

# Introduction: Waiting On The World To Change

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The issue of ISC which you see on your computer screen is about libraries and information in the World Social Forum context. We are putting the libraries in a WSF context, because ISC has so far mostly been spread and read among librarians and information specialists. But it should certainly also be the other way round, so that we would look at the WSF from a library point of view.

Either way, we hope that you who read this journal will actively support the process of changing the world social order through "information activism" as well as by being active in global activities such as WSF. The two are closely related.

The modern public library is, in fact, what the Social Forum also tries to be: "an open space".

But there is a big gap in the World Social Forum! It is the absence of the library. We, the librarians and information specialists, are supposed to be there, but we are not yet there.

What is worse: If librarians are absent from the World Social Forum, they are also absent from their real role in the information world.

We have been "*blithe as a milkmaid, or sumptuously dressed according to the wishes of its masters*", as Suzanne Briet wrote 1951 in her book about documentation.[i] But from now on, we need to follow the example of judges, legislators and governors and consider ourselves as the informational power, which has to check and balance the other powerholders.

The World Social Forum does not stay within the national borders, it is not an arrangement between states and governments. It is society itself, because society can no longer be confined to separate nations and national states. The internet is the ultimate proof, and at the same time the prime condition, of the globalisation of the human society. The time of the Empires is past. The United States of America will not lead the world. Nor will China, or Europe. The solutions attempted by the Alexanders, the Caesars, the Napoleons, the Stalins, the Hitlers and the Bushes, have proved not to be viable.

We, librarians and information specialists, are part of the solution. It could perhaps be called: the civilised solution. As said Mahatma Gandhi: civilisation would be a good idea.

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Information for Social Change started to appear in 1994 - years before the World Social Forum was born. In this issue you will find articles and documents which introduce you to the principles and methods of the WSF: for instance, an interview with one of the founders of the WSF, Brazilian theologian of liberation and social activist Chico Whitaker, who is one of the winners of the "alternative

Nobel Prize", The Right Livelihood Award, in 2006. We have chosen Chico Whitaker's sentence about guaranteeing the continuity of *the form the Forum* as the motto of this special issue, because it should be obvious that librarians have a special role to play precisely in this respect. You will also note that Nicolas Haeringer and Martí Olivella are actually trying to do the librarians' job in their reflections on how the Forum should develop from a series of events into a continuing process. This is only to be expected, of course. Is not each one of us a bit of a librarian; a collector, creator, disseminator, presenter and guardian of information?

What is the Social Forum, except being an embryonic world society? A researcher, Marlies Glasius, is defining the spread of the social forums as the growth of deliberation and struggle, which are forming a contradictory unity.[ii] She founds her thesis on Kant's idea of a universal civil society, on the one hand, and Gramsci's thoughts about the political and cultural hegemony, on the other. I like this dialectical definition of the social forum as something for ever unfinished, and which is always weighing between two alternatives: the search for truth together with the necessary debates, affirmations and refutations - the deliberation; but at the same time the need to organise and realise, to construct the new counter-power which has to prevail over the empires of the old world, in one word: the struggle!

The World Social Forum, as is well known, was originally conceived as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum. However, the WSF, too, has hitherto to a great extent been a forum for deliberation and struggle on *economic* issues. It was the pathology of the finances of this world, in particular, that brought together the European and Latin American individuals and organisations who triggered off the first Social Forum of Porto Alegre in 2001. This should explain why one section of this ISC issue has got the title: World Public Finances.

For the citizen, the common man and woman who of course do not exist as one particular type, but in thousands of variations, the world's finances has hitherto been the most distant and disinteresting subject conceivable. Not so anymore. We have started to take an interest in these exotic things and activities: the billions and the banks. We have found the international finance to be a most fascinating subject! The big numbers are not that difficult, after all. Rather, it is the information: the hieroglyphics of the money,[iii] which are there to separate us from them, the high priests of Capitalism.

Financial expertise is and will be needed, yes, but one does not need to be an expert to understand that the present world financial system (or rather non-system) is sick. It is enough to know some basic things: that the trade with money is the world's biggest market, for instance, which has grown more than a hundred times since James Tobin (Winner of the 1981 Nobel Prize in Economics) proposed his little tax on financial transactions back in the seventies; at that time, already, he was troubled by the volume of speculation on the financial markets!; or, that half of the world trade passes through the tax havens; or, again, that the indebtedness of the US economy has reached a catastrophic level, not to speak about the debts of many countries of the global South, which continue to hinder them from becoming what they are called, namely, *developing* countries.

