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# Neoliberal Visions and Revisions in Global Communications Policy From NWICO to WSIS

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The author proposes that any account seeking to contextualize crucial policy debates connected to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) must engage with two necessary projects. First, it must historicize WSIS in relation to an earlier international forum similarly focused on global communications policy, the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Second, it must theorize WSIS in terms related to neoliberalism, the dominant political economic system defining global relations today. This analysis brings into focus both continuities and changes in global communications policy during the formative period of the past three decades.

**Keywords:** *New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO); World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS); Internet governance; neoliberalism; global communication; international communication; media history; Internet policy*

Current debates on global communications policy tend toward ahistorical narratives with a focus on technical issues. In this article, I submit that any account seeking to understand what is currently unfolding in global communications must engage with two projects. First, contemporary issues must be contextualized historically. Second, these issues should be theorized in relation to the rise of the political economic order, neoliberalism. Two watershed global policy forums bookend this ascendance: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) debates spanning the 1970s and early 1980s known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), and the more recent International Telecommunications Union (ITU)–sponsored discussions at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Although both differences and similarities between NWICO and WSIS hold profound implications for international communications, the parallels between these events in structure and significance present a compelling analytical opportunity.

Keeping important changes and complexities in mind while highlighting continuity, the following analysis maps the evolving contours of ongoing debates by

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examining these two crucial condensation points in global communications policy making. Continuities and disjunctures between these two moments cannot be reduced to shifting alignments and crosscutting policy issues associated with each period but rather reflect changes in global power relations. Many of these changes can be linked to a neoliberal political economic system that favors the operations of transnational corporations over social imperatives. Therefore, this article offers a theoretical framework based on historical and critical approaches to neoliberalism. Such a framework sheds light on the deepening neoliberal entrenchment in global communication policy making and its often oppositional relationship to civil society articulations of communication rights. These rights include equal access to and participation in communications infrastructure, which requires redistributed resources and other remedies inconsistent with fundamental market imperatives.

## Overview

According to many accounts, global communication governance is characterized by recurring tensions between the neoliberal imperatives advanced by a powerful Western state–corporate alliance on one hand and communication rights championed by developing nations and civil society groups on the other. Suggesting a chain of continuity, Thussu (2000) noted,

One recurring theme in this study of international communication has been the continued domination of the global information and entertainment industries . . . by a few, mainly Western nations and the transnational corporations based in these countries. From Marconi to Microsoft, a continuity can be detected . . . whether it was cabling the world, broadcasting to an international audience or creating a virtual globe through the Internet. (p. 259)

Also articulating this recurring clash between economic power and civil society imperatives, Ó Siochrú and Girard (2003) argued that

at its starkest the issue is about the struggle for control, at a global level, of media and communications. On the one side are people, social, political, and cultural rights, and those organizations that stand by people. On the other is economic power, currently dominated by narrow commercially driven forces primarily controlled in the interests of the more powerful nations. The interaction between these is, however, not reducible to a simple formulae. (pp. ix-x)

Shifting global contexts complicate this seemingly seamless flow of domination, including evolving technological systems, geopolitical reconfigurations, and advanced stages of transnational capitalism. Although power remains preponderant, it is a messy process “not reducible to a simple formulae.”

Important linkages between NWICO and WSIS are further evidenced by recurring tropes around policy debates. For example, the recurrence of rhetorical strategies involving the “free flow of information” suggests continuity, whereas the shrinkage of debate around contentious issues such as transborder data flow marks a significant rupture. In both instances, a neoliberal logic prefigures patterns of omission and emphasis.

Although belonging to different periods, NWICO and WSIS bookend a 30-year ascendance of neoliberal logic in global communications. At first glance, contentious WSIS debates involving Internet governance and communication rights may seem like disparate issues. However, both debates are fought on narrowing terrains predicated by a foundational neoliberal economic logic. This logic girds global communication policy in ways similar to what Tom Streeter (1996) and earlier historians referred to as “corporate liberalism,” an early forerunner to today’s neoliberalism that structured 1930s broadcasting policy. Proposing an unbroken causal chain linking Streeter’s corporate liberalism and today’s neoliberalism is beyond this study’s scope. However, bringing to light similar fundamental assumptions underpinning global communication policy helps contextualize contemporary policy fights within unfolding historical processes. Like Streeter’s corporate liberalism, neoliberal imperatives at WSIS preclude challenges to foundational principles underpinning global communications policy making. Uncovering these foundational assumptions and discursive bounds illuminates global communications’ underlying logic and suggests that with NWICO, there was still a promise for radical change.

Such an analysis is necessary to provide a sharper focus on recurring issues, strategies, and structures for some of the most crucial communication policies facing the global community today. The relatively sparse WSIS-related discussions in both the mainstream and trade press all too often omit important historical context. Research historicizing and theorizing the WSIS process is important for its timeliness and for addressing critical policy matters that deserve more attention in mainstream communications research. Although the field of communication was significantly engaged with NWICO-era debates, even devoting entire issues of the *Journal of Communication* to the subject, scholarly engagement with WSIS has been limited to the work of a handful of researchers. Moreover, many younger scholars lack the institutional memory to make sense of NWICO’s legacy on contemporary debates around global communications. By explicating neoliberalism, historicizing NWICO and WSIS, and generating a critical comparative analysis between the two events, the following analysis aims to help correct this gap in the scholarship.

