

*Robert Bell, Executive Director, World Teleport Association*

All those who have never heard of WSIS, please raise your hands. A month ago, I would have raised my hand, as you are probably doing. The World Summit on the Information Society was not yet on my radar screen, but I now believe that it something the satellite industry, particularly in Asia, should follow closely.

# Whither WSIS?

**ITU Summit for Heads of State WSIS** is the brainchild of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Geneva. The idea first made its appearance in 1998 as Resolution 73 of the ITU, which instructed the ITU Secretary General to place the question of holding a World Summit on the Information Society on the docket of the United Nation's Chief Executive Board. In a nutshell, WSIS is an effort to focus the attention of the world's leaders on how information and communications technology (ICT) is transforming how we do business, entertain and inform ourselves, govern our nations and manage our societies. While offering enormous benefits, ICT is also putting huge strains on individuals and cultures, and creating new competitive challenges for entire nations.

## Prospering in the Digital Age

The "Digital Age" we live in is increasingly a place of "creative destruction." This term, coined by Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, describes his theory that the pace of innovation in an economy is proportional to the pace at which businesses in it are allowed to be destroyed. In 1997, a University of Texas professor, Donald Hicks, published a report that put facts behind the theory. He studied the past and future of the state's manufacturing industries, based on 22 years of sales-tax returns. He found that the "half-life" of new businesses had dropped 50 per cent since 1970. That is, a group of companies founded in 1985 took only half as long for half its number to disappear through normal attrition as did a group founded in 1970. Surprisingly, Hicks found that the Texas city with the fastest-growing job base and highest average wages - Austin - was also the place where businesses had the shortest life expectancy. His conclusion: that prospering in the Digital Age means fostering constant change in your economy, with all of the problems this entails. Or as Thomas L Friedman put it in his 1999 book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, "The barriers to entry into virtually any business today have been dramatically lowered, and this means that the speed by which a product goes from being an innovation to being a com-

modity has become turbocharged. If your company or country, for social, cultural or political reasons, is not willing to let creative destruction work as fast as today's turbomarkets, it will fall behind. It is not for nothing that Bill Gates likes to say at Microsoft they know only one thing: In four years, every product they make will be obsolete. The only question is whether Microsoft will make it obsolete or one of its competitors will."

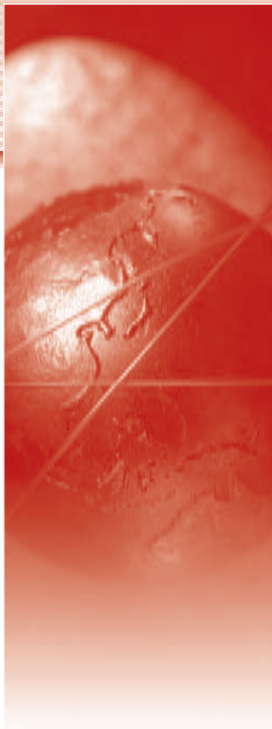
## The WSIS Process

WSIS is supposed to provide, according to its web site ([www.itu.int/wsis](http://www.itu.int/wsis)), a unique opportunity for all key stakeholders, to assemble at a high-level gathering and to develop a better understanding of this revolution and its impact on the international community. It aims to bring together Heads of State, Executive Heads of United Nations agencies, industry leaders, non-governmental organizations, media representatives and civil society in a single high-level event. The first of two Summits takes place in Geneva on December 10-12 of this year. A second Summit is scheduled for November 16-18, 2005. International and national bureaucracies are already cranking up to organize pre-summit meetings, produce an agenda, and develop drafts of the Summit Declaration and Plan of Action for debate.

## WSIS and Satellites

So, what does this all have to do with the satellite industry in Asia? The short answer is: possibly a great deal. While these international confabs involve huge amounts of talk and much less action, they do produce results. Like a heavy truck, they can take a long time to get up to speed. But once they are moving, they can be go a great distance and be very hard to stop.

So far, work on WSIS has made reference only to terrestrial telecommunications networks, because that's what the participants know about. If WSIS produces a plan that, in turn, generates grants and loans from the international community, the satellite industry risks losing out entirely on a source of revenues.



So it makes sense to invest a bit of time and effort now to make sure that satellite is one of the communications technologies recognized in the WSIS Declaration and Plan. But there is a deeper reason for the Asian satellite industry to pay attention to WSIS. In Asia as in no other region of the world, satellites are an absolutely essential part of the basic telecommunications infrastructure. Huge geographical distances, countless islands, and landscapes made of towering mountains all present obstacles to the deployment of terrestrial networks. Satellite-delivered voice, television and broadband Internet will be winning propositions in Asia for decades to come. If Asia is to continue its economic advance, satellites will play an ever-larger role.

So if the WSIS Summits ignore satellite technology, they will fail to address the unique needs of Asia's many nations and cultures. It will tend to penalize Asia in terms of economic development, relatively to regions where terrestrial networks are a better fit.

**Caveats**

So I urge you to learn something about WSIS, to find out if your national government is involved, and to contribute to the debate if possible. But a note of caution is also required. Though the WSIS concept is already five years old, it remains to be seen if it will become a meaningful step forward or merely an excuse for diplomats to travel. Everything will depend on whether or not key heads of state choose to attend. If most of the G8 heads of state are in Geneva in December, it will signal true interest in the goals of the Summit and increase the likelihood that WSIS will lead to concrete action.

As so often these days, the wild card is America's President Bush. He may consider WSIS to be a good

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The association helps its members build their businesses by educating them on issues, researching their markets, feeding them sales leads from potential customers around the world, and connecting them to strategic allies. Mr. Bell welcomes comments and can be reached at [rbell@worldteleport.org](mailto:rbell@worldteleport.org).

opportunity to reach out to other nations in a non-controversial setting - or he may dismiss the entire exercise, as he has done with several international agreements.

And whatever your opinion of the current US President, his attendance makes a difference. It would attract many other heads of state and put the influence of the world's largest economy behind the WSIS agenda. Conversely, if the US Trade Representative attends rather than President Bush, it will reduce the incentive for other heads of state to become personally involved and lower expectations of a meaningful result.

**Stay tuned.** ■

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