



COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

HE7601

.S46

1988m



3 9080 00736841 5

FREEDOM, POWER AND DEVELOPMENT:
ETHICAL ISSUES IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

BY

Prof. Lucian W. Pye
Department of Political Science, MIT

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

FREEDOM, POWER AND DEVELOPMENT:
ETHICAL ISSUES IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

BY
Prof. Lucian W. Pye
Department of Political Science, MIT

This paper was presented, October 5, 1988, as the inaugural lecture of the Frank Stanton/Andrew Heiskell Center for Public Policy in Telecommunications and Information Systems, The City University of New York.

FREEDOM, POWER AND DEVELOPMENT:
ETHICAL ISSUES IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

by

Lucian W. Pye

I feel it a great honor to have been invited to present the Inaugural Lecture launching The City University of New York's Frank Stanton/Andrew Heiskell Center for Public Policy in Telecommunications and Informations Systems. When I was asked to deliver this lecture I was moved by the prospect of publicly acknowledging my respect for the memory of my esteemed colleague and close friend, Ithiel de Sola Pool. I am confident that this new Center will be a great success, for it is starting on the right foot by recognizing that Ithiel Pool set the standards of scholarship for all who would work in the field of communications, and most particularly on the issues of freedom of expression in our society.

I must confess, however, that when I began to put my thoughts together on what I should say today I came close to panic. How could I possibly come close to doing justice to the extraordinary legacy Ithiel Pool left us in the huge field of communications research. He pioneered in every conceivable aspect of communications research -- from the early use of content analysis and the charting of the changing symbols employed by different elites, to the application of survey research and polling in designing strategies for political campaigns; he advanced our understanding of how attitudes and opinions are formed, and how individual psychology and sociological processes interact to establish climates of opinion. Finally,

he took on the challenge of illuminating the legal issues of freedom of speech raised by the impact of the modern electronic technologies of communications. In doing this he was guided by his over-riding faith that advances in communications technologies would inevitably work to expand the domain of freedom and not, as Orwell had it, to strengthen the potential for totalitarian authority.

I remember once asking Ithiel why he had taken such an interest in communications, which in the discipline of political science is a rather specialized and often overlooked sub-field. He replied that communications was a wonderful rubric under which one could freely utilize all of the social sciences, for all human behavior involves in one way or another communication. Ithiel Pool saw the study of communications as providing an opportunity to move in many directions with high spirits, unlimited curiosity, and a strong sense of moral responsibility. Indeed, for all of his fascinations with the new technologies, Ithiel was, in my judgment, motivated more by a deep appreciation of the ethical problems raised by those communications advances.

Yet, concern for ethical matters never dampened his wry sense of humor. Once when Ithiel was about to leave for Washington to testify before a Congressional committee on the psychological effects of television violence on young children, I irreverently asked him, "What do you think the congressmen would make of it if they knew that you don't have a TV set in your own house?" He replied, "Oh, they would probably understand that among Cambridge intellectuals it is still impossible to admit to having a television set, and if one should get one it would probably be necessary to keep it in the bedroom where you do other things that you don't talk about."

Since it would be hard for anyone, and certainly for me, to do justice to the full field of communications research, as defined by Ithiel Pool, I have decided to limit my remarks to three problem areas, and even on these I shall barely be able to scratch the surface. I believe, however, that this should be acceptable since my real purpose is to suggest that there is a great deal of exciting work that awaits study, and that communications research will call for a wide variety of skills, and the collaboration of people from many parts of the university.

The three areas are: First, the relationship of communications technology and political freedom which was the subject of Ithiel's last and truly great book.¹ I could have devoted the entire lecture to this urgent subject, but I have resisted the temptation because I recognize that it is far wiser for me just to set the stage for the two distinguished commentators who will follow me and whose knowledge and authority on this subject far exceed my limited abilities. Second, this being an election year, I felt that some attention should be given to the topic of the influence of the media on public opinion, and more particularly, the issue of possible ideological bias on the part of the media. Third, there is the important policy area of communications and political development in the Third World, a topic on which Ithiel and I once worked together.

It might seem that these three topics will be taking us off in three totally different directions, but I think not. For I believe that they are held together by a common central theme. This theme is that we, as a society, have been astonishingly alert in recognizing that we are somehow caught up in a profound communications revolution. We have not been insensitive to the advances in technology, and we have even tried to respond to what we thought were the social, economic, and political

implications of the new technologies. Yet, and this is the burden of my argument, we have consistently taken a far too narrow reading of the implications of the new technologies, and therefore we have failed to respond to what in fact are the much more fundamental developments we have been living through. In a very real sense we have been like the blind wisemen and the elephant in that we have consistently gotten only a part of the story right and we have missed the larger scheme of things.

This has had profound implications for the management of our public life. Profound, precisely because in all societies throughout time the communications process is basic in shaping the structure and character of politics. In our case, we have gone from having a politics based on the print media, in which the choice of words, the development of ideas, and the preservation of the record were dominant concerns, and we have entered a new world of politics based on television, that is, a politics of imagery, sound bites, and thoughts that are, according to George Will, no more than "ideological lint." With television politics the sole reality is the present moment, without the perspective of recorded memories. People complain about the election campaigns of 1988, blaming the candidates, when in fact their frustrations stem more from the fact that we are now living in the new world of television politics. Our politics is that of headlines and not deep and well crafted arguments about policies. Memory is out, and the vivid imagery of the nightly newscast takes over. The use of code words has replaced "talking politics," and our memories are those of a blur of images, at best the sensation of a vaguely recalled series of movies.

Let us see how we came to this state of affairs. It is a story of how we have over the years strived to do right, but too often we have failed to grasp the full import of what we were confronted with in the advances of

communications technology.

