

Downloading Democracy? Potential and Limitations of the Internet for Advancing Citizens' Rights in Latin America*

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The Internet has profoundly changed the public sphere, even in those countries in which only a minority of the population has a computer and a modem in their home. In Latin America, the Internet is contributing to a democratization of the public sphere, in part due to the new technologies' ability to circumvent nationally established »filters« on media access. However, important economic and social obstacles to meaningful access remain, and new forms of social exclusion associated with the new information and communication technologies have emerged.

New Technologies and Old Inequalities

Of the »classic« mass media, television and radio without question reach a broad audience in all sectors of society in Latin America. In relation to the print medium this statement is much more questionable. The Internet now implies a series of new and, especially in Third World societies, high access barriers: connection to electricity and telephone networks, availability of necessary hard- and software, know-how in handling keyboards and computer programs, and finally the money needed to buy the equipment and cover the running costs. How meaningful can the Internet be in Latin America under these conditions?

First of all, a glance at the dimensions of the global inequalities related to the Internet is informative. The most common indicator is still the number of users. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which is the central institution for the telecommunications sector within the UN system and at the same time the most authoritative data source on the topic, counted more than 600 million Internet users worldwide at the

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end of 2002 (ITU 2003). Two out of three of them live in the high-income OECD countries, although those account for only 14 percent of the world's population. Latin America has 35 million users according to these statistics (see Table 1).

The gap is still big, but a few years ago it was even more dramatic. The share of Internet users from Asia, Africa, and Latin America has been growing slowly but steadily since the mid-1990s. A number of authors readily cite these trends as evidence for the gradual shrinking of the digital divide: the gap between those using the new technologies and those without proper access to them (see, for example, UNDP 2001: 40). However, such an optimistic perception ignores the enormous differences hiding behind the label »user,« which encompasses both the Wall Street manager with a 24-hour broadband connection and the Andean »campesino« who checks e-mails from his emigrant daughter every other week in a public access center.

Other indicators, such as the number of hosts per capita or international Internet bandwidth, more clearly reflect the divide between rich and poor countries. The ITU comments: »International Internet bandwidth (or IP connectivity) is a good measure of users' experience with the Internet. The greater the bandwidth, the quicker the response times. The 400,000 citizens of Luxembourg between them share more international Internet bandwidth than Africa's 760 million citizens« (ITU 2002b: 6). The international bandwidth of a country like Belgium is 200 times larger than that of Brazil, 8,000 times larger than that of Bolivia and 80,000 times larger than that of Bangladesh (ITU 2002a: 29) – comparisons that can be continued ad nauseam. Against the calculated optimism of conceiving the digital divide as a temporary state which is to be overcome by the natural expansion of the new technologies, the ITU (2002b: 12) therefore objects: »The nature of the digital divide is shifting, from quantity to quality.«

The national user data conceal another aspect: the strong North–South discrepancies are accompanied by equally harsh disparities within individual societies, favoring the urban middle and upper classes, with additional biases along the lines of age, sex, level of education, and command of the English language (see ILO 2001: 58 f; Gómez 2000: 73). As Costa (1999) reminds us, the public sphere is always fragmented, composed of different arenas and actors with unequal access to material resources and means of communication. This holds particularly true for digital media.

Table 1:
 Internet Indicators (Hosts, Users, PC Coverage) for Latin America and the Caribbean (Date: December 2002)
 (listed by share of Internet users per 100 inhabitants)

Country	Date	Internet Users		Hosts		PCs per 100 inhabitants
		absolute	per 100 inhabitants	absolute	per 100 inhabitants	
Chile	Jan 92	3,575,000	23.75	135,155	0.90	11.93
Jamaica	Aug 94	*600,000	*22.91	1,276	0.05	5.39
Costa Rica	Jan 93	800,000	19.31	7,725	0.19	19.72
Guyana	Oct 96	125,000	14.22	63	0.01	2.73
Antigua & Barbuda	1995	7,000	12.82	622	0.80	n.d.
Uruguay	Aug 93	** 400,000	** 11.90	78,660	2.32	11.01
Argentina	1989	4,100,000	11.20	495,920	1.35	8.20
Barbados	n.d.	30,000	11.15	160	0.06	10.41
Trinidad & Tobago	Sep 95	138,000	10.60	7,209	0.55	7.95
Peru	Feb 94	2,500,000	9.34	19,447	0.07	5.56
Belize	Aug 95	22,000	8.69	1,498	0.59	13.83
Brazil	1994	14,300,000	8.22	2,237,527	1.29	7.48
Bahamas	Sep 95	21,200	6.79	32	0.01	n.d.
Grenada	Oct 96	6,500	6.13	14	0.01	13.21
Venezuela	1994	1,274,400	5.05	24,138	0.10	6.09
El Salvador	Jan 96	300,000	4.64	269	—	2.52

