CRISES IN COMMUNICATIONS

A Plea for Awareness and Response

NICHOLAS JOHNSON

COMMUNICATION touches every fiber of our lives. It is the coin of human understanding, the fabric of a free society.

The American communications mosaic includes a Defense Department "hot line" to a distant air base, a tranquilized child before a TV set, a ringing telephone, a campaigning politician's radio spot announcement, a fog-bound ship's radar, a news service teletype, a hidden microphone in a "secret" business meeting, a radio-dispatched taxicab, airline reservations with the aid of computers, and microwave towers, satellites, and laser beams.

The seriousness and scope of the communications problems confronting our nation have already left their mark upon my thinking as a new FCC Commissioner. This brief experience prompts me to pause to develop and share two thoughts. The first is that it may be useful to broaden our concept of "communications" beyond our conventional thinking about broadcasting. The second is that a vastly expanded and coordinated national effort at research and analysis of our communications system appears warranted.

In illustrating these points I will set forth at random particular areas of interest that seem to me worthy of attention. You may find the mere listing of a horizonful of dimly perceived shadows sketchy and frustrating, for each would warrant full description and development. But let me emphasize that I now pretend to few, if any, new solutions to specific

problems, and that I retain an open mind on most, if not all, of the issues. Moreover, I seek to provide neither the ephemeral relief of entertainment nor the shocking headlines of exposé. My intended contribution is modest: soberly to share my own current conceptual framework, to provide an illustrative agenda to go with it, and to sound a call to forceful response to what I see as communications crises of substantial proportions.

TECHNOLOGICAL and institutional innovations in communications are crashing upon us with ever greater intensity, like the waves of a stormy sea. And each leaves behind a debris of problems—legal, economic, social, philosophical, engineering, and aesthetic—whose solutions require the talents of the best men, institutions, and financial resources that America can bring to bear. Yet I do not see evidence of such a national response.

America is today confronting communications challenges which FCC Chairman Rosel H. Hyde has characterized as "awesome indeed." Here are but a few examples of their breadth and range. Electronic technology threatens the sanctity of the most private conversations in business room and bedroom—not to mention the telephone. Yet few workable solutions have been offered. Present management of our scarce radio frequencies impedes police and fire protection and robs us of millions of dollars in gross national product by denying expanded use of business radio.

At a time when an informed electorate is increasingly dependent upon the integrity of television news and our children spend more time with the "tube" than with the teacher, we know very little of the impact of broadcasting on our society. We don't even have a national center to preserve the radio and television tapes necessary to such a study. Nor do we know much about the structure of the industry—conglomerate corporations and concentrations of control of diverse media—and its implications for a free society.

We have the barest knowledge and anticipation (let alone control) of the rate of introduction of new electronics tech-

nology, with its accompanying social and economic upheaval: cable television, computer communications systems, the home communications center, satellites, and the laser beam—to name but five current innovations. Each presents the possibility of greatly expanding the available supply of one or several communications facilities. Lasers, for example, may conceivably carry telephonic messages so efficiently that the price of long distance calls could be more like that for local calls today. Cable television may very well eliminate the scarcity of television broadcast channels.

Each of these threats to scarcity is also a threat to an economic interest which thrives on that scarcity—lasers to equipment manufacturers, and cable television to broadcasters. Passive nineteenth century public utility concepts may be of questionable adequacy in promoting the most efficient rate of introduction of the new technology.

The needs for a second, noncommercial broadcasting service, though coming to public realization, are far from adequately met. Broadcasting contributes heavily to the economic burdens of political campaigning (roughly 40 percent of the cost), and is producing results we scarcely comprehend. The implications of our instantaneous electronic "village of the world" lie unknown before us ("live war" and other international news; satellite-to-home broadcasting in the lesser developed countries; interconnection of hundreds of millions of private telephones).

THE TOPICS DIFFER—and many more could be added—but for each, similar questions spring to mind. What is the impact on our society? How can this new force most effectively be channeled to human good? Are unrestrained market forces or some form of government regulation most appropriate? Are new or amended laws or regulations necessary? What is the most economic and efficient way to achieve the ends sought? What are the forces regulating the development and rate of introduction of the new technology? Are they effective in serving interests beyond private economic gain? How can government be most effectively structured and ad-

ministered to deal with the problem in question? What additional data, analysis, or other research is called for? Who is asking these questions? Who answers back? What price do we pay for this placid comfort of silence in a boat none dares to rock nor cares to navigate?

A major stumbling block is a conceptual one: our communications problems seem myriad rather than unitary—just as our "transportation system" problems used to be seen as problems of trains, ships, and planes. Let's look at diversity of programming as a very limited example.

