

## References for a communication strategy in the WSF process

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### I- INTRODUCTION

#### **The WSF's message facing the narratives of egoism**

It is hardly arguable that the hearts and minds that the libertarian resistances seek to touch are being more easily reached by the ideological fundamentalism disseminated by the media.

Right-wing ideas may fail to win over consciences, because the crowds they move are generally the same as those they plunder. But their advances use the dissemination of hatred, fear, and grudges to garner desperate adhesions, dissociated from discernment.

The WSF's message, *Another World is Possible*, is faced with an old enemy who has now reemerged with renewed vigour. Neoliberalism once combatted has found effective ways to propagate, among them the facilitation of extremist ideologies—who are served by the same businesses and services as those fighting them.

Mediatised terrorism brutalises society. The “other”, criminalised and abandoned for more than a decade to the wars of terror, now knocks at the door in the form of helpless and forsaken refugees. Their children killed in wars and crossings are the image of a world that has become numb.

Pain is colonised. On rare occasions, images of the martyred little ones resemble the fragility of the western children, and outrage transcends nations. But most often, thousands perish hidden in dehumanised statistics.

While the WSF's message is powerful, urgent and necessary, we have more to reflect on the media that overwhelms us with the counter-message of selfishness. Fascist narratives paint the miserable as

threats and come forward with solutions for an impossible, cleanse-driven\* management of globalised malaise. More often than not, justice and xenophobia seem viable options to people stricken by it.

As for us, we are brutalised too. Our shock at an attack in Paris is not as striking as our astonishment with bombing in Africa. And even if that is not true, one factor is coming between us and our ability to express outrage: our message lacks media. But worse than that—we have no strategies to find them

## **II – Communication on the International Council's agenda**

The WSF is a place for creating Another Possible World. Thus, its communication serves those who make the process, organisations, movements, dissenting voices, and communities around with alternatives to current model of society.

The WSF discussed its communication at the latest meeting of the International Council (WSF-IC) in August 2016 in Montréal. The discussion exposed the need to rethink the way the communication commission operates, devise its strategy for the WSF, and take advantage of the collaboration with the World Forum of Free Media (WFFM).

In December 2016, during COP-22 in Marrakech, a meeting of the WSF-IC Working Group on the dynamics for overhauling the Secretariat added demands to its basic communication tasks to improve the visibility of the WSF process.

In fact, the WSF communications cannot be organised unless we use adequate tools, which includes content, distribution and interactivity platforms. It is up to a Communication Commission to propose and discuss alternatives to provide them, and they require us to invest in disseminating content.

According to the Charter of Principles, item 7, on collective deliberations at events: “The World Social Forum undertakes to circulate such decisions widely by the means at its disposal, without directing, hierarchizing, censoring or restricting them, but as deliberations of the organisations or groups of organisations that made the decisions.”

But in order to meet this commitment, we need to identify and overcome the pitfalls that isolate the voices of the social movement. For the WFFM, the social struggles for Another Possible World are inseparable from the struggles for the right to communication, which the hegemonic system restricts from the majority of the population, notwithstanding the corporate social media phenomenon.

Advancing communications in the WSF is also about tensioning the communications around the process to confront and subvert the logic of the media systems and pave the way for other narratives and guidelines.

## **III - Brief history of communication in the WSF**

### *1 -Shared Projects*

The WSF has not had an integrated communications plan supported by the WSF-IC since 2009, when the IC Communication Commission Project initiated in 2007 to mobilise and promote the January 2008 Global Call for Action came to an end at the WSF Belém. It included a well-established interactive social media network prior to Facebook, video platforms, and radio, photo, and text coverage, with comprehensive and diverse content. It had a dedicated funding source and a managing group within the Commission, with tasks handled by the forum media and organisations.

It was based on shared communication, a concept introduced at the first WSF in 2001, which was subsequently developed in the following years among alternative media and reception projects set up at the WSF events, and included daily TV broadcasts and a free knowledge laboratory. Unlike collaboration (where all are invited to help), sharing meant organising together and using the product freely.

