



V I D É A Z I M U T

February 10th, 1998.

George Gerbner
Cultural Environment Mouvement
P.O. Box 31844
Philadelphia, PA 19104
USA

e-mailed, willing
3/4/98

Dear Professor Gerbner:

As you know, 1998 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Videazimut considers the right to communicate to be a fundamental human right, and so to mark this anniversary Videazimut's international seminar will this year be entitled «The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights.»

The series of events for this international seminar will include a Virtual Conference in May and June, leading to a collection of working papers and book published in English, French, and Spanish, and the Seminar itself, to take place in Capetown (South Africa) in September. We are writing to invite you to participate in the Virtual Conference, which will take place on the internet between 11 May and 26 June 1998. Specifically, we would welcome a short contribution from you on the subject of «Acting on the Cultural Environment», as part of a working group on Civic Education and Public Memory, within the conference theme of The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights. Your contribution could discuss the Cultural Environment Movement; we believe that this would provide a timely and useful forum in which to examine this important initiative.

The Virtual Conference is a key lead-up to the Capetown Seminar. Held on the internet with the support of the International Development Research Centre (Canada), The Virtual Conference's goal is to produce a set of working documents which will be disseminated prior to the Seminar, both in printed form and on the internet. Following the Capetown Seminar (17-22 September), the Virtual Conference proceedings will be reedited and reissued as a book publication in English, Spanish, and French.

A more detailed description of the Virtual Conference, including the Conference format and a list of invited «speakers» and, can be found in the short document we have enclosed. As an invited «speaker» and participant, you would be responsible for submitting a short (4000 word) document by 1 May 1998 on your assigned theme. Your paper would then be made available both on the WWW and through e-mail, and discussed by conference participants - including, hopefully, yourself - for approximately one week. As explained above, the paper would then, along with an edited transcript of the debates it sparked, become part of the working document to be distributed to participants of the International Seminar in Capetown, and ultimately be part of the book which will be published in English, Spanish and French following the Capetown meeting.

As the enclosed document makes clear, we have attempted to design the Virtual Conference in such a way as to make it amenable to busy schedules. Conference participants will be asked simply to set aside some of their time between 11 May and 26 June to take part in discussions over electronic mail as part of the working group they will have chosen to join. The enclosed document also lists the other «speakers» we have invited to present papers at the Virtual Conference. Many of them have already expressed positive interest in participating.

Would it be possible for you to let us know whether you will:

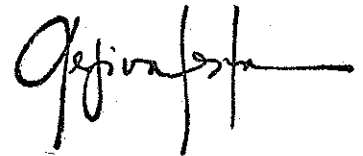
(1) accept our invitation to present a paper at the Virtual Conference; and (2) participate in the Virtual Conference, including responding to questions about your work through e-mail (or, if you prefer, through a WWW interface), during the period 11 May - 26 June?

We would appreciate receiving all responses by 2 March 1998. If possible, please indicate the dates during the period of 11 May - 26 June for which you will be unavailable, so that we can avoid scheduling discussion of your contribution during that period. Responses, and any questions you might have, should be forwarded to Bram Abramson, who is acting as coordinator of the Virtual Conference. He can be reached by e-mail (videaz@web.net), telephone (+1.514.343-6111 ext. 5419), fax (+1.514.982-6122), or by post at the address indicated on the letterhead.

Yours sincerely,



Alain Ambrosi
Secretary-General



Regina Festa
President

Virtual Conference: The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights

1. Project Initiator: Videazimut

Founded in 1990, Videazimut is an international NGO that brings together independent video and television practitioners and organizations from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America working on a common agenda for the democratisation of communication. Hailing from 45 different countries, Videazimut's membership includes community television stations, independent producers, NGOs working in social communication, community media centres, and communication researchers. Some of these members are themselves national or regional associations with large memberships of their own. With their own direct participants, the Videazimut member organizations represent over 12000 people actively promoting alternative media practices in their communities. Its members see democratic communication as an essential component of sustainable development and democratic society.

Public interventions by Videazimut take place at a number of levels. Participation in international debates on the challenges posed by 'globalization' has included all of the decade's major UN conferences, including the consultations held in Rio (1992), Copenhagen (1995), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), as well as Global Knowledge 97 (Toronto), hosted by the World Bank and the Government of Canada.

In addition to its newsletter, CLIPS, Videazimut publishes books and also disseminates information in electronic form. Recently, Videazimut produced and distributed a diskette entitled *The Social Appropriation of the New Information and Communication Technologies* with approximately fifty titles in English, French and Spanish.

Videazimut is also an active participant in several emerging «networks of networks» to promote democratic communication at the international level. These include El Grupo de los Ocho (G8) and the Mercosur Women in Communication Task Force, in Latin America, and the international Platform for Cooperation on Communication and Democratization. Videazimut represents the audiovisual sector in these coalitions, which have already implemented strategies based on a common agenda.

