

# The World Summit Awards: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

*Best practice case studies have become very popular within commercial information systems and information and communication technology (ICT) for development discourses. Best practices claim to offer a way to quickly become as good as the leaders in a particular domain, without making their mistakes. An initiative that promotes the sharing of best practices is the World Summit Awards (WSA), which, through a global contest, identifies and promotes best practices in local e-content and applications. The paper explores the process whereby organisations apply and are judged as winners, in addition to conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of selected WSA-related texts, to determine the underlying assumptions and beliefs of WSA regarding the concept of “best practice”. It holds up the findings against two principles that are fundamental to effective best practice promulgation. Ultimately it finds the WSA falling short of its intended goals because of the way in which it chooses and presents best practice cases.*

*Keywords: Digital Divide, Best Practices, Local e-content, Critical Discourse Analysis.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

ICT has become an important aspect of the modern era. “ICTs are revolutionising the way in which societies interact, conduct their businesses, compete in the international market, and set their national economic and human development agendas” and they “present – at least theoretically – a promising potential to lead developing countries into the ‘highways’ of development” (Morales-Gómez & Melesse, 1998).

There is much political and practical discourse around the role of ICT for development (ICT4D). An important event related to this issue has been the *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS). At the first phase of WSIS, held in Geneva in 2003, all UN member states committed to “build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilise and share information and knowledge” (ITU 2003). The second phase of the Summit was held in Tunis in November 2005. While no universally accepted definition for the Information Society exists, it can be described as a society in which “the creation, distribution, and manipulation of information has become the most significant economic and cultural activity. An Information Society may be contrasted with societies in which the economic underpinning is primarily Industrial or Agrarian” (TechTarget 1999).

Parallel events are held aside each Summit that provide a space for government agencies, civil society organisations, private sector companies, donor agencies and inter-governmental organisations to showcase their best practice initiatives, network and form partnerships. A key theme of the first Summit was using ICTs to promote local content and knowledge. Ballantyne (2002) defines local content as “the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest.” E-Content is a term used to describe electronic or digital content, e.g., text on a website or CD-ROM.

ICTs are tools that augment the ability to codify information, as well as enable the wide dissemination thereof, both locally and globally (NACI 2004). Because developed countries are more ICT-enabled than developing countries, they have published much more of their local content, resulting in the danger that until developing countries produce more of their own local content, “easier access to globalised knowledge is fast turning [developing countries] into ‘consumers’ of distant and potentially irrelevant information ... that may undermine or overwhelm local cultural heritage and economic livelihoods” (Ballantyne 2002). There is thus a strong call from governments and international development agencies for more ICT-enabled content from developing countries in local languages, about local and global issues, which express local viewpoints.

But “while the importance of local content has often been raised in international meetings, concrete initiatives and expertise on this topic are scarce” (Ballantyne 2002). For example, concerning material for education, Unwin (2004) notes that there is currently “very little multimedia content being developed by and for African people, let alone in local African languages.” In general, there is a distinct lack of depth within discussions on how to realise the promised benefits of local content. High-level plans don’t seem to be able to move beyond the political rhetoric and to thoroughly examine the enablers and constraints regarding increased local content creation, dissemination and consumption.

It is in this context that the WSA competition was conceptualised and takes place. The WSA is “a global contest for selecting and promoting the world’s best e-contents and applications. It is held in the framework of and in cooperation with the [WSIS]” (ICNM 2005b). Through its competition format, the winning e-content and applications are presented as examples of best practices. The contest comprises two complete rounds, run according to the WSIS phases; thus there were WSA winners recognised in Geneva in 2003 and a fresh set of winners were presented in Tunis in 2005.

The paper seeks to critically evaluate the WSA in terms of its processes and the way it portrays itself as a vehicle for e-content best practices. By understanding the WSA’s assumptions of what constitutes best practice and how it should be presented, the paper intends to provide constructive criticism to help increase the impact of WSA. Therefore, while we show how a best practices approach can be problematic, we do not intend to discount the value of best practices. Individual learning and organisational learning consists of imitating the behaviour of others, and as such the idea of observing what successful others have done is sound. We shall attempt to improve the way in which best practices are handled, rather than denounce them. The paper is organised as follows: it begins with an exploration of the concept of best practice before introducing the WSA and its process. A critical discourse analysis of key WSA texts is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings in terms of best practices. The paper concludes with a suggestion to the WSA to improve the impact of its work.