Throughout the years of the WSF's existence, proposals for communication were submitted to the IC on several occasions, and a number of initiatives were developed by commission members or partners from the media, and they deserve credit.

After 2009, the integrated project was dismantled, the social media network was replaced by another tool, and the initiatives gave way to independent, disconnected efforts. The IC office in Brazil retained its corporate website, a four-language newsletter in the years that followed, an IC discussion list, a WSF mailing list, and a press office that had been located in Brazil from 2001 until the Secretariat relocated to Maghreb-Mashrik in the run-up to the WSF in Tunis.

As of 2012, communications became more directly linked to the event organising committees and their resources, with websites and committees created for the Tunis (2013 and 2015) and Montréal (2016) events.

In Brazil, a project conducted by the IC Memory Group in collaboration with local organisations resulted in a platform to share the materials gathered by the WSF office over more than a decade long of activities. But it did not continue after the funding period. One task still lay ahead: researching and gathering content from past international, regional, and thematic forums.

Supported by collective or individual efforts, projects related to the forum, including WSFTV, Openfsm, Ciranda, and FSMinfo, just about kept running, with no integration strategies from the CC, or funding policies from the IC. The Extended Forum became part of the WSF approach, based on voluntary work. Local committees within the world or thematic WSF events adopted different strategies to encourage or arrange their own coverage. Some larger delegations included people from the media—that was the case with France, Brazil, Canada, Senegal, Italy, and Morocco, as well as individual members from other countries.

## *2- Political Agenda*

Meanwhile, the WSF 2009 started off another process, one that was more concerned with the political agenda of communications: it launched the first WFFM, which brought together, and discussed the role of, free media and movements in championing Another Model of Media, and brought forward proposals to the WSF. This process involved media outlets, content makers, alternative media technology developers, PR people from movements and minorities, with increasing engagement of people working with media & communication.

Seminars and regional WFFM events have been held in recent years in Brazil, Morocco, Tunisia, and Paris, as well as a total of six world events associated with the WSF: Belém 2009, Dakar 2011 (seminar), Rio 2012 (Rio+20), Tunis 2013-2015, and Montréal 2016.

Strategic themes in communication besides the promotion of alternative media gained prominence on the WFFM and WSF agenda—integrating activities. They ranged over a number of topics, including: protecting journalists and bloggers, internet freedom and governance, free technologies and independent networks, community radios, indigenous communications and media de-colonisation, media portrayals of women, ethnic media and the peripheries, the struggle for democratic regulatory frameworks, access to information and knowledge, and freedom of expression. A Charter of Free Media with its political agenda was adopted in Tunis 2015.

The history of the WSF—including the WFFM process—reveals a wealth of experience and political debate that could inform the strategic plan the WSF needs. Of course some processes have clearly been exhausted, and scattered initiatives have become disconnected from the mobilising outreach WSF communication needs to gain.

On the other hand, the incorporation of new languages and tools does not necessarily mean that they are better or suitable for the organisations as a group. Creating a self-conscious communication plan requires connections between the different WSF languages, something that can transform the movements' communications into a movement in itself for diversity in the media and communication, as advocated by the WFFM. Recognising the urgency of a global strategy that serves the voices within the WSF is a challenge for the IC. Taking a role in the process, with a plan that is relevant for the process, will depend on the political will to make communication a priority.

#### **IV - The global media & comms scene after 15 years of the first WSF**

##### *1. Transnationalisation*

An elite of large media corporations that concentrate a lot of power in their hands have been the propagators of the “pensée unique” that the World Social Forum was created to defy in 2001. The economies of scale with audience made possible by broadcasting in the past century have resulted in strategies to mass-disseminate, commodify, and standardise content, at the expense of depth and diversity in the media discourse.