Technology Races Ahead, But Policies Can't Keep Up.

It has for some time been commonplace to extol the wonders of the technological revolution that is obliterating distance and making the world, as the cliché goes, a global village. If it were not for the drag on our thinking we should be entering an era in which long distance calls should cost no more than calls across town. The electronic revolution has brought a proliferation in the ways that people can communicate with each other and obtain information from multiple sources without leaving home. Ithiel Pool was able to position himself at the cutting edge of the scientific advances in electronics and then to imagine, with concrete vividness, the social and legal problems that would probably accompany such technological advances. In some respects his book is more important now than when it was first published because what were his speculations at the time of writing have now become our realities. It is therefore important for other researchers to follow up his leads so that we can intellectually stay ahead of events.

Viewed purely in engineering terms, all these advances in technology would seem to multiply man's freedoms and enhance the possibilities for creative individual development. Paradoxically, as Ithiel Pool's pathbreaking book documents, governments have tended to misinterpret the social implications of advances in communications technology, and to assume that the nature of the innovations requires state regulations which have often led to restrictions on freedom of expression. For most Americans the First Amendment is sacred, for we believe that it guarantees freedom of speech for all of us, but in practice the First Amendment has only been

applied unqualifiedly to the print media. Because of the initial perceptions about the later technologies, the First Amendment has not been equally applied to communications based on each subsequent advance in the electronic media.

The invention of the telephone and the telegraph set the stage for governmental deviations from First Amendment principles. At the time this seemed reasonable because those inventions raised the specter of monopoly and the possibility of discrimination toward different users. Would it not be possible for those who strung the wires, the Bell System and Western Union, to favor some customers over others, and therefore was it not right and proper for the government to regulate their use according to the principles governing common carriers, much as was done in the case of the railroads? So the reasoning went.

The advent of radio and television also involved new technologies which on the face of it seemed to call for some degree of governmental regulation. Without regulation would not anarchy rule the air waves? Some authority surely had to allocate radio frequencies and television channels. Shouldn't government step in and see that confusion was avoided and fairness was being done?

As a result of these historical developments, the spirit of freedom associated with the First Amendment was compromised by the presumed imperatives inherent in the new technologies of communication. As a result there emerged in America a confusing pattern of controls and freedoms which have increasingly failed to make sense. We have now ended up with three distinct models for public policies dealing with communications. First, there is the print model in which the First Amendment remains sacred so that it is still unthinkable for the government to attempt to regulate

newspapers, journals and the publishing industry. Second, there is the common carrier model in which the government is called upon to intervene, in theory, to insure that there is no discrimination in providing access to all. This was the model that accompanied the invention of the telephone and the telegraph; Western Union and AT&T were seen as essentially monopolies and in order that they not use their wires to favor some and harm others the government was given the right to set rates and provide general policy guidance. Third, there is the broadcasting model in which the government licenses private owners and in the process establishes rules and standards as to what can and cannot be said or shown, actions that would be unthinkable if they were applied to the print media.

Distinctions Without Differences.

Whatever the virtues of these later models at the time they were initiated, it seems that with the continuing advances in technology they have now become increasingly confusing and at times a threat to freedom. This is because innovations in technology have largely eliminated the distinctions that initially set apart the various forms of communications. The problems are very real. For example, a former chairman of the FCC recently raised the question as to whether a newspaper delivered by teletex is an extension of print and thus as free as any other newspaper, or is it a form of broadcast which thus could be brought under the control of government.

The theory that public policy should be guided by apparent differences in technologies began, as we have said, with the invention of the telegraph and the telephone. The "common carrier" idea was not a basic threat to freedom, but it did produce over time some absurdities as

policy sought to maintain differences that no longer existed. For example, the requirement that AT&T and Western Union each be regulated in its separate domain has brought us to the ridiculous situation we have today in which, for example, to send a telegram from Boston to New York one dials a 1-800 number to tell the message to a so-called "telegraph" operator who is in, say, Chicago or Atlanta or New Jersey, who then simply dials the New York number and repeats the message. Since the distinction between the "telephone" and the "telegraph" has become essentially an artificial one, why are we left with a situation in which we can send money only by "telegraph" -- i.e. Western Union, and not by "telephone", i.e. AT&T or any of its competitors?

The FCC has apparently on several occasions wanted to make appropriate changes in regulations that would have been consistent with Pool's recommendations. For example, on July 21, 1988, that agency suggested that telephone companies should in certain cases be allowed to supply cable television on their telephone wires -- a suggestion that should be welcomed by all who are tired of having their streets torn up time and again, but which was upsetting to some cable companies, and hence to the staffs of key congressmen and senators. In the field of communications policy we continue to pretend that decisions should be guided by the myth that technologies have an inherent and hence impartial logic to them, when in fact policy decisions are the product of interest group competition. This pretense produces a situation in which political power is often more decisive than appeals to the principles of free speech in determining communications policy.

The advent of radio and television produced more than just some absurdities of logic, it produced a direct threat to the First Amendment principle. Again, the problem started with the idea that the nature of the technologies required modifications of the general principles of freedom of expression. In time, however, it has become apparent that there are really no technological problems, but there is instead the inertia of established law. The result is that today a major issue of communications policy is whether the trend in the future will be toward expanding the application of the First Amendment model to cover as much as possible of electronic communications, or will the licensing powers of government associated with the broadcasting model dominate so as to threaten the spirit of the print model? Jerome Barron, one of the earliest writers to note that there is no essential difference between print and broadcast communications, came to the conclusion in a 1967 Harvard Law Review article that because of the dangers of concentration of ownership the broadcast model of licensing should be applied to newspapers, thereby taking away the rights long associated with the freedom of the press.² Lee Bollinger, writing in a 1976 Michigan Law Review article, came to the rather novel but somewhat vacuous judgment that, although there there are no basic differences in the two modes of communications, it is still good to have separate policies since this has given the country "the best of two worlds" -- some freedoms and some constraints.³

