



Chapter XIX

World Information Flows and the Impact of New Technology: Is There a Need for International Communication Policy and Regulation?

Kerry Ferguson
University of Queensland, Australia

Communication is the fastest growing industry in the world due to a transformation of world information flows caused by the convergence of telecommunication, information technology and mass media institutions. The emerging conglomerates are leading the world towards the information age. The new technology at their disposal is creating ever increasing world information flows which are changing political, economic and cultural landscapes, and redefining work, education and development. The speed and uptake of new technology could not have been predicted and its far reaching political, economic and social implications have only recently begun to emerge. This chapter argues an international communication policy is necessary to ensure the world does not divide into the information rich and the information poor.

INTRODUCTION

There are currently no multilateral organizations concerned with world information flows and the impact of new technology. The world wide trend is for the development of national communication policies driven primarily by private interests, with the international community tackling the problem in a piecemeal fashion.

The multilateral bodies responsible for guiding, directing and providing forums for debate about the policy and regulatory framework for world information flows, The United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are hampered by internal inertia in the face of new

technology and an inability to overcome the accusations of political bias by the United States and United Kingdom during the 1980s.

The Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC) is working closely with private industry to fill the gap in international communication policy and regulation. The GIIC is an independent body established at a meeting between the heads of government of the leading industrial democracies (the G7; Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan and the USA) in 1995. The GIIC is aiming to forge a new construct for public and private sector cooperation and overcome the gap between traditional institutions and regulatory frameworks. However, the GIIC is not part of the United Nations and does not have the political influence required to implement long-term communication development objectives.

Private industry has the ability to adapt and change at a faster rate than public organizations when faced with technological change. In the case of communication national governments reacted to private industry needs rapidly by deregulating mass media and telecommunication markets. National governments have also allowed many public broadcasting organizations and state run telecommunication corporations to privatize and/or form strategic alliances with private enterprises. The new information flows emerging from the convergence of computer, mass media and telecommunication technologies cannot be viewed as a national occurrence as the institutions and information flows are global.

TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION POLICY

Private industry is driving national communication policies and regulatory regimes, leaving international organizations responsible for overseeing nationally developed standards and trading agreements. The primary focus of communication policies and regulatory frameworks is the development of infrastructure leaving the issues of technological transfer and development, content, access and the impact of world information flows to market forces. International organizations are not adequately dealing with the need for standardized trading agreements, indigenous and minority access or harnessing communication for development.

A coordinated long term communication policy and regulatory framework which incorporates the key elements of technology development and transfer, infrastructure development and maintenance, access and participation, local and international content, and a free flow of information is needed at the national, regional and international levels to ensure that both the developed and developing world are able to take part in the ever increasing world information flows resulting from new technology.

BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT POLICY VOID

There are four key factors which have caused the current policy void. These are: convergence; market liberalisation; international relations and diplomacy; and the policy and regulatory decision making process.

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