

Which Information Society Are You Talking About?

On the way to WSIS: WE SEIZE!

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This paper discusses the importance of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) scheduled to take place in December 2003 in Geneva, as well as providing a critique of it, along with a discussion of the apparent advantages of organising a counter-summit like WE SEIZE!

0. Doomed Agendas

The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) is scheduled to take place in the next month (December 10-12, 2003) in Geneva. This much celebrated meeting will supposedly shed light upon the obstacles that the so-called information society faces, and will discuss ways to deal with them in the most efficient manner for the greater good of all. In a nutshell, the WSIS is the place to be if you're interested in how we all together can widen authentic civic engagement in matters rooted in the epicentre of the information society.

Having said that, I expected that the agenda of the meeting would be straight-forward, picking on issues as diverse as spam and how to cut down on it, file-sharing and what it really means, digital ethics, access and government-imposed restrictions on Internet use, the role of open standards, software and institutions, and emerging forms of collective governance enabled partly by the Internet that might in turn help better the process of political decision-making. Instead, as of this moment, all there is in the agenda that is worth repeating here can be summarised in less than two lines of text: election of president and adjacent officers, followed by small talk, and coming to an end with plans to be discussed at the second phase of the summit in Tunis.^[1] You may wonder whether the above was worth repeating. Perhaps it isn't. But that's all there is in the agenda, and I am afraid not much else will be added.

Then again, I might have missed something. Hold on, there's another file somewhere on the WSIS website. It's entitled "Draft Plan of Action" ^[2], and judging by the title, it must contain some pretty heavy deep-dished stuff. Well, by scrolling down page six of the MS Word file, I came across the following:

a) Promote cooperation among the governments at the UN and with all stakeholders at other appropriate fora to develop guidelines that: Enhance user confidence, build trust, and protect both data and network integrity; consider existing and potential threats to ICTs; and address other information

and network security issues

b) Governments in cooperation with the private sector should prevent, detect and respond to cyber crime and [misuse] [abuse] of ICTs by: developing guidelines that take into account ongoing efforts in these areas; considering legislation that allows for effective investigation and prosecution of misuse; promoting effective mutual assistance efforts; strengthening institutional support at the international level for preventing, detecting and recovering from such incidents; and encouraging education and raising awareness.

c) Governments, and other stakeholders, should actively promote user education and awareness about online privacy and the means of protecting privacy.

d) Take appropriate action on spam at national and international levels.

This section is entitled “**Building confidence, trust and security in the use of ICTs**”. At first glance, it's a well-structured list of actions to be taken, and it touches upon many of the critical issues I stressed above, such as measures aimed at preventing spam. However, by taking a moment to reflect upon what the above piece of text really means, I came to diametrically different conclusions. With regard to spam, the problem is not to recognise that spam represents a threat to the communal model of the Internet. Anyone who's ever spent more than one hour discarding rubbish-like emails from one's inbox, or that frequented Usenet before April 12, 1994, the day the infamous Canter and Seigel ‘green card spam’ appeared on the Usenet [3], knows that for sure. In recognition of the problem, many have chosen to abandon their emails, and resorted to exploring other forms of communication forums such as weblogs, mIRC channels, Wikis, and applications widely referred to as social networking software. Some have gone to the length of declaring that email is broken.[4] The problem at hand, the way I and others see it, is to come up with a robust economic model that will remove the economic incentives for bombarding people with spam. Not a petty task, yet discussions that aspire of standing a chance of moving forward should be geared toward altering or abolishing

the economic rationale that sustains spam.[5] Understanding that spam is a problem is not enough. Existing solutions such as email filters suck.

In a similar vein, the sentence “*Governments in cooperation with the private sector should prevent, detect and respond to cyber crime and [misuse] [abuse] of ICTs*” sent shivers up and down my spine. In the landmark “Code and other Laws of Cyberspace”, Lawrence Lessig warned us against precisely this kind of shady alliance: neither governments nor corporations alone are capable of shattering the community model upon which the Internet strives. But by joining forces and modifying the architecture of the Internet on the pretence of safeguarding our privacy and bringing about a safer Internet, they will transform a forum for the continuation of democratic public discourse into myriads of cyber fragments designed to suit the needs of e-commerce.[6] In retrospect, I would rather stick with John Perry Barlow's assertion that governments have no place on the Internet.[7] Rather than discussing effective ways to curb cyber-crime, the WSIS should better try to justify why governments should interfere with the Net at the first place. That's a question I'd like to see being raised at the WSIS. Dream on...as Geert Lovink emphasises, “the World Summit on the Information Society is in great danger of producing irrelevant UN documents”[8], and apparently I've just finished reading a couple of these.

