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Communication Policy and Globalization as a Social Project

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For at least the past five thousand years, the evolution of society has been tied to the innovation and use of communication technologies (Innis, 1972). Various scholars have described the successive phases of human history according to the role of the particular systems of communication that characterized them (Tehrani, 1994). I would like to add to this approach the idea that societies can also be understood by the mechanisms they put in place to regulate these systems.

The rise and decline of the welfare state, for example, can be understood—as well as typified—by the emergence, flourishing, and now the calling into question of nationally regulated mass media systems of broadcasting and public service monopolies in telecommunication. In many respects, the history of these systems is the history of the welfare state. Where the welfare state has flourished, public service institutions and a regulated private sector have been deemed to be the legitimate creatures of the public will as well as objects of regulatory intervention in the public interest. Where media development was left to market forces, the welfare state was relatively underdeveloped; where it was left under the control of an authoritarian state, command economies prevented the delivery of the goods and services promised by the welfare state.

This rather simple analogy is useful to bear in mind as we try to understand the role of communication in shaping the next phase of human history. It is also useful insofar as emerging communication institutions, in many re-

spects, provide a foretaste of things to come. Historically, the moment of introduction of a new communication technology has always provided a snapshot of the possible paths society can take, as a range of possible uses jostle for recognition and establishment as the dominant model. As a dominant model emerges, one sees not only the main use to which the new technology will be put but also the general characteristics of its impact on society.

What kind of societies will we live in in the so-called age of globalization?¹ We should recall that it took several centuries after the emergence of the world system of nation-states for democratic rights to be universally established—and then only in a handful of states, not coincidentally, those most strongly associated with the social system of the welfare state (Bruck and Raboy, 1989). If history is a guiding light, we should expect the age of globalization to engender its own structures of governance—among these, institutional and regulatory mechanisms for dealing with technologies of communication.

The eclipse of the welfare state coincides not only with a particular political, ideological, and economic context; it also ushers in—and is ushered in by—a new age of communication. Whatever we may think of catchphrases like “the information society,” something new is going on here (Castells, 1996). The disintegration of the institutional framework for guiding and orienting the interaction of media and society over the past seventy-five years—national regulatory mechanisms—is at the core of that.

So what will take its place? We should recall that the welfare state was the result not of benevolent despotism but of often bitter social struggles, class negotiation, and at certain moments, enlightened political and economic leadership. Media, again, played a role in this process. From the early beginnings of parliamentary institutions, media rights were framed as basic social and political rights (Keane, 1991). Media were used by social actors as sources of empowerment as well as for mobilization and persuasion. Typical of the welfare state was the creation of public service broadcasting, PTTs (post telegraph and telephone services), and regulatory agencies. Today, the emergence of a new media regime is at once symptomatic of a new society in emergence and a challenge to shaping that society toward a new phase of social progress.

In the era of the welfare state, media were seen as institutions of social cohesion at the national level. One of the characteristics of globalization is the questions it raises about conventional forms of social cohesion, “national” solidarity, and shared values. In fact—as we see with the proliferation of global media—globalization basically transposes to another level the characteristics of societies whose boundaries (and media systems) were once upon a time contiguous with those of the nation-state.

Let me elaborate a bit further on this theory of media and social congruency. The city-state was defined by a politics based on oratory and the

transmission of culture through oral communication. The written word was used to maintain legal, archival, and historical records (earlier, preliterate societies were, by definition, "prehistoric").

It was only with the invention of the printing press that the nation-state became possible, enabling the consolidation of power and authority within the reach of the official state "gazettes." But the printing press also enabled the proliferation of struggles for freedom of expression, public debate, and democratic institutions. Different types of national states gave rise to different models of mass media (Nerone, 1995). But the separation of state and press was fundamental to the development of the democratic nation-state.

