COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Many countries in the developed world are currently being restructured into Post-Fordist economies or 'Information societies'. Communication technology, computers and satellites are now at the cutting edge of socio-economic development. South African decision-makers ignore these developments at their own peril. This country sits at a cross-roads. Will we see socio-economic and communication policies which facilitate South Africa's development into a post-Fordist economy or will the country be trapped into a Fordist backwater? This article argues in favour of South African's taking the plunge into an 'Information society'. More importantly, the potential for using Post-Fordist 'information technology' for creating a more democratic society is examined.

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Development is not only about the economy, education, houses and health services. It is also about human interactions. One would therefore hope that considerations on ways of building a democratic culture will be high on the agenda of development planners. In this regard, considerations on communication and culture are at stake. What is needed is to integrate media policy with the other policy work taking place in the fields of economics, education and government. Specifically, policy formulators would do well to consider the potential role that the latest communication technology can play in both the economic and cultural development

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of this country, not to mention the creation of democratic government and culture.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE BUILDING OF A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

A new mode of production - centred on information technology and instantaneous world-wide electronic communication - has become dominant in the era of multinational capitalism. Today's key economies in North America, Western Europe and the Pacific Rim are all effectively 'information societies'. The developed world has moved from an economy based on smokestacks and railroads to one based on computers and satellite telecommunications.

A smokestack economy is based on Fordist relations of production. It is a cultural and economic form associated with mass production factories of the sort developed by Henry Ford. It is an economy built upon alienated workers working eight-hour days and living in huge polluted cities. The products of these factories may have components made in four separate countries and finally assembled in a fifth, and possibly sold in a sixth. It is an economy that depends on mass production ('long-runs' and 'batches') and huge (often global) mass markets. It is an economy controlled by multi-national corporations like IBM, Shell and General Motors, which are, in effect, huge bureaucracies. The Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging complex is such a smokestack economy.

A Post-Fordist economy operates according to very different logic. A socio-econonomic shift has occured (see Harvey, 1989; Lash & Urry, 1987; Bell, 1973; and Piore & Sable, 1984). Computer-driven technology linked to instantaneous world-wide electronic communications now make it possible to profitably produce 'short-run' customized goods in factories that often operate around-the-clock using robotics. Shorter and shorter production runs become possible because factories are computerised and linked into the electronic information grid. High value products with short life spans become the norm. Speed (in innovation production and delivery) and high-level skills become the keys to economic success. Within Post-Fordism wealth is derived from knowledge, effective use of time and an efficient flow of electronic information to manage factories. Electronic communication has changed the face of knowledge production-and-flow, banking/capital flow and the relations of production. Bureaucracies (whether they be IBM or the Soviet government) have become too slow and cumbersome to deal with the needs of the Post-Fordist world and have consequently found themselves in trouble.

In similar vein, much of Africa has found itself in trouble as Fordism has blurred into Post-Fordism in the developed world. This has occured

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because most African economies were geared up to produce raw materials for Fordist economies. The developed world's Post-Fordist economies have, in many cases changed their raw material requirements. Africa's ruling elites have simply not adapted to these changes, and carry on behaving as if the old Fordist world was still in place. In addition, Post-Fordist success is premised upon speed and knowledge which are two variables in short supply in most African societies.

South Africa is located in a curious position of duality with regard to this Post-Fordist Information Age. In part, South Africa is a partially underdeveloped Third World society, where one finds a mixture of Fordist and even pre-Fordist relations of production. Yet, on the other hand, South Africa's key cities are effectively integrated into the international Post-Fordist information economy. This duality imposes important choices for policy formulators in the 'new' South Africa. In fact, in the Information Age, media and communication policy may well prove to be potentially pivotal in the development of a post- apartheid South Africa. The kind of communication system that develops during the initial reconstructive phase will have a profound impact on the nature of the emergent social order.