Country	Date	Internet Users		Hosts		PCs per 100 inhabitants
		absolute	per 100 inhabitants	absolute	per 100 inhabitants	
Mexico	1989	4,663,400	4.57	1,107,795	1.09	8.20
Columbia	May 94	1,982,000	4.57	55,626	0.13	4.93
Panama	1995	120,000	4.13	7,393	0.25	3.83
Ecuador	Jan 93	503,300	3.88	2,648	0.02	3.11
Dominican Rep.	Jun 95	300,000	3.44	45,508	0.55	n.d.
Guatemala	Dec 95	400,000	3.33	9,789	0.08	1.44
Surinam	Oct 95	** 14,500	** 3.30	24	—	4.55
Bolivia	Jul 95	270,000	3.23	1,413	0.02	2.28
Honduras	Jan 96	200,000	2.97	160	—	1.36
Paraguay	1996	100,000	1.72	4,351	0.08	3.46
Nicaragua	Feb 94	90,000	1.67	3,370	0.06	2.79
Cuba	Mar 97	** 120,000	** 1.06	1,133	0.01	3.18
Haiti	Nov 96	80,000	0.96	—	—	n.d.
Ø Latin America			6.70		0.8	6.6
Total Latin America		35,670,800		4,249,796		

Explanatory note: All data for hosts, users and PC coverage are based on estimates.

* Jamaica's position follows a rapid leap forward in ITU statistics, from 100,000 users (or 3.85% of the population) in 2001 (ITU 2002a) to 600,000 users (or 22.91% of the population) in 2002 (ITU 2003) – a leap forward that certainly results rather from a changed manner of data collection in this country than from an actual multiplication by six of the Internet users in only one year.

** Data for end of 2001; no more recent data available.

Source: ITU (2003), except for date of connection to the Internet: ITU (2000: 100).

Modernization and Exclusion: Latin America's Liberalized Telecommunications Regime

The popular phrase referring to the »revolution« of information technology stresses the historic discontinuity compared to previous developments (for example, Castells 2000). Nevertheless, the new digital information and communication technologies are the result of an extremely accelerated, but still evolutionary process. This is not only valid for the technological realm; particularly in matters of political, social, and economic organization shaping the context for use and regulation of the new technologies, much continuity prevails. Crucially important is the telecommunications regime, understood as the specific configuration of actors and regulatory mechanisms, property and market structures, pricing mechanisms, patterns of expansion and usage, laws, norms, and technological standards in the telecommunications sector of a particular country or region (Hoffmann 2004: 3–4).

In the Third World the Chilean government under General Pinochet was the first to extend the neoliberal paradigm to the telecommunications sector. Privatization and liberalization replaced state monopoly companies. In the course of the 1990s the other states of the continent followed, with different modalities. In the words of the ITU (2000:1): »No region of the world has embraced the privatization of telecommunications as enthusiastically as Latin America.« Yet this »enthusiasm« is the product of circumstances which are the very opposite of enthusing, as the organization acknowledges in the same document: »A decade of economic crises during the 1980s left many Latin American governments strapped for cash and unable to resist the demands of financial institutions ... [this] led to further international loans being [made] dependent upon privatization« (ITU 2000: 2). This economic transformation under the neoliberal paradigm forms the context in which the diffusion and use of the Internet in Latin America must be discussed.

Under the previous, so-called »Fordist« model, the state had played a decisive role in the development of the sector, conveyed via the public monopoly over practically all telecommunications services. In most Third World countries the telephone network figured low on the development priority list. More often than not, the lucrative telephone monopoly was used as a cash cow by the state to fill budget gaps or divert funds elsewhere, with no thought of investing the revenues in the enlargement and modernization of the infrastructure. This continuous

capital drain, combined with bureaucratization and corruption, led frequently to very poorly maintained telephone systems and to the inability of the state to satisfy the growing demand for telephone connections and its chronic failure to make the necessary investment in the dynamic introduction of the new digital technologies.

