

## **WSIS Intersessional Meeting Paris, 15-18 July 2003**

### **Council of Europe (Observer)**

Remarks by James Wimberley, 15 July – Stakeholders’ priorities

The Council of Europe is a European governmental organization with 45 member states, working for human rights and a democratic society in a range of policy fields. In June 2003, the Committee of Ministers – the governing body – adopted a Political Message to the Summit. The text is available on the WSIS website and that of the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup>.

The Message is a short document – three pages plus two for an action plan – and being concise may contain useful language for the Declaration. In many areas its ideas are very convergent with the draft Declaration, and I will concentrate my remarks on issues where there seems to be an interesting difference of emphasis.

Our document has little to say on questions of infrastructure, management, economic policy, poverty reduction and global development, not because these are unimportant but because they fall outside our core competences. As it happens, these are precisely the areas of greatest controversy. The Council was thus able to reach a consensus position by focusing on issues of human rights, equity, and the rule of law where the role of governments is indisputable.

The Council puts human rights first. While human rights are indivisible, this is an *information* Summit, and it is right to start with the fundamental information rights of freedom of expression and of private life as the cornerstones of policy in this area. The human rights perspective also led us to a rather more sober tone. The information society is the inevitable next stage of human development, with great opportunities but also real dangers. It is not Utopia but an arena in which the age-old struggle for human rights and human dignity must be fought anew.

The Message includes a paragraph on quality of information, sharing a concern expressed by the Director-General of Unesco in his opening speech. The Internet reminds me of the tale of Borgès about the infinite library, containing – somewhere on its miles of shelves - the true story of your life, but also many false accounts. How do you find the truth? And there are some very dark corners in the infinite library of the Web. Borgès was for a time the director of the Argentine national library, and knew whereof he dreamt.

The search for truth and wisdom is inevitably hard. The Council sees the role of governments as supporting citizens in their search for good information “not by censorship but by education for discernment and exemplary public information”.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.coe.int>

[Information, in the computer scientist's sense of bits carrying messages, serves many different purposes - abstract and practical knowledge, but also personal relations, business, trade and associative life, political debate, art and entertainment, and the search for transcendence. Our notion of quality must encompass this diversity of purposes.]<sup>2</sup>

The sections of the Political Message on access, equity and inclusion of vulnerable groups; on ICT for strengthening the democratic process; on education and lifelong learning; and on cultural diversity and local content are very close to the thrust of the draft Declaration and for lack of time I will not go into them, only to say that these are for us essential axes of policy concern and initiative.

Our approach to the public domain of information is I think innovative. We link this apparently new issue to the traditional responsibility of government for the preservation of and access to the cultural heritage in general, exemplified for instance in the public library service.

The rule of law is for us considerably wider than the issue of cyber-security and trust. The world being what it is, law must provide "rules for the repression of wrongdoing and the protection and compensation of victims". However, the rule of law does not mean government control. Co-regulation and self-regulation will continue to have essential parts to play.

The Council has created two international legal instruments expressing this philosophy; the Cybercrime and the Data Protection Conventions. These are open to non-member states and thus, we hope, balanced and high-quality contributions to a global legal order. In this context I can only endorse the remarks of my colleague from the OECD about the need to reflect in the text the relevant work of all the regional multilateral organizations.

Finally, I would like to join the appeal of the Director-General of Unesco for recognition of the role of civil society. In this field, civil society is more than a partner in implementing a plan to be adopted by governments. The Internet and the Web were largely *created* by civil society, in the form of the scientific communities of North America and Europe. Many of the pioneers are still living. I would like to add a personal plea that the Summit recognize their contributions. If governments were convening a summit in the year 1504 on the printing revolution, would they not invite, if they were living, Johannes Gutenberg and Aldus Minutius?

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<sup>2</sup> Added after delivery in the light of the discussion on paragraph 1 of the draft Declaration.