Let us go bak and briefly review how it came about that the First Amendment was not automatically applied to broadcasting. It seems that with the advent of radio, the American legal system quickly determined that there was a problem of "spectrum scarcity" which called for licensing by the government, and Congress readily agreed by establishing the Federal

Radio Commission, the forerunner of the FCC. What was in retrospect astonishing was the speed with which the courts and the Commission concluded that the differences in technology also justified totally different standards of evaluation. The Supreme Court took it as self-evident that radio was "entertainment" and since entertainment is not entitled to First Amendment protection, neither was radio. In its second annual report in 1928 the Federal Radio Commission stated that it was "unable to see that the guarantee of free speech has anything to do with entertaining programs as such," and thus for radio the First Amendment was irrelevant. V.O.Key, the eminent political scientist, wrote that the owners of broadcasting stations were "lineal descendents of operators of music halls and peep shows."⁴

The idea that radio was "entertainment" was soon supplanted by the more earnest doctrines which held that because of "spectrum scarcity" government should regulate broadcasting, first, in the "public interest" and then to insure "fairness." In the 1920s certain abiding principles of communications law which are antithetical to freedom evolved out of a series of bizarre cases. It would seem that in this field of American legal history some cases, involving ludicrous events and comical facts, ended up producing some lasting but questionable legal principles. Thus the principle that radio should be licensed according to the government's concept of the "public interest" stemmed from a landmark case involving a Dr. John R. Brinkley of Milford, Kansas, who claimed that he was a graduate of what he called the "Eclectic Medical University."

On getting control of radio station KFKB at Junction City, a few miles down a dirt road from his home, this entrepreneurial doctor jacked up the power of the station so that it could blanket much of America from the

Rocky Mountains to the Appalachians and thereby reach possibly the largest audience of any station in the America of the 1920s. Delighted with his new-found powers, he was soon exploiting the air waves to reach gullible males who were worried about their declining sexual powers. He called upon them to come to Milford where he would implant the gonads of a goat into their scrotums. At first they were expected to bring their own goat, but as business grew, Dr. Brinkley established his own herd of 750 billy goats from which the naive patients could pick one of their own liking. The "goat doctor" as he came to be called, was soon moving on to providing quack treatments for other male health anxieties, which we in the liberated 1980s still find it embarrassing to speak of in public, but which Dr. Brinkley graphically described over the air waves. The Kansas Medical Association was indignant and demanded an end to his fraudulent activities, but he fought back, proclaiming to his huge radio audience that most established doctors should not just be sued but should be jailed for malpractice. To get back at his tormentors, and to cash in on his slick skills with the microphone, Dr. Brinkley ran for governor, and possibly would have won had not the entrenched Republican Party stuffed enough ballot boxes to beat him. The Federal Radio Commission then stepped in and refused to grant a renewal of station KFKB's license, thereby establishing the principle that licensing should be based on the "public interest."⁵

That principle, which would have been abhorrent to the print media, was soon reinforced by the Supreme Court's enunciation of the "fairness doctrine" for the broadcast media. This doctrine came out of the Red Lion cases involving another set of quirky characters. What happened here was that a Reverend Billy James Hargis, who regularly purchased 15 minutes of air time from the local station in Red Lion, Pennsylvania, took delight in

passionately attacking a liberal writer, Fred Cook. Mr. Cook took umbrage and demanded that the station give him free time to answer. The Supreme Court decreed that such were his rights, and so was established the fairness doctrine whereby broadcasters must give equal time to contrary opinions.

As we have said, the rationale for licensing broadcasting grew out of the false notion that there is a serious problem of "spectrum scarcity" dictated by the nature of technology, and therefore, in the words of Justice Frankfurter in the majority opinion of another landmark case, "Unlike other modes of expression, radio inherently is not available to all. That is its unique characteristic, and that is why, unlike other modes of expression, it is subject to governmental regulation."⁶ But is it really true that it is easier to establish a newspaper than to set up a radio station? Any group of bright high school physics students would certainly find it far easier to put together a radio broadcasting facility than to publish a newspaper capable of reaching an equal size audience. In Boston we have more than fifty radio stations and only two newspapers, and we could have many more radio stations were it not for the cost of the necessary license.

It is the licensing process and not the nature of air waves that creates whatever scarcity there may be. Licensing also creates the possibility for abuses as to what is or is not in the "public interest." The analogy with the licensing of taxis comes to mind: the controls by the licensing process means that in New York medallions now cost a small fortune, but as for ensuring that standards are upheld -- I must ask, what standards? The cabs are often filthy, seemingly without springs, and the drivers are generally scruffy, and many are unable to speak intelligible

English. Recently in Washington, when I asked to be taken me to National Airport, the driver replied, "Where's that?"

At a time when there is dramatic convergence in the modes of communications the effort to maintain the distinctions in regulations by technology seems increasingly anachronistic. For example, when the norm in American cities is more and more to have only one or at best two newspapers but a large number of television channels, does it still make sense to prevent cross-ownership of the broadcast media by struggling newspaper publishers? The FCC seems to have sensed this problem in the case of Rupert Murdoch's ownership in New York of the Post and a television station and in Boston of the Herald and a small TV station. Yet, Senators Hollings and Kennedy saw it differently, and used their legislative powers to prevent any such cross-ownership.