The advocates of telecommunications liberalization took advantage of these structural deficits. The transfer to private, usually foreign telephone companies meant indeed a capital input which allowed a substantial modernization and broadening of the system. In most countries of the continent, the long waiting list for telephone connections disappeared rapidly. Nevertheless, the market can be an efficient allocation mechanism only where it encounters well-funded demand. The initial growth rates of the telephone network, as impressive as they were, greatly declined after the urban middle classes had been attended to.

Neither did liberalization lead to a general price reduction, as »conventional wisdom« would like us to believe. The consequence was rather a shifting of costs. The charges for local calls and above all the monthly basic fee rose to a level unaffordable for many Third World households, which had previously registered for a telephone connection. At this point too the ITU (2000: 3) concludes with some disillusion: »The glitter of privatization has faded. (...) Latin America still faces the hard fact that not much more than one third of the region's households have a fixed telephone. Even though a large proportion of the population is still without a phone, according to conventional statistics, there is hardly any unmet demand for telecommunications services in the region. The main reason for this is that local access prices (monthly subscription) have generally risen, excluding a great part of the population from the market.«

Telecentros and Cabinas Públicas: Latin American Alternatives to the Northern Access Model

In the developed countries of the North most citizens access the Internet during their working hours or from their private home computer. Such a model would entail profound social exclusion in the countries of the South. The primary alternatives available to democratize access to e-mail, World Wide Web, and so on, in these countries are, on the one hand, multipliers who use the Internet and help others benefit from it, and on the other hand public access centers. In Latin America two basic models

can be distinguished: the Internet cafés, small or medium-sized enterprises with commercial goals; and the so-called »telecentros,« which are typically non-profit-making and organized as an NGO (Non Governmental Organization) or as a part of communal structures.

Both offer similar services, mainly e-mail, surfing the World Wide Web, and the like. Telecentros generally put more emphasis on education and training than the ideal-type Internet café. From the point of view of a socially equitable distribution of the new information and communication technologies, however, there is another important point regarding the Internet cafés: for reasons of commercial profitability they aim mainly at affluent constituencies; the high concentration of Internet cafés in tourist destinations is only the most prominent example of this.

The continent's most successful telecentros project, the so-called »cabinas públicas« in Peru, shows how smooth the transition between the two types may turn out to be and how much they can complement each other (see Herzog 2002: 44–53; RCP 2004; and Proenza et al. 2001: 11–41). The leading force behind this initiative is the Red Científica Peruana (Peruvian Science Network, RCP), an NGO network that connects about 50 academic institutions and social organizations.

What started in 1994 as one center with 20 computers in Lima is today a national network consisting of more than 2,000 cabinas públicas of different shapes and sizes. Their contribution to the democratization of Internet access is striking: no less than an estimated 70–80 percent of Peruvian Internet users go online via the cabinas. Furthermore, with an official 2.5 million users (ITU 2003), corresponding to one in ten of its inhabitants, Peru is among the leading nations regarding Internet access in Latin America – in spite of low per capita income, strong social, ethnic, and linguistic cleavages, and low indicators in education and telephone coverage. The cabinas have indeed contributed to turning a significant part of the marginalized population from urban as well as rural backgrounds into regular users of the Internet.

The organizational model of the cabinas públicas doubtlessly played a decisive role in the rapid dispersion of the Internet in this Andean country. What started out as a social project within an NGO network was transformed successively into a business model with a highly dynamic franchising scheme, carried by small and medium-sized companies, while maintaining its socially inclusive characteristics. At least as important was the RCP's concept, which understood access to the new information and communication technologies as an essentially social and not a technolog-

ical problem. From the outset, the intention of the RCP was not only to offer the necessary hard- and software and network connections, but also to make the new media accessible according to the population's specific needs and to integrate them into their everyday structures and practices. This far exceeds mere educational measures and comprises local social work in a wider sense, as well as the development of locally produced and adapted content, ranging from the local weather forecast to the current price of potatoes on the market of Cuzco, from the use of indigenous languages to the development of a proprietary search engine »emancipated« from Google, named »Yachai,« and last but not least the use of indigenous languages in net communication.

