

The 4 “C” in global communication

The Communications Revolution is one of four, which, during the first 70 years or so of the last century, affected the way we all live, and the way we all see the world. The four revolutions I refer to occurred in **aerodynamics, nuclear physics, medicine and communication**. I use the term “revolution” to describe “abrupt and dramatic change.” Certainly we can see this in the transformation of the world of **aerodynamics** from the time of the Wright Brothers at the turn of the century, to just 70 years later when advances in aerodynamics meant that a man walked on the moon.

“Communi-Chaos”

Now let me turn to the **four revolutionary trends** I see in the past 15 years or so in **communication**. I will call these four trends “**The Four C’s**.” The First is “**Communi-Chaos**.” Because the new technologies and new media have come, and all the old ones are still around, we have a piling-on effect. The first consequence of this is a super-saturation of the marketplace of ideas. As information has increased exponentially for all decision-makers, the upside is that we have more information available to help us make informed decisions. The down side is that we have little or no time to think, must decide, act, and move on to the next of dozens of decisions confronting us in a day. As quantity has gone up, quality has gone down, and I see no end in sight.

Secondly, **Communi-Chaos** means we have many choices of information, many new TV channels, plus all the radio stations, and of course the new websites on our computers. In sum, the information flow is overwhelming and ever easier to access.

The third consequence here has been **the flight and dispersal of advertising dollars**. In the past 15 to 20 years, certainly, wealth has grown globally. But even faster is the growth of communication and media units that must survive by selling advertising. From 1950 to 1980 or 1985, we saw see three to four American TV companies nationally increase to 200 or 300 due to cable and satellite services. Now we see tens of thousands of websites that also flash advertising. Thus, all the different new and old types of media companies, from newspapers to new websites, are competing for the same finite amount of money available as advertising revenues.

There is, as I see it, **a final consequence to this Communi-Chaos** and it is important, even if it cannot be measured scientifically. This consequence is increasing **isolation** of all of us... a decline in human intercourse that is affecting the fabric of all advanced societies. Behind all of us comes a generation that is now 12 to 22 years of age. They spend an average of 36 hours per week focused on one of two cathode

ray tubes: the television and the computer, sometimes doing hours of video games. Much is lost in all of this isolated satisfaction that is derived artificially or at distance. The first **loss is true social intercourse**....the opportunity to discuss their views about the world and yours and mine.

Second is the **loss of conversational skills**. And these truly are skills. Vast numbers of very intelligent and supposedly well educated young people today, all across the world, express themselves so poorly in speaking and in writing that there is grave concern in business and in academe about a pandemic of dreadfully poor writing and speaking skills.

Third, there is a decrease in a **sense of social responsibility**. If a person no longer feels that connected to society, how can this person develop a sense of community and social responsibility and all that this, including good citizenship, entails?

The fourth danger in this isolation, this time of one-on-one with television and e-mails and surfing web sites and playing violent video games, is a loss of social kinship – **a loss of sensitivity** for the plight of fellow human beings, their problems, feelings and suffering.

Finally, there is a false sense of **instant satisfaction** of all their wants and needs. All problems and conflict are resolved in 26 minutes or 54 minutes of programming on TV, in Comedy shows or in Drama or Crime shows. Frustration then, with real life can rise to rage.

The second “C” for “Control.”

There are two aspects to this. The first relates to my fourth category of Convergence of the media. For now we can focus on the fact that as this convergence occurs, we find fewer and fewer media companies and owners with bigger and bigger media empires... and the result is fewer “gatekeepers.”

The problem arises when fewer and fewer independent and diverse news and information outlets exist. And the key word here is independent. Today there are far fewer wire services gathering the news globally. There are fewer mainstream and major news organizations that have sufficient numbers of people on staff to add to that gathering process. Those people cost money, that coverage costs a huge amount of money. Stockholders and owners of the major media outlets want profit... bottom line... care little or not at all about coverage quality.

