

# Global Communication



## INEQUALITY AND THE GLOBAL DIVIDE

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He has been a founding father of critical communication research on development issues and is the essential inspirational source for this chapter.

### Luis Ramiro Beltran (1930–)

Beltran worked as a journalist, film script writer, taught at Ohio State University and Stanford University in the USA, and was a consultant for organizations such as UNESCO. He is the recipient of many awards, including the McLuhan-Teleglobe Canada Award.

For the study of global communication, his important publications are: "Communication in Latin America: Persuasion for Status Quo or for National Development", PhD thesis, Michigan State University (1970); "Communication for development in Latin America: a forty years appraisal" (1976); "Communication: forgotten tool of national development" (1997); *Que comunicacion para el desarrollo?* (1993a); and *La communication para el desarrollo en Latinoamerica* (1993b).

For the study of global communication, Luis Ramiro Beltran taught us to critically reflect on the different understandings that exist between the North and the South of the notion of "development".

This chapter confronts you with one of the persistent characteristics of global communication: inequality. I will take the following route:

- From the 1948 UN conference on Freedom of Information through the 1970s debates on a New International Information Order and to the 2003/2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) the equality standard was at the core of international debates on the development of communication.

- Little, if any, progress has been made since the late 1940s and it can be argued that “equality” remains a contested and challenging standard in the policies and practices of social communication.
- The international community has not been able or willing to find satisfactory solutions to the inequality issue.

## The North–South divide

In the earliest meetings of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) the inadequacy of information facilities in the less developed countries was highlighted. Diplomats representing these countries stressed that with the existing disparities there could be no reciprocity and equality in global communication.

Several resolutions by the Council and by the General Assembly expressed the need to improve information enterprises in the less developed countries and in 1957 the General Assembly requested the ECOSOC Commission on Human Rights to “give special consideration to the problem of developing media of information in under-developed countries”.

One year later the United Nations General Assembly requested ECOSOC to formulate “a programme of concrete action and measures on the international plane which could be undertaken for the development of information enterprises in under-developed countries”. The specialized agencies were invited to contribute to this initiative.

UNESCO was asked to study the mass media in the “less developed countries” to survey the problems involved in the development of communication. This was no new terrain to the organization. In its early history there had been an effort to reconstruct and develop mass communication media in war-devastated countries. At its third General Conference in 1948 a resolution was adopted that added to this “the provision of raw materials, equipment and professional training facilities ... for under-developed areas”. This was the beginning of assistance to Third World countries which received special impetus when in 1958 the General Conference explicitly requested the Director General “to help develop media of information in the underdeveloped countries”. In response to the request of the General Assembly, UNESCO organized a series of expert meetings (in Bangkok, 1960, Santiago, 1961, and Paris, 1962) to assess communication needs and to design ways to meet these needs. The organization also prepared a report that was presented to the UN General Assembly in 1961. This report on *Mass Media in Developing Countries* formulated minimal levels of communication capacity and concluded that for some 70 per cent of the world population this minimum was not available (UNESCO, 1961).

The report recommended that communication development should be considered part of the overall United Nations development effort and thus be incorporated in the UN Technical Assistance Programme. In response to the report, ECOSOC suggested in 1961 that the developed countries should assist the developing countries in the “development of independent national information media, with due regard for the culture of each country”.

In 1961 ECOSOC recommended to the General Assembly that the UNESCO programme should get its place within the efforts of the First United Nations Development Decade.

In 1962 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) confirmed this by stating that “development of communication media was part of overall development”. Herewith a multilateral programme of technical assistance to the development of mass communication capacity was launched that was unanimously supported by the UN member states. The technical assistance programme that lasted throughout the 1960s was primarily oriented towards the transfer of resources and skills.

It is understandable that because of the stark disparity in communication capacity between the industrialized countries of the North and the Third World countries, there was considerable concern about Third World acquisition of communication in technology. This has to be seen within the broader context of the quest of Third World countries to complete the decolonization process and to achieve a level of self-reliant development.

