

THE CHALLENGE TO COMMUNICATIONS

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Communications: The Challenge of Change

International Symposium of Ministers of Communications

Vancouver, Canada

11 June 1986

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to have been given the opportunity to address this International Symposium of Ministers of Communications. Even though I am not a specialist in telecommunications I feel justified in sharing some of my thoughts with this distinguished gathering for two reasons. First, the title of the Symposium includes the words: "challenge of 'change" which summarizes the situation not only in communications but also the global situation, in virtually every field of human endeavour, in every country. Second, advances in communications affect all of us, whether we come from technically advanced countries or from the Third World. It is indeed difficult to say whom the revolution in communications has affected most, those who already have access to the diversity of facilities which the new technologies make possible or those who so far have had few if any contacts with even such a basic facility as the telephone.

You who are involved in setting policies, in working out international agreements, in establishing systems of ever greater scope and sophistication, are also, whether you wish it or not, reshaping much of national and international society. Speaking in Canada, it is natural to recall the work of such scholars and thinkers as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan who have done so much to change our perceptions about the role of communication in human affairs, whether expressed in the shape and practices of empires or the ways in which the means of communication influence our cultural matrices. Even though the image of the global village has become a cliché, it can still prompt the question: who are the inhabitants of this village? Certainly not those for whom the Maitland Commission recommended the provision of telephone-access within long walking distance. A sensational rock concert in aid of Africa can reach people in the millions but it still leaves out some two-thirds of the population of this planet. And access to sophisticated information networks is still the privilege of the few, whether in the North or the South.

Global networks and global marketing affect everyone, from the corporation president in Paris and the commodity broker in Chicago to the coffee farmer in Kenya and the rubber plantation worker in Malaysia. But very few have the power and access to affect the workings of these disembodied systems through which flow electronic impulses that regulate the movement of money through the banking networks or the flow of information on crops and prices. But even so, a basic question remains: Are we, despite all protestations to the contrary, replacing the old division between the haves and have-nots, within and among nations, with a new division of knows and know-nots, of information haves and have-nots? Is, then, the global village only a village of global elites? And if so, what are the effects and what are the risks?

We cannot avoid the fact that living together on this finite planet where we have the ability to damage, if not destroy, each other requires an enlargement of our concept and sense of neighbourhood. The greatest obstacle to the achievement of a new sense of neighbourhood is the drifting apart of the rich and the poor into two separate worlds. Today, this is a far more complex phenomenon than the geopolitical division of the world into North and South, industrialized and developing countries. Today, the well-to-do in Cairo, New Delhi, Lima and Lagos have far more in common with the well-to-do in Chicago and Paris than they have with the poor in their own countries.

The immensely sophisticated communications networks that you in this symposium have helped to create and maintain is a major factor in the separation of these two worlds. The affluent in the developing countries communicate more easily with each other across national boundaries via international direct-dial telephones and jumbo jets than with their poverty-stricken compatriots. The satellite dish, the video recorder, and the color television allow the rich to envelop themselves in a cocoon of privilege, which insulates them from the harsh realities of the struggle for survival in which most of their fellow-citizens are involved. For the non-affluent in poor countries, the images of privilege conveyed in the mass media have raised material expectations far beyond the capacity of their national economies to deliver within any remotely equitable framework. These dreams of affluence can only come true in the short run for a tiny minority, and then only at the expense of equity. Both frustration at the inability of the national economy to deliver general prosperity, and heightened awareness of inequality within the nation, fuel the anger that is behind so much of the turmoil in the developing world.

In short, current patterns of communication and transportation, to say nothing of a pervasive commercial culture imparted chiefly by the mass media, have aided a new stratification of the world's people into two classes that share very little information, experience and common concern. The wealthy, transnational class is thus assimilated into a universe of communication and information that is not shared by the majority of humankind. The psychological distance between these two strata is in imminent danger of reaching the point where the only form of discourse between the top and the bottom is violence, punctuated by occasional spasms of charity.

The great irony within this gloomy picture will not have escaped you, I am sure. The great irony is that the very communications and information technologies that are contributing to the fragmentation of humankind have the potential power to knit it together in ways never before possible. For those of us with access to these technologies, the sufferings of our fellow human beings are no longer "out of sight, out of mind," unless we choose to tune them out. Furthermore, we have tools for mutual cooperation and assistance of unprecedented power. We have satellites to warn of advancing deserts and receding forests, of withered crops or ravenous insect plagues in areas so remote from the centres of decision-making that hitherto, information about their problems came too late for remedial or preventive action to be effective. We have broadcasting facilities that can create a classroom wherever there is a radio receiver. We have computer programmes that can process the findings from hundreds of laboratories in order to search for exactly the right genetic trait in a plant to enable it to withstand a certain disease or respond to a certain fertilizer. We have global information-gathering networks on almost every subject, which can be accessed at the touch of a keyboard. We have immediate access to virtually every country on earth through the most complex man-made system on earth, the worldwide telephone network. One could go on with this list of modern miracles, but they are far more familiar to you than to me.

Thus, the challenge referred to in the title of this symposium brings to mind the enormous question of how to bring the poor and marginalized people of the world into the communications revolution in order to repair the split between the two worlds which now seem to be drifting further and further apart. When we refer to "decision-makers", we are not usually thinking of the poor and marginalized people of the rural backwaters and urban slums of the Third World. Yet there is no doubt that the fate of our planet and our societies is very much in their hands.

The aggregate of millions of decision and choices by individuals and households make or break population policies, maintain or exhaust the carrying capacity of specific environments, and ensure or undermine the stability of political systems.