1. Gimme Communication

To begin with, the term information society is ill-conceived, and fails to address the real issues that lie in the heart of the Internet community. We should not neglect to bear into mind that information, unlike communication and collaboration, can be easily packaged and marketed as a precious item worth buying.[9]

In the aftermath of the dot.com collapse, it is rather convenient to say that the Internet is a tool primarily for social innovation, rather than commerce. Yet, since the mid-90s, hordes of cyber-pundits and alleged Net experts were more than eager to proclaim the emergence of the information society. After all, the information age, they claimed, is unfolding before our own eyes and it is unstoppable. In 1995, Nickolas Negroponte, MIT Media Lab's prima donna, hinted that the distinction between the PC and the TV was bound to be erased as our societies progressed from analog communications to bits

and bytes[10]. It goes without saying that commercial organisations were very pleased to hear that the Internet was just another medium well-suited for mass-communications and broadcast programming. And so the exploitation of the communal Internet begun. The point I'm trying to make here is that the term information provides a fine leverage point for commercial organisations to claim ownership over our ability to communicate and collaborate. Nevertheless, things have changed since 1995 and they keep changing, especially now that the dot.com bubble has bitten the dust. Although once popular claims like *content is king* no longer rule, the term information society still persists. Why? Is it because we're truly in the midst of a technological cyclone fueled by plainloads of information bits, or is it because information can be more easily captured through the legal instruments of patents and copyrights?

They say that information wants to be free. I do not think so. Information wants to be captured. Given the world we live in – a world where corporations process information and trade in information while more and more governments keep it in the closet on the pretext of protecting us all against the elusive danger of terrorism – information wants to be held hostage. Whenever I buy a book, all I buy is information. Whenever I watch a programme on the telly, all I consume is information. On the contrary, when I read other peoples' weblogs and leave comments, or email my friends, I do not simply consume information - I indulge in conversations, and collaborate with others. Conceptualising communication and collaboration as items lined up on the supermarket shelf is much harder, if not actually impossible. Information exists in isolation of human variables whereas communication and collaboration assume, presuppose and require the engagement of at least two parties. They are interactive by default, if you will allow me to use this expression.

Thus, any discussion of the Internet and its social implications that has as a starting point the term *information* is poised to result in ambiguities, misunderstandings and errors. While access to information, and knowledge about how to navigate and filter it, is definitely crucial for democracy to grow stronger, it is even more important to find ways to more efficiently communicate and collaborate. The starting basis should always be about how to establish and nurture frictionless communication and collaboration.

2. Towards Information Oligarchy: a world for lawyers, mega-corps, and developed countries

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, I am not the only one believing that the information rhetoric is largely harmful. Alan Toner does a great job explaining that the information rhetoric and the mosaic of intellectual property regimes it seeks to foster is in fact an attempt (by shallow agendas and associated vested interests who own developed countries, and corporate behemoths) to exert control over geopolitics.[11] In his words, the agony of an unequal world is epitomised in full swing:

What this [information] rhetoric largely occluded was the wave of expansionist intellectual property laws which accompanied the ‘informatisation’ of society. These legal constraints, at whose epicentre sits the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), annex to the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATTs), have served a very strategic set of interests within the post-industrial scene. They have effectively reversed the national role of IP laws from the protection of cultural production and scientific/technological innovation to the limitation of these creative forces, and served to fix relations between advanced post-industrial states and the former ‘third world’. They have done this by creating copyright monopolies which drive concentration of ownership, push up costs of entry into markets, and exclude effective activity for many independent actors.....With the aid of stringent IP law, companies are able to exercise a biopolitical control that takes to new extremes the tendency to liberate capital by restricting individual and collective freedoms and rights – even the right to life itself.[11]

In short, the way the so-called information society currently operates is in complete favour of advanced states, large organisations capable of commanding large sums of money for lobbying, and lawyers who have a field day troubling our heads with notions we will probably never grasp. But why? And how?