With neoliberalism, the information and entertainment industry and its entire production and distribution chain came closer and merged, in an aggressive process of business concentration and globalisation. In the United States alone—which has remained the world's largest media and communications HQ to the present day—the 50 companies in the industry in the 1980's had shrunk to just half a dozen transnational giants in operation by the time the WSF was born—and narrowed a little further to five in the following years. Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Bertelsmann, and Viacom at one point controlled 90 percent of the world's media.

A 2001<sup>1</sup> report suggested the mergers had been the result of the telecom deregulation and the transnationalisation, the privatisation and commercialisation of public radio and television services, deregulation and liberalisation of media ownership, licence grants to multinational groups, the vertical and horizontal integration of domestic and international media, the emergence of regional oligopolies, and the transnationalisation and concentration of cultural industries, most notably in the production and marketing of their products.

Meanwhile, over the years of the WSF's existence, there has been an internet boom—even the WSF events were organised and promoted using online tools—as well as a voracious growth of online business, especially search engines, geolocation, social media, and data mining and selling, which have catapulted new players into the media industry and ownership of communication media.

The global media ranks have been invaded by internet experts, although the old media tycoons have remained powerful. Google (now Alphabet Inc, which also owns YouTube, Gmail, and Android) has

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Fiol

become the world's biggest communication company, even when compared to transnational corporations making profits from television, film, and magazine sales combined. The third-ranking business, next to Disney, is now Comcast Corporation, the largest cable television company in the US, and has also become the country's second-largest broadband Internet provider and third-largest telephone service provider. Facebook (which also owns WhatsApp) ranks fifth, ahead of both Germany's Bertelsmann, the leading European radio and TV company, and Viacom—two of the old, once-unbeatable leaders, now squeezed out of the top five. The powerful Time Warner has slipped from top to 16th, squeezed between Yahoo! Inc at the 15th place and Microsoft at 17th.

The power reshuffle reflects not only a competition for profits, but also the emergence of a player in the communication scene that has changed the rules for connecting with the audience—it interacts directly with it, and even derives the elements to reorganise it. Understanding the connections between power and data mining, the role and the engaging potential of social media, has become a challenge for social movements.

Equally challenging is the opportunity gap for exploring the potential of a media-dominated world. While internet penetration gets as high as 81 percent in developed countries, in emerging countries it halves to 40 percent, and if you look at the poorest countries, the figure plunges to as little as 15 percent. Even within those groups, it provides a blatant inequality indicator. According to the UN, 75 percent of the broadband capacity in the Asia-Pacific region, for example, is concentrated in East and Northeast Asia, whereas the Pacific sub-region accounts for only 1.93 percent. China has one of the most powerful communications systems in the region, and its Baidu corporation (which has lent its name to 'China's Facebook') has risen to the ninth place among the world's biggest media conglomerates. However, South and Southwest Asia, North and Central, and Southeast Asia have a combined 23.19% of the region's fixed broadband subscriptions. The digital divide remains a huge chasm keeping entire populations stranded from the opportunities created by the online network.

## *2. Cross-ownership and political power*

Rather than challenging the cross-ownership empire (where a single corporation controls television, radio, telecom services and infrastructure, the film and audiovisual industry, print media, papermaking, machinery, software, content, and distribution), the internet has become part of it as the big business spread its wings over news sites, web radio, web TV, games, apps, etc.

Regional conglomerates incorporate the mass logic of their global counterparts in creating conservative common sense. In Latin America, grassroots, working-class parties that rose to power within the first decade of the WSF faced enormous pressure from powerful media groups including Brazil's Rede Globo and Argentina's Grupo Clarín. Both of them have brazenly sought to overthrow these parties from power, whether through biased election coverage or by supporting coups d'état.

Mainstream media campaign to persuade the population that media regulation is censorship. They also try to push counter-information out of their way by advocating against public service media and choking off alternative media from the lack of policies to make them sustainable.

The administration of Mauricio Macri in Argentina has defied the Ley de Medios and re-empowered the big business. The monopolist Grupo Clarín, challenged under Cristina Kirchner's rule, regained power, getting the green lights to buy Nextel and operate across the country's entire media and communications industry.