The people who form the base of society are society's decision-makers as much as are the political leaders, the business executives, the senior bureaucrats. Yet, the decision-makers among the poor are the people who are in danger of being left out of the communications revolution - left to make their momentous decisions without scientific knowledge, without information about external conditions that affect them directly, without channels for expressing the problems they encounter or the ingenious solutions they invent. I believe the challenge of a forum such as this one, is to think of ways to ensure that these people, who are the living link between communication and development, are not overlooked.

My first argument-- or plea-- is obviously one against technological determinism. The fact that we have, through the miracles of modern communications and information technologies, unprecedented power to know

and to shape our surroundings, including the human communities in which we live, does not assure that we will use our power wisely or well. If we do not use this power to educate ourselves, to learn to think globally and act responsibly toward the full range of human communities, now so closely knit, we will demonstrate just how stark a contrast there is between the richness of our technology and the poverty of our imagination.

How then can we use the opportunities offered by new communication technologies and services to assist in preventing the split between the two worlds from widening and to restore a sense of solidarity? This is a matter of the greatest practical as well as ethical urgency. How can we use communications as a resource for this purpose and what kind of international institutional framework do we need to achieve this goal? How can we counterbalance the power inherent in the manipulation of information, and use the liberalizing potential of communication to make people more free, and also to protect individual freedom and privacy?

My second argument is that, often, the terms in which communications issues are discussed no longer seem adequate. We need to do justice to the complexities of these issues in a manner which makes them manageable, by providing conceptual access.

Thus, to my mind, we have to go beyond current approaches, which seem inadequate in three respects:

i) We have to go beyond the false or reductionist dichotomies represented by the "binary" or one-dimensional division of issues along traditional axes such as:

- free-flow versus restrictions
- deregulation versus monopoly
- private versus public

ii) The single-discipline or single-profession approach is inadequate.

iii) The single-sector approach is insufficient.

We also need to bring out the broader implications within countries, whether industrialized or developing, and between countries. We need a longer-term perspective that takes into account changes in the domestic and international division of labour and that involves an attempt to assess the impact of such changes on political, economic, social and cultural processes.

Thus, when we consider the international arrangements and institutions in the field of communication and information, we need, first, to re-organize our cognitive approaches. We need to search for more comprehensive conceptual frameworks - not a single framework but several, so as to correspond to the new levels of complexity that we face. We should be respectful of the world's cultural diversity, which is our lot and should be our pride. At the same time we are all aware that it makes a great deal of difference - a

fundamental difference in fact - whether a conceptual framework is developed and used, as the result of a multilateral effort, a bilateral one, or one developed by a group or groups of industrial countries alone.

The broader context can be summed up in one concept: that of social change fuelled by advances in communications and information services. Here we face the fundamental problem of the adjustment capacity of individuals, institutions and societies. In terms of the individual, a Swedish psychologist has justly pointed out that we are faced with two seemingly incompatible phenomena: the standstill of genetic evolution and the accelerating pace of social evolution. This raises the question of the adaptability of human beings. How far can the old biological equipment be stretched? What happens if the limits of its tolerance are exceeded? Can adaptability be measured, its limits predicted and hence the harmful effects prevented? In short, all our societies, be they traditional, transitional or information-societies, now will have to become "learning societies".

The problem of adaptability must also be raised with regard to social groups, institutions and even entire societies. At the international level, we face above all the doubly differential impact of the communications revolution between the industrialized and developing countries, and between the knows and the know-nots.

All of us need to learn how to cope with accelerated social change and with decision-making in situations of scientific uncertainty. It seems to me that the possibilities of finding solutions to new and emerging problems at the international level suffer from the absence of an international forum to consider the relevant questions in a comprehensive and coherent manner which at the same time allows for diversity. What is needed is more dialogue, more analysis and reflection from different perspectives; that would bring out the broader, longer-term national and international implications of suggested policies. I do not have to paint a picture of the current international institutional landscape for a knowledgeable audience such as this one. But even in looking at the major categories of international organizations involved-- the UN system, regional or operational inter-governmental organizations or professional associations-- it is obvious that responsibility, and thus accountability, at the international level is fragmented and dispersed: the mandates of all existing international organizations are limited, functionally or geographically.

I am not advocating attempts to create yet another intergovernmental organization of the kind we now have. Rather, what seems to be required are governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies, and bodies to mediate between the national and international levels, between different disciplines and sectors, including industry. For example, we are now facing difficult and potentially divisive negotiations in GATT about trade in services, and thus trade in information and data. I cannot see how these issues can be handled in GATT without including telecommunications. Currently, though, trade and telecommunications represent two solitary, separate, watertight compartments.

I am convinced that a Symposium such as this one represents a first and important step towards the kind of intermediate forum for dialogue and reflection that we need. But I would also appeal for a further step, bringing together those responsible for telecommunications and other major sectors which telecommunications serve, for example those responsible for trade issues or cultural affairs.

To achieve the results which I am sure we all would like to support, we also need to examine our own attitudes. We need to learn and to accept what lies ahead in this endeavour, including:

- much hard work for the acceptance of diversity in approaches and perspectives: not one truth but multiple truths
- patience and humility, if we want to serve what has become the real constituency of communications: humankind as a whole.

Thus, management in an interdependent world will demand a coordination of national policies far beyond what present international mechanisms provide. Each technology brings with it its own set of social and ethical issues. Telecommunications technology is no exception.

We need mediating mechanisms that can support solidarity across national boundaries and across the division between the rich and the poor, solidarity between the local and the global and solidarity between generations. The impact of communication and information forces us to consider what kind of society, with what kind of values, we want for ourselves-- and for our children.