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GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS: A PLEA FOR CIVIL ACTION.
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Global Networks.

As electronic information and communication networks proliferate across the globe, they affect industrial organizations, governments, social movements and individual citizens. These networks comprise the mass media, electronic databases, telecommunication services, publishing industries and myriad supporting hardware and software providers.

Taken all together, they constitute a business of over 1.600 billion dollars: their annual sales equal some 12 percent of the world's total industrial output.

An important feature of this business is its rate of concentration. There is a clear trend towards control by a few mega-companies. And the trading by these companies is shifting from the international exchange of local products to production for global markets.

As the communication conglomerates extend their activities to more countries, the production of culture and information takes on a cosmopolitan hue. The activities of media-barons Maxwell, Murdoch and Berlusconi in the recently opened Eastern European information markets are telling examples. As this goes on, it is difficult to escape the impression that the creation of the "global village" is more inspired by cultural conquest than cultural co-existence.

When the Hungarian edition of Playboy appeared in December 1989, the newspaper advertisement proudly announced that the availability of the magazine represented the freedom the Hungarians had been fighting for.

The following month, when McDonald began selling hamburgers in Moscow a company executive announced: "We're going to McDonaldize them" and described this as the company's cultural conquest. In April 1990, the French government announced that it was increasing its funding for cultural exports as part of a big cultural campaign to conquer Eastern European countries.

The new networks spanning the globe offer an unprecedented volume and choice in cultural products and information. However, this does not necessarily mean they are adequately meeting the demands of a global civil society.

Civil society.

The phrase "civil society" refers to all social transactions in the public and private sphere that are not interfered with by the state. The concept implies a defence of society against the state and it emphasizes the need of a relative autonomy for social life. In most countries civil society is legally rooted in sets of civil rights embodied in constitutions and other forms of legislation.

However, it is not sufficient, in my view, to stress the bi-polarity of state and society. Civil society also needs protection against those corporate legal entities that control large parts of national and international economies and global cultural production.

The inclusion of these actors in the concept of civil society reflects how successful their lobbying has been to have themselves considered as private citizens. Recent trends in U.S. and West-European jurisdiction granting corporate entities the status of private citizen, imply that the protection of free speech has been extended to cover commercial speech.

Thus, as the corporations take over more means and places of public expression (in the performing arts, the museums, the mass media, and the shopping malls) public space needs to be defended against not only the state, but also those commercial raiders.

Civil society needs information and communication networks that enable its citizens to exercise their right to citizenship. This means that these networks should provide the vital prerequisites of citizenship: freedom of expression and access to information. To do this the networks have to meet such minimal conditions as: affordable universal service; public access to government information; protection against unfair media-treatment; protection of privacy; diversity of information sources; reliability of information provision; and rules for liability in case of defective information.

In current discussions on civil society, the concept remains closely tied to the nation-state system. In view of the impotence of individual states to cope with global problems, we need to extend civil society beyond the national borders. It is not enough for society to establish its proper space against domestic state and market forces. As the future of world society is at stake, it should be recognized that the also international arena needs the active defence of civil concerns.

Multilateral negotiations.

The arena for the politics of global communications is primarily set by a group of multilateral public organizations. These include: the United Nations General Assembly, ECOSOC, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union, the World Intellectual Property Organization, the International Labour Organisation, the Universal Postal Union, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

As with all politics, this specific political activity can best be understood as a negotiating process through which interested communities attempt to accommodate those concerns they perceive as essential.

Critical concerns.

A recurrent concern of the international community addresses the scope and quality of global communications.

The League of Nations - between the two world wars - expressed a concern about the dangerous effects of false and distorted international reporting.

The United Nations - at the earliest stages of its existence - stressed a concern for the freedom of expression as a touchstone of all freedoms. In 1957 a Unesco report drew attention to the global communication disparity that it described as "information famine": a gross imbalance in communication capacity between the rich and the poor countries.

In the 1960s concerns emerged about the socio-cultural impact of direct satellite broadcasting. The 1970s saw the Third World concern for a fundamental restructuring of the international information order. Throughout the 1980s political issues related to international communication did acquire a prominent place on the multilateral agenda.

Today the most pressing topics demanding the attention of multilateral negotiators deal with telecommunication services, intellectual property and transborder data flows.

Large telecommunication users seek global interconnectivity as prerequisite for unimpeded delivery of their products to all markets. They are concerned about restrictive arrangements that local telecom administrations may impose. Large business users want flexible regulatory conditions to emerge from current talks on trade and technical standards at the GATT and the ITU. National network operators, particularly in the developing countries, are concerned about unfair competition and erosion of national sovereignty in political, economic and cultural terrains.