The access to technical knowledge became a concern for the Third World countries only in the 1970s. Earlier on, most of the newly independent countries were mainly interested in attracting foreign investors, particularly transnational corporations, with the expectation that they would transfer the much needed scientific and technical know-how. It was assumed in the 1950s that science and technology, which had lifted the advanced industrial countries to unprecedented levels of material wealth, would do the same for the Third World. In the remarkably rapid economic growth that North America and Western Europe experienced after the industrial revolution, science and technology were crucial factors.

Since they had progressed through laborious and expensive trial-and-error processes, it seemed a well-advised policy for those who came late to exploit the most recent state of the art. “Rarely did the countries at each stage of the decision-making process raise basic questions such as: Does the country have the technology? Can it develop it? Can it adapt imported technology? How long will it take? What resources will be needed? What are the trade-offs between importing technology now and waiting to develop it at home? Why not import now, but plan in such a fashion that there will be no more repetitive imports in the future?” (UNCTAD, 1985: 162). By and large, policymakers in the developing countries were concerned with the availability of maximum volumes of technological products rather than with the more complex problems of their political, economic, and cultural integration. Little or no attention was given to the infrastructural requirements for a productive assimilation of imported science and technology in the recipient countries.

Throughout the First United Nations Development Decade it did seem that the transfer of the latest and the best from the developed countries to the Third World was the optimal instrument for rapid development. In the course of the 1960s there was a considerable increase in the volume of technology transferred between the developed market economies and the developing countries. In the process, many recipient countries became aware that the transfer usually consisted of end-products rather than of technology *per se*, that much of the transfer took place as intra-firm movements, that the conditions under

which transfer took place were often disadvantageous for them, and that much of the technology was inappropriate, obsolete, over-priced, or all of these together.

In 1970 the tenth session of the UNCTAD Trade and Development Board decided to establish an Intergovernmental Group on Transfer of Technology (IGGTT). At its first session the IGGTT drew up a programme of work for UNCTAD in the field of transfer of technology. Herewith a strong involvement of UNCTAD in technology issues began that would soon lead to such activities as the negotiations on an international code of conduct on the transfer of technology and the revision of the industrial property system.

As the science and technology issues moved on to an essential position in multilateral negotiations, it also became clear that there were important differences in positions taken by the developed and the developing countries. These were largely based upon the conflicting interests of the protection of knowledge as private property versus the availability of knowledge as public resource. The Third World countries began to claim a right of access to scientific and technological (S&T) information in the early negotiations on the UNCTAD Code of Conduct on the Transfer of Technology where they stressed the definition of S&T information as a common good. They claimed that knowledge resources should be transferred to them. These claims were expressly formulated in UNGA Resolutions on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

One of these resolutions observed that “The benefits of technological progress are not shared equitably by all members of the international community”. Therefore, it was seen as imperative to give “to developing countries access to the achievements of modern science and technology and the creation of indigenous technology for the benefit of the developing countries in forms and in accordance with procedures which are suited to their economies”. The developed countries opposed these claims and did not support the NIEO programmes and declaration.

Despite Western opposition, the UNGA resolutions on the NIEO led to the preparations of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development. This conference was eventually held at Vienna in 1979 and on August 31 the UNCSTED adopted the Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development. The Vienna Programme responded to Third World demands for access to and transfer of knowledge, and addressed the creation of conditions under which the developing countries could improve their autonomous capacity for research and development. The programme contained a series of action proposals for the resolution of the North–South disparity in scientific and technical information. Its essential components were strengthening the scientific and technological capacities of the developing countries, restructuring the current pattern of international scientific and technological relations, strengthening the role of the UN with regard to science and technology for development, and creating the financial provisions to this end.

## **NIIO and NWICO**

In the 1970s the Non-Aligned countries began to recognize that technical assistance did not alter their dependency status, that information inequality persisted, and that in fact their

cultural sovereignty was increasingly threatened. They therefore opened the debate on the need of normative standard-setting regarding the mass media. The key agenda issue for this debate was the demand for a new international information order. This demand expressed the Third World concern about disparity in communication capacity along three lines.

There was concern about the impact of the skewed communication relations between North and South on the independent cultural development of the Third World nations. Actually, the first Non-Aligned summit in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 already referred to the impact of colonialism on culture. “The existence of colonialism in many parts of Asia and Africa, in whatever form it may be, not only prevents cultural co-operation but also suppresses the national cultures of the peoples. ... Some colonial powers have denied their dependent peoples basic rights in the sphere of education and culture”. The 1973 Non-Aligned summit at Algiers expressed its concern about cultural colonialism as the effective successor to the earlier territorial modes of colonialism.