## Neoliberalism and Its Critics

Given that global communications structure and are structured by larger power relations and patterns in the world, a legitimate starting point for a critical analysis focuses on what is arguably the central political economic structure of our time: neoliberalism.

The term *neoliberalism* remains ill defined and broadly misunderstood. Although a commonly denounced word throughout much of Latin America and elsewhere, many people living in the United States lack a critical vocabulary for the political economic system that increasingly permeates critical policy decisions, from the legality of file sharing and content discrimination on the Internet to the dismantling of social programs and widening income gaps. Neoliberalism can be explicated as a contemporary stage of capitalism most aptly defined by four indicators: the privatization, deregulation, liberalization, and globalization of markets (Harvey, 2005; Mies, 1998).

More specifically, the “Washington consensus” conception of neoliberalism is characterized by fiscal austerity, the privatization of state-controlled programs, and liberalized markets stripped of all potential impediments—tariffs, subsidies, and other protections—to transnational commercial interests (Stiglitz, 2002). In many regards, neoliberalism essentially argues for a return to *laissez faire* capitalism, whereby markets are expected to govern all sectors of society, and government intervention not in line with commercial interests is viewed as inherently suspect. In this system, the public sector is increasingly privatized or defunded. Beyond facilitating the flow and accumulation of capital for a relatively small number of private interests, a neoliberal aversion to most public interest regulations creates immediate tensions for many of the policy issues taken up by civil society groups, such as equal access and participation in media infrastructure.

The taken-for-granted nature of neoliberalism notwithstanding, a steady stream of radical criticism has contested these precepts, from both recent progressive social movements and sectors of the academy. With the latter, this has taken expression in a critical vein of international communications and media policy research. These critiques seek to problematize neoliberalism through systemic analyses that flesh out the underlying structures of governance while highlighting contradictions and contingencies manifest in global communication policy making (Ó Siochrú & Girard, 2003; Thussu, 2000). Instead of taking the dominant system as something natural and inevitable, these scholars lay bare the contingency of power politics that steer global policies in undemocratic directions.

Dan Schiller (1999) leveled one of the first critiques delineating the neoliberal shift in market expansion and political economic transition in information industries, which he called “digital capitalism.” Schiller noted the past several decades witnessed communication networks increasingly serving the market logic of transnational corporations, shirking labor standards, consumer protections, and public interest provisions. According to this view, what was initially developed at the behest of military contractors, government agencies, and technocratic university groups with taxpayer-funded government subsidies has undergone a quiet metamorphosis. Schiller pointed out that the encroaching colonization and commodification of previously public information parallels the 1600s enclosure movement of the precapitalist English countryside. But Schiller’s crucial theme here is that this “informationalized capitalism” did not develop naturally; these enclosures were constructed through repeated political intervention.

Other scholars have made similar arguments that the commons, or public domain, is being impoverished by a state-dictated copyright system run amok (Lessig, 2001; Perelman, 2002). According to these arguments, the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of digital media have made this process only more transparent.

## The Lost Promise of NWICO

Had the UNESCO debates around what became known as NWICO gone differently, global communications might look very different today. Raging in and outside the United Nations (UN) from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, the NWICO debate was the first time the full range of telecommunications and all manner of media-related issues were argued in a relatively open and truly global fashion. The NWICO debate can be understood only once situated in its broader context. Taking place within the contentious polarity of the cold war era, it was spearheaded by the Non-Aligned Movement of UN countries, whose membership had expanded significantly following decolonization, creating dozens of newly independent countries. This sudden swell in the so-called Third World countries led to a rebalance of power in the United Nations as they formed a third force straddling the bipolarity of the United States and the Soviet Union (Singham, 1977). The increased power—or at least louder voice—of the poorer countries crystallized in the establishment of the New International Economic Order, a forum in which they demanded greater political and economic sovereignty and a more equitable distribution of the world's economic resources (Carlsson, 2003). The developing world's strengthened position fueled reform efforts in various international forums, especially UNESCO, which became the primary forum for debates concentrated on cultural identity and imperialism.

Indeed, national sovereignty and communication were at the very heart of the debate. Although it would be wrong to conflate elite interests with diverse grassroots concerns when these national cultures are always sites of struggle for meaning among different ethnic, class, and gender identities (Sreberny, 1991), then, unlike now, elites in developing countries were not fully invested in a largely neoliberal alliance. As new countries were integrated into the global communications system, they were undercut by structural inequities, such as unequal media flow, foreign-owned infrastructure, and prohibitively priced rates. National sovereignty was an important mobilizing issue considering that over 80 countries and approximately 2 billion people in the global South had gained their independence after years of decolonization and, in some cases, armed struggle, only to be undercut by workaday mechanisms, including international communications. For example, the first big communications policy fight in the early 1970s was around satellite control. There was a general fear that the United States and its allies' dominance of satellite technology would allow them to beam unwanted messages into developing countries with impunity. Non-Aligned Movement countries cohered around a set of proposals

addressing satellite and other communications issues within what became known as NWICO. These debates focused on the dominance of Western news content, the transformation of communication industries, and the increasing importance of Western-controlled technologies that kept non-Western countries in a state of “forced dependency” (Preston, Herman, & Schiller, 1989).

