



# IAMCR conference report

A report of the *International Association for Mass Communication Research Conference held in Sydney, 18-22 August 1996.*

## UNESCO criticised

The conference started with a stir when some speakers at the initial plenary, notably ALP President Barry Jones, were critical of UNESCO and its role in communication.

Jones was particularly scathing about recent UNESCO reports: the Delors report on education, for example, which proposed a return to an arcadian model of the village teacher, had 'propelled us into the 60s', fail totally to address changes posed by the communications revolution to traditional modes of learning. Another report by 18 leading intellectuals had fallen on distance education as though it was some new and amazing idea. Jones said that self-congratulation and flattery oil UNESCO's wheels, and it was too reactive to criticism: a critical report on the effectiveness of its programs carried out by Australian consultant Frank Morgan (who chaired the session) had simply been buried in the archives. UNESCO has to reach five billion people, yet its budget equals roughly those of the ABC and the CSIRO combined. It needs to concentrate its efforts and use its resources more effectively.

Helen Molnar (RMIT), a member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, said UNESCO had been slow to recognise the Pacific in its communication programs and in fact had failed even to mention it in key documents. UNESCO is too Eurocentric, with 70% of the communication budget spent in Paris, compared with education where 50% goes to regional offices. The communication division needs major cultural change if it is to meet its stated objectives.

Molnar identified a number of key areas for change, such as a recognition of the convergence of technology and

content providers, and the potential cost savings in digital production methods, with less focus on print and radio; the integration of communications components into all programs, rather than being simply an add-on; less focus on the emerging democracies of eastern Europe and a recognition that commercial constraints could be equally important in the context of free speech; a move away from a heavy emphasis on journalism training and in-country training in preference to regional initiatives.

## Human rights a major theme

Human rights in a communications context was a major theme of the conference. At the third plenary, Dr Fransisco Claver, Apostolic Vicar of Bontoc Lagawe province in the Philippines, spoke movingly of the plight of indigenous people in his country and elsewhere, saying that to destroy a culture is equivalent to killing a people. Cultural relativism could end in moral relativism, he said, which would mean different views of what constitutes good and evil at different times. Basic notions of human rights tend to be the same across all cultures. The role of local media, for example in the People Power revolution in the Philippines, is very important; but so is that of the international media, which as this revolution showed can act as a powerfully inhibiting force against government use of violence.

One of the outstanding papers of the conference was given at this session by Shalini Venturelli of The American University, Washington. She said that the vision of a world wide information network crossing all boundaries, in which the Internet is the first stage, is bounded by technical assumptions and gives little consideration to

human rights implications.

The vision is based on the concept of global liberalisation of the information and communication sectors and assumes that market players will supply the needs of emerging economies more effectively than state-managed strategies, and that the benefits will trickle down to the rest of society. So far, she said, there is no demonstrated commitment to economic, social and cultural considerations such as universal service and the public interest.

A demand-led approach has been pushed aside because the liberalisation of the economic systems of developing countries is essential to the globalisation of capital. Public monopolies will be replaced by private, and the development paradigm will be altered, leading to radical changes in the role of the state, the legal order, the culture and the society. The end product will be a global information infrastructure in which the freedom of proprietary power extends even further, for example, over intellectual property. She argued the need for a supranational governing regulatory network for the information age, which can control the nature of and access to cyberspace and guarantee information rights; as well as principles for non-discriminatory access, such as positive content regulation, so that services are not predominantly commercial or reflective of an establishment view.

All communication technologies possess democratic potential. But principles of non-discriminatory access are required, such as:

- positive content regulation so that services are not predominantly commercial or reflective of an establishment view;
- rules governing investment;
- policy which promotes an integrated network approach;
- regulation of the distributor of mar-



ket power; and

- rules for government accountability in funding the network.