Then there was concern about the largely one-sided exports from the North to the countries of the Third World and the often distorted or totally absent reporting in the media of the North about developments in the South. The Algiers summit called for the “reorganization of existing communication channels, which are a legacy of the colonial past and which have hampered free, direct and fast communication between developing countries”. This disequilibrium in the exchange of information between the North and the South controlled by a few Western transnational information companies began to be criticized by the Non-Aligned movement as an instrument of cultural colonialism.

The Tunis symposium of 1976 stated: “Since information in the world shows a disequilibrium favouring some and ignoring others, it is the duty of the non-aligned countries and other developing countries to change this situation and obtain the decolonization of information and initiate a new international order of information”. The New Delhi Declaration on Decolonization of Information stated that the establishment of a New International Order for Information is as necessary as the New International Economic Order.

A third line of concern addressed the transfer of media technology. On balance, it was concluded in the early 1970s that precious little technology had been transferred and that by and large only technical end-products had been exported from the industrial nations. This was often done under disadvantageous conditions so that in the end the technical and financial dependence of the receiving countries had only increased. As from its Algiers summit in 1973, the Non-Aligned movement continuously articulated its position of strong support for the emancipation and development of media in the developing nations. UNESCO became the most important forum for this debate.

Already in 1970 the minutes of the UNESCO General Conference read: “Delegates from a number of developing countries stressed the need to ensure that the free flow of information and international exchanges should be a two-way operation. They asserted that the programme must continue to emphasize the rights of less privileged nations, to preserve their own culture.”

In a first phase (1970–1976) the debate was characterized by the effort to “decolonize”. In this period political and academic projects evolved that fundamentally criticized the existing international information order and that developed proposals for decisive changes.

Several years of declarations, resolutions, recommendations, and studies converged into the demand for a New International Information Order (NIIO).

The concept surfaced at the Tunis information symposium in March, 1976. With this concept (formally recognized by Non-Aligned Heads of State in August 1976 in Sri Lanka) a clear linkage was established with the proposal for a fundamental restructuring of the international economy that was put forward in 1974 (the New International Economic Order, NIEO). Both new orders were deeply inspired by the human rights principle of equality. Although the precise meaning of the NIIO was not defined, it was evident that it aspired to a level playing field for the international information exchange.

During the Nineteenth General Conference of UNESCO in 1976 at Nairobi, a draft resolution proposed by Tunisia was discussed and adopted. The resolution invited the Director General “to pay special attention to the activities of the bodies responsible for co-ordinating and implementing the information programme of the non-aligned countries ... to strengthen the intellectual, technical and financial resources provided for under the Regular Programme through an appreciable and appropriate increase in the proposed growth rate for communication and information activities...”.

The Twentieth General Conference of UNESCO in 1978 at Paris adopted a request to the MacBride Commission to propose measures that could lead “to the establishment of a more just and effective world information order”. In fact, this Conference was a turning point in the debate in so far as at this meeting the hostile opposition towards the idea of a new order was softened. There began to be almost unanimous acceptance that Third World countries had justifiable complaints and that concessions must be made by the industrialized states. The original formula coined by the Non-Aligned movement, NIIO, was replaced by the proposal for a “new, more just and effective world information and communication order”, NWICO. According to the interpretation of United States Ambassador John Reinhardt at the 1978 General Conference, this new order required “a more effective program of action, both public and private, to suitable identified centers of professional education and training in broadcasting and journalism in the developing world ... [and] ... a major effort to apply the benefits of advanced communications technology ... to economic and social needs in the rural areas of developing nations”. The new order (NWICO) that was now acceptable to all UNESCO member states was mainly interpreted as a programme for the transfer of knowledge, finances, and technical equipment. The problem of the international information structure was being reduced to mere technical proportions. In response to this, an intergovernmental programme for support to the development of communication was launched as a Western initiative in 1980.

