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Subject: 200 words on the main issues concerning global communication
in the digital age

George,

Here is a quick rough draft. What do you think? Feel free to edit the piece yourself.

Bob

MAIN ISSUES IN GLOBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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The Chinese character for "crisis," it has oft been noted, is comprised of the characters for "danger" and "opportunity." In this sense of the term, we are clearly in the midst of a global communication crisis.

On the one hand, new technologies and neoliberal deregulatory policies have made communication a cornerstone of the emerging global market economy. Media and telecommunication are both rapidly evolving into global markets dominated by a handful of enormous transnational firms. The two largest global media firms, Time Warner and Disney, have seen their non-U.S. revenues increase from around 10 percent in 1990 to 35 percent in 1996, with the expectation that the figure will go over 50 percent early in the next decade. In media, there is now a global first tier of some 10 mostly U.S.-based media conglomerates with widespread holding across media sectors and having global production and distribution networks. Another 30-40 large firms round out the system, occupying regional or niche markets. This is hardly a competitive market, as each of the 10 largest firms is involved in joint ventures with, on average, six of the other nine giants. In many respects it resembles a cartel. Likewise, telecommunication is becoming concentrated into the hands of "four to six global giants," as the president of MCI recently put it.

Moreover, the system is built to satisfy the needs of corporate advertisers and shareholders. To the extent the media and telecommunication systems are built to serve consumers, they aimed at business and the upper-middle classes. This is having disastrous implications for journalism, culture and notions of public service. Indeed, the traditional public service broadcasters are all in the process of becoming commercial entities, as they neoliberal model posits no need for public subsidy.

By any known theory of democracy, such a concentration of power into so few self-interested and unaccountable hands is simply unacceptable.

On the other hand, the emergence of digital technologies holds the potential of opening up and democratizing communication in manners previously unfathomable. The Internet is the most striking example of this trend, but it is by no means the only one. When digital technology is applied to radio

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and television channels -- as will be done in the coming decade -- the number of channels can increase by a factor as high as ten. We are poised to have the capacity for individuals and groups traditionally outside of the dominant media systems to be able to produce and distribute high quality material.

In the neoliberal milieu, however, the issue of how best to develop digital communication is removed from public debate and turned over to the corporate sector where profitability dictates its course. This is indefensible politically, as these are issues that deserve -- even demand -- citizen input. Moreover, the dominant media, computer and telecommunication firms are doing everything within their immense economic and political powers to see that the Internet and digital communication be brought safely within their existing empires. Left to the market, personal computers and digital television sets will become vending machines, rather than engines of democracy. The democratic potential will be marginalized if not eliminated.

The core issues for digital communication are as follows:

1. How to put communication issues on the political agenda, making them subject to informed public debate, locally, nationally and globally.
2. How to protect and expand democratic and accountable public service media and communication, to lessen inequality and to promote civic values.
3. How to lessen the commercial carpet bombing of our culture -- from media to sport, education, and seemingly all else -- to protect and promote noncommercial public space in general.
4. How to establish and develop high quality journalism and public affairs media that will draw citizens into public life as meaningful and informed participants, rather than serve as a conduit for advertisers attempting to reach viable consumers with the cheapest and least controversial fare.
5. How to establish a global communication network based upon mutual respect between peoples and nations, rather than upon profit maximization for a few dozen transnational firms.
6. How to create a nurturing cultural climate for our children, rather than subject them to a commercial indoctrination quite unlike anything ever seen before in history.
7. How to protect and promote individual free expression without state or corporate censorship.