The People's Communication Charter

Cees J. Hamelink

> The development of the GII ... must be a democratic effort ... In a sense, the GII will be a metaphor for democracy itself ... I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the GII will create ... The Global Information Infrastructure ... will circle the globe with information superhighways on which all people can travel. These highways — or, more accurately, networks of distributed intelligence — will allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community. (US Vice-President Al Gore)

Highway Utopias

Development has never seemed so easy to achieve. An abundance of Utopian scenarios promise sustainable development once digital highways have been constructed. The deployment of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is to usher in a 'new civilisation', an 'information revolution', or a 'knowledge society'.

This line of thought emphasises historical discontinuity as a major consequence of technological developments. New social values will evolve, new social relations will develop, and the 'zero sum society' comes to a definite end, once ICTs have realised worldwide access to information for all.

The current highway Utopias forecast radical changes in economics, politics, and culture. In the economy, the ICTs will create more productivity and improved chances for employment. They will upgrade the quality of work in many occupations, and also offer myriad opportunities for small-scale, independent, and decentralised forms of production. In the domain of politics, the decentralised and increased

access to unprecedented volumes of information will improve the process of democratisation. All people will be empowered to participate in public decision-making. In the cultural field, new and creative lifestyles will emerge, as well as vastly extended opportunities for different cultures to meet and understand each other; and new 'virtual communities' will be created which easily cross all the traditional borders of age, gender, race, and religion.

The essential vehicle to make these dreams come true will be the 'Global Information Infrastructure' (GII). The GII was launched by US Vice-President Al Gore in a speech at the 1994 conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Buenos Aires. The proposal has received a good deal of international political and corporate support. The meeting of the G-7 in Brussels in February 1995 decided to move ahead with implementing this global infrastructure. Its Final Declaration stated that the global information society is expected to enrich people worldwide by providing, to developing countries and countries in transition, the chance 'to leapfrog states of technology'. Countries such as Canada, Japan, Singapore, and the European Union are intent on the rapid realisation of national information infrastructures.

The developing world has also shown considerable interest, as illustrated by the African region. Interest in ICTs was very prominent during the First African Regional Symposium on Telematics for Development (1995) and also at the 21st session of the Conference of African Ministers responsible for Economic, Social and Development Planning in the same year. The 1995 Cairo Workshop on the Role and Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in Development recommended that 'without proper national information and communication policies, strategies and implementation plans, countries will not be able to partake fully in the global information society'. Although most African countries are not known as hot-spots for ICT development, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) Conference of Ministers adopted on 2 May 1995 Resolution 795, 'Building Africa's Information Highway'. In this, African ministers for economic and social development requested that the ECA set up a high-level working group on information and communication technologies in Africa made up of African technical experts, with a view to preparing a plan of action. The High-Level Working Group (after meetings in Cairo, Addis Ababa, and Dakar) produced Africa's Information Society Initiatives: An Action Framework to Build Africa's Information and Communication Infrastructure. In May 1996, the plan was authorised by the Conference of

Ministers meetings at Addis Ababa. The May 1996 Conference on Information Society and Development (ISAD) in South Africa was the venue for launching this initiative, which by 2010 foresees for Africa an information society in which:

> Every man and woman, schoolchild, village, government office, and business can access information through computers and telecommunications; Information and decision support systems are used to support decision making in all the major sectors of each nation's economy; Access is available throughout the region to international, regional and national 'information highways'; A vibrant private sector exhibits strong leadership in growing information-based economies; African information resources are accessible globally reflecting content on tourism, trade, education, culture, energy, health, transport, and natural-resource management; and Information and knowledge empower all sectors of society.

Big info-communications business is also taking a growing interest. Companies such as Time/Warner are making massive investments to secure a profitable place on the Information Superhighway. The GII project has a large number of 'computeropian prophets' such as European Commissioner Martin Bangemann, the Chief Executive Officers of companies such as AT&T, IBM, Microsoft, and American Express, media-tycoon Rupert Murdoch, authors such as Alvin Toffler, and US Vice-President Al Gore. The latter stated in his Buenos Aires address that the GII is a prerequisite to sustainable development. It will provide solutions to environmental problems, improve education and healthcare, create a global market-place, and forge a new Athenian age of democracy.