The Twenty-first General Conference in 1980 at Belgrade adopted by consensus a resolution concerning the establishment of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

During the UNESCO General Conferences of 1976, 1978, and 1980, the Western minority managed to achieve most of its policy objectives against the expressed preference of the majority of member states. In the end, the debate did not yield the results demanded

by the developing countries. Their criticism of the past failures of technical assistance programmes was answered by the creation of yet another such programme: the International Programme for the Development of Communication. This programme was seen by many Third World delegates as the instrument to implement the standards of the NWICO. The UNESCO General Conference of 1980 had stated that among these standards were the elimination of the imbalances and inequalities which characterize the present situation, the capacity of the developing countries to achieve improvement of their own situation, notably by providing infrastructure and by making their information and communication means suitable to their needs and aspirations, and the sincere will of developed countries to help them. The IPDC was not going to meet these expectations. Apart from the inherent difficulty that the IPDC represented a definition of global communication problems that had in the past not worked to the benefit of Third World nations, the programme would also from the outset suffer a chronic lack of resources. Although the Non-Aligned summit in Belgrade (September, 1989) reiterated its support for the NWICO, the UNESCO General Conference strove hard to reach consensus on formulations that represented conventional freedom of the press, pluralism of the media, freedom of expression, and free flow of information positions. According to the UNESCO Director General (in 1989), plans for a new information order no longer existed in UNESCO.

## The MacBride Round Table

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s only some international non-governmental organizations (meeting as the MacBride Round Tables on Communications) kept expressing concern “that economic and technological disparities still characterise the current international system. The rapid advances in communication technologies in the affluent parts of the world have widened that gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’” (Harare Round Table in 1989). The Round Table of Prague, 1990, was concerned about the state of communication in the South:

The rapid development of communication technology, which has drastically increased the capacity for information in industrialised countries, has bypassed many countries in the South. Essential technical infrastructures for communications are still not available there or are inaccessible to most of the people. Instead, foreign communication enterprises have, in alliance with many governments and elitist interests, created an artificial commercial culture which is accessible only to an affluent few ... a new basis and new methods for North–South co-operation, must be found which ensure greater equality and more genuine partnership.

The sixth MacBride Round Table (Honolulu, Hawaii, January 20–23, 1994) gave special attention to the inadequate communication capacity of the so-called Fourth World within the Third World, the indigenous peoples. The Round Table participants recognized “that the indigenous peoples of the world are marginalized from communicative links in the world



and within countries”. The meeting also addressed the issue of the plans for “information superhighways” to be constructed by the USA, the European Union countries, and Japan. As the participants stated in the final document, “No ‘information superhighway’ is planned for the developing world. ... It is likely that the new information highways will widen the gap between the information rich and information poor, both within individual countries and between rich and poor regions of the world, to such an extent as to render it unbridgeable in the foreseeable future”.

## The international transfer of technology

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the principle of equality in the literature and policy debates about information/communication met with a great deal of consensus. In 1991, for example, the non-discrimination standard was applied to the use of telecommunication satellites through a resolution by the General Assembly of the UN: “Communication by means of satellite should be available on a global and non-discriminatory basis” (Res. 1721 D [XVI] in 1961).

Yet, at the same time there was general agreement in the scientific literature and in public policy statements that the information/communication technology (ICT) gap between the developed and developing countries was widening. As the UNDP Development Report of 1999 stated: “The network society is creating parallel communication systems: one for those with income, education and, literally, connections, giving plentiful information at low cost and high speed; the other for those without connections, blocked by high barriers of time, cost and uncertainty and dependent on outdated information” (UNDP, 1999: 63).

At the turn of the century the worldwide distribution of ICT resources continued to be enormously unequal. In terms of availability, accessibility, and affordability of equipment and services as well as the mastery of technical and managerial skills there remained great disparities between affluent and developing countries, but also between different social groups within all countries.

