**World Social Forum**

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The World Social Forum (WSF) is a global gathering of social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that share a commitment to developing alternatives to neoliberal globalization. First held in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the WSF was originally conceptualized as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, which each year gathers the world’s economic and political elites. Subsequent editions of the WSF were held in Porto Alegre in 2002, 2003, and 2005; Mumbai, India (2004); Nairobi, Kenya (2007); Belém, Brazil (2009); Dakar, Senegal (2011); Tunis (2013, 2015); Montreal (2016) and Salvador, Brazil (2018) – regularly gathering tens of thousands of participants. The WSF has also spawned regional social forums (e.g. European Social Forum, Pan-Amazon Social Forum), national social forums (e.g. US Social Forum, India Social Forum) and local social forums, as well as thematic forums in fields including migration and education. Several editions of the WSF have taken a decentralized format – including the ‘polycentric’ WSF 2006, which was held in Bamako (Mali), Caracas (Venezuela) and Karachi (Pakistan), and the WSF 2008, which took the form of a Global Day of Action with hundreds of local activities taking place simultaneously around the world.

The WSF is governed by a Charter of Principles and an International Council, made up of representatives of NGOs and social movements, but is not itself an organization – it was conceived by its founders as a space for reflection and exchange of knowledge and experience among civil society actors. Accounts of its origins typically present the WSF as emerging out of the alter-globalization – or global justice – movement that burst onto the world stage in the late 1990s and early 2000s with a series of international protest events around summits of the G8, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization and World Bank (e.g. della Porta et al. 2006; Leite 2005; Smith et al 2008). While these protest events served to consolidate the emerging ‘movement of movements’ by bringing together a diverse range of actors in the struggle against neoliberal globalization, the WSF was conceived as a next step in this struggle, as a space in which participants could begin to articulate not only what they were against but what they were for. However, the WSF has antecedents in a much broader range of struggles and political traditions (Conway 2013). While many commentators posit the WSF as a continuation of a long history of left movements worldwide (e.g. Santos 2006), its lineages also include anti-colonial and indigenous peoples’ struggles, mass movements against dictatorship and neoliberalism in the global South, the non-class-based ‘new social movements’ that emerged (mostly but not exclusively in the global North) in the 1960s (such as feminism, gay liberation and Black consciousness), as well as environmental and human rights movements (Conway 2013: 12-16).

The WSF is, then, a meeting place for a diverse range of movements, political traditions and forms of knowledge. This diversity has been understood as central to the WSF’s political novelty and captured by the concept of ‘open space’. Described by one of its founders as “only a place, basically a horizontal space” (Whitaker 2008: 113), the WSF does not seek to establish consensus or speak on behalf of its participants, is in principle open to all civil society actors that subscribe to the fairly minimal requirement of opposition to neoliberalism and discrimination, and based on the principle of self-organization: those who organize social forums are meant simply to provide a space for participating groups to organize their own activities (Sen 2010). In this way, the WSF was intended to function as an ‘incubator’ for new initiatives without itself becoming a political actor (Whitaker 2008: 113). It has been conceptualized as a pedagogical space, with several commentators (e.g. Andreotti & Dowling 2004; Olivers 2004; Wright 2005) highlighting the parallels between the ethos of open space and the philosophy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1974), whose influential approach to critical pedagogy advocated non-hierarchical, dialogic learning processes aimed at fostering critical resistance to oppression and inequality.

The WSF’s politics of open space can be seen as expressive of a broader ‘cultural logic of networking’, linked to the rise of new information and communication technologies, which values openness, horizontality and self-organization (Juris 2008). Also central to the notion of open space is a rejection of all forms of *pensamientos únicos* (monolithic forms of thought) and embrace of epistemic plurality. Santos (2006) conceptualizes the WSF as expressive of an ‘Epistemology of the South’: a manifestation of the plurality of knowledges and epistemic practices that exist in the world and the possibility of non-hierarchical, horizontal exchange between them. Santos understands domination as profoundly epistemic in character: neoliberal globalization asserts its hegemony by discrediting other available forms of knowledge and social experience whilst denying the possibility of future alternatives. The WSF resists this dynamic by affirming the existence and validity of such alternatives (Santos 2006).