It is obviously true that ICTs can perform tasks that are indeed essential to democratic and sustainable social development. They can provide low-cost, high-speed, worldwide inter-active communications among large numbers of people, unprecedented access to information sources, and alternative channels for information provision which counter the commercial news channels; and they can support networking, lobbying, and mobilising. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, for example, showed the benefits that women's groups could get from using ICTs. The overall experience of those involved in the Beijing electronic networking (despite all the real limitations) was that the low-cost and high-speed communications had improved organisational efficiency and facilitated access to up-to-date information. Southern non-

government organisations (NGOs) indicated that the networks had allowed them to influence the conference agenda, to mobilise lobbies, and to counter commercial press coverage. The participants generally felt that the technology had strong empowerment potential. There are, however, serious obstacles in the way of realising this potential.

Economic factors

The introduction and use of ICTs do not take place in a social vacuum. This process cannot be separated from the emerging global communication order. The reality of this order is a global info-communications market that has yielded in 1997 over US$1.5 trillion in revenues, and that continues to feature a process of mergers and acquisitions which is very likely to lead to the control of the world's information and cultural supply by some four to six multi-media mega-conglomerates around the turn of the century.

Today's forerunner of the projected GII, the Internet, has begun to attract the attention of the major forces in this global market-place. The Internet, at present a public meeting place where more than 30 million PC users in some 150 countries exchange information, search databases, play games, and chat — and which has been guided by the rule of sharing information for free — has now been discovered as a major vehicle for commercial advertising. This raises the question: will the Internet (the Net) will remain an open, free, competitive, egalitarian public space? This is highly unlikely, since it cannot develop outside the current global economic order. It is fast becoming the new global advertising medium.

There is a great battle underway, with the future control of the world's largest network at stake. Money-making on the Net will require it to become an advertising medium. For companies to re-coup their enormous investments, advertising and sales will be essential. The competition to attract advertising dollars is already starting. As a result, a communicative structure that so far has been public, non-commercial, unregulated, uncensored, anarchistic, and very pluralistic may soon turn into a global electronic shopping mall.

It is difficult to understand how this transformation of the Net from a public forum into a commercial vehicle (much as happened in many countries with television) can contribute to the realisation of the empowerment potential of ICTs. In any case, if the GII project is predominantly driven by the search for profits, it is highly improbable that current inequalities in access to and use of ICTs will go away.

Political obstacles

An important political obstacle to the creation of open, public networks is the current global trend towards deregulatory policies. Their bottom line is that the introduction and use of ICTs should be largely, if not totally, a matter of market relations. The G-7 and the EU governments have reiterated that the GII will have to be constructed primarily through private investments.

Global and regional policy-making (primarily) addresses the removal of all obstacles in the way of the unhindered operation of the major ICT-investors on markets around the world. The policies of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are instrumental in supporting the global commercial media system. They are not particularly helpful to the democratisation of the world's info-communications sector. A landmark in deregulatory policies is the 1997 WTO telecom agreement. This requires signatories (68 countries, representing 98 per cent of the US$600 billion telecom trade) to liberalise their markets to foreign competition. According to various governments, this will strongly facilitate the global Superhighway, but most probably as an infrastructure for transnational business, rather than necessarily as platform for public debate on social development.

The agreement has seriously compromised the chances for universal network access, since national policies may be considered anti-competitive if governments intervene in the market to guarantee universal service. According to industry spokesmen, the agreement will speed up the search for global alliances.

Info-telecom disparity

There seems to be general agreement in the scientific literature and in public policy statements that the gap in access to ICTs between the developed and developing countries in widening, and that this hinders the integration of all countries into the Global Information Society. The seriousness of the gap is clearly demonstrated by the figures for the world distribution of telephony.

- There are one billion telephones in the world and approximately 5.7 billion people. Today some 15 per cent of the world population occupy 71 per cent of the world's main telephone lines. Low-income countries (where 55 per cent of the world population lives) have fewer than 5 per cent of the world's telephone lines.