Equitable Access – Meaningful Use – Social Appropriation

Access to computers with a network connection is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for an Internet diffusion that is conducive to development and social empowerment. The experience of the Peruvian *cabinas públicas* shows impressively how much the effect of public access centers depends on their successful integration into the needs and social structures of their respective target groups. This is also the basic idea behind the telecentros initiatives throughout Latin America. Authors from Costa Rica's *Fundación Acceso* put it in terms of a three-step formula that has become a central reference in the Latin American debate.¹ The first step is equitable access, meaning broad access to the Internet irrespective of class affiliation, sex, language, or skin color. This necessitates prices affordable also for the lower population strata as well as the passing down of basic know-how (see Gómez/Martínez 2001). The second step, transcending access, is termed meaningful use »defined as the ability to effectively use ICT resources and combine them with other appropriate forms of communication. Meaningful use also includes the possibility of people producing their own content and having access to other useful content in their own language. People make meaningful use of ICTs when they know

1. This model was originally developed by Kemly Camacho (2001), and was discussed in the influential Latin American discussion forum on »Comunidad Virtual MÍSTICA« (*Metodología e Impacto Social de las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación en América*; see <http://funredes.org/mistica>). The following definitions are cited from a summarizing document edited by the *Fundación Acceso* (Gómez/Martínez 2001).

how to combine Internet resources with community radio, face-to-face meetings, printed materials, and video, among other [things]« (ibid p. 6). The third component is the social appropriation of the new technologies. In this understanding, the ultimate goal is not the use of the Internet as such in schools or hospitals, but rather the improvement of education and medical care by its means. If – and only if – the integration of the new technologies can contribute to that, has it fulfilled its purpose. »Evidence of appropriation is not found in the use of ICTs, but rather in the changes that they have brought about in the real world« (ibid p.7).

As simple as this three-step approach may sound, many elaborate international development cooperation projects aimed at overcoming the digital divide are very distant from such an understanding. An especially striking example of the still prevailing technology-centered perspective is the so-called LINCOS («Little Intelligent Communities») project. This internationally celebrated showcase project is directed by an NGO founded by former Costa Rican president José María Figueres; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) designed the technical equipment and the big transnational computer companies act as sponsors of the hard- and software.

The project's balance, however, is disastrous: the LINCOS containers are crammed with the latest high technology, but they are put up in rural communities without any participation from the inhabitants who are supposed to benefit from them: integration into existing structures tends towards zero. The most up-to-date telemedicine equipment remains unused because there is nobody who knows how to operate it. Similarly, the digital laboratory for soil samples which the trained personnel of a regional agriculture center might put to good use serves in LINCOS solely to impress visitors from abroad; beyond that it is left to decay. It is stunning how the international media and a significant share of the development establishment have praised these caricature »white elephants« of development cooperation as an exemplary project. The project's initiator, José María Figueres, ascended on the basis of this initiative to no less a position than the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Information and Communication Technologies (Hoffmann 2002).

Circumventing Established Media Filters: The Zapatistas

One of the groundbreaking attributes of the new network-based technologies is their decentralized character. An e-mail to Buenos Aires does not cost any more than one within one's hometown; the homepage of an indigenous NGO in the Andes can be accessed as easily as the local weather forecast. As a consequence, the division into »sender« and »recipient,« while warranted for the traditional mass media, is not fully suited to the Internet. The Internet is not a one-to-many medium like radio or television, with one sender reaching a multitude of recipients with his programs. Instead, it is a many-to-many medium in which hundreds of thousands are both senders and recipients of information.

However, the Internet is no shelter for equity and equality. The hierarchical structures which mark both international relations and social conditions within each country are certainly reflected in the Internet. The Northern predominance over news about the South is unbroken. The big media corporations have frequently expanded their dominance from print media and television to the Internet. The most visited websites are in many countries exactly the homepages of those newspapers and TV stations which also dominate the non-virtual sphere.

Although the weight of such limitations must be stressed in the face of frequent idealization of the Internet, it has to be noted that the new information and communication technologies offer significant potential for circumventing the »filter« of established media. Over ten years ago, the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas impressively illustrated how the potential of the Internet could be made effective (see Huffschnid 2004; Cleaver 1995). Via e-mail and the Internet² the armed rebels succeeded in establishing unprecedented communication with a global public, which was decisive in deflecting what would have been the usual reaction of the Mexican state during the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) era: suppressing the re-

2. The Zapatistas' Internet access was by no means as comfortable as the popularized image of Subcomandante Marcos, sitting in the middle of the jungle typing e-mail messages on his Notebook, makes out. Instead the insurgents' leader saved his messages onto a floppy-disk which then had to be transported on foot or by donkey to nearby towns, where EZLN supporters forwarded the messages as e-mails. The central website of the Zapatista guerillas (www.ezln.org) was set up by a US student and was maintained outside Mexico on a San Francisco based server (Huffschnid 2004: 227).

bellion by military means, with political control over the mass media preventing any independent articulation on the part of the rebels.