**Debate and critique**

While Santos and proponents of the open space concept paint a rather optimistic picture of the WSF, critics have highlighted several ways in which it falls short of its own ideals of openness and inclusion. These include structural barriers to participation such as travel costs and visa restrictions as well as more subtle mechanisms of exclusion arising from cultural norms and discursive practices (Andretta & Doerr 2007; Doerr 2007; Vinthagen 2009; Wright 2005; Ylä-Anttila 2005). Conway (2013) conceptualizes the WSF from a postcolonial, anti-racist feminist perspective as a site of tension between modern emancipatory traditions (socialism, liberalism, anarchism, feminism) and the political praxis and visions of various subaltern ‘others’, such as indigenous and poor peoples’ movements in the global South. While the WSF has enabled such subaltern actors to enter the global stage, it remains dominated by movements grounded in the political traditions of European modernity (Conway 2013). Far from simply an open, horizontal space, the WSF is not immune to the hierarchies and exclusions that structure the world at large.

Another strand of critique has focused on the WSF’s lack of political efficacy. In the ‘space versus movement’ debate (Conway 2005; Kohler 2005; Marcuse 2005; Patomaki & Teivainen 2004; Ponniah 2005, 2008; Teivainen 2004; Wallerstein 2004), critics of the open space concept have argued that it has resulted in nothing more than a ‘talking shop’ (Worth & Buckley 2009) and called for the WSF to become more capable of formulating and acting on collective proposals, while its defenders have argued that such a move would destroy the WSF's capacity to attract a diversity of actors (Whitaker 2008). Some scholars have conceptualized this debate as a tension between ‘verticals’ and ‘horizontals’ (Kavada 2009; Smith & Smythe 2009); the former comprised of ‘older’ political actors (such as trade unions, NGOs and organized movements) that favour more hierarchical forms of organization, and the latter represented by a new generation of activists who operate with a political logic of openness and horizontal networking. This ‘new’ political culture has perhaps found its most coherent expression in the WSF Youth Camps, a staple feature of WSF events, where young activists have gathered to experiment with non-hierarchical, participatory modes of organization.

Tensions between different political cultures has been further highlighted by the emergence in the 2010s of social media-facilitated ‘movements of the squares’, which operate according to a ‘logic of connective action’ (Bennett & Segerberg 2013) based on individualized and personalized modes of political participation. At the WSF 2013 and 2015 in Tunis, and the WSF 2016 in Montréal, activists linked to these movements mobilized under the moniker GlobalSquare to create their own ‘open space’, many adopting a critical position towards what they perceived as informal hierarchies and lack of transparency within the WSF. Much of this criticism has centred on the undemocratic nature of the International Council – which is not elected and only open to organizations – and what many see as the dominance of NGOs within the WSF. This critique of the WSF can be linked to a tension between the ‘logic of aggregation’ characteristic of the ‘newest’ movements, which involves the assembly of unaffiliated individuals within public spaces, and the ‘logic of networking’ widespread within the global justice movement, which involves the networking of already formed collectives (Juris 2012, Smith et al 2014).

Another area of debate about the WSF has focused on its status as a global phenomenon. The Charter of Principles states that the ‘World Social Forum is a world process’ and it is frequently referred to in such terms by both activists and scholars. However, the WSF is perhaps more appropriately conceived as a multi-scalar process bringing together place-based movements and actors that operate on a more self-evidently global scale (Conway 2008; Osterweil 2005; Stephansen 2013a, 2013b). As it has travelled around the world, the WSF has become a site for claims by various ‘local subalterns’ – such as urban slum-dwellers in Nairobi and indigenous peoples in the Amazon – who have come to make their voices heard and assert their right to be present in the spaces of global civil society (Conway 2004, 2008). However, the WSF has frequently been criticized for excluding the local resident population, and it has been dominated by a highly mobile cosmopolitan elite of scholar-activists who have the resources and inclination to travel to international events (Conway 2008; Pleyers 2008). This raises questions about how ‘local’ or ‘global’ the forum should be (Conway 2008) and how its globality is to be defined. As Osterweil (2005) has argued, the WSF can be conceptualized as a site of tension between a ‘universalizing globalist’ perspective, which involves moving beyond place-based and local struggles to create a united global movement, and ‘place-based globalism’, which sees true globality as ’comprised of many nodes, places, interconnections and relations that at no point are totally consolidated into a singular global entity’ (2005: 26).

