organization such as ours should seek to attain a more equitable distribution of its information; one that truly reflects the diversity of the world that it is here represented.⁴¹

The United States has been heavily critical of DPI employing outside private sector contractors to re-design the UN website. The US has instead called upon the organization to use in-house staff to manage and maintain the website.

Live and archived video broadcasts, i.e. webcasts, are available on the website.⁴² These include open meetings of UN General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Security Council, press briefings by the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary General, other special events. There are also archived webcasts of UNTV programs “UN in Action” and the “Chronicle.” Viewers of these videos require fast connections to the internet (such as via DSL or a cable connection) or must wait for the video to load on their computers using slower internet connections. The United Nations webcasts its video using Real Media technology, which employs a free media player which anyone can download off the internet.⁴³

Of course, with the wealth of information available, a strong search function is necessary on the UN website. The UN recently switched from its search engine developed in-house to one powered by Google search software⁴⁴, the industry leader in internet search engines.

The United Nations is attempting to develop a search function across all public UN websites. In 2002, the High-Level Committee on Management asked for a feasibility and cost/benefit analysis of developing an inter-agency search facility, across the public web sites of all United Nations system organizations. In the light of the Secretariat’s negotiations with Google, United Nations system information and communications technology managers meeting in Geneva in May 2002 recommended that the Secretariat take the lead in investigating solutions (and the financing of those solutions) for a system-wide search engine.

In April 2002, DPI established an e-mail news service, with now has around 15,000 subscribers.⁴⁵ The e-mail service disseminates summaries of news items available on the UN website, with hyperlinks to the relevant documents.

• **United Nations documents: the Official Document System**

The main digital repository of all official United Nations documents is a unified electronic document database archive called the Official Document System or the ODS. This archive stores and supplies over 300,000 UN documents in the six official languages of the UN: English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Russian. Its holdings range from every UN

⁴¹ Ambassador Roberta Lajous, 23rd Session of the Committee of Information of the United Nations. New York: United Nations, May 3rd, 2001

⁴² <http://www.un.org/webcast/>, see Figure 1

⁴³ <http://www.real.com/>

⁴⁴ <http://www.google.com/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.un.org/news/dh/latest/subscribe.shtml>

General Assembly and Security Council resolution, reports from various UN agencies, speeches by UN officials, even vacancy notices, beginning from 1946 onward.

The Official Document System can be accessed by all United Nations staff and Missions to the United Nations using dedicated computer terminals at the UN or via the internet. After years of internal discussion and NGO lobbying, there have been efforts by the Information Technology Services Division to make the ODS freely available to the general public on the internet. The Division estimates that it will cost \$1,530,000 to upgrade the current ODS system to handle the increased load of the anticipated public users.⁴⁶ Reportedly, the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly, responsible for the UN's budget, at the end of 2003 approved the upgrade to the ODS system, which may be online as early as the end of 2004.

A more limited collection of UN documents are available on the UN's public website, mostly press releases and daily summaries of UN meetings prepared by DPI. There is also a treaty database, which is accessible by paid subscription.

• **public inquiries unit**

The United Nations receives an overwhelming amount of requests from the general public for information. For many people, this is the only way that they can directly communicate with a United Nations official.

The United Nations Public Inquiries Unit is responsible for responding to public inquiries to the United Nations received via postal mail, electronic mail, telephone and in-person visits. Part of the Outreach Division of DPI, the unit is composed of only five staff people. This is remarkable since in 2002 alone the Public Inquiries Unit responded to 46,000 e-mails, 9,000 letters, 8,000 telephone calls and 4,000 walk-in visitors.⁴⁷ The Public Inquiries Unit responds to all e-mailed requests for information, except for online petitions. In 2003, the number of e-mails has reportedly quadrupled, crashing its computer system on at least one occasion.

Other UN agencies also maintain their own public information offices and contact points.

• **the committee on information**

The principal governing body of the United Nations information and communications activities is the UN Committee on Information, a General Assembly committee composed of member states representatives. It currently is composed of 99 members, as well as non-members who participate in the meetings. The Committee meets annually for a two-week session around the end of April, early May.

The mandate of the Committee on Information is :

⁴⁶ Kofi Annan, "Reorientation of United Nations Activities in the Field of Public Information and Communications" United Nations, Report, 2003, 19

⁴⁷ Jared Sandberg, "Cubicle Front Lines: U.N. Staffers Listen To an Agitated Public," *Wall Street Journal* (26 March 2003), 27

- (a) To continue to examine United Nations public information policies and activities, in the light of the evolution of international relations, particularly during the past two decades, and of the imperatives of the establishment of the new international economic order and of a new world information and communication order;
- (b) To evaluate and follow up the efforts made and the progress achieved by the United Nations system in the field of information and communications; and
- (c) To promote the establishment of a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order intended to strengthen peace and international understanding and based on the free circulation and wider and better-balanced dissemination of information and to make recommendations thereon to the General Assembly.⁴⁸

The Committee reviews the report of the UN Department of Information and its budgetary request for the next funding period, then issues a resolution to the UN General Assembly for consideration at the UNGA's fall session.

Among the issues debated within the Committee have been the multilingual nature of the communications being issued from the United Nations, the importance of both low-tech and hi-tech communications strategies, and the enhanced coordination of the UN Information Centres around the world.

A related UN body is the ECOSOC Open-ended Working Group on Informatics. The ECOSOC Open-ended Working Group on Informatics principal concern is how to "harmonize and improve United Nations information systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States." The Working Group assists UN Missions in training, acquiring necessary computer equipment and software, getting access to specialized databases, and in developing their own websites.⁴⁹

• **civil society information dissemination**

Civil society organizations have long played an active role in disseminating information about the United Nations to a broader public. From established international networks to sectorally focused NGOs and coalitions, civil society has proven its ability to serve as an information intermediary between the United Nations system and citizens around the world. Their websites and e-mail listservs do everything from providing up-to-the-minute reports on UN meetings to publishing detailed political analyses and commentary. Independent reporting services such as UNWIRE and Earth Negotiations Bulletin often compete directly with the Department of Public Information and major media outlets on "breaking" UN stories.

From the very beginnings of the United Nations, independent United Nations Associations have sprung up in many countries to inform their national populaces about the UN by organizing public meetings and providing educational materials on various UN subjects. There are currently more than 90 United Nations Associations around the world, coordinated

⁴⁸ <http://www.un.org/ga/coi/>

⁴⁹ ECOSOC website, http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/sub_bodies.htm

by the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) based in Geneva and New York.⁵⁰

One of the most respected organizations involved in UN monitoring is the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, a program of the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Winnipeg, Canada. The Bulletin began as a small group of NGO reporters covering the negotiations of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. The timely, accurate, succinct and detailed reporting of the Earth Negotiations Bulletin has become a standard by which other reporting efforts are often compared. Widely read and lauded by governments, the United Nations and NGOs, the Bulletin has covered 178 negotiations since the 1992 conference.⁵¹

Often the most up-to-date news and in-depth analysis of a particular issue on the UN's agenda originates from civil society. For example, the principal information source on the International Criminal Court for many years has been not the United Nations but the website of the NGO Coalition for the International Criminal Court (CICC).⁵² This online resource has hosted information about the Criminal Court negotiations since they began in 1995, including official UN press releases, government statements, meeting reports, and NGO positions and analyses. The Coalition continues to monitor the Court in its first years of operation. The United Nations and many governments have praised the Coalition for their work informing the public and building support for the International Criminal Court.

Civil society information dissemination can be seen as playing a complementary, though at times controversial, role in relation to more official channels of dissemination. Civil society organizations and networks are more able (and willing) to criticize specific governments and reveal potentially damaging information to a wider audience than official UN sources. At the same time, civil society information dissemination often does not rise to journalistic standards of professionalism and has more obvious political intent, potentially tainting how that information is presented.

• recommendations

The United Nations has come quite far in its information and communications activities in the past few years, despite budget cuts and freezes, sensitive political issues, and the enormous challenge of providing information in the six official UN languages. However critical UN information remains off-line, reserved for a closed diplomatic community. The following steps are recommended as the UN develops its information communications strategy:

Recommendation 1: Share the UN's documentation with the world. The United Nations should distribute electronically its vast library of documentation, greatly increasing the audience for its message while saving paper resources. An important first step is making the Official Document System freely and openly available to the public. The cost of upgrading the UN's servers will be offset by the reduced cost of reproducing and distributing the

⁵⁰ WFUNA website, <http://www.wfuna.org>

⁵¹ Earth Negotiations Bulletin website, <http://www.iisd.ca/enbvol/enb-background.htm>

⁵² NGO Coalition for an ICC website, <http://www.iccnw.org>, see figure 2

millions of pages of UN documents. The reports that the UN may soon be releasing the funding necessary to effect the necessary upgrades to its website is welcome news.

Recommendation 2: Enhance User-Friendliness of the UN Website. The United Nations site should be designed to be easily navigated by a wide range of users, from high-school students to diplomats. The goal should be more user-driven design, where users can make their preferences known and have the most important information fed to them when they log in to the site.

Recommendation 3: Expand the Webcasting of UN Meetings. The web broadcasting capacity of the United Nations should be enhanced so that individuals around the world can observe open UN meetings more easily. Expanding the existing broadcasts to be in all six official UN languages would be a big step forward at modest additional cost.

Recommendation 4: Use Radio More Effectively. As the most widely available information and communication technology, the importance of traditional radio can not be overemphasized. The UN's radio broadcasting capacity should be expanded, in conjunction with internet radio broadcasts, to at least a one hour show produced every day, along with radio broadcasts of the daily press briefing with the spokesperson of the UN Secretary General.

Recommendation 5: A Global UN Television Station. The UN Department of Public Information should be mandated to examine the feasibility of a global UN television channel, with programming on the various UN issue areas and subjects from a variety of perspectives, featuring important UN meetings such as the Security Council and the General Assembly, as well as special events. For too long the deliberations of these multilateral bodies have been hidden from the public. The United Nations should take advantage of, rather than be subject to, the "CNN effect" in which political decisions are driven by media attention and subsequent public outcry.

Fig. 1: UN Webcast Page: <http://www.un.org/webcast>



Fig. 2: NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court Website: <http://www.iccnw.org>



United Nations and Participation

The United Nations can be seen, irrespective of technology, as a global “collaboration system.” Formal and informal meetings, a great variety of documents in multiple languages and information interchanges of all kinds, both structured and unstructured, are part of this system. Many stakeholders, both internal and external are simultaneously involved in the system. The challenge to the Organization is to reinvent itself in the interconnected world, harnessing technology to collaborate effectively and empower programme managers in the information age.⁵³

– UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Clearly the United Nations has a developed and established information dissemination and broadcasting apparatus in place, as the previous section has shown. But what are the UN’s capabilities when it comes to receiving input and feedback from the global public it is supposed to be serving? If the UN as a body politic has a mouth, where are its ears?