A number of crucial questions will need to be addressed by South Africa's in-coming policy formulators. For example, will an over- emphasis be placed on the infrastructural needs of non-information (Fordist) modes of production? Much of the discussion amongst South Africa's left-wing (including the African National Congress/ANC) involves debating ways of restructuring obsolete (Fordist) modes of production, rather than considering ways of fundamental restructuring in the direction of Post-Fordist relations of production. To some extent the ANC appears to be most concerned with developing that segment of the population who live under Pre-Fordist relations of production and integrating them into a Fordist economy. Little thought appears to have been given to the needs of developing a Post-Fordist economy.

A future South African government can choose two basic courses of action. Firstly, emphasis could be placed on reinforcing and expanding the technological infrastructures required to further the development of a Post-Fordist South African information economy.

The second course of action open to a new government will be emphasising a modernist industrial base at the expense of the information economy and communication technologies of Post-Fordism. Opting for this second course will effectively doom South Africa to a slide into 'Third Worldism' as the rest of the world moves into a new post-industrial era. South Africa has a rudimentary post-Fordist

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infrastructure; sufficiently developed to offer a launching pad to propel South Africa into a Pacific-Rim type future. A failure to expand this infrastructure, or worse still to let it run down, will effectively remove South Africa from the map of the developed world and condemn South Africans to the status of second-class world citizens.

If South Africa's potential is to be realized, South Africa will need to be fully integrated into the global electronic grid of information. However, what is to be avoided is integration into the network as a 'Third (South) World' multinational capitalist dependency where South Africans would be incorporated merely as passive uncritical 'takers' from a neo-colonial system. This is important in order that South Africans have the opportunity to be critical users of such a global system, and to be a media-trained population so as to be active contributors to such a system. Further, a serious challenge will be to demonstrate that being a part of the Information Age does not necessarily mean accepting the top-down and alienating relations of production associated with multinational capitalism (MNC). A left- democratic alternative mode of Information Age social organization can be built. This Habermas calls a "radical democratic process for the formation of public opinion" (Habermas, 1990: 19). For Habermas, the process of democratic communication should be more important than the actual content of the communication. He recognises that democratic communication is the key means to "re-distribute power". In the South African context specifically, 'participation', 'development' and 'media/ communication' need to be worked into a single programme for building a post-apartheid society with democratic (and more equally distributed) power-relationships. The South African Left, because of its ascendancy in the 1990s in the form of the ANC, may be granted the historical opportunity to demonstrate that a practical **leftist** alternative does exist to both MNC and Marxist-Leninist vanguardism.

The challenge is not merely benefiting from the latest socio-technological developments derivative of the Information Age, but also potentially enhancing democracy in South Africa by creatively using the latest media technology. The challenge is to grasp the opportunities offered by the flux of the post-apartheid reconstruction of society to demonstrate that a popular democracy can be built by co-opting the media technologies developed by MNC.

The ascendancy of the South African Left in the 1990s intercepted a specific form of MNC. The danger, however, exists that this Left might lose the struggle for meaning (to the right-wing and MNC) because of its 'marginalisation' of the importance of the superstructures as sites of

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engagement. As with the history of revolution in other societies, the South African Left has similarly demonstrated an inertia in incorporating communication, media and information technology into its vision of social reconstruction. A media policy, or at least general guidelines, are prerequisites for such reconstitution. The empowerment of all citizens through the creation of public spheres at local levels is one way of ensuring that an active/ participatory political culture permeates throughout society. Such a communication infrastructure would also create a mechanism for the on-going articulation of grassroots 'feeling'. Active public spheres could serve as brakes on the development of a national *nomenklatura* and/or oligarchy. But this potentiality requires that the Left breaks free of the limitations of orthodox historical materialism, and directly engages sites of communication and the superstructures (Louw, 1991). But if a way can be found to employ the latest communication technology creatively within a wider development programme, the rewards in terms of building a more democratic society could be enormous.

DEFINING "DEMOCRACY"

Both media and development policy will be inextricably bound up with the debate on the nature of democracy. For this reason, it is perhaps valuable to examine the notion of democracy. In particular, the two main competing visions of democracy currently used by South Africans need to be spelled out in order to at least try and take some of the semantic confusion out of future media policy debates.