- High-income countries have 50 telephone lines per 100 inhabitants. Many-low income countries have less than one telephone line per 100; this ranges from Cambodia with 0.06 to China with 0.98 in 1992 (according to figures provided by the ITU/BDT Telecommunication Indicator Database).
- More than half the world's population have never even used a telephone!
- Fewer than 6 per cent of Internet computers are in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean. Fewer than 4 per cent of World Wide Web users are in the Third World.
- In India there is one telephone line and 0.2 PCs for 100 people, compared with 49 lines and 15 PCs in Japan, and 63 lines and 21 PCs per 100 people in the USA.

The reality of the widening gap in ICT capacity raises the serious concern that the poorer countries may not be able to overcome the financial and technical obstacles which hamper their access to the new technologies. An obvious question regarding the former is whether the international community is ready to provide the massive investments needed for the renovation, upgrading, and expansion of networks in developing countries. To illustrate the scope of funds involved: it would take some US$12 billion to get half of the Philippines population on the Internet. To increase tele-density from 0.46 lines per 100 inhabitants to one per 100 in sub-Saharan Africa would require an investment of US$ 8 billion.

A particular funding problem also arises if the Internet is to be transformed into a global inter-active electronic highway. This demands a radical expansion of current band-width to transport all these signals. Simply to provide broad-band capacity to all US citizens would demand investments of several hundreds of billions of dollars.

In response to the challenge of the info-telecom gap, many public and private donor institutions have proposed plans to eliminate the disparity. Concern about the gap has inspired the World Bank, for example, to establish in early 1995 the Information for Development Program, charged with assisting developing countries in their integration into the global information economy. In 1995, the ITU established WorldTel: an ambitious project to generate private investments to bridge the global telecom gap by developing basic infrastructures. WorldTel aims to establish some 40 million telephone connections in developing countries in the next ten years, with an investment fund of at least US$ 1 billion.

AT&T plans that its Africa One project should have a fully operational optical fibre cable around the whole continent by 1999 to provide

connections for all the major coastal cities. Siemens and Alcatel also have designs (Afrilink and Atlantis-2 respectively) to provide telecom connections, especially to West Africa. Both the International Satellite Organisation (IntelSat) and the Regional African Satellite Organisation are actively promoting the expansion of e-mail services for the continent.

Apart from the mismatch between these plans and the funds that are really required, there is also the critical issue of the appropriateness of the technologies to be transferred, and the capacity of the recipient countries to master them. Current discussion on 'the gap' provides no convincing argument that the technology owners will change their attitudes and policies towards the international transfer of technology. Hitherto, the prevailing international policies have erected formidable obstacles to the reduction of North-South technology gaps. Today, there is no indication that existing restrictive business practices, the constraints on the ownership of knowledge, and the rules on intellectual property rights that are adverse to developing-country interests are radically changing. There are as yet no realistic prospects that the relations between ICT-rich and ICT-poor countries will change in the near future.

The key actors in international ICT policy-making have expressed a clear preference to leave the construction of the Global Information Society to 'the forces of the free market'. It would seem that under the institutional arrangements of a corporate-capitalist market economy, the development of an equitable information society remains a very unlikely proposition.

An any rate, it may be questioned whether within the realities of the international economic order there *can* be any serious reduction of the disparity. It may well be an illusion to think that ICT-poor countries could catch up or keep pace with advances in the North, where the rate of technological development is very high and is supported by considerable resources. This is not to say that poor countries should not try to upgrade their ICTs. They should not, however, do this in the unrealistic expectation that those who are ahead will wait for them. The situation may improve for the poorer countries, but the disparity will not go away.

What should be done?

The most immediate political challenge today is the fact that the use of ICTs for sustainable development will be determined not by technology, but by politics. The realisation of their potential requires a re-thinking of the wisdom about current deregulatory policies, a re-thinking of the role of

public funding, and a massive effort in training and education for the mastery of ICTs.

This political agenda is unlikely to be taken seriously if ICT policies are left to Princes and the Merchants alone. If market-driven arrangements are — for some time to come — the standard environment within which ICTs will be deployed, then the only force that could make a real difference are the ordinary people who buy on the market, and who have the (often unused and rarely recognised) power to say 'no'.

The realisation of the empowerment potential of ICTs should, therefore, primarily be the concern of civil-society organisations (CSOs). They need to mobilise and lobby for and with the ordinary men and women whose lives will be affected by the digital futures that are currently envisaged. Today there is only a very modest beginning of a global civil activism in the info-communications sector, connected with the People's Communication Charter, described below. These movements must urgently extend their reach by attracting the support of large public-interest organisations (labour unions, educational institutions, religious bodies) and intergovernment organisations such as UNESCO and ITU.