Separately, **there is another aspect of “Control.”** Despite the apparent free flow of people and ideas, governments can and do control flow and access to

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information. There are quotas in France and Britain on the number of foreign films and TV programs that can be shown on TV and in film theatres. When China arranged a contract with Rupert Murdoch to have his network broadcast to China by satellite, Mr. Murdoch had to agree to strip out the portion of his programs coming from the news department. Chinese authorities did not want their people to have access to foreign versions of world news. Today in China, there are many, many new coffee or tea shops where people come to use computers to surf the web sites. But Chinese authorities have used the technologies designed to screen pornographic information from our children to instead block out many web sites where people would have access to foreign news and views on issues.

The Third “C” refers to “Commonality”

By this I mean that despite my ability to now turn to over 250 TV channels that come into my home via satellite, I am faced with terrible choices. It is all junk, and it all looks the same. I am not an intellectual snob. But what is happening is evident to anyone. Many, many of the channels feature re-runs of programs and old films popular in the United States and Britain five and 10 and even 15 years ago.

Second, this mediocrity is driven by the profit motive. Programmers, producers and the advertising industry all want to reach the largest possible audience. To do this, they must appeal to the lowest common denominator.

The points are twofold. First, instead of becoming a “window to the world,” television has moved to commonality – instead of searching for uniqueness that matters in key areas. Thus, television has become a “Window to Nothing.” And, increasingly, to chase a fleeing audience of readers and viewers of news, journalists, their editors and producers have been transforming news into “infotainment” – utter cotton candy for the mind.

Finally “Convergence and Consolidation”

Convergence involves technology. Increasingly, we can go to one cathode tube, or even to our cell phones, and get everything. We can now use the web system, or disks to watch popular films. Along with this convergence there is another factor, involving **consolidation**. This relates to ownership of the media and what are called “**the lords of the global village**.” Christopher Dixon, an analyst for Paine Webber put it this way: “What happened to oil and to the automobile industry is now happening to entertainment and news flow. Deregulation and privatization provided a wide open opportunity for the emergence of global media moguls.” What we see is a proc-

ess where eight or 10 people and their organizations globally, and 50 to 70 others more regionally, own vast stretches of the means of communication. This is called vertical and horizontal integration.

Vertical integration occurs when one individual and his huge corporation own a major web system, control a major sector of satellite TV and cable TV service, own a television network, and an entire network of radio stations.

Horizontal integration occurs when some corporation like Rupert Murdoch’s or Bertelsmann’s owns sports teams, film corporations, production studios, newspaper, book or magazine publishing empires, a major portion of the record industry and other forms of entertainment, including those sports teams.

There are several consequences to having such powerful lords of the global village that are dangerous economically, but also to the marketplace of ideas. First, it means that fewer and fewer people control the most popular and major media, and there are therefore fewer and fewer other voices seen, heard and read in the marketplace of ideas.

On the surface, having powerful people as rivals might mean that we would have healthy competition on an equal level. But the reality is, they do not compete. They cooperate. They sit on each other’s boards of directors; they cooperate with each other by working deals that benefit both sides to the exclusion of other, smaller competitors.

To me, this is a very dangerous new threat to the whole idea of democracy. Given the other trends I have mentioned, will other, future media moguls be able to resist the temptation to follow the example of Mr. Berlusconi? After all, such people have towering egos, which is that it takes to run for national office almost anywhere. But they also have very large amounts of money. And most importantly, they have control of a huge microphone, which they can use to influence voters. And those voters are the victims of isolations, have limited social skills and are the products of journalism and entertainment industry trends that feed them cotton candy for the mind, makes them increasingly **ignorant and apathetic**.

This is the **fertile ground for the rise of demagogues**, charismatic figures, who take advantage of our ignorance and appeal to our worst instincts of fear, bigotry, prejudice and hate. It certainly can happen. It has happened before, even when the various modern media were far less pervasive. For example, it happened in the 1920s and 1930s in two places: Italy and Germany. And the names of those demagogues are Benito Mussolini and Adolph Hitler, both of whom co-opted their national media with fear and rewards.