Questions of scale are also brought to the fore by efforts to conceptualize the WSF as a manifestation of global civil society, or, more specifically, a global public sphere (Kaldor et al 2003; Glasius 2005; Wright 2005; Smith 2004, 2008; Smith et al 2008, 2014). As Conway (2013: Ch. 3) explains, such theorizations rely on an understanding of global civil society as a stakeholder within global governance networks – as a counterpart to state power – and see the WSF as an emergent global public sphere. Based on the Habermasian concept of the public sphere as an open and inclusive communication space located within civil society, in which citizens can come together to debate issues of common concern, such accounts conceptualize the WSF as a force for global democratization. However, although the WSF’s politics of open space on the face of it has many similarities with this concept of the public sphere, it cannot straightforwardly be conceived in such terms. While the public sphere is conceptualized within the Habermasian tradition as a counterpart to state power, the WSF has no obvious counterpart in the form of a global state authority, and while the concept of the public sphere is rooted in the assumption that it is possible (and desirable) to arrive at consensus about the common good through rational deliberation, the WSF’s open space is deliberately structured not to produce consensus (Conway & Singh 2009, Conway 2013). Moreover, oppositional character of the WSF means that it is perhaps more appropriately conceptualized as a counterpublic (Fraser 1990) or a formation of multiple counterpublics (Conway 2004).

**Citizen media in the WSF**

Although new communication technologies and diverse forms of cultural and creative expression have been central within the global justice movement, there has been surprisingly little consideration of the role of citizen media – or media, culture and communications more generally – in the academic literature on the WSF. Even those who analyse the WSF from the perspective of public sphere theory focus overwhelmingly on the physical space provided by forum events, neglecting the role of media and communications. WSF organizers, along with many of the major movements that participate within it, have also been criticized for not taking media, culture and communication seriously (e.g. Waterman 2005, Couture et al 2016).

The WSF has, however, been a rich site for citizen media as defined in this encyclopaedia. The global gatherings of the WSF provide occasions for a diverse range of citizen media practices such as theatrical protest, music concerts and impromptu street performances – and the forum site is usually overflowing with leaflets, posters and other print media. Here I will focus on a more specific type of citizen media: the use of communication media such as radio, video and online technologies by forum participants. Such media have played an important role within the WSF, as a means for activists to circulate and share coverage of the issues and debates that social movements bring to the forum. Given that the WSF has struggled to achieve visibility and standing within mainstream media, citizen and alternative media have arguably been the main sources of information about the forum for participants and interested publics. The WSF has also provided an important site for exchange and collaboration among citizen media initiatives from different parts of the world. Since its inception, citizen journalists and alternative media producers have used the WSF as a space for network-building and experimentation with new communication practices (Stephansen 2013a, 2016). Brazilian media activists, who have played an important role in this process, developed the concept and practice of *shared communication* (*comunicação compartilhada* in Portuguese) characterized by an explicit focus on creating collaborative production processes that bring media activists together. The idea of shared communication emerged with the first WSF in 2001, when a copyleft-based web publication system named Ciranda ([www.ciranda.net)](http://www.ciranda.net)) was created to enable media activists to share coverage of the forum. Having initially emerged from a need to enable sharing of content (at a time before web 2.0 technologies were widely available), the idea of shared communication soon also came to signify collaborative media production and exchange of knowledge and experience among media activists (Stephansen 2016). Dedicated spaces for citizen and alternative media (including community radios, independent journalists, video producers and tech activists) have since become a staple feature of social forum events, with the explicit aim of facilitating collaboration and mutual learning among participants.

