The end of 1995 has reached us with alarming speed. For those of us taking a special interest in understanding human communication, one can also add the phenomenal increase in the volume of both data and information, as well as the increasing complexity thereof. Whereas two years ago, for example, the Internet was seen by many to be far too unsophisticated to use even for research/academic purposes, people are today using this communications technology to conduct commercial transactions like shopping and banking. Just as the motorcar, television, microwave oven and cellular telephone has dramatically influenced our patterns of social interaction (read communication), so surely will this new (in South Africa) technology. From a social perspective, the truly fascinating dimension of the capacity for global communication that the Internet provides, is of course the level of empowerment it provides (or disempowerment for those who used to be able to control the flow of data, information and communication).

It is not possible anymore for educational institutions to see themselves as the “factories of knowledge” for broader society. There are far too many such “factories” all over the world. This very simple fact leads one to the inevitable conclusion that all of society, including the world of academia, need to deliberately rethink the role of such institutions as well as their relationships to other social institutions.

One such a relationship that has particular relevance to South (and perhaps even Southern) Africa, is the one between industry and tertiary education. I have heard too many industrialists refer to their world as “the real world” as if somehow academics were living on another planet. But then, in truth, many academics do! Perhaps it will be more useful to view the world as a Rubic Cube, that most frustrating of puzzles. We may then consider academia as living on one plane of the cube, industry on another, the family on a third, and so on. Unfortunately for us, someone has picked up this cube and has started to madly twist away!

This rather simple analogy is used to illustrate one very simple point. Unless all elements of society find new, innovative and constructive ways to cooperate in ways that will add value and meaning to the lives of every single person, we will all have failed in achieving that which we are here for. Now, more than ever, there is a need for communication scientists to research issues facing society, not in the abstract sense, but in ways that can in practical ways help ordinary people be special people. Now, more than ever, there is a need for industry to see themselves as part of a wider society, as having a purpose that extends beyond merely making profits.

Communication, that most basic tool of human and social interaction, requires first of all a willingness to become involved. This is the challenge facing all of us, whichever face of the Rubic Cube you may find yourself on (for now!).

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Editor