There is an inherent tension in the United Nations between the inclusive principle of “We the Peoples” from the UN Charter to the legal reality of the United Nations as an inter-governmental diplomatic institution, designed to serve primarily member states. Where this becomes most apparent is in the issue of participation of “non-state actors” in the UN system.

At least in principle, the United Nations has accepted a basic precept of e-democracy: the importance of involving the various stakeholders in UN processes. Moving beyond the traditional role of the UN as a forum of nation-states, increasingly civil society organizations, private sector groups, parliamentarians, local authorities, indigenous peoples and other actors are being consulted on an on-going basis. Efforts such as the Global Compact have solidified the UN’s efforts to partner with corporate entities. Meanwhile, the civil society revolution in the organization, begun around the time of the first Earth Summit in 1991, has brought together in increasing numbers civil society organizations to various UN fora.

It has been generally accepted by member states that non-governmental organizations and other non-state actors have limited rights to receive information and observe some United Nations meetings. This is codified most clearly in Resolution 1996/31 of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which establishes basic rules of participation of non-governmental organizations in ECOSOC, particularly related to attendance at meetings, submission of written statements and delivery of oral statements. This resolution only pertains to NGO participation in ECOSOC and its ancillary bodies, but does not explicitly apply to the UN General Assembly, the Security Council or specialized agencies of the United Nations system.

Beyond the submission of written statements and delivery of oral statements, there is no established, codified mechanism for civil society participation in UN policy development. Prior to every United Nations world conference and summit the participation rights of civil society have to be discussed and re-agreed upon by member states. This has led to a wide variety of participation practices across the UN system, with some bodies such as the

⁵³ Kofi Annan, 2002 Information and Communication Technology Strategy, United Nations, Report, 12

Commission on Human Rights having exceptionally open and consultative procedures for the inclusion of civil society, and others such as the International Telecommunications Union almost completely closed to NGO participation.

On a larger level, participation in the United Nations by individuals and civil society organizations is important particularly in countries where they are not able to play a role in their national level policy-making. For example, environmental groups may find themselves less powerful at the national level when confronting well-funded industry lobbyists. But at the international level, these groups may find their position much stronger in alliance with other environmental groups working together in transnational coalitions. By creating an international political process that civil society groups can participate in, this elevates a national-level debate to a broader context and creates new possibilities for progress on issues.

Participation of civil society organizations is also important at the international level to keep governments honest. For even the most open and democratic government, there is the tendency in public fora to emphasize the good things they are doing and downplay the negative. Having NGOs from a particular country present in a UN meeting, able to present their own information and opinions, increases the pressure upon a country to accurately report on its activities and policies. Besides civil society organizations, there are often few other actors at the United Nations level willing to challenge a particular government's version of its activities. It is difficult for a government to claim it does not engage in torture if there are victims of torture present and testifying to their own suffering.

• **multi-stakeholder participative processes**

In recent years, new forms of multi-stakeholder engagement have been innovated by the United Nations and other actors in the UN system.

Historically, the first multi-stakeholder international consultative process was the tripartite governing structure of the International Labor Organization. Founded in 1919, the ILO charter mandates that official delegations to the organization be composed of two representatives of the national government, one representative of workers (i.e. labor unions), and one from the business sector. Employer and worker delegates can express themselves and vote according to instructions received from their organizations. They sometimes vote against each other or even against their government representatives. The ILO Governing Body, the executive council of the ILO, draws half of its members from governments representatives, one-fourth from labor unions and one-fourth from the private sector.⁵⁴

More recently, several notable issue-focused campaigns have highlighted the strength of multi-sectoral partnerships, in particular, the campaign to stop the use of child soldiers, the anti-landmines campaign and the International Criminal Court coalition. To break out of the traditional diplomacy model, these initiatives are characterized as being composed of a relatively small group of supportive states, working collaborative with well-organized, global NGO networks and relevant UN agencies. The purpose of the issue-focused campaigns is to seek more substantive and progressive agreements than could be achieved through traditional, consensus-based UN diplomatic processes. The efficacy of these multi-sectoral

⁵⁴ ILO website, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/depts/fact.htm>

efforts can be seen in the 1998 near-universal adoption of the International Criminal Court Treaty and the ratification by 141 states of the Anti-personnel Landmine Convention.

The Commission on Sustainable Development's Multi-stakeholder Consultations were an enormous step forward in the recognition by the United Nations of the important respective roles of civil society and the private sector. Initiated in 1998 based on a recommendation of the 19th Special Session of the General Assembly ("Earth Summit+5"), the multi-stakeholder dialogues allow major groups and governments to interact on equal footing on a specific agenda issue, with parliamentary rules put aside in favor of an interactive discussion. Though not without their critics, the multi-stakeholder dialogues have had considerable influence on the CSD. For example, 80% of the international work programme on sustainable tourism development adopted by CSD in 1999 came from proposals made and discussed at the multi-stakeholder dialogue on tourism.⁵⁵

Building upon the CSD model, in the preparatory meetings leading up to the World Summit on the Information Society, new modalities for incorporating civil society and the private sector into the negotiating process were experimented with. During the third WSIS preparatory meeting in September 2003, non-governmental organizations, private sector representatives and officials from inter-governmental organizations were allowed to address government delegates on the substance of the particular paragraphs that delegates were negotiating. This was an important innovation, since in most UN processes, observers are usually only allowed to make introductory, general remarks at the beginning of the official plenary meetings. This new modality allowed other stakeholders to address governments on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, in the midst of the negotiations.

Unfortunately, many civil society observers noted that few of their proposals were incorporated into the draft text, and many were deleted in the final formulation in December 2003. As one detailed report noted, "from the 86 recommendations made by civil society, 49, i.e. more than 60 per cent, have been totally ignored."⁵⁶

It is important to note that none of these multi-stakeholder mechanisms have utilized ICTs to a significant level to increase participation in the UN. The following section highlights some current practices at the United Nations involving participative ICT technologies.

• **current UN participation modalities**

The large majority of the websites of UN agencies and subsidiary organs are primarily oriented toward providing basic information to the public, i.e. descriptions of the organization's structure, the mission or statement of purpose, a compilation of the organization's members, a list of publications and basic contact information. Most have no consultative or participative functionalities.

⁵⁵ Panel of Eminent Persons on Civil Society and UN Relationships, *UN System and Civil Society - An Inventory and Analysis of Practices* (New York: United Nations, 2003)

⁵⁶ WSIS Civil Society Family of Philanthropic Institutions and Foundations, "From Input to Impact? How Seriously Do Governmental Negotiators Take the Multi-Stakeholder Approach," Report, 22 September 2003, 1

There are however a few mechanisms in place for the United Nations to receive communications and invite public comment on its work.

Public Inquiries Unit

E-mail is one simple means for the United Nations to receive input from civil society and the general public. As noted in the previous section, the UN's Public Inquiries Unit not only receives information requests from the public, but it also receives suggestions, criticisms, and proposals from citizens around the world. One American expressed the following view to the Unit during the recent war in Iraq:

I'd like to pass on a message to the secretary-general. First of all, I want to apologize for the behavior of my president and administration for their wanton violation of the U.N. charter. And I want to apologize for my congressmen who at this moment in history are sleeping.⁵⁷

It is unclear if or how these inputs are collected, measured and communicated to relevant offices.

Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is another mechanism for the United Nations to receive input and contributions from civil society and the general public. The United Nations maintains traditional videoconferencing capabilities, facilitated by ISDN telephone lines, satellite transmissions and multimedia equipment.

According to the UN's Broadcast and Conference Support Section, video conferences are used for "senior management group meetings, departmental, budget meetings, task force, special sessions, summits, interviews, HRM planning and HQ to peacekeeping missions."⁵⁸ Currently they can accommodate up to eight simultaneous video conferences at UN Headquarters.⁵⁹

The videoconferencing facilities have been used for other less-official purposes. For example, for many years a course has been taught remotely by UN diplomats in New York to students at the University of DePaul, in Michigan, USA using two-way videoconferencing. The diplomats deliver their lectures from UN Headquarters and are able to answer questions posed by the students over the video conference.⁶⁰

NGOs have partnered with the UN to organize video conferences on various subjects, such as a video conference on peace and security that took place in July 2003, sponsored by the NGO "We, the World."⁶¹ The American NGO Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) has sponsored several video conferences using UN facilities on issues related to the World Summit on the Information Society. The CPSR video conferences linked together

⁵⁷ Sandberg, "Cubicle Front Lines," 27

⁵⁸ "United Nations New York Videoconference," United Nations, Powerpoint Presentation, November 2002, 8. Note that the awkward punctuation and phrasing is directly quoted from original.

⁵⁹ "United Nations New York Videoconference," 10.

⁶⁰ Patricia Szczerba, "DePaul University: Connecting Schools with the United Nations," *UN Chronicle* XL.2 (2003)

⁶¹ Annabel Boissonnade-Fotheringham, "Promoting Global Peace Via The Web," *UN Chronicle Online* (7 August 2003)

activists and government representatives in 13 cities around the world, including groups in Bolivia, Bulgaria, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, Namibia, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, United States, and Venezuela.⁶²

Video conferences are not generally available to the public. Only those who are able to access videoconferencing facilities, which are quite expensive and technically complex to maintain, are able to participate. UN videoconferences are typically only open to groups who have sponsored the conference and those invited to participate.

Early-Warning during Emergencies

One of the most important advantages of ICTs is their ability to rapidly and inexpensively transmit messages anywhere in the world. This is most critical during the early stages of a crisis situation, such as a natural disaster, the beginnings of a genocidal “ethnic cleansing” campaign, or the onset of a new viral epidemic. Civil society groups working with local populations often know about crisis situations long before more official, governmental agencies or the media are alerted. Thus, civil society groups can be important sources of timely information to alert the United Nations to developing emergency situations.

The United Nations has a responsibility to quickly respond to egregious human rights violations, such as torture, mass rape, and massive persecutions of minority groups. However there is no “human rights hotline” at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In 1995, the then-High Commissioner for Human Rights unveiled a fax “hotline,” to “allow the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva to monitor and react rapidly to human rights emergencies.”⁶³ It is unclear what individuals who did not have access to a fax machine were expected to do if they knew about a “human rights emergency.” That fax number no longer functions, and no corresponding telephone number or e-mail address exists.