Another area in which the competing models for communications policy seems to be rubbing against the ideals of freedom is the Fairness Doctrine that governs broadcasting but not news print. In the 1941 Mayflower Doctrine, which was based on the idea of broadcasting being a monopoly, the FCC held that "radio can serve as an instrument of democracy only when devoted to the communication of information and the exchange of ideas fairly and objectively presented," and that "freedom of speech on the radio must be broad enough to provide full and equal opportunity for the presentation to the public of all sides of public issues." Who is to be the judge of "fairness"? The government, of course. And, needless to say, government would never be tolerated as the dictator of the editorial opinions in newspapers. Is the public best served by having the FCC decide what is fairness, or is it not better to have, as John Milton argued, open competition of ideas? For as he said, "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple;

whoever knew Truth put to worse in a free and open encounter."⁷

Newspapers and Television News Are Not the Same.

To argue that broadcasting should be brought under the First Amendment principles that are applied to the print media is not to say that there are no differences in the social and political consequences of these different modes of communications. In managing news coverage, for example, there are major differences between the newspapers and television, differences which, as we shall see, have produced a radical and not entirely welcomed revolution in the character of American politics, and especially our style of election campaigning.

In the newspaper world it is possible to have reporters assigned throughout the world and to have their stories flow into the different city desks where editors can quickly scan what has come in and decide which stories deserve the front page, which should get less prominence, and which can be ignored. The result is newspapers can in a sense mirror of what has been going on in the world. Television cannot operate this way because it would be impossible to manage in any twenty-four hours all of the film clips that might be filed by "correspondents." Instead, in television it is the editors who instruct camera crews what events to cover. Often this has meant that the evening news is based on decisions taken in the morning by editors who have scanned the morning newspapers for the main stories of the day. Instead of being a mirror, television is a spotlight, guided by people who are essentially following the headlines of the day.

The result, of course, is the lack of depth that we associate with the print news. This has consequences for national politics because we know that the American public has shifted from relying upon newspapers to

getting their information on politics mainly from television. The full implications of this public dependence upon television for knowledge is something we shall return to in a moment. We need only raise the question here as to whether television news has to be as superficial and as oriented to headlines and to imagery as it now is. It seems that it should be possible to have fewer stories and greater depth. Indeed, on many Mondays there is a reversal of roles, as when the press reports what happened on such television programs as Face the Nation, and Meet the Press. We also have the example of the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour. Some may complain that such in-depth television is boring, but if there was more competition in the spirit of the free press, and less constraints by the "fairness doctrine", the result would probably be not only greater diversity but livelier programming.

The Power and the Responsibility of the Media.

Even while advocating an expansion of the First Amendment to cover the broadcasting media, we need to recognize that it does not provide an automatic formula for solving all issues of freedom and technology in communications. Even within the domain of the print media there will always be complex questions that deserve the careful attention of scholars. For example, in July of this year (1988) a jury in Minnesota had to decide whether The Minneapolis Star Tribune and The St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch were, as they claimed, protected by the First Amendment or whether the two jointly owned papers were guilty of breach of contract when they published the name of an informant to whom their reporter had promised anonymity. They found that the First Amendment should not apply, and the judge ordered the papers to pay \$700,000 to the man, who had lost his job

because of the story. There will of course be appeals as the legal process tries to sort out the differences between the freedom of the press to report all relevant facts and the obligations of newspapers to honor contracts.

This particular case also raises the question of the propriety of the increasingly common practice of the press of using unidentified sources, and publishing reports which quote unnamed "officials" who may or may not exist in fact. The press has long contended that the First Amendment protects reporters from having to reveal, even to grand juries, the names of confidential sources. In practice this approach opens the door to fictitious "sources," and it is one of many reasons for the decline in recent years in the credibility of the media in the minds of a majority of Americans. Apparently the two Minnesota newspapers felt that they should reveal the name of the informant in order to maintain their credibility.

More generally the problem of confidentiality of sources has become troublesome because of the increasingly artful use of "leaks," which at times raises the question of who is using whom in the relationships of government and the press in Washington. Politicians have learned numerous other ways of manipulating the media to their advantage. Some, for example, have developed skill in setting the scene for television so that the representatives of the media will appear to be treating them in a rude and aggressive fashion. The politicians know, and the media are fast learning, that in American political culture there is general contempt for people who engage in heckling, and the victims of hecklers can usually win instant sympathy. Thus the power of television can be turned against it.

The Power of the Media and the Possibilities of Biases.

This brings us to the second area I wish to touch upon, the question of the political influences of the media and the problems of possible ideological bias. The issues about the power and the responsibilities of the news media are murky largely because it is generally understood that in some respects the media collectively constitute a fourth branch of government, but since they are also protected by the First Amendment they are not a part of the normal processes of checks and balances which constrain and discipline the three traditional branches of government.

Uncertainty and ambivalence about the power and responsibilities of the media have led to a perverse development with respect to the First Amendment that should be the cause for concern for all who are dedicated to the cause of freedom. Initially the First Amendment was seen as a shield protecting a vulnerable press from the massive powers of the state, thereby insuring that citizens would always have the right to freely express their opinions. In recent years, however, as the media have become huge commercial enterprises the amendment has come to be seen by some as contributing to the media's posture of arrogant self-righteousness, which in turn has caused the American public, according to some polls, to be even more distrustful of the media than of their elected politicians. Has there been a subtle transition from a citizen's right to express his opinions to the more abstract idea of the American public's right to know? And if so, has it taken place without the benefit of adequately defined principles? Where, for example, should the line be drawn between newsmen trying to dig out a story and television reporters indulging their aggressions by hectoring government officials? What should be the methods and standards for checking the power of the media? Is it really healthy to have a process that makes media bashing so tempting a game for politicians?

