INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND WORLD AFFAIRS

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Summary

One of the key factors defining the historical character of the 20th century was the revolution in communications technology that made the world a smaller place, threatened the power of governments and other institutions that traditionally controlled ideas, and created entire new forms of economic production. The television, satellites, facsimile, the Internet, cellular phones, compact disks and digital computers are part of a long list of communication technologies that did not even exist in 1900. But by 2000 it was difficult to conceive of a functioning world without them. While the very idea of an international society was given more currency by these new technologies, it is ironic that they have provided that very same international society with the challenge of regulating them and devising and enforcing rules for how they should be used.

Thinkers from various fields have sought to theorize the role that international communication plays in the ecology of both domestic and international societies. These theories have focused on different dimensions of the power of communication technologies and actors who use them. They include theories of how various types of media foster different types of imperial control. There have also been theories of how these new technologies cause a reconsideration of the very concept of "community", where the old notion of communities being linked to geographic location can be

replaced by communities linked by interest regardless of where their members might be on earth.

A critical understanding of the role of international communication in "sustainable development" must be based on an informed understanding of the nature of these technologies, the history of international initiatives to regulate them, and an examination of what paradigms have, are and might be used to frame policy for these technologies. That is the mission of this article.

1. Introduction

When we talk about "international communication", or communication in international relations, we are really talking about seven dimensions of the topic: technology, telecommunication, cultural products, news, mail, cultural relations and language. These seven dimensions account for all political actions concerning international communication. These political actions are: the creation of international organizations concerned with communication; the creation of law regulating international communication; international conferences, mobilization and other actions to exchange ideas by parties concerned with international communication; government paradigms and policies; actions by firms and other players in the economic market; and paradigms and policies of international organizations aimed at regulating international communication or development.

In this introduction an overview of these seven dimensions is provided. The later sections will explain the most critical issues and events that have profound relevance to the relationship between international communication and sustainable development. However, some basic definitions must first be made clear.

What exactly is "communication"? The words "communication" and "community" both share the Latin root *communis*, meaning common. From this root we got the other Latin word *communicare*, meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "to make common to many, share, impart, divide". Communication therefore refers to some form of sharing. Indeed, communication (when it is used as a verb) - "[t] he imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)" - cannot occur unless something is shared. And the logical consequence of sharing is that two or more persons would have something in common. Therefore, one of the definitions of community is "common character; quality in common; commonness, agreement, identity". What this all means is that communication is essential for the creation of something known as a "community" at both the domestic and international levels. Implanted in the assertion that there is such a thing as an "international community" must be the assumption that the members are communicating.

Communication is vital to sustaining that community because it is only through communication that values, for example, can be shared and made common to the group. We simply cannot have a world community unless the members of that community, be they states, organizations or individuals, are communicating. This fundamental point

explains why it is so important to understand the role of communications in international relations.

Technology is a key concept in the discourse on international communication because technologies are the key variables in the ability of humankind to create communities. Technology can be defined as the application of knowledge for a purpose. Humankind has struggled to overcome two main difficulties with respect to communication: space and time. Human history has been a long struggle to solve the problem of communicating (sharing) over long distances in as brief a time possible. All communication technologies reflect the peculiar concerns about communication of the societies that invent them. For example, one of the legendary stories in the international news industry is how Paul Julius Reuter (the founder of the Reuters news agency) used 40 carrier pigeons in 1850 to fly stock market prices between Brussels and Aachen to compensate for the deficiencies of the European telegraph network. Similarly, technologies are employed to deal with the particular concerns of the regions where they are developed while other areas are left to benefit, or be damaged, by these inventions much later. That was the case with long distance telegraph cable. It is significant that the first transatlantic cable was between North America and Europe, not Africa and South America, or in the Asia region. The technology's use and ecology, like many others developed from the mid-800s on, reflected patterns of international commerce, not necessarily concerns about human deprivation.

The most common international communication technologies have been those in telecommunications, the second dimension being discussed here. The most basic telecommunication technologies are the telephone and radio. The capabilities they bring have been significant factors in the quest to establish local and international communities. But the specific nature of these technologies has also meant that international cooperation to plan and regulate them was required at a level never seen before in human history. It is for this reason that the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was the first international governmental organization.

