

Go Tell It on the Mountain

By [Kari Lynn Dean](#) | [Also by this reporter](#)

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This week, as Kofi Annan sits in his hotel room at the U.N. tech summit in Geneva, he may wonder what the world's citizens are thinking. If he glances out the window, he might see the answer blazing across Lake Geneva's Jet d'Eau, the world's tallest water fountain.

The answer could be, "Mr. Secretary General, listen to your mountain!"

And then again, it might read, "Kofi, I want to beam us into funnier times." Annan could then decide to answer -- on the fountain.

Diplomats from 191 countries meet this week in Geneva for the three-day United Nations [World Summit on the Information Society](#). It's the occasion for [The Helloworld Project](#) to project thousands of 500-foot-high laser-light SMS messages onto the Geneva fountain.

Internet users everywhere can post billboard thoughts almost instantly onto the fountain -- or onto the northern façade of New York's U.N. building, the face of a mountain in Rio de Janeiro or the front of a Bombay skyscraper.

"The idea is to use the media to allow people to get their message across to powerful people," said Swiss Web designer Johannes Gees, who conceived, coordinated and sought funding for the \$250,000 Helloworld Project. The project is similar to a smaller version he implemented at the 2001 World Economic Forum.

Anyone can use a website form or send an SMS to create a message and project it across any or all of the four global landmarks with 10- to 20-watt semiconductor lasers. Of course, Internet access hasn't yet reached all corners of the world -- that's why the United Nations is having the meeting.

But to Gees, Helloworld takes free speech and democracy up a notch.

"We speak about public space and that it belongs to everybody, but the use of public space is actually set into regimentation," Gees said. "You can buy the space for advertising, but that takes money. Or you can do graffiti, but that's illegal.

"With this project's intervention into public space, I give people who don't have money the power to be present in a big, visible way."

Big and visible it is. The largest laser projection is going to be on Morro dois Irmaos, a mountain at the southern tip of Ipanema Beach that can be seen from Rio de Janeiro's main lagoon. The message surface is 1,650 feet by 200 feet. Each letter in Rio will be 200 feet tall and 200 feet wide, made visible by a four-lasers-in-one projector and viewable from up to 1.5 miles away.

If you don't happen to be in the vicinity of a designated mountain, fountain or skyscraper, you can visit the Helloworld Project website to see the messages broadcast by webcams. (The latest version of Shockwave is required to view a [simulation](#).)

While the project may have a guerrilla feel, Gees worked with all the government entities before setting up the laser projectors. Because most of his funding came from the Swiss government's Federal Office of Culture, he requested permission from the owner of each landmark structure before shooting lasers at them.

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