

The social and cultural implications of cutting edge communications

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1996

Javed J. (1996). The social and cultural implications of cutting edge communications. In AMIC Conference on Asian Communications: the Next Twenty-five Years, Singapore, Jun 1-3, 1996. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/102080>

Paper No. 8

**25th anniversary conference
of AMIC — the Asian Mass
Communication Research and
Information Centre,
Singapore**

1 to 3 June 1996

**Notes from a
presentation by
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on

**“the social and cultural
implications of cutting edge
communications”**

The social and cultural implications of cutting edge communications.

Some observations by Javed Jabbar

At the AMIC annual conference in Manila, Philippines in 1992, I submitted that the nomenclature of 'the global city' had become a more accurate description in place of the term 'the global village' (An essay titled "The global city" was published in *Intermedia*, London, the journal of the International Institute of Communications in January 1996).

From being the global village born in the 1950s and 1960s which was apparently -- but not actually -- homogenous and stable, we have already become the global city which is vibrantly heterogeneous and volatile. Our world has the predominant characteristics of a city despite cities still occupying only a fraction of the earth's total land area. Even villages and small towns have acquired urban characteristics, specially in the social and psychological dimensions. By the year 2000, more than half of the world's population will live in the cities --- and the trend is projected to continue.

As we approach the 21st century we seem to be going from being a singular global city in the mass communications context to becoming plural global cities in a communications context as well as in the contexts of society, culture, and politics.

Global cities can be defined as multiple planetary communities that transcend or bypass political, geographical and other barriers and divisions. Those other bases for divisions may continue to exist even as a new binding and a new bonding takes place.

In one sense, these emerging global cities are like the rings of Saturn. They circle the earth and help also separate the earth into different and distinct communities. In another way, global cities are the new continents of the earth. Continents of the mind, of the heart, of skills, of interests, of incomes. They are areas on the media-map and the cyber-map of the world in which concentrations of millions of people, most of whom live in places far away from each other, share interests and identities from a vast range of choices. In doing so, they are part of the global urban-minded fraternity and yet feel a greater affinity with some one or a group in a distant place than they do with someone living next door or in the next neighbourhood.

In the media sphere, global cities are trans-continental communities that share interests in radio, TV channels, in computers, magazines, cinema.

In the work sphere, global cities are trans-continental communities that share economic features, income levels and life-styles.

In worship, global cities are trans-continental communities that share religions, beliefs and ideologies.

In high financial stakes, global cities are trans-continental communities that bring together elements involved in big business, banking, telecom, arms manufactures, armed forces. One example of global cities is also the global slums. From the slums of Lyari in Karachi to the slums of Soweto in Johannesburg to the tenements of Harlem in New York there is a new, shared, self-aware identity.

In this changed environment that directly affects the way in which people live and work let us take note of some of the processes and products that are part of cutting edge communications, those that have already demonstrated their capacity and those that are evolving.

There is the basic process of digitalization which has already revolutionized transmission of data, enabling extraordinary compression and facilitating reductions of cost.

In 1965, a trans-Atlantic cable carried 135 phone conversations simultaneously. In 1995, a fibre optic cable carries 500,000 conversation simultaneously. In 1975, a three-minute London-New York phone call cost US\$22.50. In 1995, the same call cost US\$2.20.

Specific innovations include the CD-ROM which can now make available an entire library in a single disc, the application of data base marketing that creates a new intimacy between the consumer and the corporation. Then there is video art, so well evident in the music video field. There is holography, all the variations of virtual reality, home banking, electronic shopping, local area networks, metro area networks, wide area networks, even the Right-to-Know Network in Washington, D.C. USA (tel: 202-234-8570) which lets you know the exact level of gas emission and pollution in a USA area within the past few days and hours.

There is the new approach to literature through technology known as the hyper-text novel which is a new permutation of electronic creativity in that it offers you two alternative beginnings to a story but does not adhere rigidly to a conventional middle section and offers you options for the ending.

Then there is the advent of global mobile communications, on the threshold of notable change. Wireless, palm-sized, hand-held receivers that provide hundreds of audio, video and text channels. Receivers of E-mail, Internet and the fax are already available but are expensive. Prices are expected to decline over the next few years.

The impact of the Internet and E-mail has become a subject of wide media and popular comment even though the total number of people actually using these services --

irrespective of whether we accept an estimate of 10 million -- or 60 million -- is still only a fraction of the world's population. In fact, less than 1 percent of the world's people presently use the Internet.

The new communications processes have had and will have a tangible, measurable impact on improving health care, education, justice, communication, commerce, industry, agriculture, productivity, human rights. Their contribution to the betterment of the human condition is fundamental and comprehensive and is bound to become pervasive.

New communications have also accelerated a world-wide cosmopolitanism, creating a common sense of modernization and internationally shared features in attitudes and ways of life.

For the children of the world, the new communications mean a quantum leap in the method of learning and in the advancement of education, doing in far less time what it took earlier generations years to achieve. Through the installation of the V-chip in US tv set, the child is to be protected from gratuitous and excessive depictions of violence of which there has been a marked increase on American tv in recent years.

Perhaps most important of all, the new communication will give women an unprecedented access to technology which, in computers and communications has so far been dominated by men. Women will gain the capacity to exercise a new choice and flexibility in applying technology to help reduce conventional gender bias. The empowerment of women will enter a new era.

At the same time, cutting edge communications will raise new paradoxes and contradictions.

People will achieve the power to speak -- without necessarily achieving the power to change anything substantially.

A new globalism will be projected even as a new localism is promoted.

The preservation of cultural diversity will be enabled just as historic cultures are stormed by technology, mass media and the free market.

The information economy will gather new steam and traditional, indigenous crafts will be eroded.

Mass participation in artistic and cultural work and in the mass media will be stimulated on a scale unrivalled in history. But with all the massification, culture may become formless and bland. Are we already witnessing the decline of what we know to be truly great art? Ethnicity will be further strengthened -- and yet indigenous languages will be weakened, by the increasing use of English.

As the free market flourishes, increased disparities in income are sharpening class conflicts, presently obscured by the thrills of liberalization and the fall of western communism.

New communications seem to give violence and pornography new scope for growth, as symbolically manifest in the use of the Internet by at least 100 hate groups. Though the World Trade Organization does not cover culture in a substantial way, culture industries and entertainment industries from the developed countries have become a major factor in the economy and culture of developing countries.

As we come to the end of the 20th century, the human being has become dyssynchronous. The gap between human scientific and technological capacity and the human capacity for governance and equity has become greater than at any time in history.

Media-rich elites are getting richer and will move farther, faster along the information highway. The media middle-class is growing larger across the world. Yet the overwhelming majority of the earth's people are, and will be for the next several years, the media-poor masses who will merely trundle and move very slowly along the information highway as they begin to acquire their first tv set and their first newspaper.

In conclusion, some questions.

The more the media, the less the communication ?

The fracturing of language, the primacy of the picture ?

The more the democracy, the less the participation ?

The indicators are: declining voter turn-outs, loss of faith in political leadership and exclusivist processes, features that are shared by countries with old as well as new democratic systems.

The more the light, the greater the darkness ?

When we consider these and other questions, the abiding concern that faces us along with the new communications is the need to use the technology to move from the narrow individualism of the past 3 decades to the enduring value of the community, to use the technology to reinforce the family and to renew the human spirit.