The World Health Organization (WHO) relies most upon information it receives from national ministries of health for impending health emergencies like epidemics and the use of chemical or biological weapons. It also supports the Global Public Health Intelligence Network, a semi-automated electronic system that continuously searches key web sites, alert networks, newswires and online media sites, public health e-mail services, and websites of national governments, public health institutions, NGOs and specialized discussion groups to identify early warning information about epidemic threats and rumors of unusual disease events.⁶⁴ This is an important resource, since most news about epidemics comes from unofficial sources before official government channels are alerted. However there is no direct mechanism to report to the WHO a new outbreak of a virus or other health emergency.

No online mechanism exists to report a situation to the UN Security Council.

⁶² WSIS Videoconferences webpage, http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/B-SPAN/sub_wsis_video.htm

⁶³ “Reporting Human Rights Violations,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at <http://www.un.org/rights/dpi1550e.htm>

⁶⁴ WHO website, see <http://www.who.int/csr/alertresponse/epidemicintelligence/en/>

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are online forums that allow users to post text messages to other users that are usually displayed as “topics” with responses to each topic listed in chronological order. Discussion boards have been used for many years by government agencies around the world to facilitate discussions and suggestions on government policies.

Discussion boards can be rich environments for the exchange of views and information, not bound by space or time. However the use of discussion boards at the United Nations is still in its infancy.

UNICEF maintains a “Voices of Youth” online discussion board for young people at <http://www.unicef.org/voy/> (see figure 3). This discussion board accepts postings in French, English and Spanish (without translation), allowing young people to respond to questions and issues posed by UNICEF. The topic for October 2003 was “less-reported conflicts” for example. It appears to be a fairly active community of posters, with young people maintaining extended discussions among one another that can last for several weeks or months.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization maintains a sizable discussion board with 23 separate forums, some complementing physical conferences hosted by UNESCO, others grouped around current UNESCO initiatives.⁶⁵ However many of the forums are almost moribund, with several not showing any new postings since 2001. The most active forum is the youth forum, which showed a total of only 73 postings, as of publication of this paper.

The UNICT Task Force hosts five discussion forums on the following subjects: ICT Policy and Governance, National and Regional e-Strategies, Human Resource Development and Capacity Building, Low Cost Connectivity Access, and Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship.⁶⁶ Discussion on these forums is not very active, with most topics only showing a handful of postings. This is quite ironic given the nature of the Task Force’s work.

The United Nations University hosts a discussion forum to promote discussion and information sharing about online learning issues.⁶⁷ It is mostly inactive with only a total of 47 posts and 53 registered members.

Other UN Online Consultative Initiatives

A few UN initiatives are employing new, innovative information technologies, such as “weblogs” and webcasting.

A weblog, or blog, is similar to a discussion board, presenting “postings” grouped in chronological order from an individual or group of individuals, and invites comment on those postings. The Networking and Information Technology Observatory, sponsored by the UN Development Programme, presents a range of news stories related to ICT for development in

⁶⁵ UNESCO website, <http://www.unesco.org/cgi-ubb/Ultimate.cgi>, see Figure 4.

⁶⁶ UN ICT Taskforce website, <http://www.unicttaskforce.org/forum/principal.asp>

⁶⁷ UNU website, <http://www.onlinelearning.unu.edu/forums/index.php>

a weblog format, inviting people to share stories in a number of issues areas.⁶⁸ This weblog is quite active with frequent submissions and updates.

In preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002, a “Virtual Exhibit” was established to “display a multitude of sustainable development projects being pursued around the world” and to “bring summit proceedings to a global audience - in real time, via the internet.”⁶⁹ The Virtual Exhibit project was the result of a partnership among the UN Development Programme, the Business Association for Sustainable Development, and the International Institute for Sustainable Development. The Virtual Exhibit organized daily webcasts from Johannesburg featured interviews with key leaders from government delegations, the United Nations, civil society and the private sector.

In addition to the daily web broadcasts, the Virtual Exhibit sponsored an online consultation on sustainable development issues from May to June 2002. The discussion was facilitated by discussion board software and had 475 participants, over one-third from the developing world.

• examples from other international organizations

There are many examples of consultative and participatory initiatives at the local and national levels. What is more important for consideration in the context of this paper are the ICT activities of other international organizations. There are innovative projects sponsored by such institutions as the European Union, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank.

World Trade Organization

The World Trade Organization maintains a lively, unmoderated discussion board on its website www.wto.org (see Figure 5). Topics range from graduate students asking for help finding information on an obscure aspect of trade law to people looking for employment at the WTO. There are frequent heated debates between anti-globalization protesters and supporters of the WTO. Most users post anonymously.

Here is an excerpt from a discussion on the WTO discussion board on the compulsory jurisdiction of the WTO:

TOPIC: The Compulsory Jurisdiction of WTO

From: Bing (WILLIAMLUI) Oct-14 3:18 pm

As we know ,the WTO dispute resolution adopt the Compulsory Jurisdiction, this put the WTO dispute resolution more effetual than the International Court of Justice(the jurisdiction in this one is non-compulsory jurisdiction,or consent-based jurisdiction).

Any one can give some comment?

From: QUASIGREEN Oct-16 7:53 pm

It is certainly true that the WTO dispute resolution body is more effective than the ICJ. This stems not only from the compulsory, rather than consensual, jurisdiction - it goes deeper than that. The ICJ, as originally envisioned during the birth of the UN, was supposed to be the World Court that would resolve all disputes peacefully. Unfortunately, the court was a

⁶⁸ UNESCO website, <http://sdnhq.undp.org/observatory/>

⁶⁹ Virtual Exhibit website, <http://virtualexhibit.net>

veritable still-birth because the international community lacked the mutual trust and/or political will to make the court effective...

The WTO dispute resolution body, on the other hand, has some teeth. First, if a state loses, the other state can impose duties to make up for the grievance. There is a direct cost, supported by world opinion, for disobeying international trade law as evidenced by the agreements...

FrominkDAVLS6666causethe WTO dispute resolution body is just that- a body, not a court. Only courts make precedents, while a body merely interprets rules and guidelines and acts as a mediator.

FromouldKASTMEEnt@tt-22a6:4No one really pays attention to the court. State sovereignty still reigns because the methods of enforcement are diffuse and nebulous."

Actually the method of enforcement are quite clear. Art. 94 of the UNC clearly states "If any party to a case fails to perform the obligations incumbent upon it under a judgment rendered by the Court, the other party may have recourse to the Security Council, which may, if it deems necessary, make recommendations or decide upon measures to be taken to give to the judgment." Enforcement could therefore include Chapter VII - measures if the UNSEC has feeling that the world peace is at stake...⁷⁰

The World Trade Organization webcasts several of its public meetings and press conferences. Civil society organizations are also able to submit proposals and position papers for publication on the WTO's website. Since WTO began offering NGOs the possibility of placing proposals on the WTO website in 1998, only slight more than 100 of the thousands of active trade-related NGOs have taken the opportunity to do so. Of those, only 18 have submitted three or more proposals in four years.⁷¹

European Union

The European Union has developed various channels for bringing in European citizens' voices to discuss EU policies. Of particular interest is the "Futurum" website developed by the European Union to solicit public feedback and discussion on the future of Europe, particularly with reference to the constitutional convention process underway and the expansion of the European Union.⁷² The website hosts extremely active discussion board discussions, with links to key documents and introductory statements by EU officials.

The EU also organizes live online chats with key EU officials, such as the President of the European Parliament and heads of various Directorates in the EC. Incredibly, the chats are unmoderated, live, and conducted simultaneously in 11 EU languages.

In addition, the EU coordinates online "consultations" on particular EU policies undergoing review. These consultations take the form of online forms that the public, or specific stakeholders, are asked to fill out within a certain period, and are then collated into a set of recommendations. Current consultations include: "possible legal and practical problems enterprises and lawyers encounter when using national review procedures in the area of public procurement," "Legal Problems in e-Business," and "simplification and modernization of VAT obligations in the European Union."

⁷⁰ WTO forum website, http://www.wto.org/english/forums_e/chat_e/chat_e.htm

⁷¹ Heidi Ullrich, "The WTO, Civil Society and the Role of Information," in *Civil Society in the Information Age*, ed. Peter Hajnal (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002), 193-194

⁷² Europa website, http://europa.eu.int/futurum/index_en.htm, see Figure 6.

The following excerpt from an online chat with European Commission President Romano Prodi in March 2002 demonstrates the somewhat chaotic and surreal nature of the online conversation.

Excerpt from Online “Chat” with European Commission President Romano Prodi on March 27, 2002:⁷³

[Int_ES] From Madrid]: Do you agree with Giscard d'Estaing when he says that Turkey should not belong in Europe?

[student5] We are from 151 school in Bulgaria

[Prodi] saramiret/628/es/germany/ germany is a big country and amounts to a third of the european economy. it is not in a crisis but in a moment of sluggish economic growth

[Prodi] student 5 same basis as the other candidates. In 10 years time it will be a member of the EU with all the benefits that involves

[Student4] We are also from 151 School in Sofia

[Int_NL] <Computeri> why hasn't Turkey been given a date for negotiations?

[Prodi] to sarmiret, es, 549, social projects: in addition to the completion of the transposition of the legislative social acquis, cooperation with CCs is increasing in the areas of employment policy, social protection and social inclusion to prepare them for accession. Efforts are also underway with regard to social dialogue

[MailBox] James Gilkey: Now that several nations are either in violation or will be in violation of the agreed-upon limits for national debts, will the limits be temporarily lifted, or even completely rewritten?

[Prodi] to Priit: Estonia has transformation problems as all other candidate countries among them I do believe social exclusion and rising income gap are certainly serious..

World Bank

Since 1998, the World Bank has been experimenting with various online consultative tools on their “Development Forum” website.⁷⁴ The Forum was launched “to promote and stimulate public debate, multidirectional knowledge-sharing, and learning on key development issues and challenges facing the development community and the world's poor.”

The Forum has its roots in the growing recognition by the World Bank and others in the development community that knowledge and information are vital tools of sustainable development, that our clients and other stakeholders from developing countries can and should be active contributors of high-value information on development issues.⁷⁵

The World Bank hosts discussions on various policy areas using a combined discussion board and e-mail listserv process. Participants can subscribe and participate either via e-mail or on

⁷³ Europa website, http://europa.eu.int/comm/chat/prodi2/index_en.htm

⁷⁴ World Bank website, <http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/>

⁷⁵ About Dev Forum, World Bank website, <http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/about.html>

the web. During some of the World Bank's consultation processes, they have combined physical meetings, videoconferencing, posted letters, e-mails, and posts to a discussion board into one multi-channel consultative process. For example this was conducted for the 2004 World Development Report, resulting in significant modifications and additions to the report.