The impetus behind NWICO manifested in “The Declaration on Mass Media,” first introduced to the agenda in 1972 and formally issued at the 1978 UNESCO General Assembly amid acrimonious debate. The biggest conflict centered on proposed amendments to the free flow of information doctrine, which the Western press cast as a life-or-death struggle for commercial press freedom. This trope served not only as a rallying cry but also as the dominant rhetorical and policy line for Western powers suddenly caught in an unlikely defensive position. Nevertheless, despite diplomatic hurdles and a watered-down final product, the free-flow doctrine was amended to read “free-flow and wider and better balanced dissemination of information” that included a somewhat vague call for a qualitative improvement in media content.

The MacBride Commission’s report to the 1980 UNESCO general assembly built on these earlier provisions with a wide range of recommendations applying to a plethora of communication issues, such as television imagery, the distribution of radio receivers, and the journalistic right of reply and right of correction, to name just a few (Calabrese, 2004). Although some critics argue that it glossed over antagonistic voices in a farce of harmony, there were some legitimate gains. For example, as Ó Siochrú (2004) noted,

For the first time, the NWICO had a general framework, a detailed justification and a set of proposals. After teetering on the brink of collapse, the Commission’s findings were endorsed. This was the defining moment for NWICO, one whose genesis exclusively in the intergovernmental context was soon to bear the compromising and destructive imprint of the cold war. (p. 6)

By suggesting that structural changes, including restrictions on information flow, were needed to equalize the world’s economy, UNESCO invited the wrath of anticommunist liberals and First Amendment absolutists. Furthermore, it helped enflame the newly ascendant and quickly burgeoning promarket neoliberal order led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. A counterattack was not long in the making.

Although pre-NWICO Western animosity toward UNESCO had already manifested by the mid-1970s, hostile journalistic campaigns worsened as media industry allies and lobbyists connected with the World Press Freedom Committee waged a fierce counterattack against UNESCO. They charged NWICO with infringing on press freedom by calling for government controls of news content, a prevailing myth still in circulation to this day. Generally speaking, the late 1970s saw a brief window when the United States and Western allies’ tactical shift from stick to carrot allowed the international media reform movement to reach its high-water mark. But by the

early 1980s, anti-UNESCO fervor in Western elite circles had reached a feverish pitch, abetted by campaigns orchestrated by right-wing groups such as the Heritage Foundation and culminating in the United States' and United Kingdom's pulling out of UNESCO in 1984 and 1985, respectively. NWICO gradually receded into relative obscurity following the pullout of its largest sponsors. However, MacBride panels continued annually from 1989 to 1999 and, free from U.S. and U.K. bullying, helped bring together a new civil society constituency composed of scores of new non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although at times perhaps verging on a paternalistic advocacy relationship with local grassroots groups in developing countries, this new alliance would form the basis for a new theater of contestation, one relying less on state power and more on civil society. Two decades following the lost alternatives of NWICO, the crystallization of new civil society coalitions is on full display as many of the same issues reemerge at WSIS.

### **WSIS and the Reemergence of Global Communications Contention**

The UN's ITU, an organization that works toward standardizing global telecommunication policy, first proposed WSIS in 1998. The ITU's aim in sponsoring WSIS was "to define a common vision of the information society" and address important problems and opportunities arising within a new global communications landscape. A less generous critique for explaining the impetus behind the ITU's actions was a crisis of legitimacy and search for purpose (Costanza-Chock, 2003). Nevertheless, it took on a number of pressing issues, such as the problem of a growing global digital divide. Furthermore, the ITU's 1998 formal proposal noted that "the Union is required to fulfil its tasks in an environment where telecommunications are playing an increasingly decisive and driving role at the political, economic, social and cultural levels" (para. 4). The resolution also stated "the globalization of telecommunications must take account of a harmonious evolution in policies, regulations, networks and services in all Member States" (para. 8). How to define and harmonize this evolution was a central goal of WSIS as stated in the ITU 2002 resolution expressing "the need to harness synergies and to create cooperation among the various information and communication technology initiatives" (p. 2). Given the summit model, which Klein (2003) contextualized as typically organized to address pressing international issues and having tremendous norm-setting capabilities, the discursive formation around these issues promised to have significant implications for global communications policy.

During Phase 1 of WSIS in Geneva in December 2003, representatives from government, industry, and civil society convened their "multistakeholder" approach to discuss a wide range of Internet-related issues, broadly categorized under the following rubrics: Internet governance, security, free and open software, communication rights,

intellectual property, human rights, and finances. Smaller regional preparatory committee (prepcom) meetings took place leading up to Phase 2, held in November 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia. Each phase and prepcom meeting was open to participation from governments, industry, and civil society and claimed to be open to a pluralistic discussion of global communication policies.

A closer look at WSIS's tripartite body of government, industry, and civil society helps bring this alignment into focus. According to the ITU's (n.d.-c) Web site, more than 11,000 participants from 176 countries attended the Geneva phase of WSIS, including 50 heads of state or government and vice presidents, 82 ministers, and 26 vice ministers and heads of delegations. High-level representatives from international organizations, the private sector, and civil society also participated, reportedly providing political support for the WSIS "Declaration of Principles" and "Plan of Action," but only governments had an official voice, while industry and civil society had observer status. Compared with the governments of sovereign nation-states, appearances become murkier with the industry and civil society components of WSIS. Although appearing to be a minority, industry was actually represented well through "strategic partnerships" described as "business sector entities and private-public partnerships." Groups participating in these partnerships included the self-described social entrepreneur ChangeMakers, Digital Dividends, and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC; International Telecommunications Union, n.d.-b). The civil society sector was organized according to various caucuses and working groups, including education, academia, and research; youth; media; indigenous peoples; and trade unions, think tanks, and NGOs (World Summit on the Information Society, n.d.).