## The WSIS and the global digital divide

The information/communication inequality became one of the key issues of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (in Geneva, 2003, and in Tunis, 2005). There was a tendency in the WSIS debates to treat the digital divide mainly as a matter of the globally skewed distribution of information and communication resources. The divide was not primarily seen as a dimension of the overall global “development divide”. Since this bigger problem was not seriously addressed, a romantic fallacy prevailed which proposed that the resolution of information/communication problems, and the bridging of knowledge gaps or inequalities of access to technologies, can contribute to the solution of the world’s most urgent and explosive socio-economic inequities. This isolated the digital

divide from the broader problem of the development divide. In reality, the digital divide is not more than one of the many manifestations of the unequal allocation of both material and immaterial resources in the world, both between and within societies. Its solution has little to do with information, communication or ICT. This is a matter of political will, which is lacking in a majority of nation-states. Instead of the strong political commitment that is needed, the WSIS discourse focused on the possibility of a global “Digital Solidarity Fund”. This is an almost scandalous proposition in view of the fact that since the 1970s all the efforts to develop and sustain such funds for communication development, telecom infrastructures, or technological self-reliance have failed because of the lack of political will. The WTO Ministerial meeting in Cancún (September, 2003) demonstrated once again that not all stakeholders are equally intent on solving rich–poor divides. Fortunately, the poor countries understood that the rich countries (particularly the USA and the EU) intended to impose yet another set of demands on them that would be very detrimental to their societies and their people. In this sense, the Cancún meeting was a great success. That same sense of alertness did not inspire the poor country representatives at the December 2003 WSIS.




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According to Castells (2001: 270), the digital divide is the “divide created between those individuals, firms, institutions, regions, societies that have the material and cultural conditions to operate in the digital world, and those who cannot, or cannot adapt to the speed of change”. Could education play a role in bridging gaps in global digital densities?

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The WSIS discourse on the digital divide did not critically question whether rich–poor divides can at all be resolved within the framework of the prevailing development paradigm. Following this, development is conceived of as a state of affairs which exists in society A and, unfortunately, not in society B. Therefore, through some project of intervention in society B, resources have to be transferred from A to B. Development is thus a relationship between interventionists and the subjects of intervention. The interventionists transfer such resources as information, ICT, and knowledge as inputs that will lead to development as an output. In this approach, development is “the delivery of resources” (Kaplan, 1999: 5–7). This position was reflected in the conceptual framework of the WSIS discourse that conceives development as delivery. This delivery process is geared towards the integration of its recipients into a global marketplace. There is no space for a different conceptualization of development as a process of empowerment that intends “to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives” (Kaplan, 1999: 19).

A difficult problem is that if indeed greater global equality in access to information could be achieved, this would not guarantee an improvement in the quality of people’s lives. “Even when these disparities are recognised and new organisational models such

as telecentres are proposed, the policy emphasis is frequently biased towards improving access to networks rather than towards content creation and the social processes whereby digital content can be converted into socially or economically useful knowledge” (Mansell, 1999: 8). Including people in the provision of basic public services does not create egalitarian societies. The existing social inequality means that people benefit from these services in highly inequalitarian ways. Actually, the growing literacy in many societies did not bring about more egalitarian social relationships. It certainly did have some empowering effect, but did not significantly alter power relations. Catching up with those who have the distinct social advantage is not a realistic option. They too use the new developments, such as ICTs, and, at a minimum, the gap remains and might even increase. It is a common experience with most technologies that the powerful players know best how to appropriate and control new technological developments and use them to their advantage. In the process they tend to further increase their advantage.

Large disparities in access to the Internet continue to exist, particularly for developing countries. Africa, for example, still very much lags the rest of the world in both mobile and Internet penetration. One widely recognized reason for this is the high costs of international circuits for Internet connectivity between least developed countries and Internet backbone networks. A number of initiatives are under way to address this problem. These include consideration of new models for financial exchanges among operators as well as efforts to facilitate the creation of traffic aggregation within localities, countries, or regions in developing countries in order to avoid the sending of this traffic over satellite or cable links used for intercontinental traffic – for example, between Africa and Europe or North America. The latter would aim to maximize the retention of local and national traffic within these regions and thus reduce the dependence on international communications links. To give a sense of the scale of the problem, over 75 per cent of Internet traffic in Europe remains intra-regional compared with only 1 per cent in regions like Africa.