## **1.1 Research Approach**

The interpretive paradigm, which “seeks to clarify the meaning of social situations so they can be better understood” (Ngwenyama 1991), was adopted in the research for this paper. The data source was the WSA website<sup>1</sup>; it detailed the contest process – from application through to selection and presentation of winners – and provided statements by individuals about the WSA. Cape Gateway, the e-government information project where one of the authors works, entered the 2005 round of the competition and was awarded a Special Mention in the e-government category. We experienced the WSA process and our evaluation, while subjective in the interpretive tradition, is also subjective from a participant point of view.

Interpretive research does not have an emancipatory interest as in critical social theory; it seeks to explain situations rather than change them. However, we will adopt a critical interpretive perspective,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wsis-award.org>

following Doolin's (1998) argument that "interpretive researchers need to consciously adopt a critical and reflective stance in relation to the role that IT plays in maintaining social orders and social relations in organisations" and "connect these interpretations to broader considerations of social power and control." Pozzebon (2004) proposes that "being critical may simply imply probing taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in the status quo by being critically reflective, while utilising whatever theoretical framework is chosen." Thus it is possible to critically reflect upon a situation without necessarily drawing upon critical social theory.

To enable us to undertake a critical interpretive analysis of WSA, our research process proceeded as follows. First we analysed the literature about the concept of "best practice", and noted the common mistake made in assuming the mobility of best practices that can with ease be adopted by willing adopters. The importance of local context was noted, and the difference between process and outcome, as explained below. Next, we investigated the WSA process (which we have experienced) further through available information about WSA on the Internet. We then used a critical discourse analysis of selected WSA-related texts to reach an understanding of the assumptions and expectations of WSA and some of its actors. These were embedded within the previously established context of best practices and WSA process and provided the material for the critical interpretation presented in Sections 6 and 7.

## **2 THE CONCEPT OF "BEST PRACTICE"**

The concept of "best practice" is not universally defined. It has "entered into common parlance in contemporary business discourse" (Wagner et al. 2004), usually to improve a firm's competitive edge or regain ground lost to a competitor. It has also become popular in ICT4D discourse, usually comprising a series of case studies from which patterns of best practices emerge.

While the phrase "best practice" is used loosely, it generally describes one or more initiatives or organisations that have achieved success or superior performance in a particular domain. The implicit assumption is therefore made that a practice can be described through a number of explicit characteristics; initiatives or organisations that exhibit a high number of these characteristics thus come to represent the best practice within a domain. This view of 'best practice' "contains the germ of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'substantialist fallacy': the notion that a 'practice' has substantial properties that can be transferred from firm to firm within one society and culture, and even to another culture" (Eskow 2001).

Best practice cases are commonly presented in their end-result, or outcome, state. For example, a description of e-commerce best practice might show a screenshot of the Amazon.com website with its defining characteristics exposed, such as One-click shopping or user reviews of products. Thus the outcome is shown without making any substantial reference to the process, the "practice", which was followed to achieve the outcome. This superficial, "copying" approach is problematic because i) it "confuses the outcome with the process, and disregards that the process may be the outcome you are seeking" (Bridges 2004), ii) it perpetuates the bandwagon effect (Fujimura 1992) which refers to the influence exerted by what others have done before, iii) it can stifle motivation (Bridges 2004), and iv) it does not coexist with an approach of 'growing' a best practice through an ongoing learning process.

In their study, Wagner et al. (2004) found that "while literature exists on best practices, the process of arriving at them is not considered to any extent. Instead, these actions are black-boxed and assumed." Then, when best practices are implemented in projects, "these black-boxed practices get deconstructed through use. They are then reconstructed and take on a hybrid form; the prescribed, generic processes become infused with local value." This demonstrates that there must be sufficient information provided on the process of best practice, in addition to its outcome. The factor of local context is significant, and is increasingly articulated in ICT4D discourse. Following the many failures of projects where developed-country solutions were directly transplanted into developing countries (Sundén & Wicander 2003), it is now "widely recognised that ICT in development has the most impact when you

mix it into the local cultural, political and social context in ways that are relevant to peoples' daily lives" (Bridges.org n.d.). Wagner et al. (2004) argue that over time, people "will begin to evaluate the extent to which local practices are of greater value than those mandated by best practice."