Let's start with why. Lawyers need to make a living, and the proliferation of windows of opportunity ripe for legal and legislative exploitation that the cyber-economy has provided them with will not go unseized. As for commercial organisations and powerful states, power is an end in itself. Perhaps, money is important too, but the power required to remain powerful and unchallenged by smaller, and leaner players is much more important. “No one seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end...The object of power is power”.[12]

How about *how*? Powerful states have the power to influence legislation. They have the financial power to lobby. They have the power to form international bodies and institutions such as the WTO that safeguard and enhance their power. That's the way it has always been. The oil industry still reigns not because alternative sources of energy do not exist, but because it has the financial clout to seize power. And as we said, one who has power is not willing to relinquish it. Mega-corps apply for absurd patents in case some day in the distant future they need them to stifle competition. The obvious implication of the above is that innovation, invention and experimentation across viable alternatives suffer systematically (except in those areas that might benefit the ones already in power) as those who are currently in power prefer a static environment where nothing changes to an environment that is fluid, and open to new ideas and players. This tendency to control the pace of evolution and the global barometer of power through the various instruments that fall within the umbrella of intellectual property is being further amplified due to the ongoing digitisation that is found in all spheres of the economy, culture, and society. Now, for the first time in history, more and more things can be turned into 1s and 0s. This means that more things, tangible as well as intangible, can be turned into sealed boxes of information, which can be sold as property. The realm of ideas is ripe for malicious exploitation.

According to a friend who's a software engineer, the software he writes is the outcome of his artistic endeavours; it's his ideas embodied in computer code. And he wants his ideas and his art to be accessible to as many people as possible. He 's not against the idea of making money from it. But he reckons that money will come as a by-product of the recognition he will receive for his work, if it is as outstanding as he thinks it is. For

corporations and governments though, software and digital artifacts are hot property to be defended against people like my friend who want to share their ideas with others.

3. Piracy, File Sharing and Peer-to-Peer: Just an example

The other day I read somewhere that civilised nations should jointly strike down upon peer-to-peer software and music pirates with furious anger since the proceeds from the sale of pirated music and DVDs end up in the hands of terrorists. No comment needed. Or maybe just one. I've also read in the Economist that the proceeds from such illegal activities end up in the hands of marginalised minorities living on the borderline of poverty and starvation, and no matter how ironic it may seem, if this had not been the case, those people would seriously contemplate other more dangerous lines of work such as dealing drugs and battering people in dark alleys for a fiver.[13] Draw your own conclusions. The only question I have is who has the power to define who those pirates are, and by which criteria are some people categorised as pirates?

Peer-to-peer is neither solely about file-swapping nor about copyright infringement. [SETI@Home](#) is a project harnessing the power of peer-to-peer for the search of extraterrestrial life, and Remailers enable the anonymous routing of email that can be of tremendous value to, say, a citizen who wants to alert a government officer to some wrongdoing without putting his job, social status, or physical safety in jeopardy. Software such as Gnutella and Freenet can and *is* being used by activists to disseminate information that totalitarian governments do not allow to appear on print or TV.

More interestingly perhaps, peer-to-peer, if and when conceptualised as a massively decentralised system that is supported by technological means but that extends well beyond the limited realm of technology, holds interesting lessons for the organisation of production, politics, culture, spirituality and society. In his pathbreaking paper on the wider implications of peer-to-peer, Michel Bauwens argues that peer-to-peer may even unveil the basis of a new model of civilisation premised upon bottom-up social organisation, collaborative values and direct involvement in the decision-making process by the masses that until now had been largely deprived from a say in how things were run.[14]

Other examples whose vitality for technological and social progress has been consistently overlooked abound. They fall prey to misinterpretation and confusion as no one is willing to subject them to a thorough investigation as regards to their pragmatic impact upon our life.