Much of the debate at the second phase in Tunis was whittled down to Internet governance issues, which ultimately settled on the United States-driven status quo (discussed below). The same basic structure was in place, though the participant numbers had swelled to 23,000. Civil rights violations at the hands of the Tunisian police were a major distraction and symbolized for some the degradation of the WSIS process as a whole. Perhaps attracting the most media attention was Nicholas Negroponte's unveiling of a new \$100 laptop to help remedy the digital divide in the developing world. Although generally seen as a well-meaning gesture, it came under swift criticism from people who saw this as yet another paternalistic attempt at a shortsighted technical fix (Bergstein, 2004). This emphasis on technical solutions was most clearly evidenced by the one issue that increasingly came to dominate the summit: Internet governance.

## Internet Governance

The fact that the summit's initial focus on important social problems such as the global digital divide gradually morphed into a technical dispute over Internet governance is telling in itself. Nevertheless, the Internet governance debate has important global North-South implications. The major question was whether it should remain in the hands of a private U.S. corporation under the U.S. Department of Commerce's

authority or be transferred to the ITU and thus internationalized through presumably a more multilateral and democratic process. Although not directly participating in these debates, it is impossible to understand the discussions involving Internet governance at WSIS without first examining the dominant institution involved in global Internet governance: the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

ICANN is a private, nonprofit corporation based in California and formed in 1998 after 4 years of protracted debate over the technical management of Internet activities such as the domain-naming system. The specific set of functions assigned to ICANN by the Department of Commerce includes the following: setting policy for and managing the allocation and assignment of Internet protocol addresses, adding new names to the top level of the Internet domain-name hierarchy, and maintaining responsibility for operating root servers that distribute authoritative information about the content of the top level of the domain-name space (Mueller, 2002, p. 6). This arrangement gives ICANN broad authority with far-reaching implications. In choosing who is entitled to a specific domain name and determining the number of Internet protocol addresses made available to particular regions and nations, ICANN has authority over the highly politicized allocation of a scarce resource within the Internet Protocol Version 4 system.

Consisting of a small technocratic elite with at least indirect ties to the Department of Commerce, ICANN continues to invite global scrutiny for a perceived lack of transparent governance and an arbitrary approach to allotting highly coveted top-level domains, which have, to the growing frustration of developing countries, disproportionately gone to Western countries. In fact, some U.S. universities were given more Internet protocol numbers than large populous countries such as China. Increasingly, groups ranging from United States-based advocates to representatives from developing countries have questioned ICANN's legitimacy. Although technical management and regulatory control are its purported objectives, ICANN frequently makes political decisions. For example, its mandate to allocate domain names involves intellectual property rights and trademark questions in determining who is entitled to what name. Mueller noted in an interview,

The problem with ICANN is not that it is secretive. It is far less so than most international intergovernmental organizations. ICANN is in fact very political. It poses governance problems of the first order and directly involves states. It legislates rights, regulates an industry, allocates resources, and is trying to set *de jure* standards. So there must be political accountability. That means membership, elections, or something. (quoted in Lovink, 2003, para. 7)

Thus far, attempts to democratize ICANN have seen mixed results. Of the 13 root servers, 10 are in the United States, with one each in Amsterdam, Stockholm, and Tokyo. Added to a perception of asymmetries in resource allocation, ICANN's decisions can seem arbitrary and culturally insensitive to the global community. One

example is the limiting of top-level domain names to Roman script. A more flagrant controversy arose recently when ICANN awarded an “.xxx” top-level domain name to a shady Florida-based business for the purpose of showcasing pornographic content. In their first ever veto of ICANN, the U.S. government responded to political pressure from social conservative groups and nixed .xxx, thus rendering visible the extent to which it wields control over global Internet governance (Mueller, 2005)

## Internet Governance Status Quo Triumphant

At Phase 1 of WSIS, ICANN’s future was much less certain. After 12 hours of deadlocked debate over basic issues such as the definition of Internet governance, the delegates agreed to postpone the decision until the 2005 meeting in Tunis, where, after much uncertainty, the status quo once again prevailed. In the end, only two substantive policy questions were admitted onto the decision-making agenda: a digital solidarity fund and a plan for reorganizing Internet governance, both to be taken up at Tunis in November 2005. A recurring critique from many of the developing country delegates saw ICANN as too closely tied to wealthier nations. On the other side of the debate were groups backing ICANN, such as the ICC and the Department of Commerce. These groups feared that greater UN involvement would bureaucratize the Internet, stifle innovation, and impede business operations. The ICC even took issue with the term *Internet governance* itself, believing that it implies a need for the Internet to be governed, a view that the ICC does not support (McCullagh, 2004). Even the Bush administration weighed in with a heavy hand, voicing its lack of support for the UN’s ITU taking over Internet governance responsibilities.

Despite the standstill, two official documents came out of the first phase of WSIS: the “Declaration of Principles” and the “Plan of Action.” Both dealt in some measure with issues related to Internet governance. On the ITU’s WSIS Web site, the “Declaration of Principles” was boiled down to 11 key points, declaring that “as for Internet management, involving all stakeholders and intergovernmental organizations to address both technical and public policy issues has been underscored” (n.d.-d, para. 9). Because the global Internet governance issue was deemed too complex to resolve in detail, an agreement was reached to set up the “open and inclusive” Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) to investigate and make proposals for action prior to the second phase of the summit in 2005. The “Plan of Action” (International Telecommunications Union, 2003b) affirmed a commitment to “develop a working definition of Internet governance.” In a clear concession to representatives from developing countries who were lobbying for more equitable access to top-level domains, the document stated that they will be able to “manage or supervise, as appropriate, their respective country code top-level domain name” (pp. 6-7).