In Brazil, after an impeachment coup overthrew the elected president Dilma Rousseff, ruling parties

set out to dismantle public service media. The federal government took away the independence of Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC), the national public service broadcaster. The Rio Grande do Sul state government and its allies in the state legislature closed down the public service broadcasting media run by Fundação Piratini, drawing the resistance of its workers against the dismantling and job cuts. It should be noted that the EBC and Piratini media outlets have actively participated in the coverage of the WSF over the years, building an important archive. The EBC even joined the mission to Gaza leaving from the WSF in Tunisia to Palestine, to denounce the occupation and extend solidarity to the Palestinian people.

The administration of Michel Temer has been rolling back the rights of the Brazilian population, including the right to retirement, and cutting down funding from of education and healthcare, while securing sympathy of the media by raising its advertising expenditures on private media and taking away a large portion of its advertising from the hands of progressive media. At the same time, it has tried to push a bill through Congress to gift the telecom industry with a transfer of 100 billion reais, or over 30 million dollars. The move was halted by a court, but this could still be overturned.

The rise of regional conglomerates is also a concern in Africa. Through private ownership, Naspers is expanding its power from South Africa, and so are Kenya's Nation Media Group (NMG), Tanzania's IPP Media Group, and Nigeria's Daar Communications PLC.

This empire allows the media to reach the population, but it does not mean the population have access to the media. [Sub-Saharan Africa has seen some of the world's lowest internet use levels, with less than 3 percent of the population going online in such countries as Chad (2.7%), Sierra Leone (2.5%), Niger (2.2%), Somalia (1.8%), and Eritrea (1.1%). mission to Gaza leaving from the WSF in Tunisia to Palestine, to denounce the occupation and extend solidarity to the Palestinian people.

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## **V - New digital dimension of social struggles**

The digitisation of the world is about more than just converting the media into digital media, which would already call for a strategic approach that takes into account the control of the adopted systems, and the struggle to democratise technologies and tech development. Also worthy of concern is the data integration between the internet of people and the internet of things, which mines information about social and economic strata, service use and distribution, and social functioning.

Taking Big Data perspectives as a system with data on consumer habits to sell products is possibly a naïve perception of its potential.

The most used systems on the internet—social media and search engines—use data on the behaviour and trends of individuals, communities, and populations as their raw material. In our vulnerability lies a fertile business of communication.

Whereas the online networks feed on information about *what* people think, want, and buy, Big Data processes information about *how* people think and respond. And it uses data that has been voluntarily or involuntarily supplied to it to build the circuits that will allow access to them and engagement in their interactions.

As artificial intelligence blooms, an old problem is posed for humanity: to understand who exploits the resources for which model of society. It is hard to imagine Another Possible World when even the old, business-dominated world is reinventing technology.

But then again, there is the imponderable human ability to subvert the processes it interacts with, to create the antithesis of a future where technology is a tool for control, and move to occupy it, to make access to media and data more democratic, protect alternatives and cultures, and put resources and knowledge at the service of humankind.

In this perspective, the new digital dimension of social struggles—where the tools and pitfalls that affect them both online and outside of the online space lie—must not be overlooked. Above all, we must reflect on the use of internet and social media, with a few references to the World Social Forum's communication.

*Some considerations about the internet:*

### *1 – Standing Up for Free Internet is Vital*

The internet—a network of machines with IP protocols—remains a network of potential for democratic communication, as long as exclusion, on the one hand, and colonisation, on the other, are defied with regulations that ensure neutrality, privacy, human rights, and freedom of expression. These are tangible principles, in accordance with legislative bills and participatory models advocated by the civil society in the countries and spaces where internet governance is discussed (including the Internet Civil Rights Framework that faces threats in Brazil, and the multi-stakeholder governance model). Becoming familiar with these proposals is essential because they are concerned with our digital relations in the future.

### *2 – Understanding how the internet parasites work*

The internet is a social network that hosts other social networks. Two of them have colonised it, intercepting the users' moves into the larger network.