A fundamental shift occurred with the introduction of broadcasting. In the decade following World War I, an activist, interventionist state integrated the sphere of broadcasting to its realm of activity. The discourses of legitimation for the regulation of broadcasting ranged from the scarcity of frequencies to the idea that broadcasting was a cultural and educational resource too important to be left to the marketplace. In the name of social values and the public interest, institutional structures were set up in the 1920s in most countries of northern and western Europe as well as in many of their colonial dependencies such as Canada and Australia (Raboy, 1996). These institutions were characteristic of the type of social structure that eventually came to be known as the welfare state.

Now we are on the verge of a new shift. National states are seeking to redefine their *raison d'être*. It is too early to write them off entirely, but clearly they will no longer exercise the kind and degree of sovereignty they have known for the past three hundred years. What is taking their place? On the one hand, conventional mass media activity, as well as trade and commerce, is centered in vastly more autonomous transnational business enterprises tied into the world capitalist system; on the other hand, new and intricate communication networks have begun operating across boundaries in manners as yet uncontrolled and, some say, uncontrollable.

In response, new structures of governance are beginning to emerge to complement the nation-state, at the global, regional, international, subnational, and local levels. As these structures consolidate, they will inevitably give rise to new mechanisms for media regulation. The nature of these is in no way predetermined—no more than the situation in the 1920s predetermined the emergence of, say, public service broadcasting. The media structures of the year 2000 and beyond will emerge from the convergence of a range of social struggles, entrepreneurial strategies, geopolitical developments, and diplomatic negotiations. They will also be tied to prevailing communication technologies and, most importantly, to the uses to which those technologies will be put.

One can argue about how much space there is to maneuver with respect to this historical process and about where that space is. But the key

starting point to such a necessary argument is to recognize that we are indeed engaged in a historical process, and like all historical processes it will be marked by both continuity and change with respect to what came before. One useful way to approach this may be to ask ourselves what would be an analogous social form to the welfare state in a just and equitable global society and what forms of media regulation might be appropriate to integrating communication into the social project of such a society.

Towards a Global Public Space

The global media system is developing according to its own logic, requirements, protocols, and rules. National governments and groups of states are trying to influence the activities of this transnational system in their own countries or regions as best they can. But global issues require global approaches, and global problems call for global solutions. Where can we begin looking for these?

The various dimensions of globalization and the problems it raises are being increasingly well documented in the work of distinguished scholars in political economy, sociology, anthropology, and international communication (e.g., Wallerstein, 1991; Robertson, 1992; Appadurai, 1993; Mowlana, 1996). Meanwhile, activists—and a handful of academics—are developing new normative perspectives, new programs and proposals, and building and mobilizing new networks of support for and promotion of a global public space whose outline we are just beginning to make out.

The emergence of a global communication policy environment and the extension of national debates on communication policy to the global level have both limitations and possibilities. Debates on communication policy issues in local (i.e., national) contexts are not only constrained but also enhanced by global policy developments. Globalization, I would like to suggest, should be viewed as a policy challenge rather than a justification for “the end of policy” arguments presented in neoliberal, deregulationist discourses—or even the apocalyptic views that often predominate with some obvious justification, in progressive circles. In fact, it can be argued that the struggle to create socially driven communication systems on a global scale is no more nor less than the contemporary version of the nationally based struggles that surrounded the introduction of press, radio, television, and other earlier communication technologies (McChesney, 1993; 1996).

All around us there is ample evidence that people have not given up the struggle to appropriate the means of communication in their efforts to influence the course of their own histories (His, 1996). Until we are prepared to write off the value of democratic politics altogether, we have to create and occupy the spaces in which to strengthen the democratic capabilities of communication systems. What is new today is the extent to which this has

to be done by finding ways to give expression to local concerns at the global level.

In order to begin developing a global framework for democratic media, we need to begin thinking about global public policy mechanisms, legislative, regulatory, and supervisory structures for media. We need to establish the parameters of a truly global media framework that supersedes increasingly phony "national" interests and protects cultural diversity at its own level of expression—be it territorial, linguistic, ethnocultural, gender-based, or what-have-you. This framework must empower an emerging global civil society that will otherwise remain disenfranchised at the hands of corporate interests.