Information/communication inequality is, however, not merely a matter of access to technological infrastructures and thus cannot be resolved by providing equal access to the technology. When new technologies are introduced in societies, the chances to benefit from them are always unequally distributed. Some people will benefit, others will mainly experience the negative impact. This is a recurrent pattern. When a technology that promises financial benefits is introduced in social situations where unequal power relations prevail, a small group will enjoy advantages and the majority will often experience regressive development. Access to the global network society is mainly available to those with good education and those living in the OECD countries with sufficient disposable income. In most countries, men dominate access to the Internet and young people are more likely to have access than the elderly. Ethnicity is an important factor and in many countries the differences in use by ethnic groups has widened. “English is used in almost 80% of Websites and in the common user interfaces – the graphics and instructions. Yet less than 1 in 10 people worldwide speaks the language” (UNDP, 1999: 62).

A particularly skewed distribution of ICT resources and uses concerns the position of women across the world. An immediate problem is the fact that ICT skills are largely based on literacy. Actually, "...it seems likely that the vast majority of the illiterate population will be excluded from the emerging knowledge societies" (Mansell and Wehn, 1998: 35). This affects women especially, since around the world illiteracy rates for women are higher than for men. In terms of sharing ICT knowledge, women are also disadvantaged since their numbers in enrolment for science and technology education lag far behind the figures for male enrolment. ICTs offer potentially new forms of communication that enable women to break through their often isolated social situation. They also create new opportunities of employment for women in jobs that require new skills. However, the technologies themselves will not achieve this. Unless robust policies are in place and are enforced, the possible benefits of ICTs will have no impact on women's lives. The realization of opportunities that are in principle created by the deployment of ICTs will depend upon such social variables as cultural capital, class, and age. "Although faced with these changing skill requirements and the need for continuous upgrading of skills, few women have access to the relevant education and training" (Mansell and Wehn, 1998: 249).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985) has proposed that the position of social actors is not only determined by economic capital, but also by their cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Cultural capital is made up of such features and skills as knowledge about wines, fine arts, music and literature, good manners, and mastery of foreign languages. Social capital is based upon the social networks that people develop. Symbolic capital represents social prestige and reputation.

To these forms of capital, the category of "information capital" should be added. This concept embraces the financial capacity to pay for network usage and information services, the technical ability to handle network infrastructures, the intellectual capacity to filter and evaluate information, but also the motivation to actively search for information and the ability to translate information into social practice.

Just like other forms of capital, information capital is unequally distributed across societies. Its more egalitarian distribution would require an extensive programme of education, training, and conscientization. To just have more "surfers" on the Web does not equate the equal possession of information capital.

It needs to be questioned, however, how realistic the expectation is that this disparity can indeed be narrowed, let alone be eliminated. It may well be an illusion to think that ICT-poor countries could catch up or keep pace with the advancements in the Northern countries. In the North, the rate of technological development is very high and is supported by considerable resources. It would be wasting scarce resources if poor countries did attempt to follow a "catching up" policy which would, in the end, only benefit the designers and operators of ICTs. This does not mean that poor countries should not try to upgrade their ICT systems. They should not do this in the unrealistic expectation that those who are ahead will wait for them. As a result, the situation may improve for the poorer countries, but the divide will not go away. As long as ICTs are embedded in the institutional

arrangements of a corporate-capitalist market economy, the equal entitlement to information and communication resources will remain a normative standard only.

The present discussion on the ICT gap provides no convincing argument that the owners of technology will change their attitudes and policies towards the international transfer of technology. Throughout the past decades the prevailing international policies on transfer of technology have erected formidable obstacles to the reduction of North–South technology gaps. Today, there is no indication of a radical change in the current practices of technology transfer. This makes it very unlikely that the relations between ICT-rich and ICT-poor countries will change in the near future.

The equitable sharing of communication infrastructures (the electronic highway systems created by telecom carriers such as satellites, cables, fixed lines, and mobile transmissions), computing capacity (computers, peripherals, networks), information resources (databases, libraries), and ICT-literacy (intellectual and social capabilities to deploy ICT in beneficial ways) demands an enormous effort on behalf of the international community. Massive investments are required for the renovation, upgrading, and expansion of networks in developing countries, for programmes to transfer knowledge, for training of ICT skills – in particular, for women.

