

Notes toward a GCNP position in the ongoing WSIS process

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Although our only rough consensus is that wider debate now needs to occur, the contributors to the draft in its current state include:

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One of the outcomes of an event such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) should clearly be a deepening of the dialogue on the definition of an “Information Society”. In such a dialogue, for those who affiliate themselves with the Global Community Networking Partnership (GCNP) and with the community based (“Community Networking/Community Informatics”) approach to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) use, the basis of the discussion will be that we are no longer in “transition” to an Information (or Knowledge or Learning) Society. Rather, for many of us and for much of our lived experience, we are already in the “Information Society”. Therefore the practices of community networking don’t “anticipate” that society, they describe it.

GCNP recognizes the Civil Society position as expressed in the Press Statement of November 16th and the list of essential benchmarks for WSIS. But we would also like to point to critical elements of an understanding of the nature of an Information Society (or, as we would prefer to call it, a Learning Society) that are not addressed within the context of WSIS, even in the Civil Society position. GCNP submits that a vision of access to open systems as the basis for open knowledge sharing, open decision making, open value creations, is the key basis for the achievement of social justice.

The primary purpose of GCNP is to learn and to share the ICT enabled and online practices that contribute to the formation and on-going health of communities in all their dimensions. In keeping with our vision, we strive to ensure that the systems we use to share our experience grow ever more open and accessible. Underlying that purpose is a fundamental commitment to the uses of ICTs for social change. GCNP takes an “Internet-based” or community online view of socio-economic development. The members of this network of community networking associations understand through hands-on experience how the practices of community development online reveal useful and joyful ways of learning to live in a Learning Society.

GCNP sees the Learning Society as a society of learning communities that self-organize and that “internetwork” into open patterns of local-global relationships. The fractal shapes of its economic and ecological zones emerge out the complexities of its networks. The word that describes the patterns of interaction made by such zones is not “boundaries.” It is “flow.” Based on that understanding, GCNP advocates four structural principles shaping the social networks of a Learning Society and the realities of daily life online:

1. The importance, and the absence, of the role of “community” as an essential element of public policy.

A government’s use of the word “community” in its policy statements usually masks its intention to use the Internet to off-load, down-load, outsource, or “decentralize” the delivery of government services. However, the Internet is a tool for the “distribution” of functions across networks of services delivery. Decentralization and distribution are not the same thing. The Internet allows for and enables the users of services, those within “communities” to take responsibility for the design, development and delivery of those services but within a context of local self-organization, partnership and responsibility rather than as a reaction to the withdrawal of responsibility by governments.

Nor does GCNP intend the word “community” to be seen as a synonym for “civil society”. As within WSIS, an exclusive focus on civil society’s role risks fostering an agenda that bureaucratizes and professionalizes citizenship. In community, it is a person’s authentic response to the situation, not their professional authority that contributes to the social glue of trust. In most circumstances, civil society is a creature of the state and mirrors its failings and its inability to adapt to the evolving conditions within the “Learning Society”. On the other hand, community emerges when participation occurs, when people live their own lives within the conditions as they are presented and as they are evolving.

It is our position (our agenda) that the inclusion of community in public policy is fundamental to the achievement of a Learning Society over-all. “Community” is not therefore a civil society “issue”. Community as a shared value and as a social form, mitigates the negative impacts of the forces of global competition and of state regulation, by providing the counterbalance of cooperation, collaboration and connection necessary for new forms of social integration to emerge.

2. The importance of self-organization in dynamic systems as a completely different aspect of governance.

The primary goal of the current closed systems of governance is control or stability in the social order. But self-organizing systems are also a form of governance. They sustain a dynamic social equilibrium through interpersonal, intra-social and inter-organizational interactions based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation. The result is inherently fairer in its distributive social outcomes. Open systems are built as learning systems. Complex world level problems are most effectively resolved through learning rather than control.

Communities emerge through the principles of self-organizing systems. The practices of community development online are based on cooperative actions different from that of legally enforced partnerships and hierarchies of control. Unlike closed systems which see them as dichotomous, in self-organizing systems, the on-going processes of

differentiating, integrating and redifferentiating and reintegrating are necessarily in balance.

WSIS is currently defining civil society as:

Primarily about people freely associating to achieve common aims as distinct from striving for political power or the accumulation of capital.

and

A set of public interactions which involves, but not exclusively, self-organizing groups autonomous from the state, market and family that operate or are linking across territorial boundaries.