I am talking about a framework for democratically developing global media policy, and eventually launching and sustaining public interest media, on a global scale. This is a political project, which will only be accomplished by combining political action at a variety of levels ranging from grassroots organizing and publishing manifestos to international diplomacy. The first step is to force a general debate on the need to create global mechanisms for ensuring the public interest in media; the next will be to create a permanent democratic forum for developing global media policy.

In the political arena, various authors, think tanks, and international organizations have begun to look at the need for conceptualizing notions such as global citizenship and developing new modes of governance appropriate to the twenty-first century (e.g., Group of Lisbon, 1993; von Steenberg, 1994; Falk, 1995; Archibugi and Held, 1995; Commission on Global Governance, 1995). But there are no precedents; there is no tradition for dealing with media policy outside the established political frameworks of national states. Many countries do not even have well-anchored national traditions, and where these exist, they are facing serious challenges to their legitimacy. And as there is no appropriate global public forum in which to talk about such questions, the question of global media regulation has yet to be seriously addressed.²

Transnational free-enterprise media will need to be countered with global public service media. The structural basis of such institutions is not immediately evident, given that these have traditionally operated exclusively at the national level. Hence, it is all the more important that such questions be discussed in democratic, multilateral forums. The role of existing world bodies such as UNESCO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is crucial to this, but these will have to be opened up to include participation by a broader range of actors than the present assortment of member states. New structures will need to be developed in order for media to fulfill their potential as the central institutions of an emerging global public sphere (Keane, 1995).

Credibility will need to be given to the idea that the global media environment, from the conventional airwaves to outer space, is a public resource, to be organized, managed, and regulated in the global public interest. This implies recognition of the legitimacy of public intervention on a global scale. Broadening access will require appropriate transnational regulatory mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for a more equitable distribution of global commercial benefits. There is a need for the international appropriation of some air and space for the distribution outside the country of origin of viable creative products that currently have no access to the new global agora that figures so prominently in utopian discourses on the new information technologies.

The convergence of communication technologies requires a parallel convergence in programs and policies. This is going to require the invention of new models, new concepts, and a new way of thinking about communication. For example, the notion of access has traditionally meant different things in broadcasting and in telecommunications (Raboy, 1995). In the broadcasting model, emphasis is placed on the active receiver, on free choice, and *access* refers to the entire range of products on offer. In the telecommunications model, emphasis is on the sender, on the capacity to get one's messages out, and *access* refers to the means of communication. In the new media environment, public policy will need to promote a new hybrid model of communication, one that combines the social and cultural objectives of both broadcasting and telecommunications and provides new mechanisms—drawn from both traditional models—aimed at maximizing equitable access to services and the means of communication for both senders and receivers (Hadden and Lenert, 1995).

The central issue is still who will get to use the full range of local, national, and global media to receive and disseminate messages, and on what basis. Resolution of this issue will depend on a different kind of access: to the processes and points of decision making that will determine the framework in which media are going to develop, that is to say, access to the policy framework of the new global media system.

But meanwhile, the interests promoting the global media system are not standing by idly waiting for this to happen. They are in the front lines, developing their project, mobilizing support, lobbying decision makers.

The Globalization of the Context of Communication Policy

The global arena for communication policy was launched in Paris, in 1865, with the first international (interstate) conference on telegraphy. For the next 130 years, international relations in communication were largely focused on managing the environment in which communication resources

would be used at the national level, according to the goals and capacities of individual nation-states. From the harmonization of technical standards and the development of a common rate-accounting system to the allocation of radio frequencies and later geostationary satellite positions, the underlying assumption was that communication was a national affair requiring a minimum of international coordination (Hamelink, 1994; Mattelart, 1996).³

This multilateral framework remained basically unchanged until 1995, when it was radically transformed with the launching of the United States-initiated proposal to establish a global information infrastructure (GII), presented by its promoters as a transnational, seamless communication system that would revolutionize human relations and national economies (USG, 1994a). What was new about the GII was that it proposed a single vision, a program and policy framework for the role of communication technology as a means to achieving an idealized global society.