The World Bank's web broadcast department "B-SPAN" provides regular webcasts of World Bank events over the Internet. The Bank hosts numerous seminars, workshops and conferences at its Washington, DC headquarters where some of the world's leading experts and practitioners in the financial, poverty, health, education, legal, environmental, and energy fields discuss the latest developments in their sectors. According to the World Bank:

B-SPAN provides transparency and accountability by showing unedited footage of the latest thinking and practices by policymakers on issues affecting developing world stakeholders. Unlike conventional broadcasting outlets, B-SPAN streams events on the Internet, archives them on the B-SPAN website, and has them in their original unedited format, as well as indexed files which provide quick access to specific speakers. B-SPAN lends authenticity to these broadcasts, free from the traditional extensive editing and post-production efforts that "polish" the final product by erasing glitches, misspeaks and inaccuracies.⁷⁶

How useful are these consultative processes for these institutions? For many organizations, these processes are still too new and experimental to evaluate objectively. However the World Bank had done an initial internal evaluation of their "e-consultations" concluding

these conferences did level the playing field. People gain new perspectives. Management often questions the methodology and validity of data obtained from conferences. It is up to the observer what to make of the inputs. Despite the skepticism two years ago when the WBI unit facilitating conferences began, there has been a growing tolerance and acceptance of these conferences. Some of them have a significant impact, such as the discussion of the draft WDR 2000/2001 on Poverty.⁷⁷

To sum up these last two sections, the United Nations has made some significant advances in the areas of information dissemination using ICTs, demonstrating increased transparency and by implication accountability in its practices. Whereas the UN has not made as much progress toward truly participative, collaborative processes facilitated by information technology. Other similar international organizations suggest some ways forward for the organization, and perhaps some pitfalls to avoid.

Most of the experiments in online consultations and discussion areas on international websites suffer from a lack of participation, with the notable exception of some of the World Bank and European Union consultations. There is a common fallacy among organizations, the private sector, NGOs and governments, that "if you build it, they will come." The reality is that internet users face an enormous amount of competition for their attention. They are notoriously fickle, with "surfing" being the main verb applied to their activities on the web, as opposed to "exploring" or "building community." As Dr. James Fishkin at the University

⁷⁶ About B-SPAN, World Bank website, available at <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/B-SPAN>

⁷⁷ "Lessons Learned," World Bank website, http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/tools_lessons.html

of Texas Austin describes it, internet democracy sometimes seems suited for citizens with “attention deficit disorder, zooming from one site to another rather than offering sustained dialogue.”

The second related problem with the current state of online consultations is the lack of clear follow-up and implementation. If people have made serious and thoughtful contributions to a policy-making consultation, and those contributions are ignored, they will not return to your site, and will leave disillusioned and bitter. On the other hand, simply collating and presenting the various inputs in a summary report and presenting that to policy-makers is often enough to help participants feel included.

• Recommendations

Current ICT tools offer the United Nations significant opportunities to consult and involve a range of actors in its policy-making deliberations. Existing programs being implemented by the World Bank, the European Union and others show the potential for these consultative and participative technologies. The following measures are recommended:

Recommendation 1: Encourage Innovation. UN agencies and offices should be provided with incentives to experiment with consultative and participatory processes online. It should be recognized from the start that there are few immediate financial benefits to these ICT-empowered consultations, but in the longer term they can result in better-formulated policy, increased public support, and a more “open” work culture at the UN.

Recommendation 2: Establish Partnerships. There are enormous advantages to partnering with established civil society networks, as the World Bank and the WTO have done, to develop interactive online fora and other consultative processes. Civil society networks have richer connections to grassroots constituents and a wider range of actors (young people, the elderly, those in rural areas) than do most UN agencies. At the same time, private sector companies can be substantial sources of technical and financial support, if steps are taken to avoid conflicts-of-interest and “bluwashing” effects.

Recommendation 3: Recruit Good Moderators. The same guidelines for face-to-face meetings apply to online consultations, i.e. recruit skilled technical and process moderators, bring in experts, establish reasonable rules of conduct, keep discussions on topic, etc. A good online moderator (or moderators) is essential to a successful consultation.

Recommendation 4: Combine Virtual and Physical Meetings. Consultative and participative technologies often work best not as replacements for, but as enhancements of, existing “real world” relationships. Discussion boards and e-mail listservs can assist in the follow-up and implementation of agreements reached in face-to-face negotiations. Clear rules of procedure should define how inputs received from the different meetings are integrated into the decision-making process.

Recommendation 5: Develop Community. Anonymity and surfing are less important than ongoing dialogue among a consistent and identifiable group of actors. ICT consultative tools should enable informal as well as formal modalities of communication (i.e. chats, “off topic” exchanges, etc.) These informal modes can help build friendships, trust, and allegiance, which can be just as valuable as formal agreements and transactions.

Recommendation 6: Have Policy makers Use the Tools. People do not just want to talk to each other, they want to interact with the people who are making the decisions, drafting the texts, negotiating the agreements. Getting over-burdened bureaucrats, diplomats, and departmental heads to sit down and participate in online fora is a difficult hurdle to surmount. One incentive for policy-makers is that participating online with citizens and civil society organizations is often less costly and less time consuming than more traditional public engagements. Online public meetings often can be conducted from the comfort of their own offices, at whatever time is convenient. In addition, these e-consultations can be effective publicity tools for these leaders.

