

## **IC(K)Ts, Civil Society and New Social Debates**

Luis Fernando Baron Porras  
Center of Research & Popular Education (CINEP)

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#### **To start**

*"The people have given us the duty to defend them, and that duty sometimes requires the violent restraint of violent men. In some cases, the measured use of force is all that protects us from a chaotic world ruled by force." President George Bush.*

This a recent "Quotation of the day", release by The New York Times

This public expression of president Bush is not far away or different from the expressions of the guerrilla or paramilitary groups in Colombia (produced from different ideological and political places and contexts); it is not distant of the permanent expressions used by the Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, as well.

If you go to the web pages of the war and peace actors in Colombia you can find similar expressions and speeches like President's Bush above. All of them, included, civil society organizations for peace-building and human rights, tend to show themselves as *unique* options to solve the Colombian conflict and to establish a state of peace, order and law.

These kinds of speeches show a tendency of a return to a bipolar political and military debate and conflict. These expressions reveal the grades of polarization of public debates and military confrontations have taken after September 11<sup>th</sup> around the world.

According to the researches I have involved with, and the experiences with media and information organizations in Colombia and Latin America I have had during last years, these are the kind of speeches --and their respective social practices--, it is important to avoid in order to build solid bases to reconstruct a democratic, plural and fair public media space.

#### **Some explanations**

At the end of October 2002 two partners and I presented a research report on TV news, war and peace in Colombia. At middle August, with other different team, we finished a book with the results of a research process on ICTs peace and war in Colombia. These researches emphasized the social process of reception and appropriation of media and information and their social uses.

After publishing the book we have participated at several forums, debates and congress. We were at different cities and scenarios sharing with so different people the general hypothesis and findings we produced with those researches. Few time later, I found my self involved within an international research network and within the process of the WSIS at local, national and global levels.

During last weeks I have been taking notes during panels, within airplanes, and after chatting with many different people in Colombia. At the same time I have been reading different documents, articles and memos on communications, ICTs, policies and democracy, referring to both the WSIS debates, and democratization process of communication in Colombia and other countries.

Having this experiences and reading these documents, I got the feeling that there is too much information which requires being organized. I have the feeling that almost everything has been said on communication, ICTs, knowledge, these days. It makes more difficult to add something else. This makes a major challenge to elaborate new contributions for a network like this.

During last weeks, I have built some reflections based on the lessons learning during the research processes on TV and ICTs, and my experiences with Colombian and Latin American networks, as well. Now I am sharing with you some draft ideas produced during this time.

This memo is a brainstorm which is trying to put together the Surman and Reilly report "Appropriating the Internet for Social Change," the debate of WSIS, and my recent research and activists experiences. Consider these lines like contributions to generate dialogue and to build common actions within the network we are working with.

### **New territories and social agents, new agents for new social scenarios<sup>1</sup>**

New communication and information (and knowledge) technologies (ICKTs) have created the opportunity to generate new scenarios of social disputes, conflicts and wars. These are new scenarios of solidarity, friendship and common action among people, as well. There are new social agents building and reconstructing their agency within these new territories.

Civil society is, perhaps, one of the most important agents and scenarios of these contemporary processes related to ICKTs. However this is not exactly a new phenomenon. This is the result of contemporary conditions and other social and technological dynamics, what came from other times and places.

New agents from civil society in the field of ICKTs not only are seen by government institutions, politicians, media corporations, economic sectors as a *threat*, but also they are perceived this way by other social and military movements and civil society sectors.

These new agents represent new technological, social, political and symbolic powers. These agents represent others ideas, information, knowledge, and social practices. For these reasons, they represent new pathways against places of power. They represent new opportunities to build other social relations.

This new agents represent other histories, other data and information, other daily life narratives, other languages, other visions and practices of development and life with others. I think governments; international institutions, media corporations and other social movements and groups have issues to be concerned.

These are the reasons the sectors -- mentioned above--, are defending their places, their conquests and their privileges. They are defending some states of things from different places and different levels: political, technological and economic. Not only governments or media corporations want to preserve their places, but also other empowered sectors of the society at local, national and global levels are trying to do the same. Because they have won this places with work, risks and sacrifices, according with their own stories and perspectives, that many times hide or avoid the memories and stories of exclusion or material or symbolic violence.