## Distribution of effects

A fairly common assumption about ICTs is that they have mainly benign effects and that these will be equally distributed. Informational developments and their supporting technologies obviously have a certain societal impact. In the business and political community, references to “social effects of technology” are usually made with great ease. From the academic literature it is clear that the issue of impact is far from unequivocal, and indeed is very complex. In a conventional reading of social sciences, “effects” may be conceived of as measurable variables because it is accepted that there are regularities in social processes, there are cause–effect chains, and identifiable causes of effects. In a more advanced understanding of social realities – such as those inspired by chaos theory conceptions – this has all fundamentally changed. We know far less about effects than we may want to admit. Moreover, there is no realistic possibility to anticipate with any degree of reliability and validity the future impact of technological developments. The complexity of social reality implies that technology assessment in the sense of forecasting is pretentious and misleading. We could and should think in the future sense, but then in terms of possible futures (always in the plural), both negative and positive ones.

Realistic thinking about future technological impact will have to accept both benefits and risks. ICTs may have some benign effects, but they are equally likely to have effects that are not so benign. It seems that the Information Society euphoria blinds policymakers in both politics and industry to the undesirable effects, such as the loss of privacy, growing digital dependence, or cyberwarfare.

The assumption that effects would be equally distributed betrays a considerable lack of historical insight. Whatever societal effects technological developments – such as industrial machinery in the eighteenth century or automation in the twentieth century – had, there was always an unequal distribution. Those on top of the social hierarchy usually had more benefits than those lower down in the system, who often had to live with most of the risks.

Already in 1975 a meeting of experts (in September at Geneva) recommended to the United Nations the establishment of an international machinery for the assessment of new technologies from the point of view of human rights. The assessment would have to include the evaluation of possible side-effects and long-range effects of technological innovations and would weigh possible advantages against possible disadvantages. The General Assembly never acted upon this recommendation, which would seem as urgently needed today as it was in the 1970s.

## The issue of inclusion

There seemed among participants in the World Summit on the Information Society a strong consensus on the proposal that the Information Society should be inclusive and accessible to all. Apart from the fact that nowhere is the notion of inclusion defined or elaborated, this presumes without further questioning that everyone also wants to be included. What does “inclusion” mean? Is this the same proposition as that everyone should be included in the free market economy? The notion is presented as inherently benign. Without explanation about the entity within which everyone should be included, it is unclear as to whether one should welcome or mistrust “inclusion”. How far is being included a free choice? Is it possible to consider that there may be people who would prefer not to live in whatever the Information Society might be. If, for example, an Information Society implies a societal dependence upon fallible, unreliable, and ill-understood technologies which imply great social risks, could it make sense for sensible people to let the opportunity pass by? If an Information Society means that all included people get more information, but if that information consists mainly of commercial messages and disinformation, propaganda or hate speech, could some people say they would rather be excluded?

What are the real motives behind the drive towards inclusion? Is the anxiety about digital illiteracy fed by the same motive as earlier alphabetization campaigns in European history. These were often not motivated by a strong desire to empower ordinary people but served to facilitate the functioning of a system that with too many people unable to read or write would not efficiently operate.

Moreover, a puzzling question remains how the proponents of the inclusion thesis expect that – if information is a key resource and if access to such a resource has historically always been skewed – it could be any different today. Are there any socio-economic and

political conditions that make universal accessibility to essential resources a realistic claim in the early twenty-first century?

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**?** How does digital inequality relate to broader forms of societal inequality (such as income disparities or dual occupational structures) as documented in the UNDP Human Development Reports?

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## Communication for development

This chapter began by honoring Luis Beltran for his work in a field in which equality issues were always on the agenda. It is a field that has been described in many different ways, as Development Communication, Communication for Development, and, more recently, as Communication for Sustainable Development and Social Change. There is a small library of good books on the origins and growth of studies in this field and the most important ones you will find in the further reading section (Melkote and Steeves, 2001; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006; Servaes, 2008; McAnany, 2012; and Wilkins, Tufte and Obregon, 2013). In the 2010s it continues to be a very productive area of research on such topics as environmental communication, health communication, peace communication, and rural communication. Among the essential notions that inspire all this work are human rights (especially the right to communicate), participation, and empowerment. Although the study of global communication primarily addresses communicative practices that cross national borders, the issue of (local and regional) development has become a matter of global interest that requires the synergy of global communication, development communication, and intercultural communication. A particularly interesting approach to the study of communication for social change can be found in a book by Mohan Dutta (2011). He proposes to situate this research in the realm of post-colonial studies.<sup>1</sup> By taking this route, Dutta opens new perspectives on oppression, exploitation, and resistance, and in his own words he “creates a discursive space for engaging with the role of communication to bringing about social transformation” (2011: 28).