Fig 3: UNICEF Voices of Youth Website: <http://www.unicef.org/voyn>

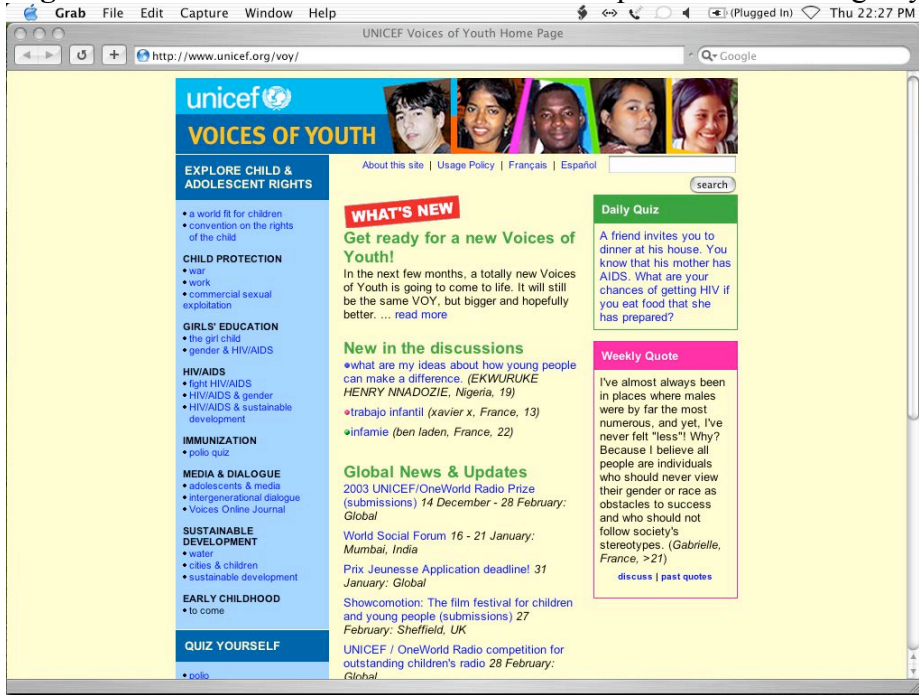


Fig 4: UNESCO Website: <http://www.unesco.org>

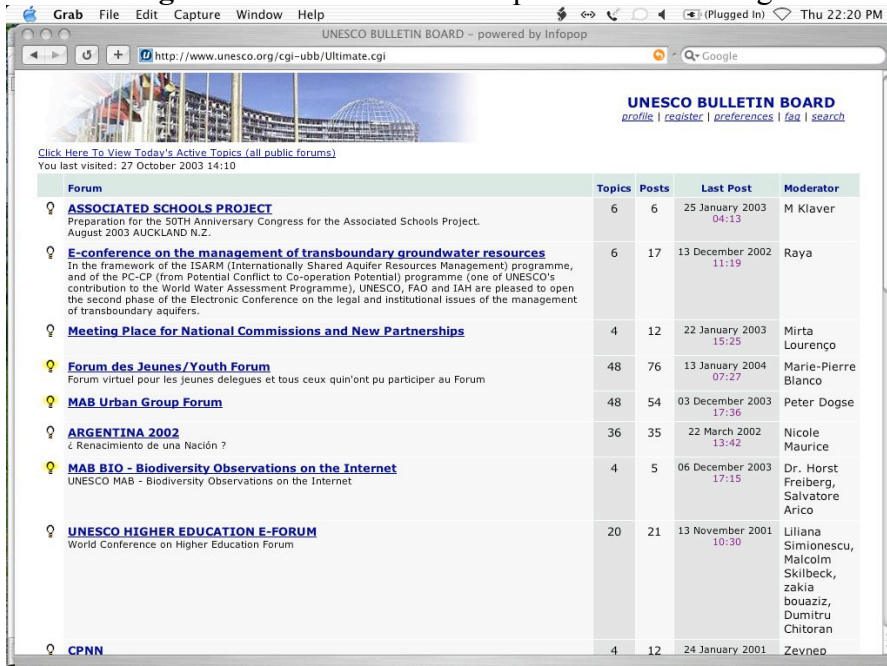


Fig 5: WTO Website: <http://www.wto.org>

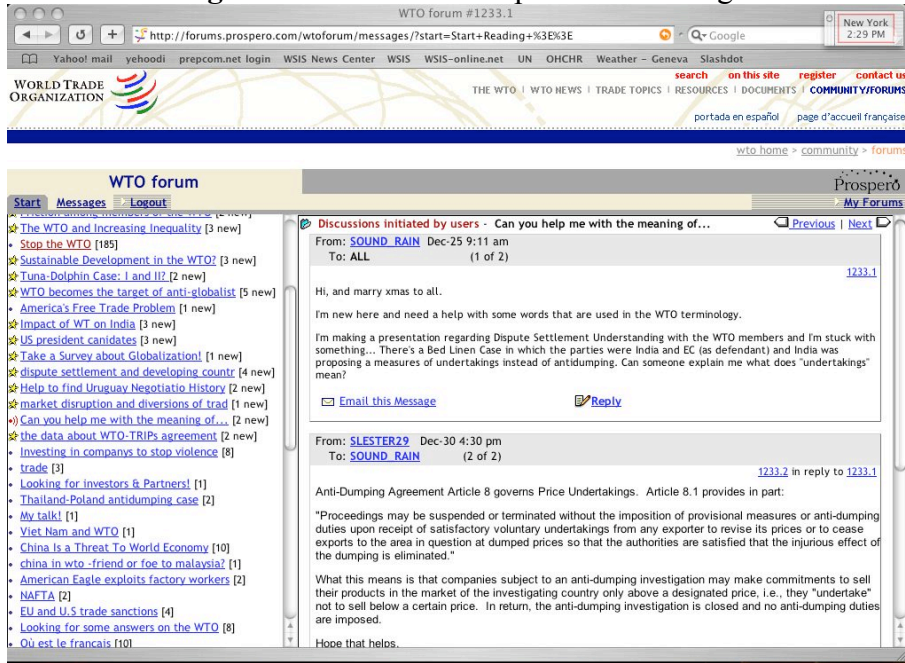
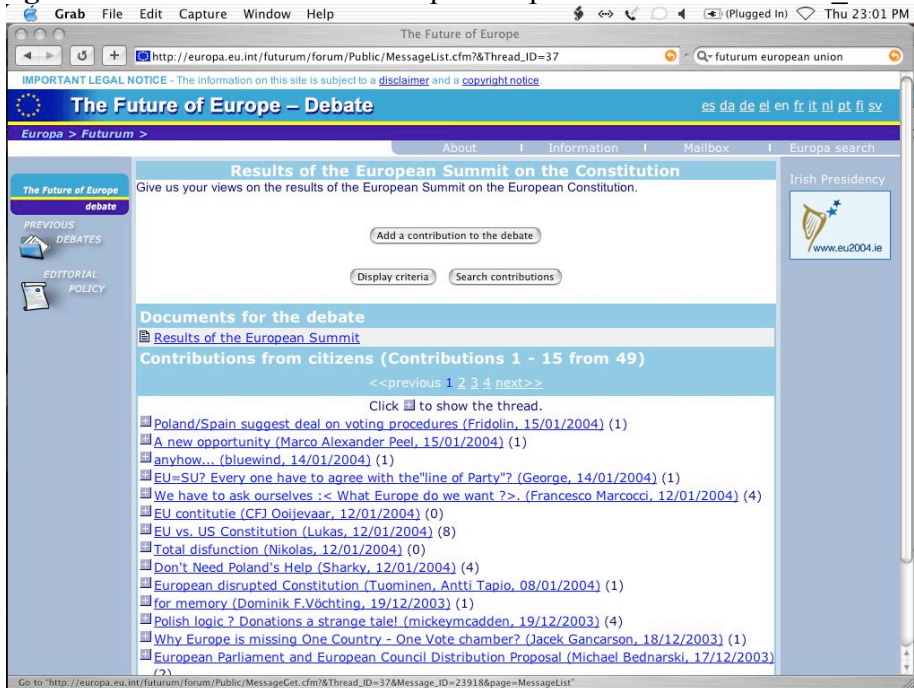


Fig 6: EU Futurum Website: http://europa.eu.int/futurum/index_en.htm



ICTs and Challenges to Democracy

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

– Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

*Possessing an unregistered telephone, fax machine or computer modem is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.*⁷⁸

– *Silenced: an International Report on Censorship and Control of the Internet* . 2003

Despite international legal instruments, conventions and declarations to the contrary, the rights of access to information and public participation are not universally respected. Indeed, information communications technologies are explicitly employed in many states to hamper the free enjoyment of democratic rights.

As stated earlier, the Internet is value-neutral. While it has important potential uses to enhance democracy, it can also be applied toward less socially benevolent purposes. This section outlines some of the key anti-democratic applications of ICT technology, focusing on the Digital Divide(s), access restrictions, censorship and surveillance, and finally ICT governance. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, since there exists already a host of important research in these areas. More relevant to the subject of this monograph, this section discusses what are some constructive measures that the United Nations can take to respond to these threats to democracy worldwide.

• the digital divide(s)

The so-called “Digital Divide” is a principal barrier to the application of democracy-enhancing functionalities of ICTs. The Digital Divide is a term coined to describe the multi-faceted problem of the lack of access by individuals to information communications technologies. If a significant proportion of citizens are unable to utilize ICTs, developing enhanced websites, webcasting and bulletin boards will do little to enhance democracy at any level. Conversely, if government services and access to policy making is increasingly mediated by advanced ICTs, those without access will be increasingly disenfranchised and marginalized.

Although the issue of access to ICTs is often described as “The Digital Divide,” it is more precise to examine barriers access as originating from several sources, i.e. multiple Digital Divides. There are many hurdles to access to ICTs, and solutions to the different digital divides will have to be multi-dimensional and holistic. Among the Digital Divides:

⁷⁸ Privacy International and GreenNet Educational Trust, *Silenced: an International Report on Censorship and Control of the Internet* (2003), 53

- Poverty Divide - People living below the poverty line can not afford computers or internet access costs. Poorer countries can not afford to upgrade their infrastructures (electricity, telephone, cable, etc.) to facilitate ICT access.
- Literacy Divide - More than 850 million people in the developing world are illiterate.
- Linguistic Divide – An estimated 80% of internet content is in English. Only around 11% of the world population speaks English as a first or second language.
- Gender Divide - There are significant gender differences in access to ICTs, education in high-technology fields, and participation in ICT governance.
- Age Divide – The elderly are often left behind as services make the transition to the Information Society.
- Rural Divide - Rural areas have less access to regular electricity, telephone, cable, and other infrastructure necessary for ICT usage.
- Disability Divide – As the internet becomes more multimedia, using proprietary software formats, it becomes more and more difficult for disabled communities to use.

Put another way, the average Internet user is urban dwelling, well educated, middle class, young, and male.

The disparities are vast. As has been oft-quoted, there are more telephone lines in metropolitan Tokyo than in all of sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa. According to one study, in Africa in 2001, out of 800 million people, only 1 in 4 had a radio, 1 in 13 a television set, 1 in 40 a telephone and 1 out of 130 a computer. Meanwhile in North America and Europe, telephone, radio and television access is nearly universal, and one in every two people has access to the Internet.⁷⁹

Within countries as well, there are enormous disparities. According to UNDP, in China the 15 least connected provinces, with 600 million people, have only 4 million Internet users while Shanghai and Beijing, with 27 million people, have 5 million users. In the Dominican Republic 80% of Internet users live in the capital, Santo Domingo. Among India's 1.4 million Internet connections, more than 1.3 million are in the five states of Delhi, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Mumbai.⁸⁰

Women are grossly under-represented among ICT users, professions, and governing agencies. Men make up 86% of users in Ethiopia, 83% in Senegal, 70% in China, 67% in France and 62% in Latin America.⁸¹ A gender analysis of ICT usage and control is in the process of being developed among the academic, research, and advocacy communities. There are already focal areas in the analysis, targeting access of boys and girls to ICT education, traditional roles of men and women as caregiver, scientist, math expertise, etc. and access of women to boards and higher positions in ICT firms and in telecommunication government ministries.

Various programs and projects to address the Digital Divide have come from many sources, governmental, civil society, private sector, and intergovernmental institutions. These vary from efforts to develop lower cost ICT devices, such as the "Simputer," to international

⁷⁹ Gumisai Mutume, "Africa Takes On the Digital Divide," *Africa Recovery* (23 October 2003)

⁸⁰ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2001* (New York: UNDP, 2001), 23

⁸¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2001*, 40

infrastructure financing schemes, such as the Digital Solidarity Fund being proposed by the government of Senegal.

The United Nations Information Communications Task Force (or UN ICT Task Force) was established by ECOSOC in 2000 to help address the “Digital Divide” between the developed and developing world. The Task Force is composed of individuals from the public and private sectors, civil society and the scientific community, from both Northern and Southern countries. Among the Task Force’s activities, it is mandated to: advise the UN Secretary General on ICT-issues, develop innovative funding mechanisms for ICT projects, engage and inform the media on the importance of bridging the Digital Divide, and assist countries in developing national-level ICT strategies.

As a result of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, the UN Secretary General has been mandated to form a new Task Force on ICT financing issues.⁸² The membership, participation, meetings and modalities of this Task Force have not been announced as of the publication of this paper.

• **access controls / censorship**

Beyond the technological, infrastructure, economic and cultural limitations on access to ICTs, some governments impose their own restrictions on access and content. Access to the internet is in many ways more challenging to authoritarian governments than other traditional media. Those with access to the internet become not merely consumers of information, which in itself is powerful, they can become producers and broadcasters in their own right, establishing websites, discussion boards, e-mail lists, and web radio broadcasts.

At the most basic level, access to the internet is in some cases tightly controlled by the government. The Burmese government has the most comprehensive restrictions on internet use, which echo the tight controls it imposes over traditional media such as newspapers and radio. In 2001, the state-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunications was the country’s only internet service provider (ISP) issuing only 1,000 e-mail accounts. The following year, a limited number of private companies were allowed to sell e-mail and internet access. But all internet traffic passes through government servers, which monitors all internet activity closely. Simply owning an unregistered telephone, fax machine or computer modem in Burma is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.⁸³

Beyond access control, blocking particular websites is practiced by a number of authoritarian governments, including China, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. China has the most developed system, called by some the “great Firewall of China” filtering and monitoring network traffic through the government’s official internet gateways.⁸⁴ Saudi Arabia in a three month period blocked over 400,000 websites, preventing access within Saudi Arabia not only to pornographic content but also to information from human rights and opposition groups. The

⁸² “Plan of Action.” United Nations. Official Declaration, 12 December 2003, para 27.

⁸³ Privacy International and GreenNet Educational Trust, *Silenced*, 53

⁸⁴ Greg Walton, *China’s Golden Shield* (Montreal: International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2001),

Tunisian government requires ISPs to send in monthly lists of their users, and routinely blocks NGO sites and sites critical of the Tunisian government.⁸⁵

The punishment for violating a government's content restrictions can be severe. In Tunisia, the editor of the "TuneZine" website was sentenced in 2002 to two years imprisonment for criticizing the government on his site.⁸⁶ Chinese dissidents have likewise been jailed simply for posting to online discussion boards or providing Chinese e-mail addresses to democracy advocates outside of China.⁸⁷

Amnesty International in November 2003 issued an action alert on the situation of the freedom of expression on the internet in Vietnam⁸⁸. Amnesty drew attention to the arrest and detention of at least 10 individuals in Vietnam for disseminating via e-mail or the web messages critical of the Vietnamese government. According to Amnesty, six of them have already been tried and sentenced to long prison terms under national security legislation, while the others are detained awaiting trial.