Although large decisions were postponed, debate raged on after the summit. A special “WSIS-online” forum was the site of fierce critiques questioning the U.S. mandate for controlling the Internet via ICANN. The issue of unilateral control of

the root-server system and the lack of sovereign Internet rights continues to animate opposition in policy circles as well, especially during the four WGIG meetings that culminated in July 2005 in a recommendation to internationalize Internet governance. However, around the same time, the United States launched a preemptive official announcement that it would not relinquish control of Internet governance. A European Union (EU) decision during the October 2005 prepcom meeting made the unprecedented step of breaking with American support for the ICANN-led status quo. This intransigence prompted a high-profile letter from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice strongly urging the EU to renege. At Tunis during Phase 2 of WSIS, the EU and other potential dissidents accommodated the United States in maintaining the ICANN status quo, though a potentially significant development occurred with the new UN group, the Internet Governance Forum. This new working group was reportedly created to encourage an "evolutionary process" toward a more multilateral governance structure. Other, more discursive developments manifested in official WSIS statements that pledged a commitment to defining the information society in terms consistent with communication rights. Nevertheless, WSIS ended with the status quo prevailing, at least for the short term. However, the United States finds itself increasingly isolated in maintaining unilateral control over what many people around the world consider to be a global medium. Contentious debate promises to continue in multiple forums.

## Previous Literature

Although not an untrammelled terrain, further research is needed to delineate how preexisting neoliberal power relationships have transposed themselves onto new media industries as they undergo increased commodification and corporate domination of what was once vaunted as an open domain. Ó Siochrú (2004) made an important first step in understanding the historical processes linking NWICO and WSIS by analyzing WSIS within a larger inquiry going back several decades to the beginning of NWICO. Similarly, several articles in a January 2005 special issue of *Global Media and Communication* take this historical approach.

Other critical analyses look at the institutional structure of WSIS. McLaughlin (in press) argued that this institutional arrangement can best be described as neocorporatism, in which the UN's trilateral approach of coordinating NGO networks, businesses, and governments facilitates the co-optation of more moderate civil society groups, providing cover for business interests to push a neoliberal agenda. McLaughlin suggested that corporatist tendencies within the UN and its offshoots equate human rights and democracy with capitalist ventures and therefore enable neoliberal economic orthodoxy's hegemonic status. Of the 16 official civil society groups during Phase 1, McLaughlin noted that 11 were partnered up with members of the private sector or advocates. Thus, civil society groups' gaining a seat at the table arguably came

at the price of losing voice and being used as cover by business interests for public relations and potential business opportunities.

McLaughlin and Pickard (2005) extended this critique to ongoing Internet governance negotiations that ultimately allow industry groups to co-opt civil society groups into maintaining a deregulatory status quo. In particular, they saw this happening within the WGIG proceedings, arguing that “the goal of corporatism traditionally has been to promote social integration and stability within highly capitalist economies by creating cooperative arrangements among a limited set of conflicting social groups” (p. 367). Likewise, Streeter (1996) reminded us that a facade of neutrality aids the larger profit motive in policy making:

Yet the profit motive alone cannot account for all that goes on. . . . In a corporate liberal environment, administrative neutrality and expertise are political prerequisites of pro-corporate decisions. If there is going to be government intervention on the industry’s behalf, it must be done in a way that at least suggests the presence of neutral principles and expert decision-making. . . . Even corporations have an interest—an ambivalent one—in fostering institutions that are not mechanically tied to corporate designs, institutions that demonstrate some autonomy. (p. 120)

These descriptions could arguably apply to the WSIS process as a whole, with its self-legitimizing rhetoric and self-congratulation regarding its own process. Although even some critical scholars saw reason for cautious optimism in the opportunities offered at WSIS (Klein, 2003; Raboy, 2004), others noted that what little progress was made at WSIS could never move beyond the discursive level and have any impact on actual policy (Hamelink, 2004). An even less generous interpretation sees WSIS as providing window dressing for a system-limiting debate within narrowing parameters, keeping fundamental questions of power off the table and out of bounds for discussion (Hamelink, 2004; Mansell, 2005). Taken together, these analyses provide rich context for further research. What remains to be more fully addressed, however, is how these events fit into a larger framework of neoliberal power relations and what this means for global communication policy in general.

## Methods and Inquiry

A historical approach to global policy making throws into stark relief the contingencies and conflicts between diverse interests and stakeholders. After historicizing NWICO and WSIS, what remains to be explicated are important differences and similarities and an analysis of what this contrast tells us about neoliberalism and contemporary global communications. In other words, what changing global power relationships does a comparative analysis of NWICO and WSIS bring into focus? By analyzing primary sources in the form of historical and online documents from each

global forum, I advance this line of inquiry in the following ways: I catalogue significant continuities and disjunctures, expand this critique to include the full range of debate on Internet governance through the second phase of WSIS, and further link neoliberal structural changes with specific policy trajectories. By historicizing WSIS in its relation to NWICO, theorizing related debates in the context of neoliberalism, and textually analyzing key policy documents, this analysis brings into sharper focus the foundational assumptions of today's global communications system. In this vein, the following sections trace the continuities and changes between the two periods. I conclude by offering a number of observations stemming from this analysis, including ideas for future research.