The ANC's definition of democracy is premised upon three assumptions: (i) a left-wing vision of direct participation; (ii) a communal understanding of society (in which "the community" is stressed over the individual); and (iii) the notion of rule by the majority (which effectively means 50% plus one person in an elective system). These assumptions derive, to a considerable extent, from the organizational style of the United Democratic front (UDF) in the 1980s in which political activists were directly accountable to their constituencies on an almost face-to-face, day-to-day basis. The rhetoric of the 1980s stressed the notions of "accountability to the community" and "majority rule" as a goal.

The ANC's vision of democracy works best for small group politics, especially at the local level. It is a conception of governance which captures the best elements of democracy in the Platonic dialogue or Greek city-state sense. A problem potentially arises with regard to transfering the UDF's small-group direct-participation activism into a model for governing millions. When millions are involved, however, the result could become a plebiscitary democracy, which appears to facilitate direct participation and grassroots community power, but

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which actually becomes a sham in which elites, in reality, manipulate the masses.

The NP's definition of democracy is premised upon three different assumptions: (i) representative democracy; (ii) individual participation in the democratic process; and (iii) the notion of pluralist checks-and-balances. The NP vision is consequently much closer to the understanding of democracy as practiced in the USA. Hence the NP rejects, for example, the ANC's majoritarian principles and communal vision of society, in favour of a conception of democracy in which individuals fight for their particular interests by organizing themselves into a (pluralistic) range of political groups. The right to differ from the majority is stressed in this vision. This NP vision of democracy stresses the need to protect minority positions from the so- called "tyranny of the majority". Further, this pluralist view of democracy in no way attempts to facilitate direct participation in the process of government by 'the masses'. Instead, government is seen to be carried out by elected representatives who are called to account at regular elections. In this form of government it is easy for the elected to lose touch with the electorate.

The form which South Africa's media and development policy will ultimately assume will hinge upon which of the above assumptions of democracy (or compromises between them) is adopted. The struggle over definitions is a long way from over. But whatever the outcome, those working in the policy field need at least to be personally clear which of the above assumptions underpin their own thinking.

ISSUES RELATING TO "ACCESS"

A characteristic feature of the South African Left's thinking on the media involves the issue of how to make media infrastructures more accessible to the country's citizenry. It is a concern that has direct implications for the building of a democratic culture, as well as for the process of development. Thinking on this topic is centrally concerned with finding mechanisms for empowering disadvantaged grassroots communities by enabling them to **talk for themselves**. Notions of what it means to create accessible media have often become entangled with talk of "democratizing" the media. The favoured mechanisms for achieving an accessible media are community newsletters, community radio, grassroots media training projects and Media Resource Centres. The popular "struggle" of the 1980s has deeply etched itself into the consciousness of left-wing South Africans, as represented by the ANC. This popular struggle was premised upon a bottom-up grassroots mobilization. It was a genre of resistance that impacted on media activists as well. In this regard the operation of the *Grassroots* newsletter in Cape Town from 1980

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to 1985 (see Louw, 1989) proved to be an especially central 'media access' project in terms of the impact it had on the thinking of South African media activists.

For the ANC, as a result of the 1980s UDF experience, the principle of accessible media has come to be taken for granted. In fact, it has become almost fetishized, so that there is little discussion as to whether the principle of accessibility is in fact suitable for the contemporary South African ('post-struggle') context. The NP camp, on the other hand, has as yet not even come to terms with what this discourse about accessibility is all about. The way in which the ANC and NP camps use the term "community media" in completely different ways perhaps best illustrates this discursive disjuncture. In general, those within the NP camp appear either bemused or irritated by this leftist discourse. Certainly there is, as yet, no dialogue over this issue between the two key South African constituencies.

The issue of making media accessible is, for better or worse, now a part of the South African media policy debate. However, discussion of the issue needs to be taken much further. The NP camp needs to at least give some consideration to the left-wing challenge that only subsidized community-access media infrastructures will provide the many disadvantaged South Africans with a media voice. Failure to provide these sections of the population with media voices could be seen as anti-democratic. The Left, on the other hand, needs to consider the NP challenge that the ANC's vision of the media tied to the twin notions of "democracy = majoritarianism" plus direct "people's participation, could effectively become anti-democratic. From a pluralist conception of democracy, this ANC vision is anti-democratic. At heart, the problem is that South Africa's left and right wings believe in different definitions of democracy, and hence they talk past each other even while apparently using the same words.