### Regional perspectives

Some of the most interesting papers were those from countries in our region, like China and Singapore, which gave up-to-date information about developments in both broadcast media and information networks: for instance, Duncan Holaday's paper about the use of techniques such as proxy caches and routing to censor the Internet in Singapore; Shoba Das's outline of contemporary television in India, where up to 35 channels are available in some areas a mere six years after the government monopoly was broken, and regional channels in languages other than Hindi are proliferating; and Huang Yu on China, where Star TV has gone from 1.2m viewers in 1992 to 38m currently, there are 3000 cable TV stations (many running pirated foreign programs) and 100,000 people with Internet access (including many of China's elite). In China the government is still attempting to restrict access to these technologies by means of regulation, but it is a losing battle.

A paper on universal service, jointly presented by Deanna Robinson (USA), Richard Joseph (Aust.) and Graham Wagner (NZ) to a session on new technology, produced some sobering material for Australia on the brink of full telecommunications competition and possible Telstra privatisation. In the US, while there is 94% overall penetration, there is only 88% in rural areas. Robinson produced a map of Oregon showing large gaps where there is no service at all because it is not economical for the telcos to provide it. Systems of funding, and definitions of universal service have not proved satisfactory. Wagner said that experience in New Zealand shows there is still a need for government to intervene, for example in disputes over interconnect fees. There is growing concern over lack of access among poorer people.

A session on media law and policy in Russia given by three scholars from Moscow State University suggested that Russia has rapidly moved towards Western-style patterns in media ownership and control, though there is a highly diversified market including a state-owned media, media owned by city administration, and joint stock companies with foreign investors. Regulations are applied to such areas as the establishment of mass media outlets by foreigners (prohibited, though there are no limitations on ownership) and there are codes of practice covering the relationship between proprietor/major shareholder and editor-in-chief. There is a new type of 'mafia' controlling the media, notably the banks, like Mosbank which owns radio, television and newspapers. Politicians have learned to use the media and to cultivate media proprietors. Yeltsin's recent victory followed massive expenditure in the media on his campaign.

### Scholars attack scholarship

Three of the world's most distinguished mass communications scholars attacked the state of critical communications in the culminating session of the conference. On a panel which included George Gerbner (US) and Finland's Kaarle Nordenstreng, the United Kingdom's James Halloran was the most outspoken, claiming that much contemporary scholarship confused erudition with obscurantism. 'If you can't understand it it must be good', appeared to be the guiding principle, he said.

Halloran said that there was a mutual admiration society in the field with a great deal of academic backslapping, but 'no-one [is] taking any notice of us'. The agendas were the same as 30 years ago, and he questioned whether anything worthwhile was being done. In a multidisciplinary field like mass communications, there were discontinuities and different perspectives even within disciplines. He said scholars had a re-

sponsibility to be self-critical without being pessimistic.

Gerbner said he would add only 'approving footnotes' to Halloran's comments. He drew a distinction between 'administrative' research designed to achieve certain goals, and 'critical' research which is change-oriented and which questions and examines. He claimed that the latter has become an increasingly marginalised and irrelevant academic exercise, and said that conference participants had an obligation and an opportunity to turn this situation around.

The proliferation of channels of communication is being limited by the shrinking number of owners, and uniformity dominates the cultural environment. Independent voices have been squeezed out; even the US networks are now just one element in giant conglomerates. Children from infancy are being exposed to a particular world view.

Two younger scholars took issue with these speakers. Manjunath Pendakur (Northwestern University, USA) said that they had demonstrated a generation gap and displayed a sense of hopelessness which he did not share. They were undermining their own contributions to a whole generation of students. He rejected the idea that action was potentially corrupting and said that the alternative was total passivity.

Annabelle Serebny-Mohammadi (University of Leicester, UK) said that the arguments about globalisation are overwhelmingly negative and couched in 'mantras' of media and cultural imperialism. She spoke of new genres of media and cultural industries developing in the south, and new hope in the capacity of communications technology to reach across boundaries and build international solidarity, for example among women and environmentalists. □

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*Further information about IAMCR (membership, the conference etc) may be obtained from [cxro@musica.mcgill.ca](mailto:cxro@musica.mcgill.ca)*