### **Analysis of Continuities and Disjunctures**

The trajectory from NWICO to WSIS suggests several overarching themes, cross-cutting issues, and significant ruptures. Some of these differences are organizational. For example, NWICO's connection to UNESCO and WSIS's connection to the ITU suggest that the latter is less concerned with culture and more focused on technical standards of telecommunication. Other changes can be understood in terms of strategy. Although NWICO actors were nation focused and overtly political, WSIS favors a technical focus, with NGOs taking up civil society issues instead of aligning within a monolithic structure or focusing on national sovereignty. And yet other changes reflect tectonic shifts in the global political and social landscape.

### **Geopolitical Changes**

Since the days of NWICO, neoliberal imperatives in global communications have driven Western corporations to further expand into transnational producer and distribution chains as developing countries privatize their telecommunication services and liberalize their markets for foreign investment. The collapse of Soviet socialism, the end of cold war politics, the introduction of promarket policies in China, and the integration of developing-country elites all accelerated the further build-out of a transnational communication system structured along neoliberal lines. These developments have changed the configurations of resistance and reform since NWICO.

The NWICO model was predicated on the idea that the nation-state was a crucial site of contestation (Nordenstreng & Schiller, 1984). Many of the significant debates were carried on at a statist level between adversarial "First World" and "Third World" governments, connecting with similar debates in professional media associations and academic institutions around the world. At the time, many progressives saw a beleaguered Third World and failed to notice how class structures were hardening (Ahmad, 1992). Now states along with developing-world elites and intellectuals are fully integrated into transnational capitalism. In other words, though states obviously still matter, national

sovereignty is no longer the major rallying cry. During the NWICO years, developing countries were calling for financial aid to develop their own information capabilities to reduce dependence on Western organizations and technology. Now the parameters of the debate no longer pit developed and developing countries against each other in the same manner, and questions of power have given way to a focus on technical issues. Although a North-South divide clearly persists and manifests in digital-divide rhetoric, important social issues no longer animate policy debates at WSIS as they once did at NWICO.

## Media Coverage

Misinforming press coverage marked both NWICO and WSIS. One recent study's findings suggest that there was a virtual news blackout in U.S. press accounts of WSIS-related events, compared with news coverage in Europe, Africa, and Asia (Pickard, 2004). What little coverage did occur (31 articles spanning 6 months before and 6 months after WSIS) was mostly hostile to any discussion of the ITU's taking over Internet governance from ICANN. One misinformed op-ed even suggested that if the ITU were to take over Internet governance, Syria and China could meddle with Americans' personal e-mail (Huggett, 2003). A similar analysis of news coverage of Phase 2 of WSIS showed that it was only marginally improved. Such hostile media coverage is consistent with content analyses of early 1980s news coverage during the fiercest UNESCO contention. These studies provide incontrovertible evidence of anti-UNESCO and NWICO biases in the U.S. press (Preston et al., 1989). Although the emphasis then was more disinformation than lack of information, both types of press accounts ultimately had the same effect: bolstering the case for U.S. dominance in global communications. During NWICO debates, the U.S. media lobbied against it on a diplomatic level and conducted smear campaigns in their news coverage. The main rationale for the 1980s was the prevailing media-generated myth that NWICO wanted to enforce journalist licenses and other heavy-handed state interventions against freedom of the press. During WSIS, the main rationale was that the unique freedom and genius of the Internet was antithetical to governance. According to this view, the Internet was functioning smoothly and in need of no oversight other than what ICANN already provides. The current status quo was hailed as the best of all possible Internet systems.

## Alternative Visions for Communication Rights

Criticism notwithstanding, both phases of WSIS saw a genuinely progressive presence, represented by groups such as the World Association for Christian Communication, the coalition behind the Communication Rights in the Information Society campaign, the Association for Progressive Communications, and the European-based Communica. Each of these groups articulated alternative policy visions on the basis of

social justice and human rights and worked hard to get less technocentric language into official WSIS documents, while crafting counterproposals. Indeed, the continuity between NWICO-era and WSIS rhetoric was not only discursive. Key actors, most notably the World Association for Christian Communication, were deeply involved in both movements, as were many veteran academics and activists.

Arguably the most significant alternative vision to emerge and manifest at Phase 1 of WSIS was the “civil society declaration.” Although there were at least a dozen civil society declarations drawn up and showcased on the now-revamped civil society Web site from groups such as “people with disabilities” and “indigenous peoples,” the document “Shaping Civil Society for Human Needs” was an important articulation of progressive civil society goals, emphasizing human rights, social justice, and people-centered sustainable development (International Telecommunication Union, 2003c). It also discusses at length “gender justice,” the “importance of youth,” “workers rights,” and other issues that either did not make it into the UN’s “Declaration of Principles” or were deemphasized. Overall, this wording is very similar to NWICO-era manifestos, with references to communication rights, evident in the following statement that foreshadowed a clash between progressive and neoliberal proponents:

Information and communication are much more than commodities or consumer goods, a concept promoted by the West. They are essential needs for person-in-community and communities-of-persons. All people want and need to enrich their lives by sharing information and ideas with other people and societies. Both content and form of communications must therefore respond to genuine communications needs of the people in society. (Nordenstreng, 1984, p. 35)

These proposals at least achieved significant discursive developments surrounding important policy debates. NGOs and various civil society groups at the meeting proposed alternative models that were seriously discussed. For example, an alternative vision articulated in terms associated with “the right to communicate” in Article 19 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” was forced into the debate. A significant symbolic victory for activists and progressive NGOs was the inclusion of language from Article 19 in the “Declaration of Principles” document:

We reaffirm, as an essential foundation of the Information Society, and as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that 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. Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers. (International Telecommunication Union, 2003a, para. 4)

This statement anchors the focus on information to crucial communication processes and challenges the otherwise technocentric thrust of official WSIS documents. Nevertheless, many participants saw this inclusion as merely a token gesture. Although it suggests that everyone's communication needs should benefit from the information society, it does not address preexisting global inequities or the means by which these problems can be addressed.