The GCNP approach, by assuming processes of self-organization also assumes certain consequences for acting from self-organization that are not normally included in public policy thinking. For GCNP, in a society where the primary element of structure **and** the primary structural element is “community,” the WSIS civil society definition should actually be understood to cover all of society, not merely a sector within it. In such a society the primary mode and operation of “structure” supports and enables *learning* as the central value and practice.

The concept of “communities of practice” is at the heart of an understanding of how the dynamics of informing, knowing, and learning shape a political economy of ideas. Effectively applying the “rules” structuring self-organizing systems to development requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of what “governance” actually means. Governance in self-organizing systems that are open and that learn, is different from governance in hierarchical systems that control.

If you look carefully inside large organizations, institutions and governments, you can find pockets of people engaged in growing communities of practice online. Those communities are pushing the organizational contexts they inhabit toward a tipping point where access to open systems becomes the predominant force structuring their organizations’ interactions with the world around them.

It is important to underline that we are really not speaking the language of private and public sector “partnerships.” We are talking about cooperative actions in the context of self-organizing systems that learn, as representing a completely different form of governance from hierarchies of control. In self-organizing systems, social practices related to learning and through learning--social, economic, and even political innovation, can act as a bridge between those motivated by resource management issues and those motivated by cooperation in the public interest or for the common good. In community, functions that integrate and functions that differentiate do not work in opposition to each other.

Institutional democracy is not all that there is to governance, and the context in which the will to power is exercised is changing rapidly. For example, the assumptions that underlie the writing of code for open source systems, and therefore the source code that makes the Internet work, most definitely includes values in human relationship that are

inherently political—values such as cooperation, mutual respect, peer to peer reciprocity. The protection of those values is essential to our survival.

The nature of community networking experience and practices is such that we can and should address issues of governance more broadly than the simple project to reinvigorate democracy. For discussion, here is a possible objective that might suit GCNP's global needs:

To engage in political dialogue about the networks in which individuals and societies interact online and the implications of such networked interaction for changing forms of governance.

3. The absolute need to defend (non-negotiable) the Internet as a commons.

GCNP assumes an Internet-based model when interpreting the cultural functions that structure a Learning Society. In that view, the Internet must be sustained as an artifact of the culture of a commons that we all share. The Internet expresses the values of the culture that created it, and users of the Internet are thereby immersed in the values of that culture. This is in contrast to the worldviews of governments and corporations who still assume that the Internet is merely a device, a “tool,” which can be adapted to their purposes without consequences for their existing way of seeing the world. But the Internet is not value free. It arrives in their midst with its cultural message intact.

All of humanity needs the Internet in order to collaborate on global issues. If the privatization of the Internet that is now underway totally succeeds, then humanity will have destroyed an important means of addressing the matters of its own survival. This is an issue that rapidly becomes both technical and philosophical. In essence, the Internet's code layer, the software that runs the servers, links and connections, is in the public domain because it is written in the languages of Open Source Systems. To continue to function as designed, it must stay there.

Usually the idea of an “electronic commons” is stated by civil society organizations to mean a dedicated civic “space” that is somehow separated from the Internet overall. But the Internet's code layer already forms a commons that all of its inhabitants occupy. It just isn't good tactics for GCNP or Civil Society to abandon the whole territory in order to defend only part of it. Nation states are a huge distance away from accepting that the erosion of that commons is not in their long-term interest.

4. Effective Use beyond the Digital Divide

GCNP believes that the most important driving factor in socio-economic and political development is choice. In societies governed by dynamic self-organization, there is a need to understand that economic access to ICT infrastructure is only one part of a much

broader question of access to open processes of participation in the life of communities and societies overall.

The “Digital Divide” as a terminology and as a practice seems largely to be about ensuring “access” to the infrastructure and content of ICTs. But that sense of “access” for many, if not for most, is insufficient. The technology is not just a source of “content”, to be passively consumed, such as all previous media. Rather ICTs are also means for the production and distribution of content and, beyond content, for the production and distribution of knowledge and practices about the systems of production and distribution themselves.

The utility of dynamic systems is their capacity to sustain an echo of their own actions. What this implies is that the challenge with ICTs is not to provide simple and passive “access” to the ICTs. Rather, it is to provide the means by which individuals in their communities can make effective use of these technologies for productive as well as other processes. What they know, that which informs them, governs their capacity to make effective choices both about what they produce and what they consume. Effective use is the standard. Access in all its various components is a pre-condition and an enabler of “use.” The embodiment of experience in a community of practice that provides the way for that participation and choice to occur is what we mean by community networking.