These questions are becoming more vexing because the American political culture has given the media the right to raise issues about the conduct of, say, candidates that would be off-limits for the politicians themselves to address. The press and television can probe and use innuendo in ways that are taboo for the politicians themselves. It was seen as legitimate for the press to expose Senator Biden's propensity for plagiarism but not for Governor Dukakis's aide to be involved in doing so. There is, however, a cost for the freedom that the media have in this gray area, for the practice does create a paranoid political climate in which not only a President Lyndon Johnson but most politicians will feel they are surrounded by enemies "out there." This can hardly be a healthy atmosphere for democracy.

In order to sort out the rights and wrongs of such issues it is necessary for researchers to give us a better understanding of exactly what are the powers and the limitations of the media in shaping public opinion. It is, of course, universally assumed that both the press and television decisively influence public opinion. Why would so much be spent on advertising if the media did not affect people's thinking and acting? Why are academics so pleased to have their "op-ed" pieces published in the New York Times? Is it because they believe they have influenced the flow of real world events, or is it only the thrill of seeing their names in print?

Yet, in spite of such assumptions the precise nature of the power of the press and the electronic media is not easily gauged. Certainly by giving attention to particular people and events they create celebrities and determine what will be the topics of the day in social discourse. There are numerous studies documenting the power of the media in setting the agendas of issues that will dominate public attention. But to what extent

is this power just a transitory form of influence, a grasshopper phenomenon, not to be confused with the sustained power that the three conventional branches of government command?

This is the kind of question that not only needs to be asked but repeatedly researched. I stress the idea of repeatedly. Indeed, on this happy occasion of the inauguration of a major communications research program, I should point out that the conclusions reached by the social sciences are not to be confused with the permanent "laws" of the physical sciences, and therefore the findings of yesterday's research may not hold up under tomorrow's conditions. Indeed, one of the great disappointments of the behavioral revolution in the social sciences has been that findings, based on the most exacting standards of scientific work, have proved to have disturbingly short half-lives. Human behavior is simply too sensitive to time, place, and culture to follow unchanging and deterministic "laws." Thus, while the rules of the scientific method place equal demands for precision and rigor on the work of both the social and the physical scientist, it is a sad fact that the findings of the social scientist cannot have the same durability as the enduring and law-like findings of the physical scientist.

In communications research this has meant that some of the most venerated theories have to be regularly restudied and modified. For example, one of the keystones of communications work, the two-step theory, has come increasingly into question. This theory holds that most Americans get the information that guides their political behavior through word of mouth messages from opinion leaders and not directly from the media, and the opinion leaders, in selecting out from the media what they pass on, slant the information which the passive public receives. Scholars such as James

Short have shown that the changing character of the American occupational structure has reduced the importance of opinion leaders and in the process has created a more independent-minded public which gets much of its information directly from the media, and particularly from television.⁸ Instead of masses of laborers in huge factories working shoulder to shoulder with their union representatives, today's work places more often have small groups of people or even individual workers who feel more competent to interpret what they are exposed to in the media. Thus the rise of the independent voter and the increase in split tickets.

All of this suggests growth in the power of the mass media. Yet once we try to go beyond such a broad generalization, it requires a great deal of sophistication to pinpoint the influence of the different forms of media, as Donald Kinder has shown in his latest work.⁹ In particular Kinder has discovered that television, in spite of the brevity of its news coverage of individual stories, has considerably more influence than was once suspected—especially in setting the agenda of issues for public attention. Therefore the print media may no longer have quite the monopoly it was once thought to have in influencing political thinking. Also so much for the legal doctrine that broadcasting is for "entertainment" and not politics.

The importance of television goes well beyond its obvious power to deliver visual impact on the public mind, dramatizing some stories while minimizing the importance of others. Television has also contributed to making American politics an activity that is focussed almost entirely upon the present. Events and concerns that obsessed the American public only a few weeks or months ago can be totally put out of mind as attention is concentrated on what is new today. The attention span on issues in American

politics has been declining in recent years, with the result that the agenda of issues now changes with startling rapidity. It may be far less the personality of Ronald Reagan that tagged him the "Teflon president" and more the nature of television that insures that no story will be long lasting. Given the limited memory of the electronic media it should be possible for any reasonably skilled politician to become a "Teflon president."

The situation may be much more serious. The combination of the technical characteristics of television as popular communication and the regulations we have historically imposed upon it seems to be drastically changing the nature of American politics -- as is all too apparent in this year's presidential campaign. Is there any hope that American politics can regain the vitality it once had when the dominant mode of communications was an unfettered press? Now that television has become the main form of communications for structuring national politics, are we going to have to pay an exorbitantly high price for the folly of first dismissing electronic communications as only "entertainment" and of then neutering it by imprisoning it within bureaucratic definitions of the "public interest" and the constraints of the "fairness doctrine"?

The price we pay is an ironical one, for the very neutralness of television, when combined with the imperatives of brevity, has forced out discussion of issues and elevated the playing to emotions. Professionalism within the media once served to insure that the public got detailed information about issues. Increasingly, however, the public has had to depend largely upon essentially partisan sources for general information about fundamental issues which cannot be captured in the evening newscasts. The result is that we now have a strange political atmosphere. At the

center there is a vividness of imagery but a blandness, indeed vacuity, of ideas, but at the fringes there is shrill partisan voices seeking to be heard, but there is also a sophisticated public that has learned to discount the views of anyone who seems emotionally involved in a topic.

Against these discouraging developments, which I see as looming large, there is the much more optimistic view, put forward by among others Ithiel Pool, that advances in the electronic forms of communications, including in particular cable television, can possibly open the door to greater citizen participation in public affairs, and thus expand democracy. In the past mass communications were generally seen as providing leaders with the means to amplify their messages so as to reach ever larger audiences, and thereby bring an entire population into national politics, but always under the sway of the leaders. Now there are possibilities for the public to communicate more effectively with their leaders and for public officials to get direct information as to what is on the minds of the citizens. F. Christopher Arterton has examined in detail a variety of experiments in political participation and what he has called "teledemocracy."¹⁰ Among his conclusions are that there is nothing deterministic in the technologies, and that if there is to be greater popular participation through electronic communications it will be up to the initiatives of both public officials and citizens. The potential for pseudo-participation is great and there remains the possibility that the new technologies will be used by the elites to manipulate public opinion.

