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MEDIA

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October 17, 1985

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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139  
TELEX: 92-1473 MIT CAM

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## THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE NEW COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA

The speakers for this seminar are the authors of a forthcoming book on new media and political values. The book is the work of a Faculty Study Group at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and is sponsored by the Markle Foundation.

Christopher Arterton - Harvard University

Arterton concentrated on how technology was changing and its likely effect on political leaders. He noted the Study Group wished to describe what was happening, rather than speculate about the future shape of the American communications industry. He said that they were also interested in broader questions about the requirements of democracy, and the way in which technological changes are likely to affect this. His work primarily concerns the communication relationships that go on between elections. He noted that a citizen's influence in democracy does not stop with the end of the election process. There were three sets of communication relationships that were being investigated:

- a) where citizens try to communicate to government officials,
- b) where government officials communicate to citizens,
- c) where government officials communicate among themselves.

In the area of lobbying politics, citizens primarily try to influence public policy by influencing government officials. In this area he pointed out some newer vehicles that were being used. For example, anti-abortion groups, distributed video tape copies of the film 'Silent Scream' to Congressmen and Senators on Capitol Hill. However in this instance, the film itself became an issue. He said that most of the newer vehicles for lobbying were not efforts to directly influence Congressmen but rather efforts to shape public opinion and thereby influence the thinking of Congress. In another instance labor unions requested Congressmen to watch a 15 minute clip of three of their constituents talking about foreign policy. They were somewhat successful in getting Congressmen to sit down and watch the film, whereas the 'Silent Scream' was watched by only one in twenty Congressmen. There was also the Chamber of Commerce effort to use closed circuit satellite video channel. 'Bisnet', which eventually collapsed for lack of attention/interest of people at the local level. As a result 'Bisnet' evolved into a general audience program of a pro business nature. Similarly labor unions have the Labor Institute of Public Affairs which is producing advertisements for use by local unions to influence public opinion.

Arterton said that there was considerable activity as government officials were trying to influence citizen opinion. Here one has to differentiate between self-serving politicians trying to promote their own re-election, and general interest public education and information. The differentiation is a difficult task. Most Congressmen have a computerised correspondance system to respond to the volume of mail that comes in from constituents. The biggest change (during the last 10

years) in Arterton's opinion is in the development of Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (CSPAN), which broadcasts sessions of the House of Congress and its committees. He said that there are efforts being made in many state Legislatures to computerize information systems and make them generally available to the public.

Arterton said that the development in the area of communication between government officials is very slow. He gave an example of an attempt made in Congress to schedule committee meetings by computer. The system was not implemented because the committee chairmen were reluctant to have their meeting times scheduled as it deprived them of a strategic resource. Changes in this area he said would not happen overnight but there are chances for incremental change. As an example he quoted the Houses' creation of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and its economic model and the economic model used by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Both CBO and OMB swap information relating to their models which is a step forward in government official to government official communication.

In closing he said that the emerging media will re-enforce some of the existing trends in governance particularly by reinforcing established interests. Secondly he said that politics is becoming less mediated by becoming more public. Politicians are finding ways of bypassing newspaper editors, TV editors, and other forms of news media, and instead getting their message more directly to the public. This trend he expected would continue. It is also being observed to happen between National Unions, the National Chamber of Commerce, etc and their membership (i.e. bypassing local organisations). Thirdly he said that there is likely to be greater competition for the attention of the American public. This could be detrimental of politics as, for example, when people escape political information on TV by putting on the VCR instead.

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Jeffrey Abramson - Brandeis University

Abramson focussed his remarks on the political ideal commonly called participatory democracy (or direct democracy). The question, he said, is whether there is anything in modern telecommunications that could support a fundamental shift in our political arrangements from representative to participatory institutions.

In participatory democracy some tend to focus rather exclusively on electronic televotes, instant polls, home centred voting, push button councils attached to the TV etc. Others concentrate more on classical forms of democratic participation such as electronic town meetings, constitutional conventions, televised debates, public affairs programing, civil education, and the like. This is all part of the communications revolution, a liberation of communications from the constraints of geography and the obstacles of distance and time. The most common argument against participatory democracy is that the modern

nation state is simply too big to allow people to participate in any meaningful direct sense. However he said that these arguments were no longer technically true - citizens can be empowered to speak for themselves on matters of public importance. He said that we ought therefore to begin making the legal, economic, and regulatory decisions necessary to tap this kind of direct participatory democratic potential housed in the new media.

