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To WSIS, concerning the merits of OpenCourseWare

With the advent of the Information Society, information itself has become a prized commodity on the market. The realization that the *distribution* of knowledge, not just the knowledge itself, can render a profit has changed the world irrevocably. Unfortunately, that realization has left many world citizens out of the loop of information exchange. If the WSIS does not want information to become just another implement of the privileged to exacerbate the gap between rich and poor, it must act now to eliminate that divide. Adopting OpenCourseWare (OCW) is a clear way to link the have-nots to the haves in the global economy. Breathing new, digital life into the principles of WSIS and the UN Millenium Declaration, OpenCourseWare specifically enables access to information and knowledge, allows for international cooperation, and facilitates sound democracy and governance.

Originating at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2001, OpenCourseWare is an online initiative to make the primary materials for all of MIT's approximately 2000 courses available on the Internet for no charge. Though patrons of OCW will generally be unable to interact with MIT faculty, the opportunity for educational exploration by those who would otherwise not have access to the academic content is tremendous. Freely accessible content being proffered by some of the world's top scientific minds surpasses the expectation of granting "access to information and knowledge," one of WSIS's key principles for an information society for all. People all over the world are utilizing this body of expert knowledge.

However, the real opportunity for impact will come when two things occur: more institutions of knowledge offer their materials freely to the public and a forum for discourse about the content is created. Such developments will greatly expand the capacity for international and regional cooperation, another one of WSIS's key principles.

Imagine an environmental engineer in Uganda exploring online materials about providing vital infrastructure for water distribution. However, the class is designed for a different area of the world with different circumstances and different constraints. The techniques could be useful but he does not know how he can apply them to the set of constraints present in his situation. He goes to an online forum for the class he is taking and strikes up discussion with someone who has experience applying the techniques in a similar environment as the Ugandan engineer. The talk results in the infrastructure being laid in the most cost-efficient way possible. Once people can talk about their learning, the possibilities for collaboration and creativity are endless.

OCW can also serve to make the democratic process more efficient by creating a more informed citizenry. The importance of good democracy and governance is well documented by the UN Millennium Declaration. An informed citizenry serves to make the political process more inclusive as citizens know more about the issues at stake. Also, the more information decision makers have access to, hopefully the better the outcome of that decision will be.

OpenCourseWare can send tremendous shockwaves through the global fabric. WSIS knows that great investments are required to bring the developing world to the same level as the developed world. These days, information is a huge part of the

production function. OCW would be an excellent investment of intellectual capital. I

encourage you to strongly consider adopting OCW as part of WSIS's action plan.

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