This enduring potential of the media to manipulate public opinion leads directly to the issue of bias on the part of the decision-makers in the communications industry. Aaron Wildavsky in reviewing Kinder's work has singled out the relationship of power and bias as a subject that deserves

much further research.¹¹ He suggests that in theory there are four possible relationships between the degree of power and the existence of bias. First, there is the unlikely possibility that the media have little influence and negligible bias, in which case the question becomes trivial. If, secondly, the media do have little influence but are highly biased, the result would be rather comical. If, however, the media turn out to be powerful but also objective, then we would have the ideal situation as far as much of communications theory goes. Finally, there is the disturbing possibility, which Wildavsky believes is most likely, that the media are powerful but also biased. Wildavsky suggests that as unfortunate as this would be, researchers should examine this possibility with the same degree of thoroughness as Kinder used in looking at the power of the media.

The study of bias is of course a tricky matter, for one person's bias is another's objective truth. The polarities of left and right provide the two ideological extremes for the charges of bias. The left, of course, insists that the media are in the service of "monopoly capitalism", and that they consistently suppresses important issues. The Marxists are thus convinced that the media control the agenda of issues to favor the interests of "capitalism," and that if the media would only try to "get behind" the topics of the day they would come to the "real" explanation of events which they are confident their Marxist doctrines have already unveiled.¹² The political right is for its part convinced that the news industry is populated with devious and impassioned liberals. They sense that by pounding away against what they call the "liberal press" they can intimidate reporters.

Those who work in the media know that the relationship of economic considerations and bias in reporting is far more subtle and complex than

the Marxists imagine it to be. Richard Clurman, who for 20 years worked at Time Inc. as writer and as chief of correspondents, makes the telling point that the complex interactions between executive management and reporters has been inadequately studied, and he believes that it is an area that would be most revealing if examined. Instead of appeals to a counter-ideology, Clurman recommends that the fight against bias can best be done by, first, establishing the practice of the media systematically reporting critically on themselves -- that is, more stories about how and why certain stories were produced -- and, second, by providing more ways for the public to respond to the coverage of the media so as to make the media more aware of how they stand in the public eye.¹³

The people in the media are generally less disturbed by the suggestion that they are slaves of capitalists and more troubled by the opposite charge of succumbing to a liberal ideological bias -- a charge that is not easy to disprove. Yet there are ways of exploring some of the dimensions of bias. Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter, for example, have carried out a major study that compares the opinions of a large sample of journalists and scientists, both physicists and nuclear engineers, about the safety of nuclear power plants.¹⁴ They discovered that the two groups are poles apart in their understanding of risks. They did not inquire into why the journalists had failed to check out the opinions of the physicists or why the journalists are so much more fearful than the scientists. One possibility would be to up-date Leo Rosten's study of the Washington press corps of some thirty years ago in which he found out that the typical journalist was a person who wanted to be close to power but did not want the responsibilities of decision-making.¹⁵ Journalists thus enjoy the mischief of things going wrong, of exposing the faults of others, and of

observing the failing of those institutions in which people want to place their faith. Another possible explanation of the Rothman and Lichter findings, offered by Ann Crigler, is that the "squeaky wheel gets attention" and therefore the journalists are attracted to those scientists who are the most fearful of risks and prone to dramatize any possible dangers.¹⁶

Countering Bias With Professionalism Requires Ethical Standards

The response of the media to charges of bias has been to assert the ideals of professionalism associated with the evolution of journalism. Unfortunately, however, the practice has generally been to treat professionalism as largely a matter of "objectivity" or "neutrality," of not taking sides, and it has not been seen in terms of achieving higher standards.

The media, for example, will go to great lengths to cover both sides of issues. The American public has consequently come to expect that whenever their government is engaged in a controversy with another government they will shortly be seeing on their television screens the spokesmen for the other government, be it for the Ayatollah or the Sandanistas or whoever. If the current practices had been followed a generation ago, Hitler and Stalin would have had their "fair shakes" in making their cases in the American media. The problem of course with this approach is that it reduces political competition to a form of chess in which "you play the white and I'll play black, and in the next round we'll change around." Public affairs are thereby reduced to the politics of spokesmen without any pretense of over-arching ethical standards. (Unless this remark be taken as a slight of the McNeill/Lehrer program, let me

quickly add that that program deserves our praise, not least for its constant demonstration that civility is a more effective way of prying out the thoughts of officials than the abrasiveness of less competent questioners.) This effort to resolve the problem of bias compels the media to take the position that there really is no such thing as a collective or national interest. Indeed, it often leads to the rather bizarre view that Americans should not get passionate about their own national interest, but should always be sensitive to the national interests of other countries.

There, of course, is nothing wrong in trying to see the other side's point of view. But what is needed is the introduction of a higher ethical perspective to help the public evaluate events and to judge the legitimacy of U.S. policies. Professionalism should also include an awareness of the concept of a collective interest that needs the support of the media. Those working in the field of communications should have not difficulty appreciating the concept of a collective interest because most of the theorizing about the role of communications in political development in the Third World has been premised on the reality of such a concept.

The Media and Nation-Building.