Meetings such as the WSIS should seek to promote understanding of the actual social impact of potentially disruptive technologies like peer-to-peer, rather than reducing them to the libelous state of piracy. But if the only ones attending such meetings are the ones who have an interest in distorting reality, then what good is it? Are there any checks on those twisted efforts to manipulate reality? Because if there aren't any, what's the point of pondering on the importance of the WSIS? I am optimistic. There are grounds for hope. Such meetings invariably attract NGOs, activists and people who *choose* to be engaged in the process.

4. Where's the Civil Society?

With respect to the WSIS, Alan Toner notes that NGOs – non-profit organisations that are frequently sustained by the labour pains of volunteers, and that seek to represent the interests of minority groups – are being pushed aside by the structure and organisation of the WSIS. They are either not given space and time to voice their concerns, or they are grouped together at some remote building far away from where any substantial discussions take place.[11] This may be true, I can't say. Sure enough, NGOs' lobbying power is essentially limited due to their lack of resources. Travel and maintenance expenses aside, NGO representatives need money to launch their projects, but most importantly they need a space where they can co-operate with others so that creative synergies between already existent projects become visible, and the possibility of starting new projects materialises. NGOs need a space, a forum where the process of cross-fertilisation among points of view, ideas and projects blossoms. Whether we like it or not, this space will not be provided by the WSIS, or so it seems.

5. Counter-revolutions and the new new Renaissance

The space for discussion and concerted action will be provided by those who are interested the most in how technology affects our lives. In parallel with the WSIS, there

is **WE SEIZE!**, a counter-event that will become for a few days the co-ordinating point for tactical media activism, and will hopefully plant the seeds for direct action. I might be wrong, but I reckon that more people from all over the world will aggregate around WE SEIZE than attend WSIS.

The scope and focus of WE SEIZE's activities is broad, but well-targeted. Officially, WE SEIZE is organised around three thematic areas: a **strategic conference** (9th and 10th Dec.), a **polimedia lab** and **high noon** (10 – 12 Dec.) and is partly financed by a generous fund from George Soros's Open Society Institute. Unofficially, activists – volunteers who put enormous amounts of time and energy in materialising their vision of an open and participative technology landscape – have gotten at work making sure that whatever goes down will be video and radio streamed so that those unlucky ones who are unable to flock to Geneva will be kept informed. Everyone is welcomed to join the crew, and everything is being done in order to facilitate the widest possible participation. Wi-Fi will be in place, and practical workshops and presentations will educate people about doing-it-themselves. Workshops on a wide spectrum of topics, including free/open source software, encryption, and hacking in general, will be going on for the whole duration of the counter-summit. Indymedia activists will set up an independent communication centre, freeing information flows to and from Geneva and providing an alternative coverage of the events. This is, of course, only a tiny glimpse of what WE SEIZE is about.

WE SEIZE! is taking place in Geneva, but its roar is far reaching and global: it urges people worldwide to participate regardless of their geographical location, and people respond to its call. Media guerillas in Sheffield, UK, for example, gave away free CDs of two Linux distros ([dyne:bolic](#) and [knoppix](#)), distributed leaflets whose aim is to raise awareness around WSIS and WE SEIZE! and projected the WE SEIZE! and Indymedia symbols onto the Sheffield Town Hall and local Gap store.[15] WE SEIZE! Is a local event, but it's global in terms of *reach and richness*.

Naturally, the organisation side of WE SEIZE is transparent. Everything is being decided in a democratic fashion in the main mailing list which is open for the public, with additional and up-to-date information provided at the Wiki pages of the We SEIZE

website, and other web sites like **Hubproject**. Communication is not limited to the mailing list as there's also an IRC channel for real-time synchronous communication. The point is that everyone is welcomed to join and participate, and this is grounds for hope. Discussions will be the focus of the counter-conference, and presentations will be informal and anyone is welcomed to propose and deliver a presentation. The distinction between audience and speaker will be blurred as the goal is not simply to educate and inform but to advance the aims of a global, inter-networked community of open-minded people looking to achieve co-op between their projects, ideas, and groups.