Despite all of these efforts at censorship, individual ingenuity, technical innovations, and human nature have in even the most repressive environments succeeded in creating spaces for political expression and dialogue. A recent study commissioned by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) of Chinese views on internet use revealed interesting statistics on political uses of ICTs:

- 71% of Internet users and 69% of non-users agreed that the Internet gives people more opportunities to express their political views.
- 79% of Internet users and 77% of non-users agreed that the Internet gives people a better knowledge of politics.
- 79% of Internet users and 73% of non-users agreed that the Internet will give government a better understanding of the views of its citizens.
- 60.8% of Internet users and 61% of non-users agreed that the Internet gives people more opportunities to criticize government's policies.⁸⁹

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has recognized that the right of the freedom of expression extends to cyberspace. In its 2002 resolution on the Freedom of Expression, the Commission urged states to "refrain from imposing restrictions which are not consistent with the provisions of article 19, paragraph 3, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on access to or use of modern telecommunications technologies, including radio, television and the Internet." In addition, the Commission recognized "the positive contribution" that the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, particularly by the media, including the Internet, can make to the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Privacy International and GreenNet Educational Trust, *Silenced*, 117

⁸⁶ Privacy International and GreenNet Educational Trust, *Silenced*, 43

⁸⁷ Andrew Shapiro, *The Control Revolution* (New York: Century Foundation, 1999), 65-66

⁸⁸ <http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410372003>

⁸⁹ Guo Liang, *Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Twelve Chinese Cities* (New York: Markle Foundation, 2003),

⁹⁰ UN Commission on Human Rights, United Nations, Report, 2002 "The Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression"

• surveillance and monitoring

Beyond censorship, many governments, including several democratic ones, employ an arsenal of information technologies to monitor the online activities of citizens around the world. The sheer processing and storage capabilities of modern computers make it much easier for governments to monitor the ICT activities of its citizens, raising important privacy and civil liberties concerns. ICT surveillance received a huge boost after the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, resulting in governments around the world imposing much more intrusive monitoring technologies as part of the war against terrorism.

Privacy advocates note that “terrorist activity” is widely open to interpretation since there is no agreed upon international definition. Some note that in the guise of the war against terrorism, some governments are more heavily monitoring opposition parties, NGOs, and others critical of the government. UNESCO passed a resolution on terrorism and the media in 2002 that noted that

the threat of terrorism should not be used as an excuse to impose restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and of the media, or on freedom of information, and specifically on the following rights: to editorial independence; to protect confidential sources of information; to access information held by public bodies; to freedom of movement; and to privacy of communications.⁹¹

The most powerful of these surveillance technologies is a global interception and relay system called ECHELON. ECHELON is operated by intelligence agencies in five nations: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. According to the American Civil Liberties Union’s “Echelon Watch” ECHELON is capable of intercepting as many as three billion communications everyday, including phone calls, e-mail messages, internet downloads, satellite transmissions, and so on. Reportedly ECHELON sifts through an estimated 90 percent of all traffic that flows through the Internet.⁹²

Several governments, including the United States, Russia and China, have developed “black box” internet monitoring devices that are connected directly to the servers of an ISP to monitor internet traffic and send any suspect information to the government intelligence service.

• global governance of ICTs

Who governs these new technologies will in large part determine if they are utilized for democracy-enhancing purposes or not. Whoever governs the internet can control its content, and manipulate it for their own purposes.

On the one hand, there is the danger that the internet will be so overwhelmed by multinational corporations that it ceases to be a medium that supports democratic dialogue and exchanges of information. Witness the dominance of television by large corporate entities and the negligible amount of public access broadcasting. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the internet is controlled by national governments that seek to impose

⁹¹ UNESCO, UNESCO, Resolution, 2002, “Resolution on Terrorism and the Media”

⁹² American Civil Liberties Union, Echelon Watch, <http://archive.aclu.org/echelonwatch/faq.html>

severe restrictions on the freedom of expression, association and access to information required for a healthy democratic system. So who is on the “governing board” of the internet is the key question to answer.

The main organization governing a principal asset of the internet is the Internet Corporation For Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN. ICANN is a quasi-independent organization responsible for the technical coordination of the internet domain names and IP address numbers used on the World Wide Web, basically the address system that allows internet users to be able to get to any website from wherever they are. Created in October 1998 by a directive from the United States Department of Commerce, the mandate and authority of ICANN is still to a significant degree under the aegis of the United States government.

ICANN was the subject of some of the most publicized debates occurring during the WSIS in December 2003. The main battle has been between two positions: support for the current ICANN system and putting the domain name system under the control of the International Telecommunications Union.

Without entering into the minutiae of this debate, two points are important to make clear. Firstly, forcing governments and other actors to only examine two narrow and equally unsatisfactory options will not advance the issue. There are a range of interesting and realistic proposals for governance of ICTs that have been advanced by several NGOs, academic institutions and governments. The debate should be enlarged to include as many innovative proposals as possible.

Secondly, it is important to note that whatever global coordinating mechanism is eventually agreed upon, it must take into account the views and needs of the various stakeholders who use the internet, from scientific researchers, schools and universities, non-governmental organizations, companies large and small, and governments, to the general online public. The governing board of such an institution should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner, including members of all of these communities. Neither the ITU nor ICANN as presently constituted meet these criteria adequately.

• recommendations

How can the United Nations respond to the incredible challenges posed by the Digital Divides, online censorship and surveillance? While the United Nations has no means at its disposal to compel states, it can help address some of the most anti-democratic applications of ICTs.

Recommendation 1: Addressing the Digital Divides. There is an ongoing and difficult debate at the World Summit on the Information Society on the funding mechanisms for ICT development. The UN Secretary General has been asked to convene a multi-sectoral working group to meet on ICT financing issues. Given the various aspects to the Digital Divide, a narrow focus on infrastructure development or e-commerce will do little to reduce the divide. Development plans must take into account gender, generational, geographic and economic factors.

Recommendation 2: Focus on Vulnerable Groups. The multi-faceted nature of the problem should not prevent targeted funding specifically to meet the needs of vulnerable

groups. Projects that assist specific vulnerable groups can have multiplier effects beyond that population, such as ICT education of poor girls in rural areas or enabling web access for blind people. Financing of government projects should be balanced with support for private sector and civil society initiatives, which often are more cost-effective and better able to reach marginalized communities.

Recommendation 3: Conduct National-level Consultations. Whatever funding mechanisms are agreed upon, it is clear that different strategies are going to be needed for each developing country, taking into account the unique demographics, infrastructure, education level, and cultural values of each country. National level consultations involving civil society, the private sector and different government agencies from the local to the national level must be conducted to ensure that the most suitable ICT development projects are put in place. The results of these consultations can be reported at the WSIS in Tunis in 2005.

Recommendation 4: Confront the United Nations' Linguistic Divide. The United Nations can take a stand against the Linguistic Divide by committing itself more fully to providing all online documentation at least in the six official UN languages. Provision of information in Chinese and Spanish, for example, can exponentially increase the reach of UN broadcasting. It should also be noted that there are many people, particularly in the developing world, who do not speak any of the official UN languages.

Recommendation 5: Promote Gender Balance in ICT Use. The UN must address the Gender Divide in its own activities and structures. UN field education projects should ensure that girls and women are targeted as under-represented in ICT training. UN staff training programs of United Nations Institute for Training and Research should help female staff obtain equal ICT skills as their male counterparts. It is worth noting that the webmaster of the main United Nations website is a woman and that the International Telecommunications Union appointed the first woman to head the ITU Council only in 1999.

Recommendation 6: Follow WAI Guidelines for Disabled Individuals. UN online services should be available to all users, including those who have disabilities. UN websites should conform to W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines for disabled people using assistive ICT technologies. The UN should encourage the websites of member states, NGOs and other affiliated bodies to conform to the WAI guidelines as well.

Recommendation 7: Expand Mandate of Rapporteur on Opinion and Expression to Include Online Speech. There are mechanisms within the Commission on Human Rights that deal with censorship issues, in particular the position of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The rapporteur's mandate should be expanded to include internet censorship, receiving reports and complaints from NGOs around the world and conducting online "visits" to websites of governments where physical visits are not possible. This would emphasize that the internet is not a "rights-free-zone" but in fact is covered by the existing international agreements on the freedom of expression and access to information.

Recommendation 8: Create a Multilateral Forum on Surveillance Issues. National governments have long considered their own surveillance and intelligence activities as beyond the purview of the United Nations, as the sovereign right of every state. But given the development of these new technologies that enable increasingly intrusive monitoring of

citizen's everyday lives, a multilateral body within the United Nations should be mandated to address these issues. A committee of the Commission on Human Rights could convene annually on surveillance and privacy issues, receiving reports and complaints from NGOs and individuals, and making recommendations to the UN General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights.

Recommendation 9: Ensure Democratic Global Governance of ICTs. As the UN Secretary General establishes a Working Group on internet governance, one of its first agenda items should be to agree on the baseline principles that should guide all ICT governance regimes, including transparency, accountability, and public participation. Innovative governance schemes that balance competing corporate, governmental and public interests should be thoroughly examined and discussed.

Conclusion

*The Organization can also be viewed as the natural home of "information hubs", virtual centres of data, dialogue, and focused collaboration that address the many substantive issues facing the United Nations at any point in time.*⁹³

– UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Imagine a lot of computers, let's say several million... Imagine they are situated all over the world. Obviously, they belong to many different people (students, doctors, secretaries...) and institutions (companies, universities, hospitals...) Now imagine that you connect all of these computers to the Internet... Now imagine that you have a magic tool which makes all of them act as a single, huge and powerful computer...⁹⁴

– Gridcafe.com

This monograph has presented the present state of the United Nations information and communications strategy, focusing on access to information and participation as democracy-enhancing aspects of ICT policy. This was followed by a discussion of some of the challenges posed to democracy by information communications technologies, including the Digital Divides, censorship and surveillance issues. In each section there was presented several policy recommendations for the United Nations to consider.

The larger context of this examination is the difficult quest of the United Nations to re-invent and re-invigorate itself in the midst of a very different political and economic climate than it faced in 1945. A new vision of how the United Nations could operate in this wired, multi-sectoral climate may originate from the scientific research community, the concept of distributed computing.

Distributed Computing

Distributed computing is an innovative method developed by the scientific research community to meet their ever-expanding need for more powerful computer processing capacity. In order to study high-order problems, for example analyzing meteorological phenomena or DNA, research teams used to need access to a super-computer costing hundreds of millions of dollars.

But distributed computing avoids this requirement. It takes a high-order problem and divides up the task among a large number, from dozens to hundreds of thousands, of distributed and networked smaller computers, having each one tackle a small part of the problem. The collective has much, much more processing power and capacity than the units operating individually. This is due to the large amount of resources of most personal computers that are under-utilized.