### **The Free Flow of Information Versus the Right to Communicate**

Another crucial theme for this analysis is the doctrine of the free flow of information that first became prominent in U.S. foreign policy near the end of World War II. Interestingly, the concern for information quality, though raised during the mid-1940s Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, had largely dropped out of Western discourse by the 1970s (Schiller, 1976). Herb Schiller (1976) demonstrated how the free-flow doctrine historically was used for economic interests as a central goal of American foreign policy. He remarked that after WWII, "it was an especially propitious time to extol the virtues of unrestricted movement of information" and quoted John Foster Dulles's remark "If I were to be granted one point of foreign policy and no other, I would make it the free flow of information" (pp. 24-25). Schiller argued that the language of the free flow of information was more a language of oppression than liberation, used by U.S. corporations to rid themselves of regulatory constraints.

Similarly, during NWICO, Western democracies were adamant that the international flow of information should not be restricted by government regulation, decrying a heavy-handed infringement on press freedom and informational openness. Now a similar critique is being leveled at the UN. What both related tactics achieve in the final analysis is to provide cover for operations of U.S. power and sustenance for a prevailing status quo. The licensing of journalists was a red herring then; the fear of top-heavy Internet governance is a red herring now. In both cases, the rhetoric of the free flow of information was about controlling information for corporate convenience and corporate-state power. These tropes still constitute a central piece of the debate but are now less visible and refolded into emancipatory rhetoric that ultimately argues for commercial interests to operate unimpeded. The increasingly corporate-dominated Internet arguably represents a major triumph of this view.

In this way, liberal rhetoric and good intentions have been co-opted repeatedly to cover the goals and maneuvers of the U.S. state and transnational corporations. This first became evident during the years after World War II, when liberals' internationalist concerns for creating a nonpropagandistic information environment laid fertile ground for industry interests to advocate for unfettered market operations, reappropriating liberal rhetoric to justify removing regulatory mechanisms and cultural safeguards. Work by Daniel Bell (1973) and others hailing the arrival of a new postindustrial society provided further rhetorical cover for the neoliberal ascendancy in the

1980s, making way for a rapidly expanding global market. Ó Siochrú (2004) argues that following the 1970s,

the notion of the centrality of information moved from the academic to the policy domain. By the time the “post industrial” society was replaced by the information society, the meaning attributed to it had been whittled down and shaped by political agendas of the time. By the late 1990s, the political, economic and semantic mold had set. The information society model of choice—implicitly there was only one—was to be private sector driven and owned, with governments and global institutions to create the political and regulatory environment suited to privatization and liberalization. Despite the name, its main goal was economic and it was integrally linked to the process of neoliberal public goals. (p. 4)

Ó Siochrú also noted how *information society* is an ideologically loaded term that extricates information from communication processes.

However, Ó Siochrú (2004) argues that the ITU, which has the lead organizational role in WSIS, had already fallen in line behind the neoliberal banner and had “swallowed undigested the ideologically-driven claims for the ‘information society’” (p. 8). One does not have to look very far for evidence of this neoliberal allegiance. Suggesting that a fundamental shift from an industrial to information-based society is taking place, the ITU’s WSIS “frequently asked questions” section states,

The rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies and innovation in digital systems represent a revolution that has fundamentally changed the way people think, behave, communicate, work and earn their livelihood. This so-called digital revolution has forged new ways to create knowledge, educate people and disseminate information. It has restructured the way the world conducts economic and business practices, runs governments and engages politically. (n.d.-a, para. 2)

Charged with defining the “information society,” WSIS recognized that a “digital revolution in information and communication technologies has created the platform for a free flow of information, ideas and knowledge across the globe” (para. 1). This global “digital revolution” had presumably unleashed new dynamics and radical breaks with past relations, an ideological assumption connected to earlier postindustrial and neoliberal rhetorics that privilege easily commodified information over communication processes.

## Scope of Debate

Although a direct comparison between NWICO and WSIS is limited by the latter’s focus on the Internet, significant technological developments clearly have exacerbated concerns first addressed at NWICO. Also noteworthy are issues no longer on the table during these discussions. These omissions reflect larger political economic structural

changes that have filtered down through the policy discourse. For example, according to the WSIS vision, access is a wholly good thing without qualifying whether for individuals or corporations. Furthermore, little discussion centers on transborder data flow despite the fact that 90% of the Internet belongs to proprietary networks, not the "open" Internet (Schiller, 2001). These networks require special security and firewalls and generate an enormous international flow of data. Yet it has become an unquestioned assumption that this flow should be left unregulated.