Bringing together people and ideas is key to Videazimut's range of activities. In collaboration with its members, Videazimut has organized a number of international and regional gatherings in all parts of the globe. The Videazimut international seminars to date have been:

- Alternative Communication and Development Alternatives (MontrÉal, 1990);
- The Challenge of Democratic Television (Maputo, 1991);
- Moving Images and Cultural Identity (Lima, Peru, 1992);
- New Technologies and the Democratisation of Audiovisual Communication (New Delhi, 1994);
- Media for Citizenship in the Electronic Age: Community TV and New Technologies (Brazil, 1996).

For the first time this year, the international seminar will be preceded by a Virtual Conference aimed at generating and disseminating fresh thinking on our theme for 1998:

- The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights (Capetown, 1998).

2. Project Context

The Right to Communicate The year 1998 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Signed in the aftermath of the Second World War, this declaration became a screen upon which people and peoples around the world projected their hope for harmonious development in a climate of peace and democracy.

Even as the much-heralded millennial shift looms, communities across the globe are faced with the constant evolution of transnational challenges on all levels: ecological, economic, social, cultural, political, ethical. For the coalition-building that is fundamental to meeting these challenges, the Declaration - through the notions of pluralism, tolerance and democracy that it sets forth - functions as a surrogate universal charter at the intersection of particularisms. That these guidelines are not consistently respected in practice points to the on-going struggle of actions and ideas in which the Declaration is a key tool.

In its declaration of principles, Videazimut aligns itself with a growing consensus on the right to communicate as a fundamental human right. In 1998, Videazimut, its members and allies will highlight the right to communicate and the conditions for exercising this right.

Taking Up The Right to Communicate

The right to communicate has always been at the heart of social struggle. As times change, as geographical contexts shift, and as technology marches on, this right has also evolved: freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the right to information, and, now, the right to communicate. The latter is the embodiment of its precursors in the era of globalisation.

The right to communicate is a part of all struggle for the spaces of liberty - and against all of the tactics of authoritarian, exclusive and excluding power, be they marshalled by religious or by aristocratic groups, by the State or by capital, or by our peers. The right to communicate is a fundamental building block in the real-world process of democratization and development. Being able to exercise the right to communicate is basic to organizing robust public space and a genuinely participatory democracy.

As a policy instrument, the right to communicate is more and more a basic part of all tool-kits for the deployment of social forces. The struggle for the right to communicate has taken on this new dimension because communication itself has become a central issue in establishing a new world order. The neoliberal dream of the globe greased up for friction-free capitalism appears in the form of the new international telecommunications regulations that the alliance of transnational capital and G7 states would like to see implemented.

Physical repression tramples freedom of expression in many countries. State-based communication policies have only just begun to deal with the new technological environment as a problematic of communication. United Nations institutions established by the international community a half-century ago are being limited in their regulatory power, suddenly superseded. That is the landscape in which the forces that come together in the Global Information Infrastructure (GII) wield institutions like the World Trade Organization and the World Bank as sites from which to territorialize an ideological, political and economic order which is increasingly inaccessible to the majority and which is increasing greater inequality.

These new developments are creating a democratic communication deficit on a worldwide scale. They are acting to confirm certain aspects of the MacBride Report (1980) and its conclusions on the need for access to and participation in the production and distribution of information. If the right to communicate begins with the right to information, it also encompasses the right to being involved in creating and distributing one's information and,

what is more and more crucial, the right to knowledge - that is, the ability to select information based on the democratic needs and aspirations of individuals and communities.

The rapid development of new information and communication technologies is jeopardizing individual and collective rights. It is posing new challenges to policymakers, who must coordinate their regulatory actions at local, national, and international levels. Globally, then, the democratization of communication cannot be reduced to questions of economics and technology transfer: it must also be attended to through the interlocking levels of legal, political, technological and cultural questions.

Fabulous sums of money are at stake in the communication and information industries. Enormous resources continue to be marshalled for the corporate initiatives seeking to realign global networks. But other movements have emerged all over the globe, too. Civic efforts have defended the right to communicate. Political programmes have laboured to explode the forced equivalence of citizenship with consumption. Academic activism has sought to link research with targetted intervention. These movements subsist on comparatively modest economic means, and may not yet represent a bona fide alternative project - but they are reflected in a range of different communication practices, in the creative appropriation of new communication and information technologies, and in writing, educating and lobbying in arenas at all levels. The commercial logic of communication and information is being challenged by a logic which identifies itself unabashedly as a logic of public interest. And in the countries of both the North and the South, state communications policies are being influenced by these efforts.

3. Project Format

As the World Bank and the African Information Society Initiative promoted by the Economic Commission for Africa would have it, communications are the new frontier. This massive new flow of capital and transfer of technology will not only affect populations unequally, but may also short-circuit evolving projects for democratic development. An International Seminar on The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights will be held in Capetown, 17-22 September 1998, on the heels of the International Telecommunications Union's Africa Telecom 98 event in May - providing a context for a response from representatives committed to a non-corporatist right to communicate.