As the WSF has travelled around the world, shared communication activists have sought to establish links with citizen media producers in the places where the forum has been held (Stephansen 2013a). At the WSF 2009 in Belém, members of the Ciranda network worked closely with local media activists, including community radios and an organization that used audio-visual media as a tool for community engagement, to organize independent coverage of the WSF and in the process create networks and build capacity among grassroots activists (ibid). The WSF 2011 in Dakar provided an occasion for Latin American media activists to connect with their counterparts in the Indymedia Africa network. When the WSF moved to Tunis in 2013 and 2015, the network expanded further to include community radios, bloggers and other media activists in the Maghreb-Mashreq region. The WSF 2016 in Montreal provided an opportunity to connect with North American activists (Couture et al 2016). Shared communication activists have adopted what might be understood as a movement-building approach to media activism: they understand the mobilizing function of citizen and alternative media not just in terms of their role in disseminating convincing messages, but emphasize the importance of mobilizing people to participate in media production and building solidarity-based networks among media activists (Stephansen 2016). This movement-building approach has enabled grassroots citizen media initiatives in different parts of the world to connect with a growing transnational network of media activists and feel part of a global struggle. For example, Stephansen (2013a) details how community radios and video activists in Belém used the WSF 2009 as an opportunity build capacity among local media activists and strengthen links between social movements in the Amazon, while simultaneously connecting with transnational networks. In this way, ‘citizen media practices’ (Stephansen 2016) concerned with capacity-building, networking and movement-building support a place-based globalism (discussed above) that allows marginalized actors to connect to global networks while remaining committed to place-based struggles.

As well as enabling collaboration and networking among citizen media producers, the WSF has also provided a site for political discussions about media and technology. Media and communication first appeared as a thematic axis at the WSF 2003 (Milan 2013: 36) and since then activists have organized seminars and workshops at every WSF to discuss issues ranging from censorship and repression to community media and internet governance. Since 2009, these discussions have been brought together under the banner of the World Forum of Free Media (FMML, for *Fórum Mundial de Mídia Livre*), a thematic forum linked to the WSF that gathers a wide range of actors including community radios, free software developers, citizen journalists, bloggers, and NGOs that support access to information and communication. Following the first FMML, which was held alongside the WSF 2009 in Belém, subsequent editions have been organized in conjunction with the Rio +20 summit in 2012, the WSF 2013 and 2015 in Tunis, and the WSF 2016 in Montreal. For media activists who have been involved in the WSF process since the beginning, the development of the FMML has been accompanied by a shift in collective identity as they have gradually come to see themselves not only as producers of citizen and alternative media but as participants in a social movement that takes media and communication as a subject of contention in its own right (Stephansen 2017).

**Conclusion**

Citizen media have played a central role in documenting the ideas and proposals emerging from the WSF and making these more widely known. However, by highlighting a range of practices that relate to citizen media, such as capacity-building, networking and movement-building, this entry has shown that the significance of citizen media within the WSF process is not limited to their capacity to disseminate information. The WSF and FMML have also provided important sites for the development of transnational networks of media activists and for political discussions about media and technology issues – including, *inter alia*, the challenges that citizen media face due to repression, censorship and the growing power of media corporations. Thus, while much recent literature on citizen media has focused on individuals’ use of web 2.0 technologies to make their voices heard, this brief discussion of citizen media in the WSF has emphasized the collective dimension of media activism and the politicization of media and technology issues.

As highlighted above, media and communication have not received much attention in the academic literature about the WSF, and have not always been high on the agenda of forum organizers and participating movements. However, given the role that citizen and alternative media play both in terms of disseminating information and mobilizing new actors, they should be considered fundamental to the WSF process. Citizen media contribute to the ‘open space’ of the WSF by disseminating information about participants’ ideas and proposals, thus facilitating exchange of knowledge and experience beyond forum events. The emphasis that many activists place on supporting grassroots movements to produce their own media is evidence of a commitment to epistemic plurality that recognizes the importance of giving voice to marginalized groups. Citizen media can thus be seen as central to the WSF’s pedagogical praxis and to the idea of the WSF as ‘Epistemology of the South’. Finally, citizen and alternative media should be central to theorizations of the WSF as a global public sphere. Most obviously, because such media disseminate information about the WSF and thereby contribute to making it more ‘public’ and ‘global’, but also because citizen media practices like the ones discussed here contribute to the *making* and interlinking of publics at different scales (Stephansen 2016). The practices of media activists within the WSF thus point towards an understanding of the ‘global public sphere’ as de-centred, multi-scalar and constituted through diverse communication practices (Stephansen, forthcoming).

**Further reading**

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