Deirdre Williams

S ometime last summer I was chatting with my Diplo classmate, Jamil, on Skype. He asked me if I planned to go to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in November 2008. I laughed. I can't afford it. And who would fund me? Too expensive, too far, out of the question.

Fast forward to the end of October. A miracle! A Fellowship from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to attend the IGF in Hyderabad appears. I am personally grateful to everyone involved in the selection and funding process for taking a "cyber" view of me. (Online we are all angels - sexless, ageless, raceless.) At the ICANN meeting in Puerto Rico last year I was not aware of anything unusual in the demographics, but in Hyderabad I noticed that while men of my age were quite well-represented, there were comparatively few women. Thank you for allowing me to be one of them.

A second, but also important, miracle – almost instant permission from Sir Arthur Lewis Community College where I teach, to allow me to accept the Fellowship, in spite of the fact that this will be my second Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related trip in two months even though I teach English Literature.

Before I leave I tell my students about the meeting and ask if they have any comments or questions they would like me to take with me to the IGF. My class monitor, Georgise, says "Ask them to try not to be so greedy Miss".

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I also make my usual weekend visit to a severely disabled friend, Susan, and her husband. I show them the programme and promise to attend the session on the first day "Internet accessibility for people with disabilities" in the hope of making contacts or finding information related to the "eye response" technology and software which is now the only means by which she can "speak".

I take three issues with me to India to measure against the international voice I will hear there. Each of them in some way is about the

right to speak. The first is that people are more important than technology; technology should serve people, not the other way round. The second is part of my study with Jamil – that multilingualism on the Internet should be focused on allowing people to speak, as well as on helping them to listen, that people should be enabled to create content in their own language. And the third is about people like Susan who are entirely dependent on technology and the freedoms it can offer them, to know what is being done for them.

India IS incredible. The security is very tight in the aftermath of Mumbai, but everyone seems smiling, helpful, charming. The city of Hyderabad seems to be growing at an amazing rate with new buildings everywhere. I also admired the Golconda Fort and the serene Buddha in the pearly lake. I am proud that my West Indian training has prepared me well for East Indian spicy biryani.

On Tuesday we attend the Second Parliamentary Forum and immediately I see a way to carry back involvement in Internet Governance to St Lucia. The Speaker of the House in St Lucia, and civil servants in the e-Government Unit have expressed an interest in what I may learn in Hyderabad. And already, even before the Forum itself, there is an obvious emphasis on the needs of people rather than the needs of technology.

On Wednesday, the first day of the Forum proper, is the session I promised Susan I would attend. It is chaired by Abdul Waheed Khan, Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information UNESCO. The presentations are generally discussing issues involving hundreds of millions of people in a rather impersonal and objective manner. When the question period comes I preface my intervention by stating that I am talking about ONE person. Thinking of Susan, I become emotional and to my shame and horror my voice starts to break as if I am going to cry. I get back under control again and finish what I have to say. Mr Waheed Khan thanks me for reminding them all that "Access for people with disabilities" is not just one big issue but an aggregation of many small private tragedies. Perhaps he is merely being diplomatic but at the end of the session many people come to speak to me and offer help, including the ITU official present for that session, and they press me to attend the other sessions in that particular thread.

So two of my three concerns are addressed – I have found contacts that may have help for Susan, and I have been reassured that there is a real concern for people over technology, and for individual people beside the necessary masses. My third concern is addressed on the second day in sessions on multilingualism. I am even able to use and cite the research I have done as part of a collaborative project before coming to the IGF. I investigated Welsh which, like Catalan, has used the Internet as a powerful mechanism to promote a minority language and culture. But I also hear the repeated pleas of India which seeks to retain the English lingua franca which facilitates communication among its fifteen official languages. Paradoxically in my part of the world the unofficial minority French lexicon Kweyol serves as a lingua franca between officially English

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speaking St. Lucia and Dominica, and officially French-speaking Martinique and Guadeloupe. And more and more the former St. Lucian Prime Minister who said "Conputa-a pa ka pale kweyol" – the computer cannot speak Kweyol – is being proved wrong.

What have I brought home from Hyderabad? For me, and I would venture for many others as well, the Internet is about the net-working of individual people, with an objective of reaching a state of mutual understanding, and Internet Governance should keep this as its prime consideration. Of course this is a slow process. Of course we move towards the objective with infinitesimally small steps, but we do move. We still must find a point of balance so that "togetherness" does not have to be "sameness" which is why the "non-session" (the discussion had been re-scheduled) on "Identity on the Internet" was so interesting. In that case, the people who had come for the originally-scheduled session found common interests and stayed to examine them more closely. And the balance between "togetherness" and "sameness" is why there is an insistence in the multilingualism debate on facilitating the right to speak, as well as the right to listen. And - connected to this - comes the success of the improved and expanded remote participation at this particular IGF.

I have an answer for Georgise, my student. These people didn't seem greedy to me, in fact they were trying very hard to share. Look at the generosity of Canada which provided the funding for us to attend the Hyderabad meeting. Canada, through the International Development Research Centre has also funded numerous ICT initiatives in the Caribbean region. Canada is a very modest donor, but deserves a very loud thank you. Overall the IGF was a wonderful experience – thank you to everyone who helped to make it happen, thank you for the material you have given me to work with in the coming year in St. Lucia and regionally. While we were in Hyderabad the Diplo group was given International Telecommunications Union (ITU) t-shirts. On the front is printed "R U knectd?"; on the back "We R." with the ITU logo and "Committed to connecting the world … one billion at a time".

I am "knected", and I'll do my best to make sure that St. Lucia and the region are too. ■

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EXTRACT

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT:

How the Internet Governance Forum
empowered people from developing countries