Some people would like us to believe that WE SEIZE! is the forerunner of a revolution, or at least a sign of a revolution in progress. But what I see is not a revolution. It is a political, social, cultural and economic renaissance. I see people coming together to share themselves, and to re-shape the world according to their beliefs and dreams. I see a re-framing of what has become the cyber tactical media community around communal values, reciprocity, and ethics. When it comes to the cyber realm, the only establishment, if it can be said to be an establishment, is the creativity that is being unleashed by loosely knit groups of people who enlarge the sphere within which cyber creativity and democracy applies. We should not focus our efforts on revolting against a ghost of the past that is reluctantly dying; a ghost that is inevitably confronting its own inner ghosts as it gets to realise it is unable to control our creative efforts. As Douglas Rushkoff says “renaissance is a dimensional leap, when our perspective shifts so dramatically that our understanding of the oldest, most fundamental elements of existence changes, the stories we have been using no longer work”.**[16]**

And the renaissance we're now in the midst of is as profound as the ones that went before it. We're no longer limited by geography, or any technological and cultural priesthoods for that matter. Again, peer-to-peer is a fine illustration of that paradigm shift. Most peer-to-peer technologies, from Napster to Freenet and from Jabber to weblogs enable us to step outside from our assigned role as passive consumers of reality. Tools developed in a bottom-up fashion empower us to become the authors of our own lives and architects of our own frames of governance. We, the people, are now for the first time in history able to reinvent our cultures and societies in unprecedented ways, changing the ways we relate to each other, and to the old world order. We don't need to

ask for permission; we are the new establishment that emerges from the ashes of the old ruined world of cultural impotence, economic inefficiency, and political megalomania. We develop the tools; we use them; and the world is changing with us as we go along. Trying to destroy the political artefacts of an earlier epoch – copyrights and patents [17]– is not necessary. Those institutions will self-destruct as people realise their striking irrelevance to the new inter-networked world of knowledge. Napster and similarly functioning software are “the market's correction for the failure of mainstream radio not just to adapt to the Net, but even to fulfill the missions it established for itself over the decades”.[18] Weblogs enable us to re-claim a higher state of democratic consciousness.[19] The free/open source software community demonstrates that cooperation, passion and talent make capital dance. We should not try to revolt against the old order. In fact, I believe that the old order is revolting against us, trying spasmodically to secure a few last moments of breath before dying forever. Sure enough, we need to be cautious and have a vigilant eye, but we don't need to consume ourselves with dystopic visions of big brother - manufactured technotopias. There is no revolution to start here; if there was one anyway that has started a long time ago with the emergence of the network of networks. It's time we called it a rebirth, a renaissance of our identities in a digital world. We don't need to be consumed with fighting wars; instead, we should be forging bonds and caring for the new big issues that unfold before our own eyes. In my opinion, that is digital ethics [20], but I will leave that discussion for another time and place – perhaps WE SEIZE!.

6. An Open Source Model : a final note to WSIS

From the depths of cyberia, I urge you not to stifle the vein of innovation that the Internet is. Do not consider its lifeblood to be information, corporate endorsements, or patents. It's not. Enable people to communicate with each other, and dare to collaborate with them. Then, you will be surprised by how much can be accomplished. Otherwise, all we will be left with is useless information. And we don't need more. We already have plenty. What we need is to make sense out of it, and better ourselves in the process through the re-emergence of the open, collaborative spirit upon which the Internet strived. Help us restore and grow it so that one day, we might arrive at the ideal of a truly interconnected global brain, rather than winding up with another huge library.

7. References

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Links:

WE SEIZE! Website: <http://www.geneva03.org/>

WE SEIZE! Mailing list: <http://lists.emdash.org/mailman/listinfo/prep-l>

Mailing List Archive at <http://lola.d-a-s-h.org/pipermail/prep-l/>

WE SEIZE! Strategic Conference: <http://www.geneva03.org/sconf/index.php>

WE SEIZE! High Noon: <http://www.geneva03.org/highnoon/index.php>

WE SEIZE! IRC Channel: irc.indymedia.org [channel #wsis] and another irc #wsis channel is available on www.ecn.org/6601 ssl secure mode

Hub [Eur@action](http://eur@action) Project Website: <http://hubproject.org/en/?l=en>