RETHINKING 'DEVELOPMENT'

Creating a democratic culture in South Africa cannot be divorced from the wider development strategies to be adopted. Some creative thinking will be required in this regard.

A democratic public sphere requires, firstly, an infrastructure that facilitates active grassroots participation – ie. constitutionally guaranteed 'access' to local and national communication processes. However, such access should be more than a legal 'paper' right; it should be underpinned by guaranteed access to resources. The latter could be facilitated by a state media subsidy system (Louw, 1990; 1992). A nation-wide network of Media Resource Centres (MRCs) would be one useful form. Creating MRCs need not entail building new infrastructures, and/or a massive resource outlay. Every school,

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college and university in the country already has some of the infrastructure required by an MRC. MRC development could occur through a re-arrangement of existing resources around such educational nodes. There already exists a massive countrywide network of churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, etc which could provide a significant rudimentary shell for MRC construction. Secondly, the creation of a fully functioning 'public sphere' would be impossible without a 'media literate' population, intellectually equipped to use all the potential available in contemporary, and still to be developed, information technologies. So, for example, the (neo-Luddite) notion that some technologies are only appropriate for the 'First (North) World' can only serve to retard social progress in contexts like South Africa.

The argument is often heard that South Africa is a 'developing society' without the necessary funds to allocate to such a scheme in a post-apartheid media. Sections of Left and liberal opinion argue that funding of basic housing is more important than media during the post-apartheid reconstruction. Housing is important, but so too is democracy. A participative media infrastructure (and the training to use it) represents, in the long run, a greater guarantee of housing for all: by empowering people with democratic communications, all would have access to make their demands heard on an on-going basis (for housing, jobs, schools, etc). The key to democratic development is to give people the means to decide for themselves what they want, and the channels to articulate their wants.

Another argument against media development is that the masses are not 'ready' for such 'First World' infrastructures. This sort of logic applauds the rural-peasant-based 'African Model' of development (Barratt-Brown, 1990: chapter 14). This is a strangely 'patronising' and 'colonial' mindset. It implies that Africans are not ready for so-called First World technology and that Africa needs 'appropriate technology' (Robinson, 1979). 'Appropriate' means 'less sophisticated' which, in a sense implies keeping Africa locked into Fordist or even Pre-Fordist relations of production. This effectively means keeping Africa 'backward'. It is unlikely that South Africans would opt for the 'backward looking' route if given the choice. South Africa has the resources to integrate virtually all its citizens into an urban-based Information society within a reasonable time-frame, if the will exists to do so. But this requires a significant rearrangement of existing resources via a 'development scheme' to create the infrastructures and provide the necessary training. The 'not-ready' argument is a short-sighted interpretation of 'development' and a condemnation of South Africa to the status of a 'Third (South) World' society disconnected

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from the global Post-Fordist information economy. It need not mean massive **additional** outlays. Rather, it means a creative 'arrangement' of available 'development' funding. Infrastructures and training required for democratic communication would become part of overall reconstruction/development plans.

The challenge is to use the possibilities and spaces of the Information Age to construct a democratic culture. The Cape's *Grassroots* community media project, in particular, demonstrated, on a micro-scale, that the concepts of a 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1974) and 'popular communication' (White, 1980) are not merely utopian. If the ANC wins the first one person one vote election, it could grant the Left the opportunity to demonstrate this on a much larger scale. But to succeed, there will be a need to develop answers to the problems of social organisation and social struggle in an era during which the superstructures are so dominant. The 'top down' MNC relations of production and communication do not have to form the basis of either media or social organisation in an information society. The Left must creatively use the democratic possibilities inherent in the Information Age to overcome the legacy of 'socialism-without-democracy' in Eastern Europe. This will, in part, require considering that work already done in the area of popular and participative community media.

THEORIZING POPULAR MEDIA, PARTICIPATIVE COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

During the 1980s, the South African 'alternative' media (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991) were influenced by both leftist 'popular' and socialist-democratic principles; some from external sources, and some of local origin.