At its core, the concept of best practice can be well intended, enabling the sharing of learned lessons and helping people and organisations to not reinvent the wheel or make the same mistakes as others. But to ensure that the intended benefits are realised, best practice cases should provide ample evidence of practice, and not only of outcome. This is an acknowledgement that best practices always need to be adapted to a particular local context. As a promoter of e-content best practices, the WSA is the subject of focus in this paper. It is evaluated against two principles: the focus of presentation of its best practice cases (balance of outcome- vs. process-focus) and the ability of others to adapt the cases to their local context.

### **3 THE WORLD SUMMIT AWARDS**

#### **3.1 About the World Summit Awards**

The mission of the WSA is to showcase best practice e-content products from the 168 countries that participate in the contest. The focus of the initiative is summarised as follows (ICNM 2005a):

*"WSA places its emphasis on cultural diversity and identity, the creation of varied information content and the digitalization of educational, scientific and cultural heritage. It aims not only to make the benefits of the new Information Society accessible and meaningful for all humanity, but in particular to raise public awareness and give deserved public recognition to the highest quality e-Content, produced all over the world. WSA strongly aims to encourage openness towards different cultures and to support the exchange of local best practice examples by and within its international network. It sees the bridging of the digital divide and narrowing of the content gap as its overall goal."*

The WSA is a contest that operates at the highest level of prominence: it is supported by numerous governments, heads of state and international organizations, including the Internet Society, UNESCO and the UN ICT Task Force. It is coordinated by the Austrian-based International Centre for New Media (ICNM).

#### **3.2 The WSA Process**

Briefly, the process works as follows: in an initial selection round, national experts select the best e-content product from their country in eight categories: e-learning, e-culture, e-science, e-government, e-health, e-business, e-entertainment and e-inclusion. In 2003, this resulted in the nomination of 803 projects which were evaluated in a three-round judging process by the WSA Grand Jury, meeting in Dubai from October 17-22. It brought together national experts from 36 countries, representing all continents and a diverse range of languages and cultures. In 2005, 742 projects were nominated and were again evaluated in a three-round judging process by the WSA Grand Jury, this time consisting of 37 experts, most of them selected from the members of the 2005 Expert Panel by the WSA Board of Directors. The WSA Board of Directors, built on the EUROPRIX network, contributes to the benefit of the World Summit Award. Meeting every two months on the occasion of international WSA events, the Board discusses the overall strategic and operational development of the award and makes decisions on the next steps to be taken. In 2003 and in 2005, 40 winners were selected (five in each category). A further 20 products, chosen from the major world regions, were awarded with a Special Mention. The 2005 winners were presented at the WSA Gala in Tunis on 16 November 2005. This provides a platform for leading producers and designers of e-content to meet with leaders of state, civil society and business.

Selection of the winners by the Grand Jury is based on details given in the application form, which only allows for a very limited amount of information, and the following criteria that are applied against the actual e-content products: quality and comprehensiveness of content; ease of use, including functionality, navigation and orientation; value added through interactivity and multimedia; quality of design (aesthetic value of graphics / music or sounds); quality of craftsmanship (technical realisation); strategic importance for the global development of the Information Society; and accessibility to users with disabilities. The process through which a nominated entry was conceptualized, its overcoming of particular obstacles, and how it came into its final, submitted form is not evaluated by the Grand Jury. They have insufficient information to do this at their disposal, and neither does any of the evaluation criteria focus on these issues.

In the 2003 round of the competition, the winners were publicised on the WSA website and descriptions of them printed in a book, both in English only. It is assumed that the same will be done in this round. The 2005 winners are already published on the WSA website, however, for each winner only the title of the project and the individual/organisation behind it are displayed, along with a URL, thumbnail screenshot and a very brief description. Thus to gain access to the winner information, one must be able to read English and, unless you can get a copy of the book, have Internet access.