What roles do the librarians and libraries play in all this, the world's public finances? As mentioned earlier, it is to do with information. In order to explain how it can be "the information", I should like to quote, here, a passage from the English summary of the doctoral dissertation of Finnish library scientist Timo Kuronen:

"The legal right of access to information is limited to public documents, actions by the authorities and certain administrative matters related to the individual concerned. A general right to freedom of information which includes information about the market economy does not exist. There is not even any prospect of such a law, and this is a serious problem, since the private sector's share of all social functions is very large and growing continuously. Information about the markets is a blind spot in freedom of information, the ideological background of which is seeing information as a commodity that can be owned like any other." [iv ]

Transparency in the World Public Finances (WPF) could be considered to be an implicit goal of the social forum process, although the Forum does not set goals, or adopt programs, or make any resolutions. But WPF, as a goal, is probably supported by most of the hundreds of organisations and movements which participate in the process of the social forum. Many of these are, as was already said, focussing their activities on financial problems and on international institutions like The World Bank, The International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation which are themselves seen as part of the problems.

Therefore, a number of organisations - Liberdade Brasil, Attac Japan, the Network Institute for Global Democratisation etc. - are now trying to launch an initiative, called "World Public Finances", at the Nairobi WSF. The articles below by Emma Lochery and Francine Mestrum, plus the concept paper by Matti Kohonen, should provide more information on the subject.

The bulk of the content in this issue of ISC is, however, meant to throw light on the beginning process of *rapprochement* between the social forums and the libraries. The public libraries and the social movements, which started to grow in parallel and together a couple of centuries ago - first in the USA, and then in Europe and the rest of the world - somehow seem to have lost sight of each other's somewhere on the way. They need, in short, to reconnect and build the world's public library. The centrepiece of that new institution is already in place; it is called the internet. [v ]

As far as the present author is concerned, the connection of the library and the social movements begun in Finland with the opening, in February 1994, of "The Cable Book", the branch of the City Library of Helsinki which ran the first World Wide Web-server of the library, taking advantage of the GNU/Linux operating system (then version 1.0), which was installed in the computer of the People's Educational Association. It continued ten years later at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, where the then chairperson of the IFLA, Kay Raseroka from Botswana, said that librarians should go to the WSF and document it in their libraries. And now it is gaining speed via the first WSF in Africa, the one in Nairobi 20-25 January 2007. The article by Esther Obachi, who

is the secretary of Kenya Library Association and a founding member of PALIAct (Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group) on "The Management of the WSF Information" should bear witness to where we stand as this issue goes to print.

A few days before Christmas, I heard a new pop song on the radio. It is called "Waiting on the World to Change":

*It's hard to beat the system  
when we're standing at a distance  
so we keep waiting  
waiting on the world to change  
now if we had the power  
to bring our neighbors home from war  
they would have never missed a Christmas  
no more ribbons on their door  
and when you trust your television  
what you get is what you got  
cause when they own the information, oh  
they can bend it all they want [vi ]*

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1. Quoted from: Briet, Suzanne (2001): What is Documentation? Selections from *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (Paris 1951) translated and commented by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet. See <http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~roday/briet.htm>

2. Glasius, Marlies: "Deliberation or Struggle? Civil Society Traditions Behind the Social Forums" *Ephemera*, volume 5(2): 240-252. <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2glasius.pdf> Published/accessed: 2005/ Accessed December 2006. - See below, Further Readings on the WSF.

3. I borrow this expression from Peter Lamborn Wilson's essay "Hieroglyphics and Money", in *Poetics and Politics in Action*, edited by Anne Waldman and Lisa birman, Coffee House Press 1998, pp 267-288.

4. Kuronen, Timo (2000): *Kansalaiskeskustelun edellytykset ja mahdollisuudet tietoverkkojen aikakaudella*. *Acta Electronica Universitatis Tamperensis* 31, p. 198 (<http://acta.uta.fi/pdf/951-44-4814-6.pdf>). - In English translation, the Finnish title of this work could be: Conditions and possibilities for the Deliberation of the Citizens in the Age of the Networks.

5. But for how long? "We must ensure that the Internet remains open and accessible to all citizens without any limitation on the ability of individuals to choose the content they wish regardless of the Internet service provider they use to connect to the Worldwide Web. We cannot take this future for granted. We must be prepared to fight for it because some of the same forces of corporate consolidation and control that have distorted the television marketplace have an interest in controlling the Internet marketplace as well. Far too much is at stake to ever allow that to happen", as said Al Gore in his speech "America's Democracy is in Grave Danger" at Media Conference, October 2005.

6. From *Waiting on the World To Change*, by John Mayer. You can listen to and watch it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKSOIM4BTws&eurl=> But don't wait. Do it!