Leftist debates on democratising South African media fall into three subcategories.

Firstly, theoretical identification of participatory media structures, and how to create such structures.

Secondly, the encouragement of society-wide **democratic practices** and the media's role in them. How to generate democratic practices and dialogue that penetrate into every sector of society, through to the grassroots; and to what extent democratic practices will be **assisted** by a democratic media structure, are prime questions.

Thirdly, how to prevent the emergence of a new (minority) ruling group accumulating power and wealth at the expense of the majority. Two possible South African distortions of leftist practice in this regard would be a *nomenklatura* system, or a co-option of sectors of the Left into comprador arrangements with MNC.

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Various projects have attempted to institutionalise the above notions into media practice. Examples are Chile (Mattelart, 1983); Nicaragua (Mattelart, 1986; White, 1990); Mocambique (de Vasconcelos, 1990); community media projects in Britain (Nigg & Wade, 1980); resource centre projects in South Africa (Karlsson, 1989; Criticos, 1989); and the South African progressive alternative-media (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991). The latter attempted to prevent the granting of a privileged position to media activists/workers; and to prevent uni-directional (top-down) communication which would turn the masses into mere passive recipients of media messages. As Mattelart states:

> The left, even if it goes along with the rules of the market, cannot allow its publications to remain passive objects. A new culture cannot be imposed. A new culture is created by the various revolutionary sectors; they create it by participating organisationally in its creation (Mattelart, 1983: 326).

Participation is the key word in organising popular media (Mattelart & Siegelaub, 1983; White, 1980). Christians (1987) has argued the need to move away from the "negative freedom" of the Enlightenment and towards the positive freedom of a **participative culture**. He draws on both Robert White and Paulo Freire (1972) to develop the notion of communication as "open spaces". 'Spaces' are 'public spheres' within which positive freedom can be exercised. This notion is the very antithesis of the 'culture industry' (and the 'Enlightenment culture') described by Adorno & Horkheimer (1979) and Marcuse (1968). This kind of participative media offers a vehicle for counteracting the social anomie and alienation associated with being 'controlled', rather than being 'in control'. It also opens up spaces for the full articulation and growth of popular culture.

Journalists as 'facilitators' of social communication replaces the idea of them as 'originators' of media messages. The media should rather be operated as a **mechanism** to facilitate social dialogue/democracy and an on-going learning process. This is especially important in South Africa where decades of neo-fascist rule stunted the development of an indigenous 'democratic culture' (amongst both the ruling classes and most of the ruled). A mechanism for institutionalising dialogue is required so that an active grassroots political culture can directly impact on national policy. (The latter is a reasonable guarantee against the possible rise of a co-opted comprador class, and/or *nomenklatura* oligarchy). Mattelart argues in this regard that the media should be seen as:

> mechanisms allowing the workers to develop their level of awareness, and hence their ability to assess and give opinions about published products

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and thereby to avoid the risk of manipulation by those with longer experience (Mattelart, 1983).

Ideally, such participation should be implemented during the transition (negotiation) phase leading to democratic rule in South Africa. In reality, it seems unlikely that this will be possible because the non- leftist parties to the negotiations will block such developments. Until the Left comes to power no funds will be allocated to the creation of the sort of communication infrastructure needed. Another impediment is the 'top-down' rhetorical posturing that is characteristic of transition periods. In addition, the ANC has demonstrated, during the first three years of the 1990s, that it lacks sufficient resources to even develop an effective internal dialogical structure (able to make its own constituency effectively part of real decision-making) during this transition phase. Of even greater concern, mainstream thinking within the ANC appears to still be locked into a Fordist mindset in which the development of a (neo-socialist) smokestack econony is the goal. There appears to be no vision within the ANC of the possibilities of Post-Fordism for the economic and social development of South Africa.

TEACHING MEDIA TO BUILD DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

In examining all aspects of cultural production and consumption, including media and the teaching of media, two fundamental (and interrelated) questions are: who benefits? And who loses? At heart, these are questions of power and context; and questions of how power affects cultural meanings and practices (Boyd-Barrett & Braham, 1987; Punter, 1986).