A major point of contention during the NWICO years concerned information flow imbalances (Duc, 1981; Varis, 1984). This debate later became a red herring by mischaracterizing it as the central plank of NWICO's platform and thus having it stand in for the entire range of important issues. Of all issues, it served as a straw man to be torn down once the flows could be presented as less quantitatively asymmetric (Schiller, 2001). The key argument here is that the change in flow did not equal a change in structural form of the information system or a qualitative change in content. In other words, structures of cultural production remain intact and do not relieve cultural imperialist trends of negative representations of developing countries that cut across class, gender, and racial categories. Tracey (1985) reminded us that the perceived weakness of the cultural imperialism thesis, similar to critiques against the hypodermic model of media effects, was also tied up with disagreements over the degree to which Western content negatively affected developing countries. On the other hand, Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2006) argued that the media imperialism argument not only was legitimate then but is also still relevant now, evidenced by the continuing power of U.S. and Western corporations in telecommunications within the global economy. Critics such as Boyd-Barrett see the continued dominance of ICANN as an instrument of American hegemony. At any rate, although content was no longer a major concern at WSIS, vestiges of this debate persist in discussions dealing with digital divide concerns framed in terms of access, not flows, a debate that still speaks to North-South inequities and deserves more attention.

Overall, there is also a crucial difference in the tone of the debates. Although both debates were contentious, the ideological edge is missing at WSIS. Instead, the emphasis is on reconciling different stakeholders within the current system. This current system, however, arguably privileges Western, especially American, interests. Now that American power is generally more in line with transnational capitalism, neoliberal inflections more easily map onto the Internet. Indeed, the much-vaunted openness of the Internet has come to be almost synonymous with unregulated markets for commercial interests.

## Implications and Future Research

My research of two discrete moments and movements toward reforming the international communications system points to several overarching themes. First, it is

clear that our current era is witnessing the further consolidation of a unified communications system structured along neoliberal lines. Second, it is clear that this hegemony was not yet ascendant with NWICO, although tensions between Western corporate liberalism and developing countries were already crystallizing. Indeed, NWICO's momentum sprung from the turmoil in the global order brought on by decolonization that opened a brief window for nation-states to discuss alternatives not in line with neoliberal dominance, such as the "right to communicate" doctrine. Third, it is clear that rhetorical strategies have remained relatively consistent. In many cases, the doctrine of the free flow of information continues to provide cover for the neoliberal objectives of Western nation-states and corporations. Finally, it is clear that the space for debate at WSIS has narrowed. For example, it is noteworthy that many related issues, including transborder data flow, cultural diversity, and the regulation of news content, are no longer on the table for discussion at WSIS. This shrinkage of debate indicates a further dominance of neoliberal logic and transnational corporations, thus altering national priorities and discursive boundaries.

During the Internet governance debates, a kind of historical amnesia hindered progressive possibilities, replacing the model of the Internet as a public good with the model of the Internet as a tool for commerce. The distant possibility of the ITU as a public institution taking on a multilateral governing role, though still completely dedicated to the project of liberalization, has proved to be highly controversial, though not viewed as much as a threat to Western interests as NWICO. In the final analysis, ICANN's Internet governance accords with neoliberal theory: The industry is left to be "self-regulated" and is not accountable to public interest provisions or public oversight. Significantly, this self-regulation still allows for U.S. veto power over all ICANN decisions.

In sum, my analysis suggests that similar to Streeter's (1996) corporate liberalism, the WSIS domain does not contest the fundamental economic order. Instead of focusing on underlying social inequities and political solutions, WSIS seeks to shore up the existing system by limiting debate to technical issues. This overall narrowing of discursive boundaries reflects the ascendance of neoliberalism. The increasing depth and range of neoliberal capitalism has manifested in acceptance of a global communications policy regime designed to privilege commerce over global justice concerns about sharing resources within a human rights-focused system. Efforts toward redressing persistent asymmetries in global communications between rich and poor nations have been largely abandoned. Yet the contradictions that produce such a policy regime are also reflected in continuing contestation at WSIS, including the rise of NGO coalitions and civil society discourse that has remained consistent for decades despite changing global contexts. These changes and continuities reflect both the power of neoliberal dominance and potential openings for progressive groups to contest it. Invoking the language of communication rights, many activists refuse to accept "information society" triumphalist rhetoric and other technological determinist arguments that render the framework of unequal power development irrelevant and ignore communication and cultural issues.

In light of today's neoliberal orthodoxy, it is important and useful to recognize that diverse views were once seriously discussed, and there was once a wide range of serious debate and division among governments as to what a global communication regime should look like. For a brief time, there was a compelling promise of a new culture emerging with the rise of newly independent states. That promise of social transformation now seems more remote, but the possibility for resistance remains, though perhaps outside of WSIS. For example, Ó Siochrú (2004) encouraged WSIS-focused activists to engage more with less compromised civil society forums, such as the World Social Forum, which has opened up substantial space for critics of the current global policy regime.

An understanding of how political economic structures have changed gives us purchase to comprehend what is happening at WSIS but, more important, on what is happening in global communications policy making writ large. Future research should include examining free-trade instruments such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization, which operate according to a more pronounced neoliberal logic and arguably have a more profound effect on global communication policy. Likewise, future international media reform efforts will need to focus more energy on these arenas. Although today's global policy regime evidences a neoliberal efflorescence, the evolving communications landscape brings with it new constraints and opportunities for resistance. These dynamic contours remind us that global policy regimes are human-made things and, far from being inevitable, are subject to human agency and change.

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