WSA further publicises the winners through a worldwide Best Content Road Show in all of the major world regions on invitation and in cooperation with local key partners. In 2004, WSA Road Shows were conducted in over 20 countries. The next sequence of events started in November 2005, after the winners of the WSA 2005 had been officially announced and celebrated at the Winners Gala in Tunis. Organizations and individuals from all over the world are invited to become partners of the global WSA initiative and conduct WSA Road Show events in their own country. While these road shows have the potential to disseminate information about the process behind the showcased best practice examples, it would not seem to happen in practice. Event organizers are encouraged to have a World Best Content Exhibition as part of an existing national/international event, conference, or exhibition. The 2004-2005 WSA Road Show Report provides details about the 20 national events and in most cases, the WSA component consisted of an exhibition booth. A notable exception was the event in Khartoum, which was organized as a WSA Workshop. However, the event is described as “A memorable joint celebration with lectures and speeches, accompanied by a large exhibition of the winning products of the WSA 2003. The winning products were installed on 200 computers in lecture rooms and libraries of the five universities and colleges.” There is no evidence of a discussion of the best practice processes followed by winners.

In Sections 6 and 7 we will analyse the WSA process. First it is important to establish a common understanding of the complexity and richness of ICT-enabled local content initiatives and e-content products. The current deficiency of local e-content in developing countries is the product of a number of challenges, including lack of access to ICTs, lack of ICT skills and capacity, cultural constraints and a lack of appreciation of the benefits of local content. The complex set of interdependencies related to e-content is outside the scope of this paper; it is only important to acknowledge that it exists. As an illustration of the complexities, we will briefly consider the issues of language and adaptation.

### **3.3 Local Content with the Support of ICT's**

It is a recognised problem that most content on the web is in English. In 2000, 68% of all websites were in English (Pastore 2000) but a year before that only a quarter of the world's population could speak English as a first, second or foreign language (Graddol 1999). “Language is one of the pillars of culture; it reflects not only the ways in which reality is captured and communicated but also the ways in which its meaning is understood and appropriated” (Morales-Gómez & Melesse 1998). Because culture is embedded in language, the prevalence of English content means that the views and context are inherently “Western”. Castells (1999) says that “language and culture are key elements and the online environment is immersed in the culture of the community that it serves.” Thus existing content cannot necessarily be made locally relevant just by translating it into a local language; it must be

adapted within the local context. In his five-stage maturity model for community ICT, Williamson (2004) has the generation of e-content (in a local language), or adapting content to local needs, as stage four. In other words, these activities require a significant level of maturity in people, software, hardware, skills, etc.

To enable us to undertake a critical interpretive analysis of the WSA, we need to understand the explicit and implicit assumptions and expectations on which the WSA are based. The discussion above about best practices, the WSA process and e-content provided the context within which these assumptions and expectations will be embedded to undertake such an analysis in Section 6. Ideally, we should have interviewed key WSA actors, but with this being impossible, we decided to undertake a critical discourse analysis of several texts selected from the WSA website. The first is from a page titled *General Information on the World Summit Award*, the second from a page titled *WSA 2005 Winners*, and the third from a page of statements on WSA. The particular statements, from March 2003, are by Charles Geiger, Executive Secretary of the Organising Committee of the WSIS and Ted Baracos, Commercial Director of MILIA, a global forum for owners, buyers and distributors of digital content and new interactive technologies. Further texts selected were taken from the page titled *WSA World* featuring statements by various spokespersons for the different regions. Excerpts from statements by Ana Serrano, for North America and Oceania, Titilayo Akinsanmi, for Africa, Waheed Al Balushi, for Arab Countries and the Middle East, and Martin Casey for Europe were selected. The criteria used for the selection of the different texts were simply that we chose those that revealed, in our opinion, most about the underlying assumptions and expectations of the various actors.

#### **4 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WORLD SUMMIT AWARDS TEXTS**

Discourse analysis begins with the assumption that “through language and practice, versions of the social world, how it works, and how it should ideally be, are constructed” (Potter & Wetherell 1987). Phillips & Hardy (2002) explain that in the exploration of the discursive production of aspects of social reality, discourse analysis is fundamentally interpretive. In order to evaluate the WSA texts we followed Thompson’s (2004) operationalization of Fairclough’s approach to CDA (Fairclough 1995). Thompson (*op. cit.*) says of CDA:

*[It] “is a useful tool for IS researchers; in particular, those wishing to understand the potent interaction of ICT with developmental and other discursive ‘gazes’ which look out upon contested organisational landscapes. Indeed, it is this very task – uncovering, problematising, and raising our consciousness about contestable assumptions which have, through sheer use, become woven into the fabric of discursive interaction - at which CDA arguably excels.”*