⁹³ Annan, *Information and Communication Technology Strategy* 12

⁹⁴ GridCafe website, <http://gridcafe.web.cern.ch/gridcafe/whatisgrid/dream.html>

A well-known example is Seti@Home, a worldwide distributed computing grid based at the University of California at Berkeley, that allows users connected to the Internet to donate their PC's spare CPU cycles to the exploration of extraterrestrial life in the universe. Its task is to sort through the 1.4 billion potential signals picked up by the Arecibo telescope to find signals that repeat. Users receive approximately 350K of data at a time and the client software runs as a colorful screensaver.⁹⁵

An ambitious distributed computing effort is a research project at Oxford University that employs more than one million PCs to research a cure for cancer. People around the world donate a few CPU cycles from their PCs through "screensaver time." The project eventually will analyze 3.5 billion molecules for cancer-fighting potential.⁹⁶

The key to the success of the computing network is a management server, a computer that coordinates the entire project. The server has several roles. First it takes computing requests and divides these large processing tasks into smaller tasks that can run on individual desktop systems. Then it sends application "packages" and some client management software to the idle client machines that request them. The server monitors the status of the jobs being run by the clients. After the client machines run those packages, the server assembles the results sent back by the client and structures them for presentation.

The United Nations as a Policy Management Server

By analogy, the United Nations system can be conceived of as similar to a computer network, whose mission is to develop responses and solutions to difficult political, economic, and security problems. From this perspective, the traditional diplomatic system can be seen as a closed network, composed of a small number of actors working together under the loose coordination of the UN "server," receiving very little input or contributions from external resources.

What distributed computing suggests is that a multitude of networked smaller computers can be as powerful or more powerful than one supercomputer. By analogy, the solution for the United Nations in meeting the increasing demands put upon it may not be to create a more powerful super-structure, but for the UN to work more effectively in coordinating and directing the activities of the various actors that interact with the system. Perhaps what is needed is a population of networked governmental, civil society, and private sector "clients" who work together on particular problems coordinated by the UN as a management server.

The UN Secretary-General was expressing this notion when he wrote about the United Nations as the center of "information hubs":

The Organization can also be viewed as the natural home of "information hubs," virtual centres of data, dialogue, and focused collaboration that address the many substantive issues facing the United Nations at any point in time. Each hub would enable rich interaction, at many levels of access, among the experts and knowledge seekers, both within and from outside the Organization who are concerned with its area of focus. In effect, a hub would comprise a global "community of interest" dedicated to a substantive subject that is chartered by the Organization and aligned

⁹⁵ Leon Erlanger, "Distributed Computing: An Introduction," *Extreme Tech* (4 April 2002)

⁹⁶ Grid Computing Planet website, <http://gridcomputingplanet.com/faq/>

with its goals. The Organization would set as the objective for each information hub that it become globally pre-eminent in its focus area, cutting across the structures of the United Nations and engaging civil society intensely and comprehensively.⁹⁷

How fanciful is this idea? Again, the scientific research community demonstrates how these “information hubs” might operate. In many different areas of scientific research, researchers and scholars are already using advanced ICT tools to collaborate on specific issue areas and difficult scientific challenges. So-called “collaboratories” are combining webconferencing, instant messaging, document drafting “groupware” and other technologies to bring together communities of experts from around the globe.⁹⁸ These collaboratories have explored such varying subject matter as brain morphometry⁹⁹, electron microscopy,¹⁰⁰ fuel combustion,¹⁰¹ HIV/AIDS,¹⁰² astronomy,¹⁰³ and telemedicine.¹⁰⁴

Are these scientific collaborative efforts applicable to international policy-making processes? Dr. Derrick Cogburn of the University of Michigan believes so. In partnership with the Washington DC-based NGO Cotelco, Dr. Cogburn is developing an “ICT Policy Collaboratory.” The purpose of this collaboratory is to put web-based collaborative tools in the hands of ICT policy-making actors in the same way that the scientific community has utilized these technologies. In his words, the ICT Policy Collaboratory seeks to “enhance the effective participation of civil society actors from around the world – those actively involved in global policy processes, and those who have yet to participate – in the multiple and complex processes of global governance.” Among the impressive list of tools this initiative offers are:

- Synchronous, real-time, video and audio web-conferencing
- High quality voice and video communication over IP
- Presence awareness and text chatting
- Multi-media content delivery (e.g., PowerPoint slides, movies, and websites)
- Collaborative white boards
- Virtual seminar rooms for plenary sessions
- Virtual break-out rooms for working groups and caucuses
- Moderated discussions and turn-taking
- Online deliberation and decision-making tools (polling)¹⁰⁵

The Malta-based Diplo Foundation is leading a similar effort designed to provide software tools and research to assist diplomatic negotiations. One central goal of the foundation is to explore the use of the internet in negotiation processes. According to Jovan Kurbalija of the Diplo Foundation, online diplomatic negotiations may be helpful in specific scenarios, such as when there are security considerations involving holding physical meetings, during very

⁹⁷ Annan, *Information and Communication Technology Strategy* 12

⁹⁸ See Science of Collaboratories, <http://www.scienceofcollaboratories.org>

⁹⁹ Biomedical Informatics Research Network <http://www.nbirn.net/>

¹⁰⁰ Bugscope, <http://bugscope.beckman.uiuc.edu/>

¹⁰¹ Diesel Combustion Collaboratory, <http://www-collab.ca.sandia.gov/dcc/index.html>

¹⁰² Great Lakes Regional Center For AIDS Research, <http://www.greatlakescfar.org/>

¹⁰³ Keck Observatory, <http://www2.keck.hawaii.edu>

¹⁰⁴ National Laboratory for the Study of Rural Telemedicine, <http://telemed.medicine.uiowa.edu/>

¹⁰⁵ Dr. Derrick Cogburn, “iPC - the Civil Society ICT Policy Collaboratory,” University of Michigan, Background Note, 2003

emotionally charged negotiations (i.e. Israel-Palestine peace accords), and in the preparation of documents prior to a physical meeting. Kurbalija notes that “participation via the Internet would reduce expenses, improve diplomatic processes and ensure global participation in decision-making, which is essential for the effective implementation of various international agreements and decisions.”¹⁰⁶

Diplo Foundation has developed a hypertext-based diplomatic tool, which employs the original strength of the World-wide Web – hyperlinks between different documents – to enrich and deepen the information contained in diplomatic documents. Thus, a hypertext draft treaty might contain links to the various sources of language in the treaty, background material, the range of positions among various delegations, and alternative proposed language. Diplo has used this hypertext tool to examine various negotiations such as the UN vote on the Kosovo crisis (1998) and the Trinidad & Tobago - Venezuela Fisheries Agreement (1996).¹⁰⁷

Whether or not these collaborative negotiation tools will be used by governments, civil society or the private sector has yet to be seen. But they are examples of how distributed, participatory, net-enabled forms of international policy-making might become a reality. They demonstrate how the e-democracy principles of stakeholder accountability, access to information and public participation might be incorporated into policy-making processes.

Some examples of applications of these types of e-democracy technologies include expert consultations, hearings from affected stakeholders, and roundtable discussions. These ICT-empowered applications could be held in conjunction with traditional diplomatic negotiations, and over time might gain more legitimacy and political support within the UN.

The World Summit on the Information Society is a good case study for these applications, given the subject of the Summit. The broad mandate of the subject area and complexity of the multitude of issues being dealt with by delegates means that for many issues there are few delegations with detailed expertise in those areas, which range from Digital Commons to Open Source software to applications for handicapped communities. It is exactly in scenarios like this that ICTs could help support ongoing diplomatic negotiations, while also bringing in outside expertise and perspectives.

Using tools such as those being developed by Cogburn and Kurbalija, one could imagine an informal working group on cybersecurity inviting other stakeholders to share their views virtually. So the working group could include an expert on cyber-terrorism in Dublin, an encryption software company in Osaka, and an NGO focusing on civil liberties issues in San Francisco, all participating virtually in the deliberations.

One could argue that these and other e-democracy applications are merely technological tools, when what is required is more political and substantive support for the existing processes of democracy. Then again, the printing press and the ballot booth are also only machines, and yet both technologies are essential to modern democracies. It is possible that someday we will view ICTs as the tools that made possible supra-national democracy.

¹⁰⁶ Jovan Kurbalija, “Internet and Negotiations,” Diplo Foundation, Information Note, 2003

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.diplomacy.edu/Tools/analytica.asp>

In sum, there are vast resources – informational, intellectual, physical, financial – among civil society, the private sector and governments worldwide. And there are no shortages of challenges for the world community to address – HIV/AIDS, terrorism, grinding poverty, social inequality. If the United Nations in the Information Society is to remain relevant, it must harness these resources to address these challenges. Information communications technology can and must play a key role in realizing this vision.

• Recommendations

Evolving the United Nations policy-making processes toward a more distributed, networked, multi-stakeholder format will require enormous amounts of “political will.” This vision of the United Nations as a “policy management server” challenges the relationship of nation-states to the UN system as well as the overall policy architecture of the organization. But there are ways forward:

Recommendation 1: Focus on Issues of Common Concern. The success of many multi-stakeholder campaigns was due in part to the focus those networks could bring to bear on a discrete issue area, toward an achievable end, i.e. rather than focusing on teenage smoking as a general social ill, targeting tobacco advertising and young people. This can also serve to build media interest and public support for particular collaborative efforts.

Recommendation 2: Feed into Existing Intergovernmental Processes. Rather than creating completely new policy arenas, a more productive strategy is to focus where possible on existing intergovernmental policy arenas and expand them to include multi-stakeholder dimensions, i.e. the multi-stakeholder roundtables incorporated into the Commission on Sustainable Development. At the same time, efforts need to be made to move beyond merely symbolic consultations to ones that effect outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Accommodate Different Levels of Participation. In every sector, there are a range of actors of various levels who could in principle be included, from heads of government ministries to local city officials, from international NGO representatives to grassroots activists, from multinational corporate leaders to small business owners. ICTs can enable consultations on various levels as well as among various sectors enriching the debate. A compelling force in the landmines campaign was that it brought together high level government officials and victims of landmines.

Recommendation 4: Move Beyond Lowest Common Denominator. Requiring consensus among all actors or universal approval often results in agreements with little substance or enforcement mechanisms. But where a smaller number of actors are willing to agree and move forward on an issue, they should be encouraged to adopt the more rigorous standard, even if the dissenters are not likely to implement it.

Recommendation 5: Adapt Rules of Procedure. As ICT-enabled consultations become commonplace, official UN rules of procedure will have to be adapted to include these processes. While member-states will retain the main sovereign mandate to approve and implement UN policy, procedures could be adopted to require consultation of key sectors before major decisions are reached. Time-bound consultations can allow key stakeholders to respond and propose alternative text to drafts before they are formally agreed upon.

Recommendation 6: Reduce Physical Meetings to Fund Virtual Meetings. Significant savings should result from moving away from costly UN summit processes toward more focused, online policy-making processes. At the same time, more preparatory work done virtually can result in less physical meeting time spent on less critical issues. The savings in paper printing, simultaneous voice interpretation, and meeting space alone could be tremendous.