The GII project emanated from the Clinton administration's 1993 "Agenda for Action," launching an initiative to build a new national information infrastructure (NII), which it defined as "the aggregate of the nation's networks, computers, software, information resources, developers, and producers" (cited in Kahin, 1995, p. 3).⁴ The NII has been the object of vigorous debate in the United States over the contradictions between the development of its public interest and commercial vocations (Branscomb, 1995). But tramped to the global level, it becomes an apparently unproblematic plan for establishing an information- and communication-based utopia.

First presented by U.S. vice president Albert Gore at a meeting of the ITU in Buenos Aires in 1994, the GII project traverses a continuum connecting public purpose and private enterprise by mobilizing such concepts as free trade, industrial development, modernization, and technological progress. It became a concrete program in February 1995, with the adoption by the G-7 countries of an eight-point plan for implementing it, following a U.S. strategy for bringing its partners in the alliance of advanced countries aboard under U.S. leadership.

In a document prepared as background to the G-7 meeting in Brussels, the United States outlined the necessity for international coordination of regulatory policies on competition, interconnectivity, global applications, and content (USG, 1994b). The United States' stated objectives for Brussels included support for the five basic principles announced in the GII plan—private investment, competition, flexible regulation, open access, and universal service—and identification of "policy actions" likely to advance these principles. But the key objective was to integrate the private sector to the process.

The role of the private sector would be definitively consecrated in Brussels. In addition, a more complex political dynamic set in, reflecting the

range of important specific interests of different G-7 members. The need to achieve favorable positioning for their own national representatives at the table of international capital, as well as to reflect key aspects of national policy (and thus speak to domestic public opinion), required negotiation of an acceptable *modus vivendi*. The U.S. version of the GII's original five points was thus expanded with the addition of references to equal access, content diversity, and international cooperation (G-7, 1995). The new eight-point GII proposal indicated a greater attentiveness to potentially explosive issues such as perceived threats to cultural and linguistic diversity, social justice, and the gap between richer and poorer nations.

The irony of a "global" project originating from a private meeting of the world's most powerful nations has been lost on most mainstream observers. In terms of the changing world system of governance, the Brussels meeting represented a major shift: for the first time under the auspices of the G-7, corporate enterprises met around their own separate table, with official status.⁵ Groups representing civil society, meanwhile, were relegated to the margins of unofficial intervention—more reminiscent of the masses gathered outside the city gates in medieval Europe than of the social partners that could be imagined by a naïve reading of the GII project.

The GII project has since been further developed in other venues, such as the 1997 World Trade Organization agreement on "market access for basic telecommunications services" signed by all members of the OECD along with some forty "developing" or "transitional" (i.e., east-central European) countries (WTO, 1997). Under this accord—again, the result of a U.S. initiative—"participants agreed to set aside national differences in how basic telecommunications might be defined domestically." Henceforth, telecommunications infrastructure development in 90 percent of the world market will proceed without regard to national regulatory constraints, particularly concerning domestic ownership requirements.

Indeed, in every respect, the GII project is a harbinger of both a certain emerging global regulatory system in communication and a future system of world governance.⁶ It is an imperial project, with enormous implications for the future of democracy, insofar as it is based on political decision making at a level where there is no accountability, the recognized autonomy of private capital, and the formal exclusion of the institutions of civil society. In terms of international relations, it extends the dependency of the technologically challenged parts of the world. As a social project, it locates human development as a potential benefit of economic investment rather than as the principal goal (Raboy, 1997).

This is the reality behind the rhetoric of the GII. But is it the only possible reality, or is there an alternative way to imagine the organization of the global information society?