If the objective is to empower all citizens through public spheres, then 'critical' and 'aware' media producers and users are required. For Habermas, this gets to the heart of the leftist project in the contemporary world: to use the public sphere to 'generate ferment', and work for a redistribution of power' (Habermas, 1990). A prerequisite for a functioning popular communication is a citizenry that is fully equipped to make use of the 'democratic spaces' provided by information technology. Both media producers and users need to be taught to be continually aware of the power relationships underpinning media messages (and media technology) (Tomaselli & Prinsloo, 1990). In this way they will learn to understand the social implications of how they, and others, are relating to the media. Journalists, for example, should be taught to go beyond merely knowing how to produce a news story. They also need to consider who benefits/who loses through them using a particular style of news-gathering? Why have they been taught to do their job in a particular way? Why are newsrooms and the wider media-institutions configured the way they are? Why is certain media technology developed

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(and by whom), while other areas of research-and- development are left fallow?

Similarly, media users should be made aware and more questioning of existing (and possible) patterns of media ownership, news selection, television programming, etc. Both producers and users should be educated on how existing media-relations (including the influence of both State intervention and market forces) may be manipulating them, and may be curtailing the possibilities inherent in communication-technology. Media can improve democracy through facilitating more social interaction and by making information, entertainment and a participative political culture more readily available for all. If Habermas is correct, once people know the possibilities they will demand access to this potential. Skewed power relationships will not be tolerated once people know they are skewed (Habermas, 1990).

This requires 'teaching the media' in a particular way: an understanding of context needs to be incorporated into all media training and media education. Linked to this is the notion of social struggle. Media literacy alerts people to the nature of struggles occurring; the way those involved in the struggles manipulate and/or are manipulated by the media; and how certain players in the struggle have advantages afforded them by their direct ownership of, or behind- the-scenes influence over, media institutions. A public with such knowledge (of media, context and struggle) would become critical 'readers' of media. A successful media education programme would make the very notion of 'user' and/or 'consumer' of media somewhat redundant because a media-literate public would be less dependent and/ or more akin to active co-producers of media-messages.

Teaching all future (and present) media producers and users about the relationship between power and ideas would make for a more 'rational' use of media. Both would benefit from media-instruction that contextualises media in these terms. The effect should be to help human beings regain control of the media (and the social communication process), and overcome the 'culture industry'. This would, in effect 're-humanise' the media, by potentially creating a social dialogue, or public sphere. But an important pre-requisite is for people to learn about the media in its contextual setting. This knowledge will enable people to become active co-manipulators of media variables and thereby become co-creators of culture and hegemony. This notion amounts to turning the Frankfurt School on its head: the School's members were (rightly) concerned at the way in which the culture industry was able to co-opt even the most oppositional of forces, thereby 'killing' the revolutionary 'dialectic'. By inverting the School's logic we can arrive at the notion of an

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attempt at counter-co-option: the opportunities and gaps offered by the superstructures developed by MNC should be co-opted for the purposes of building a democratic participative culture.

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

Democracy requires an involved and active citizenry. Citizens need to be active participants in a multi-directional social dialogue. As Enzensberger argues, the electronic media offer the framework for such a discourse. People need to (i) understand the media; (ii) understand its possibilities and limitations; (iii) have access to the media; (iv) be able to critically 'read' media messages; (v) be in a position to make an on-going input into a plural media system if they so wish; (vi) recognise the importance of their participation as citizens if democracy is to work; and (vii) believe that their participation does make a difference (ie. feel 'empowered'). Within such a democratic system, media workers will facilitate social dialogue, rather than be the 'experts' with sole access to the production of messages - in other words, the antithesis of 'top-down' (and manipulative) media systems in both Western Liberal-democracies and in the Marxist-Leninist state socialisms.