Communications satellites, cable television, UHF development, direct satellite broadcasting in the upper UHF channels, pay television, regulation of network program ownership, alternative funding for noncommercial broadcasting, encouragement of local programming, copyright protection in broadcasting, duplication of AM radio programming on FM, and alternative uses for educational stations can most comfortably be considered in isolation from one another. My message is simple. We must forsake this comfort. Our core communications problem, and opportunity, derives from a burgeoning technology. In order most profitably to harness this technology we must, in the initial stage, view its various ramifications as parts of a whole.

Satellites, UHF television, and cable television have implications for television transmission, for the number of channels available, and hence for possible improvement in programming. Satellites also have implications for frequency management and telephone and other home communication transmission, as does the cable network supplying cable television. Thus it is difficult to treat alternative approaches to program diversity without raising even more wide-ranging communications issues. But my point for now is merely that it may be exceedingly unwise (even for purposes of program diversity) to deal with each alternative in case-by-case isolation.

THROUGHOUT all our communications problems runs the need for awareness, anticipation, and long-range forecast-

ing. Where are we headed if we "do nothing"? What are the implications and trends? What alternatives are open to us? What are the consequences—costs and benefits—of each? What must we do—today—to prepare for the future?

These are the central questions in our numerous communications crises; questions we as a nation appear ill prepared to address.

The fact is that the federal government has no coordinated administration of communications, and virtually no long-range planning efforts or research and development program whatsoever. America's communications industries add substantially to our gross national product—at least $20 billion a year from broadcast-related activities alone. And yet the FCC's share of our $100 billion federal budget is only $17 million (less than $\frac{2}{100}$ths of 1 percent)—all but $2 million of which goes to salaries.

It's understandable that the agency's activities would be limited almost entirely to granting licenses and resolving disputes between private parties. But the result is that the FCC spends most of its time as little more than a "Federal Broadcasting Commission," dealing on an ad hoc basis with the increased power, station log, antenna location, and other day-to-day problems of 7,000 U.S. television and radio stations.

Even such little frequency management responsibility as the agency exercises is divided between the FCC and DTM (the Office of Director of Telecommunications Management in the Executive Office of the President)—an able but small group attempting to coordinate allocation of frequencies to the Defense Department and other government agencies. Neither FCC nor DTM has a very substantial laboratory capability. The largest run by the government—the highly specialized Institute for Telecommunication Sciences and Aeronomy at Boulder—reports to the Secretary of Commerce.

THE AUTHOR of a recent investment letter commented upon the FCC's prevailing regulatory philosophy in arguing that broadcasting properties are a prime acquisition for growing conglomerate corporations. The article appears in *Mergers*

& Acquisitions and is entitled, "The Broadcasting Industry: a profitable acquisition area." The author says of government regulation: "the overwhelming majority of radio and TV licenses have been repeatedly renewed, period after period, without the slightest difficulty or problem."

Perhaps the agency should take pride in the author's conclusion that "the FCC has never imposed regulations which materially impaired management's ability . . . to maximize the station's profit. . . ." Perhaps not. For it just could be that those who believe "what's good for General Sarnoff is good for America" are, in fact, serving neither very well.

For example, almost all social and technical research in communications is done outside government. In view of government's rather clear and substantial public responsibility, one would think it profitably could invest in a degree of planning and research at least comparable to that of, say, AT&T—a single, FCC-regulated communications company with revenues over $11 billion last year, and a 15,000-man laboratory effort.

There is little question such an effort would do as much for corporate profits as for the public interest. At this time, however, it is not clear anyone in government is even collecting, let alone reading, interpreting, and utilizing, the results of the research done elsewhere. Most technical research is done by private corporations, such as the Bell Laboratories of AT&T. And the major research in the social sciences and public policy areas is scattered among numerous institutes, centers, foundations, private associations, and universities around the country.

There have been occasional outbursts of excellence. Yet scanning the total output of our great universities and foundations I see but few stirrings in that barren tundra adjacent the "vast wasteland."

THREE HYPOTHESES seem warranted: (1) duplication and inefficiency result from this lack of coordination, (2) many vital areas of communications research and application are overlooked entirely, and (3) investing substantially

greater private and public money would return handsome dividends indeed.

One clear point of beginning in communications research and analysis is the gathering of data and the creation of standards for measuring performance. The principle of accountability has spawned a profession. Financial accounting serves, in large measure, as a means of informing shareholders about performance—against a standard of profit. The Securities and Exchange Commission requires such accounting to better inform investors.

Government can play a useful role in the process of social and economic accounting. Much critical research would be impossible were it not for information gathered by the committees of Congress and the agencies within the executive branch. We cannot begin to resolve an "unemployment" or "crime" problem, for example, until we gather the relevant statistics—indeed, the problem, in one sense, does not even exist without the statistics. Likewise the constructs of "gross national product" and "consumer price index" are central to the very conceptualization of some of our most basic economic and social problems.

