Communications Technology and Social Policy

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW "CULTURAL REVOLUTION"

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INTRODUCTION

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If the new future of the future is to be different from the old future of the past, it should be subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. By that I mean that the use of the future as a political instrument should be explained, and even its scientific assessment demystified. Then we can move on to the consideration of the merits of social intelligence in shaping the future. That is the task of this section.

In their chapter on "The History of the Future," James W. Carey and John J. Quirk trace the work of some scientistic "oracles to the people and servants of the ruling class." The future that never comes but always is "just around the corner" or "at the end of the tunnel" serves to make the present more acceptable. Since rapid change in the "quality of life" is apparent to all, it is not difficult to claim that a change in the structure of society will come about by the same processes of extension and intensification that pervade the present. Thus the claims made for the future effects of electricity in 1852 are compared to the claims for the future effects of electronics made in 1972. Information technologists may gain a monopoly of knowledge in the profound sense of being able to define what it means to be reasonable.

Michael Gurevitch and Philip Elliott pursue the question of monopoly in their chapter on "Communication Technologies and the Future of the Broadcasting Professions." They foresee changes in the self-image of the profession (if it can be called that), and in its control over the most massive channels of communication. Ironically, they write, the public's "right to know" has been transformed into the professionals' right to define what it is that the public has a right to know. With the proliferation and diversification of channels, the status and control of the media "professional" may decline, giving way to even more overt business control exercised through technological and market "mechanisms." The disestablishment of the "New Priesthood" of media professionals may mark the end of a period of the elite standards and professional quality controls, to giving full sway to "populist commercialism" managed by technicians.

How these or other foreseeable developments will influence the political system is Forrest P. Chisman's topic in "Politics and the New Mass Commu-

nication." Chisman finds most current predictions questionable, if not misleading. The proliferation of channels and consequent fragmentation of audiences raises many theoretical and practical problems. The rosy myth of the future of telecommunications may lead us to ignore present warning signals and to delay needed reforms.

Even the exclusive preoccupation with technology assessment may have that effect, argues Edwin B. Parker in his chapter on "Assessment or Change in Communication Technology." "If we structure the problem as one of assessment of the technology itself, or as one of developing social indicators to better measure effects after they have happened, then the battle will have been lost before we start," Parker writes. The alternative he recommends is immediate institutional intervention and social planning, assuring maximum public utilization of the fruits of communication technology. Waiting for consensus, or even for a crisis that might precipitate consensus, is waiting too long. If the problems reside in the basic institutional structure of society, as Parker believes, crisis and concensus can be managed to support instead of change that structure. Publicity and mobilization of human energies must take advantage of the flexibilities that now exist to initiate the changes. Assessment of consequences can be more effective once institutional change is underway.

Just how such assessment might be conducted, whenever it occurs, is the topic of the last two chapters. James D. Halloran refers to the investigation of media performance as "Research in Forbidden Territory" because the organs of public consciousness have been resistant to the idea of public consciousness of their own operations. Surveying the British scene, Halloran concludes that between the clamor of governments and the self-serving proclamations of the media, a third voice is needed to track the consequences of new developments in communications.

What that third voice might be is the subject of the final chapter on "Cultural Indicators: The Third Voice," by George Gerbner. Three areas of analysis designate study of how policies are made, what message systems are produced, and what contributions they make to public conceptions of life and society. Tracking the present as it flows past might point the way to a future that is neither a mirage nor a trap.