In addition to Thompson's own paper, which demonstrates his CDA method, it has been applied by Roode et al. (2004). Described briefly, Fairclough's CDA identifies “speech genres” and “discursive types” in bodies of text. The generic speech genres apply “horizontally across various orders of discourse (which any researcher, for example, might be likely to find when performing CDA in other domains)” (Thompson 2004). By contrast, discursive types are “‘vertically’ identifiable as part of a particular order of discourse and which are likely to remain specific to a particular domain of study” (*op. cit.*). Due to space limitations we do not show the speech genres and discursive types in our analysis below. Suffice it to say that we made only minor adaptations to Thompson’s categorisation scheme.

There is an inherent subjectivity in identifying these speech genres and discursive types and applying them to specific sections of text on the WSA website. While our motive is to uncover the WSA assumptions and expectations, the presentation of analysis in tabular format (unique to Thompson’s approach) puts the author and reader in a comparable position to interpret the text (*op. cit.*). This offers some mitigation against unwanted subjectivity and bias.

The reference column in the table below indicates the source of the text, found in the bibliography. Usually this column shows the line number in the analysed texts, but we have chosen to reference the source because different sources are used and on each of the actual pages where the texts are found it is easy to locate the excerpts.

Ref	Text	Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Practice)	Explanation (Social Practice)
ICNM, 2005a	WSA places its emphasis on cultural diversity and identity, the creation of varied information content and the digitalization of educational, scientific and cultural heritage. It aims not only to make the <b>benefits of the new Information Society accessible and meaningful for all humanity</b> , but in particular to <b>raise public awareness and give deserved public recognition to the highest quality e-Content</b> , produced all over the world. WSA strongly aims to <b>encourage openness</b> towards different cultures and to <b>support the exchange of local best practice</b> examples by and within its international network. It sees the bridging of the <b>digital divide</b> and narrowing of the <b>content gap as its overall goal</b> .	<p>Establishment of WSA's role, values, aims and goals.</p> <p>WSA as conduit for tolerance and best practice exchange.</p> <p>WSA as contributor to alleviation of Information Society problems.</p>	<p>Establishment of "digital divide" and "content gap" as disparities that require intervention.</p> <p>Establishes legitimacy of the WSA as an intervener.</p>	<p>Establishment of WSA as embodying expert opinion.</p> <p>Positioning of WSA as a major player in closing the digital and e-content divides.</p> <p>Establishment of WSA values: diversity, sharing and networking, quality, tolerance and local-focus. WSA desires the creation of more local e-content</p> <p>Holds that everybody must be a part of the Information Society. Constructs the importance of, and need for, best practices.</p> <p>Portrays WSA as identifier, facilitator and repository of e-content best practices.</p>
ICNM, 2005d	The overall process meets <b>near-scientific requirements of independent, inter-subjective judgment and of establishing the best available expert views</b> . A special emphasis in the product evaluation was put on projects which show the benefits of <b>information and communication technology for the development of communities and help to bridge the growing content gap</b> between developed and developing countries.	<p>Establishment of the expertness and rigour of WSA.</p> <p>Deterministic portrayal of ICT as instrument of development.</p> <p>Reassertion of "content gap".</p>	<p>Unproblematic treatment of role of ICT and e-content in development.</p> <p>Appeal to WSA's expertise.</p> <p>Shows WSA to be neutral and follow a pragmatic and "near-scientific" process.</p>	<p>Reassertion of legitimacy of WSA as expert in e-content. Show WSA process to be rigorous and sound.</p> <p>Ignores the complexities and risks associated with ICT as instrument of development.</p>