This position and the idea that the media should serve the collective interest brings us to the third area I wish to deal with, that of the media and political development in the Third World. I feel that we can make the transition from American politics to the developing world because the two great developments that stimulated the growth of communications research in the post-World War II era were, first, the analysis of public opinion and electoral behavior in democratic societies, and second, the possibilities of using communications policies to facilitate the development of the new

nations that emerged from the collapse of Western colonialism. The initial pre-War interest in the study of communications came out of the problems of understanding the potentials of propaganda associated with the First World War and the subsequent rise of fascism and communism.

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s there was a great deal of research on the possible uses of communications in speeding political and economic development -- and indeed, Ithiel Pool first came to M.I.T. to direct research on this very subject. There was considerable excitement in the social sciences as scholars such as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Fred Frey developed theories that explored the potential of communications for human and social development. Indeed, Karl Deutsch became a leading innovator in the social sciences by developing theories about nationalism and nation-building in which communications patterns were treated as the key factor explaining historical developments.¹⁷

These theories stressed the possibilities of elites communicating new values to their rural mass populations. It was assumed that modernizing elites, in command of the appropriate knowledge, would be able to reach out to their mass publics, most particularly the more traditional rural populations, and through the mass media teach them ideas and skills that would bring them into the modern world. It was believed at the time that this was precisely what Mao Zedong was doing in China. Indeed, it was even thought that Mao had certain advantages because the Chinese people were cut off from any other distracting forms of communications and had only the messages that the regime deemed appropriate for national development. Put simply, the idea was that the mass media made it possible for an elite to target an audience and then transmit its own ideas to the minds of the masses. Hence, the Third World was encouraged to saturate its radio and

television broadcasts with uplift programs designed by government bureaucrats, a prospect that should have made us shudder at the time.

Needless to say, the potential of the media conceived of in these terms, was misjudged. Although we had at the time considerable evidence that the communications process is a much more complex phenomenon, and that audiences react to more than just the explicit or intended messages. Moreover, there are always a host of other channels of communications in any society that provide contexts for whatever the mass media may be disseminating. This utilitarian approach of the mass media in the service of social advancement produced unrelieved earnest and humorless moralizing, preachy programming that has become the hallmark of public broadcasting in country after country of the developing world. The concept of purposefulness in social science theories became translated into dutiful dedication in the work of bureaucrats, who as converts were often unquestioning true believers.

By the 1970s it was becoming apparent that the theories were in danger of slipping over the edge into the realm of caricature. Interestingly, the main evidence for the limitations of the targeting theory of communications in the service of development came from China. The advent of Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the end of Maoism revealed that all the efforts of the late Chairman to transform the Chinese masses into "Socialist New Men" had been a major failure, for the Chinese people remained essentially Chinese. Indeed, the effort had been in many respects counter-productive. The regime's monopoly of the mass media had made the people distrustful of official pronouncements and strong believers in informal channels of communication. People looked to the official media for signals about factional conflicts within the elite and for guidance on what

to do to keep on the good side of authority. But few people totally abandoned their private thinking to accept the full content of the official media. They practiced instead the great Chinese art of feigned compliance, of conforming on the surface with the officially defined consensus while in their private thoughts and acts they continued to seek, as best they could, their own self interest.

Interestingly, the growth of informal communication patterns in China was greatly advanced by the sons and daughters of high level cadres who discovered that they could profitably produce secret newsletters which passed on the gossip they picked up in family conversations. These became known as xiao-dao xiao-xi or "By-roads News." Others soon picked up the practice, and as a result the informal spreading of information became a significant small industry which still continues today. We now know that students in China, in spite of being cut off from open sources of information, have been able to learn a great deal about democracy and the way of life in other countries through these informal channels of communication. The government finds that it has to translate a great deal of information from abroad which it classifies as nei-bu or "restricted," but it must allow access to the materials to large numbers of people who then systematically pass on what is supposed to be secret.

There is evidence that much the same processes have been taking place in the other societies that went overboard in trying to target communications. The result of all of this is a strange paradox: in the industrialized countries where service industries are on the rise we find a decline in the two-step flow as more and more people feel comfortable in making their own decisions from their exposure to the mass media, but in the developing world it is the other way around as more and more people

have come to rely upon informal, word of mouth processes of communication.

Paradoxically, the enthusiasm of the American theorists of communications and development spread to the elites of many of the Third World, but with a strange boomerang effect. One might have thought that such elites would have developed doubts about the theories after they tried to put them into practice in changing the behavior of their own peoples. Instead many of them have clung to the theories, only shifting their application to the arena of international communications. Relying on their interpretation of communication theory, they argued that if those who controlled the media could target messages to influence the behavior of mass audiences, then they had the right to conclude that this describe exactly what was taking place in the world at large, in which the Western news services, as the manipulating elite, monopolized the flow of information across international boundaries, thereby affecting the behavior of the people in the Third World.¹⁸ The result has been the call for a "New Information Order" which has, of course, been a direct attack on the integrity of the existing news services. The complaint brings us back to the issue of bias in the Western media. The paradox is even more ironic because the Third World elites who pushed hardest for a "New Order" were, in spite of their "socialist" and "progressive" rhetoric, generally opposed to significant social change in their own countries and hostile to the liberal bias they see in the Western mass media and the news services. They have not wanted their publics to be exposed to what the Chinese have called "Bourgeois liberalism."

There is a final irony in this story of applied social science research. How was it possible that the generation who developed the theories of communications and development, of which I am a part, which was

brought up in the Depression and came of age in World War II, how could we of all the generations have been so earnestly purposeful in describing the role of the mass media? How could we have forgotten that for us the mass media meant listening every Sunday night to Jack Benny, Allen's Ally, Fibber McGee and Molly and all the other wonderful programs of the era of great radio? The rest of the week we cemented our spirit of community by repeating the jokes in schools and work places. We further strengthened our bonds of community, in the face of adversity, by flocking to the movies in response to a star system in which we could thrill together at seeing Katherine Hepburn, Betty Grable, Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, and Clark Gable acting the parts of Katherine Hepburn, Betty Grable, Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire and Clark Gable. So, when we came to think about the problems of nation-building how could we have forgotten all of this?