Because new social and technological scenarios have created new social agents with new forms of communication and new knowledge, and vice versa, I have the feeling its necessary to take a look not only at the appropriations and impact of the ICKTs by civil society organizations but also at the speeches

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<sup>1</sup> The comments and hypothesis I will present at this paper are based on the analysis and experiences I have from the Colombia situation, and some *intuitions* I have after taking a look of experiences, documents and stories from other countries.

they are circulating to different levels (local, national and global), and the social practices they are promoting and generating to other agents and contexts.

For those reasons, I think it is so important to include different social practices, speeches, and technological appropriations and impacts (not only the successfully ones). Its necessary to study and understand, and to include, as well, the democratic and solidarity and politically correct appropriations, impacts, speeches and social uses, but also those uses that promote others visions, other cultural, political, religion, gender, and economic practices which are against some cultural values and imaginaries like freedom, plurality, democracy etc.

As Surman and Reilly's report shows, there is a particular movement or collective action going on. Is a particular group of civil society organizations characterized by their work and appropriations of ICTs, which they call "social tech organizations and activists"?

These civil society organizations, which are involved with ICTs are special and strategic actors, because they are hybrid and frontier agents. They are not only building networks and social expressions within the field of communication, information and knowledge. They are involved within important struggles for the right to communicate, against concentration of media, information and knowledge, and struggling for access to media, information and knowledge. But also they are articulated to other political, cultural and economics dynamics related to environment, development, poverty, justice, gender, and human rights processes, at local, national, regional and global levels. This makes more interdisciplinary and intercultural their agency and their initiatives. This makes richer and more complex their social presence.

This context locates civil society ICTs organizations in the middle of numerous social dynamics. It configures themselves as versatile agents of the borders, of the margins. This situation produces mobile and changing identities to deal, not only with different actors, but also with different scenarios and subjects.

### **Identity battles**

But this contemporary phenomenon is creating the conditions of construction and reconstructions of new identities of new agents, (like civil society ICTs organizations), what are building new territories of political, cultural and economic participation. New identities that is important to recognize, to understand and to study, as well.

Communication, information, knowledge and new technologies are political, economic territories of debate and struggle, but basically they are symbolic territories of dispute. They are also new territories of constructions and reconstructions of identities.

Colombian appropriations and uses of Internet by agents involve with dynamics of conflict and peace in Colombia (government institutions, armed groups: institutional army, guerrillas and paramilitary groups; and civil organizations of peace), show that they are using this new media to develop an "identity war". Before everything, they are using their web pages and spaces within Internet to build and present new images of themselves.

Neither armed groups, nor government institutions and civil society organizations of peace-building, were comfortable and agree with the images that media corporation presents of them by information and institutional campaigns. At the same time, all of them were struggling with the adversary's images they have constructed against each other.

They were building new public identities what they want to present to different domestic and international "publics". They were constructing new public identities trying to get credibility as information producers and to get legitimacy to their war and peace actions. They were fighting within Internet not only for people legitimacy but also for their support. By Internet they were building directly (without mediations), new speeches, ideas and knowledge about them: about their "histories", about their missions and visions,

about the daily facts of war and peace, human rights, terrorism, and drugs traffic. Their identity battle were founded on the others atrocities, others faults and mistakes.

But, at the same time, those new identities represent new challenges for them. These identities have obligated them to respond publicly and directly for them. Those public identities are building new social responsibilities and coherence between speeches and facts. Coherence demanded by social sectors in order to support or legitimate the ends and methods of the different actors. Now in Colombia it is clear, again, that institutions and organizations cannot develop their political, cultural or economic struggles without the “public” hearts and support.

The direct opportunity Internet has offered them to develop their own communication and information has created not only new organizational changes, but also new public responsibilities.

### **The issue of representation**

Among other factors, the power of civil society organizations is based on their independence from governmental and economic sectors, and on the differences of their manners to organize them selves, their structures and their actions. Its power is based on the possibility of representing directly their interest, hopes and dreams, as well.

As Surman and Reilly’s report shows: “Civil society refers to the set of institutions and organizations and behavior situated between the state, the business world and the family.” and “civil society is a site of struggle for and over meaning” (P. 6)

However these characteristics are their weaknesses too. In Colombia, and probably in many places, civil society organizations are criticized and illegitimated by governments, media corporations, political parties, social movements and by others civil society organizations, as well, because they do not represent civil society. They are condemned, because they do not have clear, ritual or formal structures or pathways to mediate social claims, to represent social interests. But basically they have a lack of social credibility and support because of their distances with “general civil society”.