Still, the popular denomination of the Zapatistas as »the world's first Internet guerrillas« is misleading. While they used the new technologies, they were never at the core of their project nor can they explain their (relative) success. Virtually nobody would have been interested in the Internet messages of a »Subcomandante Marcos« if they had not been part of an armed rebellion. The entrance of the rebels into the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas on New Year's Day 1994 would not have attracted such international interest if it had not been for the extraordinary »window of opportunity« opened up by the PRI system's loss of legitimation and Mexico's joining NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) that same day. Far fewer would have continued reading the messages of Marcos had they not deviated so strikingly from the traditional Latin American guerilla discourse. More than that: not only the discourse, but also the concept behind the Zapatista guerillas broke with the classic understanding of an »armed avant-garde of the people.« Instead, the Zapatistas presented themselves as an armed but self-confined movement, aiming at the construction of negotiating power for the powerless vis-à-vis the government and at making the voices of the marginalized indigenous groups heard.

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In that sense, the Zapatistas used the Internet as one component within a complex and innovative communication strategy. Many other groups and movements trying to reproduce the success of the so-called »Internet guerilla« rapidly discovered that a website filled with programmatic declarations and an extensive mailing list alone did not gain them any more sympathy, greater influence over the national public, or more power in political disputes.

Internet and »Media Sovereignty«: The Cuban Case

The Internet's cross-border character has led to a growing transnationalization of domestic political public spheres. This particularly affects governments or political systems which claim national »media sovereignty« or depend strongly on their control over national media. In this sense, Cuba is the country in Latin America that is experiencing these tensions most severely. One and a half decades after the collapse of the socialist states in Eastern Europe, the Castro regime still unconditionally upholds the state monopoly over all mass media, as codified in Article 53 of the Cuban Constitution of 1976: »The citizens are granted liberty of word and press in accordance with the goals of the socialist society. The material conditions for its exercise are given through the fact that press, radio, television, cinema and other means of mass communication are state or social property and under no circumstances can be the object of private property.«³ Now, how can this constitutional postulate be guaranteed under the conditions of the Internet?

A state monopoly over the media requires effective control over the national media sphere. Therefore official Cuba for a long time perceived the Internet, in which homepages from all over the world are just »one click away,« primarily as a political danger. Typical is the statement of a Cuban author who sees a reflection of »the hegemonic ambitions of the USA in this invasion *sui generis*, realized not by marines, but by information, which moves via satellites, fiber optic cables and Hertz frequencies« (Sánchez Villaverde 1996: 40).

This perspective is inevitably at odds with Cuba's economic strategy since the early 1990s, however, which is based on a limited opening up of the economy (tourism, joint ventures, and so on) and which claims science, medicine, and biotechnology as vital future perspectives. A proactive attitude towards the new information and communication technologies seems indispensable here.

As the last Latin American country to do so, the Castro regime finally decided to establish a regular IP (Internet Protocol) connection in 1996. The political context sheds light on this action. On the one hand, the USA smoothed the way by normalizing telephone and data connections be-

3. República de Cuba 1976 (translation by the author); for a detailed analysis of the Cuban case see Hoffmann 2004: 161–245.

tween the two countries and exempting them from the US embargo, on the grounds that increased communication would advance Castro's downfall. This made it possible for Cuba's first Internet connection to be provided not through states like Canada or Mexico, but directly via a 64 kbps connection to Florida, provided by the US company Sprint. On the other hand, the internal political context is noteworthy: while the USA used the promotion of intensified communication as a »track two« alongside their long-standing embargo policy to undermine the regime, the Cuban Internet connection only materialized a few months after the Politburo had effectively attacked and permanently silenced the previously vital intellectual reform debate within the country's institutions precisely on the grounds that such »excessive« pluralism would play into the hands of the US government (Hoffmann 1997).

In the middle of the 1990s the Cuban government decided furthermore to transform the state telecom monopoly into a joint venture with capital from abroad because this was the only way of securing the necessary investment for the extension and modernization of the obsolete telephone system and data network. In 2000 followed the creation of the new Ministry for Information and Communication, replacing the former army-run Ministry of Communications and fusing it with crucial institutions of the IT sector.

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Nevertheless, Internet use remains under close state surveillance. Private access from home is forbidden; public access centers are largely reserved for foreigners or selected user groups, or it is restricted to a closed domestic Cuban network, similar to a company's intranet, which the authorities refer to as the »Cubonet.« These intra-Cuban networks – for example, the health sector's Infomed network – sometimes work quite well and fulfill important functions. However, they would be much more convincing if they could be used in addition to and not as a replacement for the resources of the world wide web.