Since our cultural environment is as essential to our common future as is the natural ecology, it is time for people's movements to focus on the organisation and quality of the production and distribution of information and other cultural expressions. Mobilising the users' community, and stimulating critical reflection on the quality of the cultural environment, is a tall order. However, it can be done, and it is actually being done. An increasing number of individuals and groups around the world are beginning to express concern about the quality of media performance. A start has also been made with the creation of a broad international movement of alert and demanding media users, based upon what has been called the *People's Communication Charter*.

The People's Communication Charter

This Charter is an initiative of the Third World Network (TWN) in Malaysia, the Centre for Communication and Human Rights in The Netherlands, the Cultural Environment Movement in the USA, and AMARC — the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters — based in Peru and Canada. In the early 1990s, academics and activists associated with TWN and its affiliated Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) initiated a debate on the feasibility of a world people's movement in the field of communication and culture.

The TWN and CAP had already an impressive record in developing people's movements in such areas as reforming international trade and conservation of the tropical rain forest. They had proved capable of bringing the concerns of grassroots people in the South to the diplomatic negotiations of the Uruguay GATT multilateral trade round, and UNCED in Rio de Janeiro.

An obvious problem is that information consumers are seldom organised in representative associations. They are a diverse community, geographically dispersed and ideologically fragmented. The *People's Communication Charter* was seen as a first step in creating a constituency for concerns about the quality of the cultural environment. It provides a common framework for those who share the belief that people should be active and critical participants in their social reality, and capable of governing themselves. The Charter may help to develop a permanent movement concerned with the quality of our cultural environment. One idea is to organise an International Tribunal which would receive complaints by signatories to the Charter, and invite the parties involved to submit evidence and defence upon which the Tribunal could come to a judgment.

The Charter is not an end in itself. It provides the basis for a permanent critical reflection on those worldwide trends that will determine the quality of our lives in the third millennium. It is, therefore, important to see it as an open document which can always be updated, amended, improved, and expanded. In fact, since the Charter was presented on the Web (http://ww.waag.org/pcc), new ideas and suggested changes have been proposed and discussed. A critical moment in the history of the Charter was the founding convention of the Cultural Environment Movement in March 1996, when the first public ratification of the text took place. In June 1997, the governing body of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) endorsed the Charter, following much discussion by WACC members in its eight regions; and important amendments proposed by its central committee.

In 1998, the Charter will be on the agenda of the General Assembly of AMARC and of the Paris Convention of the Cultural Environment Movement. For the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UHDR) in December 1998, initiatives are being developed to secure some form of acclaim for the Charter from the international political community.

Most important, however, is the goal of soliciting more support for the ideas that the Charter embodies from individuals and institutions

worldwide. In August 1996, for example, it was displayed at the famous Dokumenta exhibition at Kassel in Germany, and was discussed and signed by many visitors. The web-site of the Charter is where such events and progress in widening support for it are publicised.

Beyond the text itself and its endorsement, the most critical element for the future of the Charter is obviously its implementation. In an open, democratic, people's movement this cannot be organised by some central governing body. Implementation is very much the concern of local and national groups, either newly formed or already established for other (or similar) purposes. The realisation of the people's right to communicate cannot be an homogeneous project, but will take different forms in different socio-cultural and political contexts. In one country, this may be the institution of an ombudsman's office to be responsible for the quality of the cultural environment; in another a national award may be given to the TV programme found most in violation of the Charter's principles; in some places a civil-society campaign to rescue public broadcasting may be necessary; elsewhere the focus may be on protecting children or defending the media interests of people with a disability.

This is really the business of ordinary people. It is also the ultimate test-case for the meaning of the People's Communication Charter. It only makes sense if people themselves eventually begin to be concerned about implementing it.

■ **Cees J. Hamelink** *is Professor of International Communication at the University of Amsterdam and Editor-in-Chief of the* International Journal for Communication Studies Gazette. *He is also Honorary President of the International Association for Mass Communication Research. This article was first published in* Development in Practice, *Volume 8, number 1, in 1998.*