Educating people in 'how to read' media critically - ie. to 'see through' the appearance of 'self-explanatoriness' is a starting point. Media literacy would seek to generate a recognition that all messages are 'constructs' and carry with them the hidden ideology of both their creator and of the creator's context. The South African Left have generally had little difficulty in 'seeing through' the ideological constructs of the NP (eg. South African Broadcasting Corporation) and Afrikaans Press) or of capital (eg. the English conservative-liberal Press). But they have often been less successful in seeing through the ideology of white-owned 'black' newspapers like *City Press* or *The Sowetan*; and very uncritical when it comes to reading left-wing media texts. The latter are seen as 'truth'[4]. In building a left- hegemony the danger exists of replacing one form of closed sycophantic media (seen during NP-rule) with another equally closed and sycophantic (but leftist) communication system. Such a 'flip-flop' occurred, for example, in Zimbabwe. A democracy based upon participative-citizens requires the capacity to read all media texts critically, even those with which one might 'agree'.

CITIZENS AS MEDIA PRODUCERS

Educating critical message-receivers is insufficient, however. This is because even critical reception implies a second-class status; and/or a *de facto* acceptance of the superior position of the message- producers. If an interactive-democratic (popular) communication system is to be constructed, then ultimately everybody has to be made a

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producer (or at least potential producer) of media messages. This should not be dismissed as a utopian idea, not even in 'developing societies' (see Nair & White, 1987). The Post-Fordist information technologies through which society can solve the impediments in creating fully popular-democratic (dialogical) communication systems, already exist. (The proliferation of E-Mail Bulletin Boards in the First World offers some insight into the possibilities available). The challenge now is to educate citizens (on a mass basis) how to use this media technology such that all can potentially be involved in the creative process of making communication. The task is to persuade policy makers to allocate the necessary resources to solve the problems and to create the popular communication infrastructures so as to realise latent possibilities. One way to nudge society into creating such a network and/or solving any impediments is to create a media literate population who know what possibilities await it in a hegemony re-ordered around a popular communication system.

But because creating a fully-interactive media network will take a long time and considerable resources, a start has to be made somewhere. It would be unrealistic to implement a 'public sphere' network that completely blanketed the country on day one. Rather, it would have to be built incrementally. Because of the growing impact of media on the 'second hand' world in which people now 'live', it may well be that in our contemporary world it is far more important to teach school pupils (and even those at tertiary level) how to critically read an everyday media text rather than how to critically read Shakespeare. Once one has learnt to be a critical receiver, one by definition 'understands media' (and how it is produced, and its possibilities). Thereafter, the transition to becoming an active co-producer of media messages is not such a big step. The potential rewards for being successful in employing communication technology in the building of a interactive (popular-dialogical) communication system would be the creation of both a democratic culture and socio-political system in South Africa. As important, coming to terms with the application of such communication technologies would result in South African developing the potential for becoming a fully-fledged member of a Post-Fordist global economy instead of slidding into an excluded, economically-marginal nation, which appears to be the fate of the rest of Africa.

FOOTNOTES

1. Trying to apply the principles of direct participation of the masses in decision-making can very easily be manipulated into a plebescitary democracy in which the ruling elite creates the sham of democracy by both framing questions in a certain way (so that they more-or-less

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guarantee themselves the mandate they want), and by apparently involving millions of their citizens in a snap decision- making process.

In the USA context such plebescitary logic has resulted in some thought being given to questions of how to apply the electronic media for the creation of a participatory democracy based on an electronic polling system (see Toffler, 1991:357). In South Africa where millions do not even have access to electricity and where even basic literacy (never mind computer literacy) is confined to a minority, discussions of an electronic information system being used for democratic polling could be considered inappropriate. And in the short term this is correct. However, for the long-term, such notions need not be entirely dismissed. Hence, South Africans could at least keep the issue of applying the electronic media for building democracy in mind when formulating and executing future media, education and economic policy.

2. See *Media Development* special issue, 'Electronic Networking in the Third World', Vol XXXIV, (4), 1987, pp. 2-28, for example, on the possibilities that 'electronic networking' has for assisting development in the South/Third World.

3. See also the Philippines experience as described by Eleanor R. Dionisio, 'Small media, Big victory' *Media Development*, Vol XXXIII, (4), 1986, pp. 6-8.

4. This grading of the 'ability'/'inability' of Leftists to 'read' media texts is derived from a series of ('Durban Media Trainers Group') workshops run by this author for various left-wing activists during 1990.

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