Google and Facebook rake off 95% of all money spent on online advertising worldwide. That is because Facebook and Google have become the internet itself for more than a billion users. That means operating only on those networks' logic, algorithms, and filters, instead of tapping the full potential of the internet that lies outside the confines of these systems that only parasitise and drain it. While it may be interesting to use existing networks for accessing topic communities that have already been created, it is vital to think of alternative uses for the internet.

### *3 – Championing broadband, the frontier of inequality*

Fewer than 3, 7 billion people worldwide have access to broadband, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). This poses two major issues: a) unequal use of technology for development; b) the risk that parasite networks arrive first at these places, deploying their internet for their own use. On the other hand, mobile phone coverage has continued to grow, reaching 95% of the global population (7 billion people) in areas with at least 2G coverage, and almost 4 billion with 4G coverage. Facebook provides its Zero Rating (free access limited to applications and services that interest Facebook) to places like India and Latin America. Free access to broadband will be crucial for Another Possible World.

#### *4 - Promote good-living autonomous networks in the digital world*

The internet, as we know it, technologically speaking, is not the only internet possible. The connection between machines via protocols other than IPs—or even radio signals—can create local autonomous networks. It is not a competition with the worldwide web by defending a counter-hegemonic internet—another similar thing—but to trust and recognise autonomous networks as alternatives against advertisement flooding and manipulation. These are experiences of indigenous and traditional communities, created to break the isolation of remote places, but also to protect local livelihoods with which we need to connect.

#### *5 – Avoiding the social media bubbles*

In Zygmunt Bauman's words: "Social media don't teach us to dialogue because it is so easy to avoid controversy... But most people use social media not to unite, not to open their horizons wider, but on the contrary, to cut themselves a comfort zone where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are the reflections of their own face. Social media are very useful, they provide pleasure, but they are a trap." → Zygmunt Bauman (1925 – 2017)

## **VI- Recommendations for a Communication Plan**

An overall communication plan for the WSF should reflect on the relationship between communication and activism as mentioned in the WSF 2009: communicating to take action and vice-versa.

In addition to providing content for platforms and releases, it should encourage sharing and debate, incorporate languages, integrate initiatives, help raise awareness about the media environment, and consider non-corporate alternatives.

In this perspective, the strategic communication plan should not emanate from an organisation, group, or press office, but from the International Council, with the support of an extended commission, which in addition to its IC members, undertakes talks to incorporate processes that struggle for another communication where there is willingness to collaborate.

### *1) Support and services*

Some tasks and services have been pinpointed to meet basic needs of the process, namely updates on calendars and events, site maintenance and updates, newsletter mailing lists, accreditation of emails and media, translations, management of the International Council communication tools. They depend on resources and routines to circulate information on the process and events. But its relevance for the process depends on its integration with the other recommendations.

### *2) Diagnosis*

The expanded CC should develop strategies to build engagement among organisations and movements to identify communication problems and needs. An IC reference document should be open to regular updates, so that it informs and provides criteria for communication activities. In addition to collective movements and organisations, we should map alternative, associative and community media and other free media, progressive media, publications and PR media from trade unions and social organisations, public media and accessible broadcast network content, and journalists constructively interested in the WSF process throughout the media scope, and trying to engage them in the diagnosis.

### *3) Activism and training*

Engagement with the shared communication process is deeper than just establishing a diagnosis, which should be achieved through tangible proposals for (presential or remote) participation and initiatives aimed at empowering communication for all. Debates and seminars on communication within social struggles, and training labs at events are part of this challenge. Local organizations and media on the WSF events should gain prominence. The involvement of the media and media activism in the WSF process after the events depends on infrastructure and logistical support. In addition to the diagnosis of local conditions, the offer of resources and connections for the work of the press and free media and the adequate assistance to communicators should be taken as priority in budget planning, and be monitored by the IC.