I am struck with how many of our generation still seem to miss the point as they worry about what people in other countries will think of America as they watch our television programs on their local networks. Such people seem to fail to sense what is going on when people all over the world have shared emotions about the episodes of "Dallas", are laughing together with the "Hill Street Blues", and are caught up in the antics of "Miami Vice". Are not these the functional equivalents of the Jack Benny Show and Allen's Alley, and what are the implications of an audience that crosses national boundaries being brought together in a joyful shared experience? I am reminded of an incident a few years ago in Asia when I was with a delegation of American academics. During a break in the conference we happened to be joined by a group of non-academic Americans, who quickly made friends with the Asians and before we knew it they were laughing together and slapping their thighs at the shared memories of

episodes of "Dallas" and other American television shows. The American academics were silent, completely out of it. Yet, as I remember the group, they were all people who in their youth must have enjoyed the Sunday radio programs, and probably to this day some of them would insist that those shows were culturally significant, perhaps even a high art form. Of course they weren't. They were instead socially important in community building, as perhaps are today's television programs.

The Challenge of Communications Research.

In closing, let me say that I hope that by touching upon these three large topics I have been able to convey to you some feeling for the great challenge inherent in communications research. This is a field that calls for collaboration among scholars with a variety of interests and skills. The central thrust of my review of three quite different aspects of the problems of communications and freedom is that while technology has been important in advancing our abilities to transmit information, public policy should not be dictated by presumed considerations as to any technological imperatives. What is needed is high sensitivity to the social and political significance of changing communications technologies. Radio and television have changed the character of the American political process. But the results do not have to be the kind of empty political "dialogues" we seem to be having in this election year.

Students of communications need to understand what is taking place at the frontiers of technological advances, but it is even more important for them to develop a strong sense of professionalism that goes well beyond being just technically competent. There is a need for professionalism that is based on a vivid sense of ethical responsibilities and upon a commitment

to both individual freedom and the collective interest. The goal of an advanced communications society should be that of free men and women in a society that knows the values of community. For the magic of modern electronic communications is that it can expand and deepen the precious sense of community that binds people together and makes freedom into something more than just isolated autonomy.

To train people to work in the contemporary world of communications there must, therefore, be extensive cooperation among people from many parts of a university. There is a need for those with an understanding of our legal processes and of governmental regulation procedures. The door needs to be opened to the information that can only come from scientists and engineers who are informed about the next developments in communications technologies. There is a major place in the research center for sociologists and psychologists who can carry out systematic analysis of public opinion and attitude formation and cognitive processes. More importantly, there must be people who will openly take on the challenge of thinking through the ethical issues that should be at the heart of professionalism in this field. There should be no set boundaries on what is to be researched, for communications lies at the heart of human behavior and its study needs to encompass all the essential dimensions of the human condition.

This is the great challenge that the new Stanton/Heiskell Center will be taking up in the years ahead. I want to wish you great success, and to thank you once again for giving me this opportunity to address you and to pay my respects to the memory of Ithiel de Sola Pool.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ithiel de Sola-Pool, Technologies of Freedom, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
2. Jerome Barron, "Access to the Media -- A New First Amendment Right," Harvard Law Review, Vol. 80, p. 1641, 1967.
3. Lee Bollinger, "Freedom of the Press and Public Access," Michigan Law Review, Vol. 75, p. 1, 1976.
4. As quoted by Lucas A. Powe, Jr., American Broadcasting and the First Amendment, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.30.
5. *Ibid.*, especially chapters 2 and 3.
6. Felix Frankfurter, majority opinion in the *Red Lion* case, 319 U.S. at 226-27, as quoted in Powe, op. cit. p.36.
7. John Milton, Areopagitica, quoted in Powe, op. cit., p.2.
8. James Short, The New Voter Class: Job Mobility and Political Choice in American Elections, Doctorial Dissertation, Department of Political Science, M.I.T.
9. Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, News That Matters: Television and American Opinion, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
10. F. Christopher Arterton, "Political Participation and 'Teledemocracy,'" PS, Political Science and Politics, Vol. XXI, No.3, Summer 1988, pp. 620-627. See also his, Teledemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy? (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); and his, Media Politics: The New Strategies of Presidential Campaigns, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984).
11. Aaron Wildavsky, "Where Bias and Influence Meet," The Public Interest, No. 91, Spring 1988, pp. 94-8. See also A. Wildavsky, "The

- Media's 'American Egalitarians,'" The Public Interest, No.88, Summer 1987, pp.94-104.
12. W. Lance Bennett, News: The Politics of Illusion, (New York: Longman, 1988).
 13. Richard M. Clurman, Beyond Malice: The Media's Years of Reckoning, (New Brunswick: Transactions Books, 1988).
 14. Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, "Elite Ideology and Risk Perception in Nuclear Energy Policy," American Political Science Review, Vol. 81, No.2, June 1987, pp. 383-404.
 15. Leo C. Rosten, The Washington Correspondent, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937).
 16. Personal communication.
 17. Karl Deutsch, Nationalism and Social Communication: An Enquiry into the Foundations of Nationalism, (New York: Wiley, 1953).
 18. For a discussion of the demand for a new order in communications, see: Robert L. Stevenson, Communication, Development, and the Third World, (New York: Longman, 1988). For a discussion of how the concept of communications for development was turned around into the need for a New Information Order, see, Rene Jean Ravoult, "International Information: Bullet or Boomerang?" in David L. Paletz, ed., Political Communication Research: Approaches, Studies, Assessments, (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1987).