If civil society ICTs organizations want to win credibility and legitimacy and power they have to develop stronger links and dialogues with NGO, scholars, social movements, grassroots organizations and networks, and they have to articulate their actions with other civil society organizations.

Within Colombia, the links and dialogues with others sectors are poor. Because of the special language and matters this organizations deal with, they have built distances with others organizations and social movements. At the same time these movements and organizations have built their own distances as well. This is an expression of the fragmentation of civil society too, created by war and other social problems like political and economic exclusion, the lack of trust, and hopeless.

But the most important challenge for civil society ICTs organizations is to build dialogues, links and social practices with “the general civil society”, with “common people”, common citizens who do not know the specialize language of ICTs, who do not know the games and rules of political lobby, with people and organizations who are more invisible and marginalized than civil society organizations and social movements.

This challenge is related with other bigger. The challenge for these organizations is to have the courage and humility to transform their discourses and their practices after “meeting” with others. In several Colombia movements and organizations, and within some documents and proposals from global civil society I have read to the WSIS, as well, I can perceive the convictions that civil society organization are in fact at the correct and truly side of social processes; the convictions of being at the side of “the good people”, with good intentions and good ends. A place that makes easy to see the erroneous and bad things of the others, but with a lack of capacity or ability to have a critique look at themselves.

In addition, because of the domestic situation and some world tendencies --like the war against terrorism-, several civil society organizations in Colombia and other countries and global movements, including social tech organizations, have create an irreconcilable confrontation with the State, governments institutions, media corporations, other social movements and organizations. They have built statistic and monolithic images of these institutions and organizations that do not permit seeing their differences, movements and internal debates. They have built an image of the others as enemies or rivals. They have constructed a vision of an intrinsic confrontation between civil society organizations and those institutions and movements.

This perception of contradictions and confrontations of agents, ends and methods do not make possible to build proactive relations and generate common actions with them. These prejudices do not make possible to create conditions for political and cultural debate, and have created inherent irreconcilable boundaries with other social agents. These perceptions create limits to exercise democracy and citizenship.

These convictions, do not allow civil society organization to evaluate and reconsider their ends, practices and discourses, and make so difficult their relations with other legitimate social agents. This behavior makes so difficult the dialogue with different people, ideas and dreams.

These preconceptions are useful to produce idealize and maximize referents to negotiate with others. At the same time this kind of barrier produce a lack of pragmatism and strategic realism to negotiate and to get common agreements with other sectors.

Furthermore, I think it is so important for civil society ICTs organizations to develop, not only a speech and practice of rights but also, speeches and practices of duties and compromises. The new social scenarios demand new compromises and new citizens responsibilities, which match with democracy, tolerance and differences discourses and practices civil society organizations promote. This new scenarios demand not only claims and compromise by others, but also the civil society ones.

### **New stories, new mediations**

According to the results of the researches we have done in Colombia we have found that "common people", common citizen expect other persons and institutions tell them what is going on in Colombia. They hope other stories and visions. They want to build new credible and legitimate places of social information and knowledge.

In general, people and organizations we have worked with within our researches do not trust not only big media corporations, but also they do not trust government institutions, traditional politicians, and armed groups like guerrilla and paramilitary organizations. They do not feel they can contribute to build a new situation, a new social project, a new future, as well. They use their information as *hints* to survive within a dangerous context and to define their relations with other agents and organizations. But they do not trust them.

And we have clear examples not only in Colombia but also in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador where people not only is demanding new political, and economical and cultural discourses and practices, but also are asking for other agents which represent other forms for living, other democratic and fair institutions, other relations among people, among nations, among international institutions.

These claims are associated with the demand of other communication and information institutions and practices, other symbolic mediators and mediations. They are claims, expressions and movements for other mediations and mediators for building other power's relations, other social situations.

These contexts represent an historical opportunity to promote, strength and empower new civil society organizations and also other stories, other tellers, other vision and other people. This way of symbolic inclusion is another challenge for new media, information and knowledge agents.

This represents an opportunity to avoid the way of confrontation and polarization, and adopt the path of strategic agreement and new symbolic constructions.