The concern about the protection of privacy in global data trade stems from the increasing application of electronic dataprocessing in international transactions. More and more paper-based documents are replaced by computer records. This has expanded the possibilities for privacy invasion, the creation of non-protected datahavens, and raised consumer issues in case of incorrect charges, non-delivery of electronically ordered goods, or the unauthorized access to consumer accounts. To-day rapidly growing volumes of personal information are collected, stored, and sold through vast electronic systems. Global markets are emerging for personal information. For banking and insurance companies that have been collecting large volumes of personal information, there is a strong interest in selling that information on a general market. As transnational conglomerates discover the value of their datacollections, there are serious risks that violations of privacy rights take on global scope.

Intellectual property rights are a hotly disputed item in the new GATT round of multilateral trade negotiations. U.S. sources claim that over US \$ 60 billion is lost annually due to the trading in counterfeit goods and the unauthorized production of copyrighted and patented products. The U.S., through bilateral pressures and the multilateral talks in the GATT, want other countries to adopt intellectual property protection similar to its own. Developing countries are concerned about the obstacles to local technology innovation that transnational patent monopolies create. Since most foreign patents are not worked and mainly serve to undercut local competition, developing countries resort to involuntary licensing. This means that they offer the unworked patents to local companies. The original rights owners receive royalty payments. The U.S. vehemently opposes this practice.

Communities.

In the early stages of multilateral standard-setting a handful of nation-states were the uncontested regulators. Their majority belonged to the Western world. When the society of states expanded with the advent of the post-colonial societies, the diplomatic process was challenged by the political bureaucracies of the new independent countries in the Third World. Their efforts to change the multilateral system in order to accomodate a new set of concerns did meet with limited success only. The concerns of the Third World community were expediently coopted, forgotten, or negotiated away in most fora. The multilateral organizations become global in number, but in political essence they remained tied to their Western roots. The dialogue between states that took place within a state system that shared a large measure of cultural and historical similarity did not keep pace with the emerging global reality of widely divergent codes of conduct.

Recent crucial negotiations on multilateral agreements in the field of telecommunication services and intellectual property rights have definitely moved in the direction of Western interests. The outcome of important meetings of the ITU during 1988 and 1989 serve the Transnational Corporations much better than the Third World community.

The communication capacities of most developing countries continue to remain inadequate and form a serious obstacle to their efforts to combat conditions of deprivation. Negotiations on the international transfer of technology and assistance programmes have persistently failed to resolve "information famine".

Less unfortunate than the Third World community has been the community that represents the world's leading transnational companies. This community comprises the large business users of international telecommunications and the traders in intellectual property. Particularly since the 1980s it has forced itself upon the standard-setting process and managed to effectively lobby for an optimal accomodation of its entrepreneurial concerns. Within a multilateral forum such as the ITU the industrial organizations have recently shifted legal status from mere observers to full-fledged members in the key consultative committees of the Union.

The small users.

A remarkable feature of multilateral politics is that it has little to offer to its largest community: the citizens of the world.

This community comprises the millions of "small users" of global communications. The developments in global communications affect their daily lives in significant ways: they watch foreign television programmes, use the international telephone lines, they buy recorded music and they read international news.

The way in which global communications operate determines the variety of content in the media, the representation of diverse social interests, the access to public libraries, the charges of connection and use of telephone and postal services, and the quality of information network services.

And yet, the "small users" are no party to the multilateral negotiations and their concerns are not adequately expressed. This is not sufficiently refuted by the argument that governments represent in multilateral negotiations the people that elected them. In reality, governments are not always democratically elected, and even if they are, they tend to primarily represent the political-economic priorities of national elites. Ironically enough, though, the multilateral standard-setting process almost routinely justifies its actions with a reference to the interests and well-being of the "users". It is invariably implied that this community is the ultimate beneficiary: many preambles to regulatory instruments claim to address, "all members of the human family", "all human beings", "all peoples", or just "everyone".

Need for civil action at the global level.

It is quite obvious that the community of global citizens, the "small users", is geographically dispersed, ideologically fragmented and badly organized.

It will be no easy matter to design effective mechanisms to articulate the concerns of such a heterogeneous community. Yet, if we do not want to delegate crucial decisions about the future of global communications to the states and the TNC's, there is little choice but to begin introducing civil society into the process of global multilateral negotiations.

What I propose is the setting up of an international coalition of international non governmental organizations (INGO's) that are active in such fields as human rights, consumer protection, peace, gender, race, communication, research, and environment. The main purpose of such a coalition should be to define and articulate civil concerns in the field of global communications, and to represent these concerns in the appropriate multilateral fora.

A first step in this civil initiative would be the convening of an international conference of interested INGO's in 1991. This conference would begin to formulate a Charter for the Protection of Citizen Concerns in Global Communications.

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