### Note

1. I return to the issue of post-colonialism in Chapter 13.



## Reading spotlight

### Communication Inequality

Galtung, J. and Vincent, R.C. (1992). *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order?* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

This book addresses communication inequality in the context of global problems. It analyzes the 1970s debates on proposals for new economic and information orders. The notion “glasnost” points to the need to develop better global understanding through the improvement of global news flows.

Hamelink, C.J. (1983). *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications*. New York: Longman. This book explores the cultural dimensions of the global communication divide. Develops proposals for national communication policies on the basis of the theoretical proposition of “dissociation”.

## Communication and Development

McAnany, E. (ed.) (1980). *Communications in the Rural Third World: The Role of Information in Development*. New York: Praeger.

After the introductory reflections by McAnany on the role of information and communication in development, access, exposure and impact of mass media for development are analyzed by Larry Shore. This is followed by three case studies: Ivory Coast, Guatemala and Brazil.

Servaes, J. (1999). *Communication for Development*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

The text moves from a theoretical analysis of modernization, dependency and multiplicity to policy and planning for social change. Concrete case studies on participatory policymaking and research.

## Online resources



Visit the book's companion website at <https://study.sagepub.com/hamelink> to watch the author discussing the theme of this chapter: **The Global Divide**



Visit the book's companion website at <https://study.sagepub.com/hamelink> to access the following journal articles free of charge:

Chakravarty, P. (2004). Telecom, national development and the Indian state: a post-colonial critique. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26(2): 227–249.

Deursen, A. van and Van Dijk, J. (2011). Internet skills and the digital divide. *New Media & Society*, 13(6): 893–911.

Padovani, C. (2005). Debating communication imbalances from the MacBride Report to the World Summit on the Information Society: an analysis of a changing discourse. *Global Media and Communication*, 1(3): 316–338.



Servaes, J., Polk, E., Reilly, D. and Yakupitijage, T. (2012). Towards sustainability indicators for “communication for development and social change projects”. *International Communication Gazette*, 74(2) : 99–123.

White, R. A. (2004). Is “Empowerment” the answer? Current theory and research on development communication. *Gazette*, 66(1): 7–24.

Wilkins, K.G. and Enghel, F. (2013). The privatization of development through global communication industries: Living Proof? *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2): 165–181.

## Further reading

Bordenave, J.D. (1977). *Communication and Rural Development*. Paris: UNESCO.

Casimir, F. (ed.) (1991). *Communication in Development*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.

Gumucio-Dagron, A. and Tufte, T. (eds) (2006). *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange, NJ: Communication for Social Change Consortium.

Hancock, A. (ed.) (1984). *Technology Transfer and Communication*. Paris: UNESCO.

Hedebro, G. (1982). *Communication and Social Change in Developing Countries: A Critical View*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

Lerner, D. (1958). *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York: Free Press.

McAnany, E.G. (ed.) (1980). *Communications in the Rural Third World: The Role of Information in Development*. New York: Praeger.

McAnany, E.G. (2012). *Saving the World: A Brief History of Communication for Development and Social Change*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

McPhail, Th. (2009). *Development Communication: Reframing the Role of the Media*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Melkote, S.R. and Steeves, H.L. (2001). *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice for Empowerment* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Rogers, E.M. (ed.) (1976). *Communication and Development*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Schramm, W. (1964). *Mass Media and National Development*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Servaes, J. (1999). *Communication for Development*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Servaes, J. (ed.) (2008). *Communication for Development and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Wilkins, K., Tufte, T. and Obregon, R. (eds) (2014). *The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

### **RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT**

Conduct a research project on the role of your country (its government, its diplomats) in the 1970s negotiations concerning the establishment of a new order for information and communication in the world.

How would you approach a historical analysis like this? Where could you find relevant sources? Are there experts you could interview? What questions would you ask?