Public accountability, of some kind, is obviously necessary for meaningful consideration of the various problems I have sketched. But what standards and data are most relevant? Is profit alone enough? I think not. Here are some examples of additional data which might be useful.

Congressional investigations have given us much information on eavesdropping technology, but perhaps we should institutionalize the process, so that the public can continually be made aware of the current threats to its privacy. Public disclosure of cost analysis of new telephonic technology also might be useful. That way consideration could be given to what the public pays for having new equipment—and what it pays in doing without. The benefits of "local programming" lie at the heart of much FCC regulation: the interference-ridden AM radio band, and allocation of 420 extremely valuable megacycles to UHF television, to name two examples. Programming of popular music and the television

fare of three networks could be provided at much lower cost.

How much "local programming" is being provided, in fact, by our 7,000-station broadcasting industry? Or take comparative broadcast license allocation hearings. They cost the public, and the industry, millions of dollars annually. For what? Is there evidence the public receives better programming from the performance of the winner (as distinguished from his promises) than from a licensee who purchases a station and avoids the expense of hearings?

BROADCASTING STANDARDS and information are especially important, because regulation of program content encounters undefined statutory and constitutional limitations on "censorship." But such limitations cannot totally frustrate the public's search for standards and the desire for information, for the programming product obviously lies at the heart of broadcasting's public accountability. Measuring programming performance has troubled the FCC for decades, with the result that, to my knowledge, not a single station's license has been revoked or failed of renewal for programming reasons alone during the past 30 years.

Surely all would agree that audience and critic response, properly measured, are relevant to program evaluation. Central to meaningful analysis of media is accessibility of its product: newspapers, magazines, radio, and television tapes or films. The news coverage of two newspapers easily can be compared in hundreds of newspaper libraries. To compare the news coverage of two networks is extraordinarily difficult and expensive; it is often literally impossible. Television's coverage of the Army–McCarthy hearings came within a hairsbreadth of being forever lost. The president of a major national television network recently told me he was unable to find President Kennedy's inaugural address in the network's library. There are many reasons for establishing national libraries of broadcasting's creative product, but comparative evaluation is obviously one.

What else should the public know? What of stories that were not covered in news or documentaries, or were covered

and killed? How about changes in entertainment programming—or even news—brought about by advertisers, or through other economic forces? Should the public know the ownership of broadcast properties, including the full range of media and other interests of the conglomerate corporate owners? Would more financial information be useful regarding individual shows' costs and profits? Of course, to be of use such programming material and financial information would have to be analyzed and reported by some competent group. Perhaps a privately funded, independent group—suggested occasionally over the years by broadcasting leaders, legislators, and academicians—would be preferable to the FCC.

Would more comment from the public be useful? All agree the ratings systems could be improved. Would it be desirable, as the British do, to poll more viewers more often, and measure the intensity of their involvement and response, as well as whether the television set is on? How do we measure how they might have responded to what has not been offered?

The "letters to the editor" column offers meaningful appraisal of many of America's print media. How about broadcasting? Should efforts be made to obtain more public participation in the FCC's examination every three years of a station's service to its local community? Should radio's "open mike" programs be used to this end, and possibly be extended to television, to allow public comment on the performance of the very station receiving FCC evaluation?

CRISES bring public awareness, and therein lies my hope for 1967. It will be a year in which America will be forced to focus as never before on one of mankind's most fundamental needs: an understanding of what our communications systems can do for us—and to us. Satellites (domestic and international), noncommercial broadcasting (the Ford and Carnegie Commission proposals), cable television and copyright law revision, the use of the reserved upper UHF TV channels, the AT&T rate investigation, congested

mobile radio frequencies, technological innovations—these and more involve issues that must be resolved and will provide the headlines that capture our awareness. What will be the response?

Hopefully, we will be charting planning efforts and research programs, looking for talent, and bringing kindred souls together in conferences and seminars. Every profession has some special talent to contribute. There is little in our lives and intellectual disciplines that does not relate to communication problems in some way.

Speaking at Brookings' fiftieth anniversary observance recently, President Johnson spoke of these needs in more general context. "The enormous complexity of modern living," he said, demands "something better than a visceral, emotional response." He urged that "the critical faculty . . . constantly . . . challenge the accepted wisdom . . . [and] be concerned at least as much with analyzing the terrific complexity of modern problems as . . . with devising sweeping new strategies for social advances."

Our communications challenges surely pose a need both for analyses of complex modern problems and for sweeping new strategies. In challenging accepted wisdom we must sometimes ask hard, embarrassing questions. What are the economic and institutional rigidities impeding the development of communications systems that might serve man with greater economy and satisfaction? How much better to ask such questions now than to reflect back in later years upon an America that might have been.