The seminar will identify strategies for the promotion of models for democratic communication in the next century. Its theme stems from a conviction that policy is important as an intervention into the institutional and material conditions of communication. Its

objective is to address the issues of global, regional and national communication policies using the right to communicate and the communication of rights as its tool, and to identify how such a tool can be wielded in order to put into place the conditions favourable to a genuine practice of the right to communicate.

The pre-seminar Virtual Conference, running from May 11 to June 26, 1998, is a key lead-up to the International Seminar. Held on the internet, the Virtual Conference will be held in conjunction with the International Development Research Centre (Canada). The Virtual Conference's goal is to produce a set of working documents which will be disseminated prior to the seminar, both in printed form and on the internet. Following the Capetown seminar, the Virtual Conference proceedings will be reedited and reissued as a book publication in English, Spanish, and French.

This Virtual Conference on the Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights will examine how communication policies and regulations must not only ensure access to information and equipment but also guarantee genuine public participation in media organizations as well as in the making of state and global communication policy. The papers and workshops will thus focus on the necessary conditions in which the right to communicate become useful. Five working groups will be convened, providing five points of entry for approaching the subject at hand.

The Virtual Conference is open to participation through one of two internet platforms: e-mail, or the World-Wide Web (WWW). Each of the five working groups which will have a moderator facilitating discussion. Actual discussion will take place through an e-mail listserv, meaning that e-mail messages sent by any member of the group will be distributed to all members. Discussions will also be posted at each working group's WWW home page.

Working Groups

As already mentioned, the Virtual Conference on the Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights will run from May 11 to June 26, for a period of seven weeks. Apart from preliminary introductions at the beginning and a week-long plenary at the Conference's end, the five working groups will convene electronically during that period. The working groups will spend approximately one week examining and reacting to each of 4-5 proposals or «guest speakers» in the form of short (under 4000 word) documents which will be posted on e-mail prior to each discussion, and also made available on each working group's WWW site as of May 11.

This format was chosen to approximate that of a «live» conference, in which a paper is presented, and debate follows. Unlike many conferences, however, here debates are given equal weight to that of the papers themselves. The Virtual Conference proceedings, which will be distributed first as working papers and then published in book form, will feature edited versions of the on-line debates. Moderators will help facilitate discussion in each working group, and provide translation assistance (English-Spanish-French) where required.

The topics of the five working groups are closely related, and most participants will find topics of interest in more than one working group. We ask participants to choose one working group, however, to which to belong and focus their contributions, and we feel that this will make for a richer and more productive discussion.

The five working groups, with lists of invited speakers, are:

LEGAL APPROACHES

- Overview of Communication Law in the Context of Communication Rights(Pierre Trudel, Centre for Research in Public Law, Université de Montréal);
- Uses of Comparative Approaches to Media Policy and Law
(Monroe Price, Centre for Comparative Media Policy and Law, Oxford University)*;
- Challenges for Global Regulation of Communication
(Marc Raboy, Communication Policy Research Laboratory, Université de Montréal)* ;
- Legal Struggles and Access to Policy (Beth Costa);
- People's Communication Charter
(Cees Hamelink, Centre for Communication and Human Rights, University of Amsterdam).

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

- Corporate Concentration: A Threat to the Right to Communicate? (Robert W. McChesney, Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison)*;
- Resource Allocation in Independent Media Production: Problems and Prospects (Deedee Hallek, Paper Tiger TV);
- Alternative Media (Ishikawa);
- Public Access to Communication Policy (Jesus Martín-BarbÈro & German Rey, Colombia)
- Universal Access versus Universal Service (Sean O'Siochru, Nexus Research Collective, Dublin, and Tsepho Rantho, Senior Manager, South African Universal Service Agency)* .

FEMINIST APPROACHES (Regina Festa)

(to be coordinated by Regina Festa. Invited speakers include Regina Festa and Michèle Mattelart.).

MINORITY CHALLENGES

- First Peoples and the Right to Communicate;
- Majority Censorship, Minority Broadcasting
(Amir Hassanpour, Toronto & Pradip Thomas, London);
- Minority Languages and New Technologies;
- Policy and Pluralism: Ensuring Minorities' Right to Communicate
(Lorna Roth, Communication Studies, Concordia University).

CIVIC EDUCATION AND PUBLIC MEMORY

- From Media Literacy to Civic Education - Education's Challenge: Responding to the Knowledge Gap (members of FELAFAC);
- The Right to Memory
(José Antonio Mayobre, Director, Programa Archivo Audiovisual de Venezuela) ;
- Acting on the Cultural Environment
(George Gerbner, Cultural Environment Mouvement, Philadelphia & Adbusters representative);
- Media History as Media Education?
(Armand Mattelart, Université de Paris, France).

(indicates that speaker is confirmed)*

Technical details will be made available at a later date, and a series of announcements will be sent out starting one month prior to the Virtual Conference. The conference facilitator is available at all times to respond to questions and queries both technical and substantive, however:

Bram Abramson

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