

## **COMMUNICATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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### **Summary**

The technological revolution of the twentieth century has given communication a new meaning, encompassing many definitions, depending on the social, cultural and economic context in which it is used. This essay attempts to identify the challenges and opportunities that will be faced by communities globally and locally as we renegotiate our identities based on communication trends. Changes will continue to take place on both theoretical and practical levels. Ironically, the opportunities that new technologies create also constitute the challenges on all levels. This essay documents some of the potential opportunities and their corresponding challenges as identified by both theorists and practitioners.

### **1. Introduction**

In the past "mass communication" and "mass media" were terms that connected to easily identifiable media of communication. Print, radio and television defined an uncomplicated evolution of mass media. They also catalyzed a new arena of debate on issues of participation, social change and challenges to the traditional public sphere. While many of the broad issues debated by practitioners and scholars remain essentially the same, the meaning of communication has changed radically. No longer is communication limited to the press, television or radio, but now also includes the many technologies that characterize the so-called technological revolution. (See *Evolution of Mass Communications*; See *Traditional and Modern Media*).

When Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "global village" in the 1960s there was little indication of the plethora of technologies that would, three decades later, make the world a "global city". As Manuel Castells has since noted, we no longer live in a "global village", but rather in "customized cottages" that are produced globally and distributed locally. We have become less concerned with establishing a provincial neighborhood and more concerned with becoming technologically savvy, urbane citizens of the world. Models of development, global trading and economic laws have been renegotiated to accommodate the trends in communication technology. Additionally, both symbolic and physical manifestations of power among leaders of this global community have shifted from the "hard power" of nuclear warfare to the "soft power" of communication development.

While the promises of communication -- such as increased social participation and citizenship in the democratic process, increased knowledge due to advanced technologies, and more flexible geographical and spatial boundaries -- are still real, the difficulties of adapting the new technologies in order to fulfill these promises remain challenging in many parts of the world. The opportunities as well as the challenges of communication in the coming years cannot be separated from the social, cultural and geographical reconfigurations of the technological revolution. Our collective identity as global citizens is constantly questioned, as these new technologies are adopted by, and adapted to, individual nations. Issues of access challenge promises of equality and participatory democracy, when power is redefined in terms of technological advancement. As systems of advanced communication infrastructures increasingly become metonyms for development, issues of social and cultural identity increasingly need to be addressed. (See *Identity Formation and Difference*.)

William Miller (in an edited collection by Pavik and Denis) argues that technological change, and accompanying changes in societal values, are moving us to a new era, defined by an "economy of choice". Miller and many other scholars observe an *evolutionary* process that has marked communication development. While the rapid spread of new communication and information technologies may seem revolutionary, it is actually just one stage in the larger historical context, in which industrialization is also one phase. Identifying the stages of this evolution, Miller notes that prior to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century, the world economy was an "economy of despair" where most people lived at a subsistence level. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century created an "economy of need" and allowed the Western world, for the first time, to provide many of its citizens with basic material needs. The post-industrial age that we live in has emerged from a wide array of new technologies, and is also driven by social change and accompanying changes in values. Perhaps the single most outstanding feature of this new era is the convergence of communication technologies, which many scholars have addressed. Convergence usually refers to the integrating of electronic technologies into unified delivery systems; for instance, the integration of television, telephone, cable and computer/Internet. These and related industries subsequently become more concentrated due to decreased competition as technologies and services merge. (See *The Internet as a Mass Communications Medium*.)

The convergence of new technologies is frequently traced to the twentieth century

invention and joint use of digitization (which allows any type of information to be converted to a binary code), computers and satellites. Converging new technologies now include those in microelectronics, computing, telecommunications and optoelectronics.

Everette Dennis and John Pavlik note that convergence is especially visible in new "hypermedia", which blend computers, video images and sound. It is also evident in traditional media, where mass communication and telecommunication are converging, as in the case of facsimile newspapers and videotex. There is also an increasing overlap between print and broadcast media, for instance in the use of digital image processing in both types of media.

This convergence of technology means that we can no longer separate communications as a purely audience-driven set of "media" that can be analyzed in terms of entertainment and educational value. Instead, it is an amalgamated entity that has reconfigured the physical, social, cultural and economic spheres of modern society. Negotiating the realities that these new converging technologies create, paradoxically presents both challenges and opportunities within the same context.

## **2. Challenges**

Within the latter decades of the twentieth century continuing into the twenty-first century, two very distinct phenomena have occurred. First, as noted at the outset, communication has been redefined and given new meaning, referring increasingly to the technological revolution of the late twentieth century. By renegotiating the meaning of communication, we have also successfully renamed our own identity as a society -- a global culture -- managed by these technological innovations. Thus, the second phenomenon is the mainstreaming of globalization, which suggests an increasingly global scope of political, economic and social activity. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi has argued that globalization swings between promoting a global homogeneity, and promoting a heterogeneity that challenges identity within the global community and the belief in a single global culture. Globalization is a by-product of the technological revolution that created modern forms of communication. Therefore, to identify future issues concerning communication, one must accept a symbiotic relationship between communication and globalization, realizing that one is symptomatic of the other.

While there is general consensus on the evolution of Western society from agrarian to civil to information, we have not yet reached a comfortable articulation in the shift from a civil society to an information society. Scholars such as Linda Low note, however, significant change in the re-definition of power and control in which the new information society is based on an economic system, as opposed to the political system that governed civil society. This, Low argues, strongly affects the cultural and social systems within nations. Addressing these effects and solving the dilemmas that arise due to these problems are among the challenges that face communication scholars and practitioners in the coming years. Questions of political power and world standing in the new global economy remain tied to the spatial inequities brought on by new communication technologies. Many argue for technology's power to eliminate the

physical boundaries of our existence. These arguments are challenged by Vincent Mosco, among others, who states (in Herman and Swiss' edited collection) that there are problems with the "death-of-distance" and "end-of geography" metaphors. Most significant is the common misconception of equating geography with distance. Mosco argues that while it is possible to overcome distance via new technological innovations, this does not usually reduce desire for living and working in certain regions, because of the importance of face-to-face communities and the cultural values those regions carry. Physical geographies carry with them certain social and cultural values and connections that cannot be completely recreated through virtual reality. For instance, advertising, Web designers and other creative professionals often choose to locate in New York City because it is a global commercial center, even though it is possible and less expensive to do the work from more remote locations. As argued by Mosco, the utopia promised by new technologies comes with significant and interrelated physical and cultural challenges that need further investigation.

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### **Biographical Sketches**

**H. Leslie Steeves** is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies and Research at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon, where she has taught since 1987. Prior to her appointment at Oregon she taught at the University of Iowa. Her Ph.D. is in Mass Communications from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on two areas and their intersection: women's roles and representations in mass media, and communications in developing countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa. She has published a number of articles in these areas, as well as a book: *Gender Violence and the Press: The St. Kizito Story* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, 1997). She also is co-author (with Srinivas Melkote) of *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice for Empowerment, 2nd edition* (New Delhi: Sage, 2001). She has had two Fulbright grants for teaching and research in Africa.

**Kumarini Silva** is a doctoral candidate from Sri Lanka, at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon. Her research areas are international communication and feminist theory, with an emphasis on Third World development and feminism in the postmodern era. Recent conference papers include: "Silence is golden: Who speaks for Third World women?", "A cry in silence: The rise and fall of Rigoberta Menchu", and "Asian Americans: The politics of assimilation". Current research includes a study of the Sarvodaya Women's Movement of Sri Lanka in the context of activism/empowerment and feminism in developing countries.