ICNM, 2005b	<p>...The World Summit Award, <b>held within the framework of the World Summit on the Information Society</b>, demonstrates the cutting edge in harnessing the vast potential of the digital revolution in the service of humanity. It is my fervent hope that this collaboration with WSA in <b>bringing to the forefront the finest examples of e-content and showcasing best practices from around the world</b> will go a long way in providing comprehensive shape to the vision enunciated in Geneva and pave the road ahead to Tunis and beyond.</p>	<p>Positions the WSA as part of the drive for the Information Society and at the forefront of attempts to achieve development through ICT.</p> <p>Expects that showcasing the best in e-content and accompanying best practices will contribute towards the shaping of the Information Society.</p>	<p>Establishes the authority of WSA.</p> <p>Assumption that WSA process will identify those exemplars of e-content and best practices that can shape the Information Society vision.</p>	<p>Uses position of authority to extend this to WSA.</p>
ICNM, 2005b	<p>The World Summit Award is a <b>great vehicle to promote creativity</b> in digital content and encourage interactive media-makers to <b>push new boundaries with new visions</b> applauded by the professional community.</p>	<p>Portrayal of WSA as catalyst of creative inspiration.</p>	<p>Confidence</p>	<p>Implies that e-content producers already have boundaries, they are already producing. Thus WSA is not creating new producers, only creatively stirring up existing ones.</p>
ICNM, 2005e	<p>In North America and Oceania, the creation and production of e-Content becomes more and more important. ...The WSA's role in the development of e-Content is in my opinion two-fold: On the one hand <b>it should encourage best practice e-Content production</b> from around the world, and on the other hand it ought to ensure that global audiences see the <b>diversity of e-Content</b> paradigms from around the world.</p>	<p>Describes expectations of WSA: encouraging best practices in producing e-content, and ensuring that the diversity of e-content is recognized.</p>	<p>Optimism</p>	<p>Assumes that the format of the WSA promotes best practices in e-content production and expects that the diversity of e-content should be celebrated.</p>
ICNM, 2005e	<p>...Helping Africans to create, understand, use, buy, sell and exchange content meaningful to their lives is not the obscure fad of a few enthusiasts on the fringe of the global Information Society. It is a core purpose, and the <b>WSA can have an impact by valuing and motivating local content, by</b></p>	<p>Makes a strong plea for the development of best practices in the production of local e-content, and for the development of the skills needed to do this.</p>	<p>Persuasion Pragmatism</p>	<p>Describes not what she thinks WSA stands for, but what it should stand for: not simply identifying winners, but creating winners through developing the requisite skills and addressing other obstacles in the way</p>

	<b>building adaptation skills, by addressing language issues, by promoting local ownership and participation, by making local content visible, by engaging in joint action on content development and by strengthening the local skills base.</b>			of local content developers.
ICNM, 2005e	ICTs more and more become a major component of our lives, and this is why it is of great importance for us to focus on best practice and innovative use. <b>Because of ICTs, various aspects of society will need to change</b> , such as information structure and disseminating of information. <b>To help tackling these changes, quality e-Content is needed</b> , and this is why I welcome the World Summit Award to focus on this issue... I think the WSA should even more focus on <b>showcasing best practice projects</b> in all regions of the world, seeking <b>support from local authorities and getting them involved in promoting quality e-Content products.</b>	Sees ICTs as the driving force for societal changes, and expects these changes to be facilitated through quality e-content.  The WSA is seen as a support for the development of such needed quality e-content.  Expects the WSA to enlist local support for the promotion of quality e-content projects.	Technological optimism Determinism	The WSA focus on e-content can contribute towards the Information Society.  The role of best practices in the production of quality e-content is not recognized or acknowledged – quality e-content is equated with best practices.
ICNM, 2005e	... The WSA transcends borders, it inspires and cultivates innovation, it draws attention to the possibilities of e-Content and recognises best practice across the world. The WSA must continue to showcase innovation and best practice in the use of e-Content and continue through its national network to carry the message to all corners of the world.	Emphasizes the cultivation of innovation by WSA and expects the WSA to promote this world-wide.	Confidence Persuasion Technological optimism Pragmatism	Unproblematic view of the situation: e-content presents a challenge to innovate and WSA should promote this globally.

## 5 ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE WSA

The following can be said of the assumptions (implicit or explicit) of WSA and expectations of some of the actors:

- The WSA represents expert opinions. WSA winners really are the best e-content products in the world and therefore must represent best practices.