### *4) Problematization*

The WSF is a self-conscious process, where expressing and confronting ideas is a measure of their quality and relevance. Thought and debate should be expressed. Encouraging the production and publication of articles, interviews and analyses of contemporary struggles by the WSF organisations (whether as individuals or corporations) requires ongoing efforts to encourage journalism with a sense of criticism and facilitate agenda and sources in the WSF process. The commission should also establish criteria and strategies related to market media.

### *5) Revitalisation of the information system*

The development of a network or an integrating platform for WSF communication activities should serve the collective interests, in order to overcome the lack of “belongingness” with projects conceived without much engagement. Despite the lack of support, surviving initiatives should be encouraged, modernised where required, and spread, together with documentation platforms; articles shall be shared at the service of the WSF. But as a communicative process among social struggles, the WSF needs a functional, friendly, and smart main platform with the possibility of adding new languages, one that could serve as a symbol of the purpose of political renewal, building on the diagnosis of trends and security protocols by technology communities getting away from corporate traps.

### *6) Diversifying languages*

Languages are changing. New narratives and storytelling models for facts dialogue with a media-dominated society. Grassroots communication initiatives follow micro resistance and occupations. The WSF can be a space and a laboratory for media activism. The expanded commission aims at promoting joint activities with media campaigners, bloggers, cartoonists, community broadcasters, new audiovisual media communicators.

### *7) Self-conscious sharing and privacy*

Corporate social media are undeniably being used by organisations, movements, activists, and social events hoping to extend their reach to the communities of interest. A problem arises when these media

replace and turn away from independent initiatives and make communication vulnerable to the algorithms that in fact keep them apart. Taking a “use it but don’t trust it” approach requires education. The commission is responsible for contributing to a conscious perception of social media, and guidance on security best practices, so that members can use social media, not serve them by providing sensitive data on individuals and organisations. The Commission should also disseminate free, autonomous, or protected alternatives, starting with the WSF tool set.

#### *8) Context in the communication scene*

Knowing how communication systems that limit social struggles and alternatives operate is critical for the WSF process. The extended CC should be responsible for seeking and circulating resources and updates on the global context, the social agenda, and the communication scene at event venues to help with strategies.

#### *9) Movement for change*

Communicating the WSF is a political act that involves the struggle for freedom of expression, neutrality, privacy and internet freedom, universal access to broadband internet, technologies, and knowledge, for protecting journalists, bloggers, and broadcasters from persecution and violence, respect for women and human diversity, decolonizing the media, and recognising the value of cultures. Especially for the Southern countries, the following is essential: policy advocacy and public service communication, laws to make the sector more democratic and promote the diverse voices and equivalent spaces between public, state-led, private and community media. These struggles must be in the communication frameworks, contributing to local and regional agendas.

#### *10) Project Feasibility*

A Strategic Communication Plan for the WSF process entails combined action among professional activities, activism, partnerships and coordination among organisations. It requires mobility, ability to create debates, support projects, develop tools, and train teams. It takes priorities, political will, and funding. In order to become feasible, first and foremost, it takes a legitimate strategic project and its stages with organisations, movements, WFFM and funding agencies. The WSF International Council should take the first step

### **VII – Proposed steps for a global project**

#### *1) References*

To adopt the Reference Document for interactions with the organisations, the WFFM, the IC commissions, etc.

#### *2) Support to the Secretariat*

Beginning immediately, to set up a Provisional Communication Commission to support the definition of the basic communication services to the IC to be carried out by the Secretariat (1 – Support and Services ), depending on resource availability.

#### *3) Common and shared guidelines*

Planning and preparing an open international seminar on the challenges of communication for social struggles and the WSF process, organised by the IC and the WFFM, in order to enable the adoption of

strategic communication guidelines between organisations and the drafting of recommendations to the IC.

#### *4) Formating the project*

Based on the Strategic Guidelines and recommendations resulting from the Seminar and the Reference Document, to hold a workshop to design an integrated technical and financial project in stages, with the support of the funding agencies and the Finance Commission.

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