Abramson went on to raise two questions - one about the technology, and another about the ideal of participation itself. He then listed two developments on the technical side namely 1) the transformation of TV from a passive to an interactive medium, 2) the combination of older long distance communication with a more local scaled down communication, characteristic of local cable programming.

He made some general remarks about broadcasting prior to cable satellite distribution. All electronic media going back to the telegraph were already involved in what he called the 'conquest of scale' i.e. the liberation of communication from geography. This is a characteristic of all electronic communication. Not only the electronic media but also in the print media obstacles of distance do not matter as much as they used to. This serves democracy in two ways; a) distributing information more widely, contributing to a better informed electorate, b) the nationalizing focus - a common vision of the country, a vocabulary, a set of concerns, a political agenda of common concern. He said that there were immense and common criticisms of the conquest of scale by communications which could be summarized as follows.

1) Electronic communications have conquered scale, but only in a one way direction, 2) the national scale is simply too large for a democracy - democracy requires scaled down communication avenues attuned to local concerns. The reasons Abramson gave were a) spectrum scarcity and therefore difficulty for citizens to get access, b) the national focus of news has tended to distract people from local community involvement, c) mass audience programming and its habits to which network programming is geared.

He said that in the paper that he was currently writing, he intended to discuss these two technical properties i.e. the interactivity and the scaled down nature of communications. What is at stake he said is the combination of the two way cable capacity with computer scanning of the responses. This could take in a mass of interactions and tabulate them instantaneously. On the scaled down side, localising, decentralising, 'narrow casting', etc rest on cable technology and on the franchise system that makes cable systems synonymous with local political boundaries. It also depends on the wired nature of cable which allows it to have discrete local programming and also something like computer conferencing that would allow diverse groups to carry on their own political programming.

With regard to the issue of using communication technology in a more participatory sense, he said that there were two fundamentally different scenarios. One is to take the form of the initiative and referendum process e.g. voting from the

home. The second model is the one that rests on the town meeting ideal. Which requires not just an act of voting but an act of deliberation, of debate, of dicourse, of dialogue, before voting.

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#### Speakers' Comments and Responses To Questions

The question was raised about the issue of privacy in the interactive systems. Abramson responded by agreeing that one of the prime preliminary worries was who will control these systems. He said the potential existed for the invasion of privacy and that they intended to try and address it in their final policy conclusions. Arterton also agreed that the privacy concerns related to this operation were real. He said that there were possibilities of fraud as well. He said that there is no doubt that privacy is of value in our society and it is of value in the working of political institutions rather than an end in itself.

There was a challenge made by a member of the audience that the speakers had misunderstood what democracy was all about. Democracy is a pluralistic group process not a series of plebiscites. Neuman responded by agreeing and said that the speakers were not proposing that plebiscites and democracy were the same thing. The inquirer went on to state that government involved an element of trust between people. He believed that personal trust was what made government democracies work, not so much whether one agreed on everything with his representative. Abramson responded saying that it was impossible to talk about what technology was going to do to democracy if they did not reach some agreement about what democracy is. He said that democracy depends not only on trust between the represented and the representative, but also between the representative and the people. For he has to trust that the people do know their own interests best. He said that if the normal presumption is that people don't know what is good for them, then we are talking about vanguard politics.

A question was raised from the audience about the definition of localism. He said that we would find our current geographically determined political system under increasing pressure from non geographic interest group aggregations which are made possible by these new technologies. We will have what is in a sense a 19th century political structure faced with a 21st century ability to communicate and aggregate in groups which are independent of the old limitations of geography and proximity. Arterton in response stated that the three authors of this study disagreed on this point, but his own conclusions tend to run along the line suggested by the inquirer. He said that this transcending of geography was already apparent with the sunbelt Conservative Congressmen who hail from Bufffalo New York and Jessie Helms who had a constituency reaching well beyond the terrain of North Carolina in terms of people that support him and to whom he responds politically.

Abramson responding to a question described the danger of pluralism that could arise from the wide range of choices available through either cable TV or direct satellite

broadcasting. He said that this could provide amusement and entertainment for each specific group of people, but this could be bad for democracy. He said that pluralism stands for a lot of propositions but at least it stands for a free with a non-coercive government. The problem is that if people only talk to their own kind there will be no consensus, discussion, or an attempt to see the interests of others, then we would be a plurality but not a nation.

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