Recommendation 7: Develop New Resources to Support New Mechanisms. Finding the financial resources to support more distributed, collaborative ICT tools at the UN is a big challenge. In principle, these multi-sectoral collaborative networks should be supported by all participating actors, in whatever ways they are capable of. These contributions might be in the areas of expert assistance, staff secondment, physical and technological resources, or financial support. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that financial sponsorship or support is not linked to representation or votes within a collaborative policy process.

Appendix I: E-democracy in the Negotiating Texts of the World Summit on the Information Society

The following excerpts from official WSIS texts demonstrate the general evolution of language pertaining to e-democracy in the negotiation process from May 2002 to December 2004. Note that brackets denote text that was still open for negotiation by delegations.

• Regional Preparatory Conferences

A series of regional conferences took place to bring together delegations to share views on the Information Society. Much of the language coming out of these conferences was very supportive of e-democracy principles, with even a specific reference to “e-democracy” in the Western Asian conference.

Report of the African Regional Conference, Bamako 28-30 May 2002 (WSIS/PC-1/DOC/7-E)

7. Cooperation and collaboration should be enhanced through ... The strengthening of networks that can increase individual participation in local, national, regional and international democracy.¹⁰⁸

Report Of The Pan-European Regional Conference, Bucharest, 7-9 November 2002 (WSIS/PC-2/DOC/5-E)

E-Government: More Efficient and Accountable. ICT tools will make policies more accountable and transparent and will enable better monitoring, evaluation and control of public services and allow for greater efficiency in their delivery. Public administration can make use of ICT tools to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency in the delivery of public services to citizens (education, health, transportation etc.) and to enterprises.¹⁰⁹

Report of the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference, Tokyo, 13-15 January 2003 (WSIS/PC-2/DOC/6-E)

a) *e-government* ICT networks can offer better public services to citizens by more efficient and effective dissemination of information and delivery of essential government services. E-government can also generate a greater sense of community participation, and improve informed decision-making and development programme implementation.¹¹⁰

Report of the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Conference, Bávaro, 29-31 January 2003 (WSIS/PC-2/DOC/7-E)

(n) Enhancing public-sector performance through the adoption of e-government tools for the sector’s modernization and good governance. The steps taken to this end shall reflect an approach that combines electronic information-based services for citizens (e-government) and the provision of online services for the public with the reinforcement of participatory elements (e-democracy). It is necessary to find avenues for the integration and linkage of the various public-sector authorities that will permit the establishment of a one-stop user window to provide citizen-oriented e-government

¹⁰⁸ “Africa Regional Conference for WSIS.” United Nations. Report, 5 June 2002.

¹⁰⁹ “Final Declaration of the Pan European Regional Conference.” United Nations. 2003.

¹¹⁰ “Final Declaration of the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference.” United Nations. Report, 2003.

services. It is also necessary to emphasize the importance of citizen access to information on public administration for citizen participation, transparency and accountability in government activities. Special e-government applications shall be designed and used to serve as a catalyst in encouraging firms and individuals to prefer online transactions;¹¹¹

Report of the Western Asia Regional Conference, Beirut, 4-6 February 2003 (WSIS/PC-2/DOC/8-E)

E-government empowers citizens through access to information, improves interactions with business and industry, and leads to better delivery of government services to citizens and more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be greater convenience, improved efficiency of the economic system, increased transparency and less corruption, leading to increased possibility for developing countries to attract foreign investments and financial assistance. Basic government services should be provided online by a target date...

...Introducing concepts such as e-democracy and e-governance in the decision-making process of local and national governments is essential... Initiatives regarding e-government should exist at regional, national and local levels... It is hoped that global standards for e-government are established by an appropriate international body to ensure accepted implementation practices by different governments.¹¹²

• Second Preparatory Committee, 17-28 February 2003

The second preparatory committee of the WSIS was the first attempt by government delegations to draft actual working texts, incorporating the various contributions made by delegations. Notable was the inclusion of various references to democracy, accountability and transparency in the draft Declaration of Principles:

Draft Declaration of Principles, Prepcom II (WSIS/PC-2/DT/2-E)

12. The development of that society should take place within a global and local context of fundamental principles such as those of respect for human rights, democracy, environmental protection, the advancement of peace, the right to development, fundamental freedoms, economic progress and social equity.

16. The Information Society offers great potential in promoting international peace, sustainable development, democracy, transparency, accountability, and good governance.

37. Information is the basis of a well-functioning and transparent decision-making process and a prerequisite for any democracy.

61. E-government empowers citizens through access to information, improves interactions with business and industry, and leads to better delivery of government services to citizens and more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be greater convenience, improved

¹¹¹ "Report of the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Conference for WSIS." United Nations. Report, 2003.

¹¹² "Final Declaration of the Western Asia Preparatory Conference." United Nations. Report, 2003.

efficiency of the economic system, increased transparency and less corruption, leading to increased possibility for developing countries to attract foreign investments and financial assistance.¹¹³

73. Every citizen should be guaranteed freedom of expression and protected access to information in the worldwide public domain as part of their inalienable right to freely accessing the information constituting the heritage of humankind, which is disseminated in all media. This may involve the strengthening of networks that can increase individual participation in local, national, regional and international democracy.

The draft Plan of Action from Prepcom II contains a short section on “e-government.”

Draft Plan of Action, Prepcom II (WSIS/PC-2/DT/3-E)

27. E-Government: ICT tools will make policies more accountable and transparent and will enable better monitoring, evaluation and control of public services and allow for greater efficiency in their delivery. Public administration can make use of ICT tools to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency in the delivery of public services to citizens (education, health, transportation etc.) and to enterprises;¹¹⁴

• Third Preparatory Committee, 15-26 September 2003

At what was supposed to be the final preparatory committee meeting prior to the Summit, much of the text was approaching its final formulation. In the course of the negotiations, the references to democracy, accountability and transparency were significantly reduced in the draft Declaration of Principles. Notable is the deletion of the reference in Para 73 from the Declaration of Principles from Prepcom II to increased “individual participation in local, national, regional and international democracy.”

Draft Declaration of Principles, Prepcom III (WSIS/PC-3/DT/1(Rev.2 B)-E)

3. We reaffirm the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, [OPTION A: including the right to development] and their ties to the principles of a democratic society, good governance, the rule of law at national and international level and sustainable development, [upholding the sovereign equality of all States].

32. [39] The Information Society must support [an enabling international economic environment conducive to] [good governance,] democracy, transparency, efficiency and accountability. Strengthening relations with citizens is an essential investment in policy-making and ICTs should be used as an important tool for good governance and more accessible government.

48. [52. A. The Information Society should [in accordance with the UN Declaration of Human Rights,] [respect peace and] uphold [the values of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as other] fundamental values such as [peace,] freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. [Of particular interest for the Information Society are truth, trust, honesty, justice, human dignity, [transparency and accountability].] [Truth, trust, honesty, justice,

¹¹³ “Draft Declaration Based on the Discussion in the Working Group of Sub-committee 2.” United Nations. Draft Text, 25 February 2003.

¹¹⁴ “Draft Plan of Action Based on the Discussion in the Working Group of Sub-committee 2.” United Nations. Draft Text, 27 February 2003.

human dignity, and respect for [the diversity of] moral, social, and religious values of all societies are equally important in the Information Society.]¹¹⁵

The Plan of Action from Prepcom III included a significant number of references to access to public information and e-government increasing transparency and accountability:

Draft Plan of Action, Prepcom III (WSIS03/PC-3/DT-2(Rev. 1)-E)

16. b) Governments should provide adequate access on the Internet to public official information. They should establish legislation on access to information and the preservation of public data, notably in the area of the new technologies.

g) Governments should actively promote the use of ICTs as a fundamental working tool by their citizens and local authorities. In this respect, the international community and other stakeholders should support capacity building for local authorities in the widespread use of ICTs as a means of improving local governance.

20. E-government

a) Implement e-government strategies focusing on applications aimed at innovating and promoting transparency in public administrations and democratic processes, improving efficiency and strengthening relations with citizens.

b) Develop national e-government initiatives, at all levels, adapted to the needs of citizens and entrepreneurs, to achieve a more efficient allocation of resources and public goods.

c) Support international co-operation initiatives in the field of e-government, in order to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency at all levels of government.¹¹⁶

• Final Adopted Texts of World Summit on the Information Society, 10-12 December 2003

The final agreed text of the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action of the Geneva WSIS represented in many areas significant compromises and condensing of texts. A number of e-democracy references in the Declaration of Principles were minimized or deleted. Notably, the reference to an international environment conducive to “democracy, transparency, efficiency and accountability” and the importance of “strengthening the relationship with citizens” in paragraph 32 in the Draft Declaration from Prepcom III was struck from the final text. Similarly, the reference to “transparency and accountability” in paragraph 56 of the Prepcom III’s Declaration was deleted in the final text. What remains is the following:

WSIS Declaration of Principles (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E)

3. We also reaffirm that democracy, sustainable development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as good governance at all levels are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “Draft Declaration of Principles.” United Nations. Draft Text, 26 September 2003.

¹¹⁶ “Draft Plan of Action.” United Nations. Draft Text, 24 September 2003.

¹¹⁷ “Declaration of Principles.” United Nations. Official Declaration, 12 December 2003.

The relevant paragraphs in the Plan of Action are virtually unchanged from Prepcom III to the final texts:

WSIS Plan of Action (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/5-E)

10. b) Governments are encouraged to provide adequate access through various communication resources, notably the Internet, to public official information. Establishing legislation on access to information and the preservation of public data, notably in the area of the new technologies, is encouraged.

f) Governments should actively promote the use of ICTs as a fundamental working tool by their citizens and local authorities. In this respect, the international community and other stakeholders should support capacity building for local authorities in the widespread use of ICTs as a means of improving local governance.

15. E-government

a) Implement e-government strategies focusing on applications aimed at innovating and promoting transparency in public administrations and democratic processes, improving efficiency and strengthening relations with citizens.

b) Develop national e-government initiatives and services, at all levels, adapted to the needs of citizens and business, to achieve a more efficient allocation of resources and public goods.

c) Support international cooperation initiatives in the field of e-government, in order to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency at all levels of government.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ “Plan of Action.” United Nations. Official Declaration, 12 December 2003.

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GridCafe	http://www.gridcafe.web.cern.ch
ICANN	http://www.icann.org
ICANN Watch	http://www.icannwatch.org
NGO Coalition for the International Criminal Court	http://www.iccnw.org
Publicus	http://www.publicus.net
United Nations	http://www.un.org
UN Committee on Information	http://www.un.org/ga/coi/bureau.htm
UN Department of Public Information NGO Section	http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection
UN ICT Task Force	www.unictaskforce.org
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