Internet use at the workplace is subject to strict control, which is assured by organizational as well as technical mechanisms. The centralization of national Internet access permits the preventive central blocking of

unwanted sites for all users. Nevertheless, subsequent control is more important: each institution granted Internet access must name a person in charge of computer security; and all users have to sign an escrow setting out their obligation to use the Internet only for purposes beneficial to a socialist society. Mostly on a monthly basis those responsible for security receive long printouts with data traces left by their colleagues while surfing the Internet. Since everybody knows about this (and because exemplary punishments call to mind the state's seriousness on the matter) general anticipatory obedience ensues.

The state's restrictions meet the requirements of the Cuban constitution inasmuch as they prevent the information flow over the Internet from functioning as an independent mass medium. The oppositional websites maintained by Cuban emigrants (for example, the virtual daily newspaper *Encuentro en la Red* at www.cubanencuentro.com) reach only a small audience on the island. And even for those reading it, there is little opportunity to publicly articulate this information bootlegged into the country. The same holds true for the dissident journalists on the island, whose texts are posted on the Internet by supporters from abroad (for example, www.cubanet.org). While in recent years these »periodistas independientes« have come to prominence abroad, most Cubans on the island first learned of their existence when the government arrested over 70 of them in March and April 2003, sentencing them to long prison terms as a public deterrent.

The balance is ambivalent. The new information and communication technologies have become a substantial component of the efforts to modernize the Cuban state, economy, and society. And the combination of tightening up societal possibilities of expression and the careful widening of access to the new digital media under state control has so far proven to be a politically feasible path. The Internet has not changed the Cuban public sphere very much. But the state has reacted to the mere potential of the Internet for transnationalizing and pluralizing the public sphere with a multitude of restrictions which entail high economic and social costs and constitute a heavy burden on the country's development prospects.

Communication Rights: A Plea for a Citizens' Rights-Centered Perspective

As many Third World states put the slogan »media sovereignty« on the agenda of the debate about the »New World Information and Communication Order« in the 1970s and 1980s, more often than not the postulated ideal of emancipation from the post-colonial media dominance of the North went hand in hand with individual governments' desire to suppress oppositional voices in their own country. Against this background, the North could link its opposition to a change in media power structures relatively easily with the accusation that the authoritarian government representatives of the South were in the end only interested in restricting their population's civil rights.

The Internet has cast this conflict in a new light. If previously radio and TV stations had to make an extra effort to broadcast across national boundaries – as in the case of the »Voice of America« or »Deutsche Welle« – the Internet has turned it around: now it takes a special effort to make content from abroad *in*accessible to the population. At the same time, the discrepancies and dependencies between North and South remain largely as blatant as 20 or 30 years ago.

The discussions at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva in December 2003 therefore seemed in part like a replay of the debates of the 1970s and 1980s. The South called for financial contributions from the North to overcome the »digital divide« and demanded the transfer of the central governance structures of the Internet to an intergovernmental arrangement within the UN framework, that is, to an organization in which all countries are represented solely by government representatives, without interference from civil society representatives (as is the case with the ITU itself). Meanwhile, the advanced industrialized countries showed a limited will to hand out money and vehemently defended the current organizational model, in which the Internet's highest regulatory authority – the Internet Corporation on Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – is a private entity, set up under US corporate law and collaborating closely and in a formalized manner with the US government. The latter was justified especially by the argument that this was the only way of protecting pluralism and the free flow of information against state interference and censorship. In Geneva, as in the debate three decades earlier, this argument received costless support from the fact that those countries most fervently in favor of an intergov-

ernmental arrangement – at the WSIS summit, for example, China played a leading role – were precisely those which severely restrict the emergence of an independent and pluralist public sphere in their own countries.

While most governments – in spite of the emergence of new technologies – found themselves in the same political trenches during the Geneva World Summit as three decades earlier, it was the civil organizations gathered around the summit which effectively opened up new perspectives. Their central approach is to understand access to and use of the Internet as citizens' communication rights, as formulated by the campaign »Communication Rights in the Information Society« (CRIS – www.cris.info.org) or by the Association for Progressive Communications (see APC 2001 and www.apc.org). Such a citizens' rights-centered perspective defends freedom of opinion and expression in the new digital media against authoritarian intervention (by both the state and non-state actors) just as much as it opposes mechanisms of social exclusion inherent in a neoliberal economic model, claiming an undeniable need for full participation in the public sphere, including the new media and technologies, for all sectors of society.

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