- The application form, even though it is so short, combined with the e-content product itself, adequately captures the best practice characteristics of a submission. This allows the panel of experts to legitimately recognise it as a quality e-content initiative.
- Quality e-content and best practices are exchangeable concepts.
- Focusing on the outcome of a best practice case (quality e-content) provides sufficient substance for it to be easily shared and be of benefit to others.
- The WSA process is thus sound in identifying and facilitating the exchange of best practices by showcasing quality e-content products.
- Diversity and local context are very important principles. Ideally, the WSA results in the creation of e-content in all countries in the world, in many different languages, based on the best practices offered by the WSA.
- An expectation, voiced by the spokesperson for Africa, was quite unique and not articulated by anyone else. Titilayo Akinsanmi described not what she thinks WSA stands for, but what it *should* stand for: not simply identifying winners, but creating winners through developing the requisite skills and addressing other obstacles in the way of local content developers. We did not find this expressed in any form in any of the WSA documents.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Considering the complex context of ICT-enabled local content initiatives, and what has been revealed about the WSA, we now discuss the latter against the two principles associated with best practices that are outlined in this paper, i.e., the need to provide information on process as well as outcome, and the ability for others to adapt best practices to their own local context.

The WSA selection process and dissemination of best practice e-contents is based on outcome, on the end product. The key issues, processes and context needed to fully describe a local content initiative are not conveyed in the current WSA process and presentation of the winners.

There is an inherent belief that by showcasing what is possible with ICTs, the WSA makes a contribution to closing the digital divide and content gap. But given the process of the WSA, the contribution can only be in terms of raising awareness and creating a vision for current and aspiring content producers by showing them what their e-content could and should look like.

The ICT4D community is aware of some of the barriers that constrain greater ICT-enablement of developing countries and the need for more local content; what is not known is how to overcome those barriers, what process must be followed to reach the desired outcome. Therein lies the answer to large-scale impact.

While disseminating best practices assumes a “high-degree of homogeneity” between the organisations of the intended audience (Wagner et al. 2004), the WSA emphasises and celebrates diversity. The WSA presents the winners in sectors, e.g., e-government, but their only other common factors, aside from sharing a sector, is that they are local content initiatives that use ICTs. It is a highly heterogeneous group, differentiated by factors such as geographic location, local culture, language, audience profiles, etc. That makes it potentially very difficult for anyone else to learn from the best practices, unless they share a number of commonalities. For example, is DirectGov (UK) useful to the Lesotho government’s e-strategists, given their vastly different situations? The Lesotho e-strategists may have a “visual”, an outcome, of where they want to get to, but WSA simply does not provide them with enough information about the process to tell them *how* to get there. In other words, in terms of the way in which best practices are adapted and implemented in a particular context, the WSA-presented black box is sealed too tightly for it to be deconstructed and localised.

The WSA, despite its scale and cast of partners and high patrons reduces the complexities of local content initiatives and thereby devalues the potential for best practices sharing. The mismatch between the high-level presentation of winners and the multifarious nature of their content, ultimately results in

an exercise that does not adequately recognise the complexity of local content and the adaptation of best practices.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The paper has highlighted some of the challenges and success factors of the notion of best practices. In this context the WSA has been evaluated as an initiative that purports to identify, promote and engender best practices in e-content initiatives.

In terms of “making existing excellence visible”, the WSA certainly does a good job of providing high-level exposure to projects, big or small. Its reach (168 countries), budget and support is truly impressive.

Taking a broad view of the WSA, it can certainly be said that it does add value: it *does* provide a gallery of excellent examples of ICT-enabled local content initiatives from around the world. It *does* reduce the chances of “reinventing the wheel” or unnecessarily repeating mistakes made by others. It *does* offer many people the opportunity to attend a gala award ceremony and meet others who are working in the same space. It *does* raise awareness around the issue of local content, and what is possible with ICTs. An initiative like this *does* offer a mechanism for exposing small initiatives that might otherwise go unnoticed, which can spark ideas for others working in the field (Bridges.org n.d.).

However, a critical analysis of the process and fundamental beliefs of the WSA has shown a best practice gallery that is fundamentally flawed in impact. The WSA does not provide enough information on the process behind each of its best practice cases, which limits the ability of others to successfully learn from these very good examples. It does not provide what Titilayo Akinsanmi, spokesperson for Africa, hopes for in WSA: “...building adaptation skills, by addressing language issues, ...by engaging in joint action on content development and by strengthening the local skills base” (WSA World page on ICNM 2005a).

The WSA would do better by disseminating cases that adequately describe the context of the initiative, such as socio-economics, culture, literacy levels of audience, budget for initiative, etc., and how those issues were successfully dealt with to produce a local e-content offering. This would make it possible for others to adapt the process to their local context and increase the chances of achieving the same outcome as the WSA winners.

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