Another set of communication technologies has made it possible to store and retrieve large quantities of information. They deal with the problem of communicating over space and time in a different way from the basic telecommunication technologies. They allow sound and images to be packaged, transported and sold to anyone in any place. These technologies include photography, cinema and phonograms. They have enabled the creation of what has been described as "cultural industries", producing a phenomenon known as "cultural products". Concerns about the diffusion of cultural products via international trade and mass media led to the international debates over "cultural imperialism". Cultural products have become a major topic in international trade negotiations. The world's chief exporter of these products, the United States, complained that its cultural industries were suffering economic harm when people in foreign countries made multiple video and audio recordings of American movies, music and computer software for sale without compensating the original makers. Governments of net importers of cultural products complained that foreign cultural products, especially from the United States, were a threat to their cultural sovereignty, killing off the traditional forms of cultural expression that made their countries and regions unique.

Just as modern communication technologies have facilitated the diffusion of cultural products to far corners of the world, they have enabled the creation of a global news system. The main arteries of that system for most of the 20th century were the big international news agencies, the five largest being Reuters (with headquarters in London), Agence France-Presse (Paris), ITAR-TASS (Moscow), United Press International (Washington, D.C.), and the Associated Press (New York). Satellite and video technologies led to the addition of video news agencies, such as APTV, WTN and Reuters. Then in the 1980s came international television networks devoted to 24-hour news and opinion, the most famous of which was the Cable News Network (CNN), based in Atlanta, the United States. Another international news service, Bloomberg, began as a financial information network, but it took advantage of its youth to employ the newest computer, audio and video technologies to provide a variety of news to subscribers via specialized terminals. There are other media from outside North America and Europe in the international news system but their abilities to collect and disseminate news are dwarfed by the big media. The constituencies these smaller news organizations reach are not always in the epicenters of world political and economic power, so they still do not have the influence of the North American and European agencies which set the agenda of what is important for the decision-makers and leaders of public opinion in places like London, Washington, and Paris. It was concerns about such inequalities that sparked the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate at the United Nations. (See *International Communications and Media Networks*.)

After a discussion of advanced electronic technologies it would seem that the mail would be a relatively uncontroversial dimension of international communication. Pen and paper are among the oldest and simplest forms of communication. However, the mail is one of the most complicated topics in international communication. Like telecommunication, it has the distinction of having one of the oldest international governmental organizations. The Universal Postal Union (UPU) originated with an international congress in Berne, Switzerland, in 1874. It facilitates a global postal system by regarding the whole world as a single postal territory. Through the UPU, postal authorities agree on the rules for what and how items should be mailed, and they compensate each other for handling each other's mail. But the concept of "mail" had to be broadened in the later years of the 20th century. The Internet brought "electronic mail" or "e-mail", and advances in jet plane and computer technologies meant that private companies other than government postal authorities were able to provide mail service, often faster and more efficiently than post offices could. The monopoly of governments in the area of mail distribution was broken. The UPU has had to respond to these developments. As an international governmental organization it has also had to deal with states trying to settle scores from other arenas through the forum of the UPU.

A sixth dimension of international communication is "cultural relations", a blanket term that refers to various forms of international exchange among people. These exchanges can occur via mass media, through educational exchanges, language training or tourism. The term refers to forms of contact meant to construct international understanding and empathy, and foster a world society, as well as strategic communications that aim to give one actor in international politics an advantage over another. The reason why strategic international communication is considered by this author and others a form of

international cultural relations is that many of the practices intended, or perceived, to create a pacific global system actually originated in the strategic activities of states. Institutions that actually have the benign image of running programs to develop international understanding actually are also means by which nation-states conduct their public relations and try to win public opinion and markets in foreign countries. Such bodies include the British Council (established in 1935) and BBC World Service (1932) of the United Kingdom, the Alliance Française (1883) of France, the Japan Foundation (1972), the United States Information Agency (1953), the Goethe Institute of Germany (1951), and the Cervantes Institute of Spain (1991). These countries can afford to maintain international short-wave broadcasting services, educational exchange schemes, and language training programs to maintain their good images. Because institutionalized, international, cultural relations of this sort are financially and technologically intensive it means that only a small proportion of actors in international affairs have this capability.

Although language is considered last in the list, it is one of the most critical issues in international communication. Some estimates of the number of languages spoken in the world have ranged from between 4,000 to 6,000. The topic of language is often mired in controversy. Many disputes begin with the very definition of what is a language, as opposed to, say, a dialect. Then decisions have to be made about the teaching and use of languages. Should there be one official language or more than one, especially in countries with several languages? Should a foreign language be adopted as the official language? Who should be made to learn and speak a language? What rights do linguistic minorities have? When a decision is made to provide government jobs and services to specific linguistic groups, what message does that send to those who do not speak those languages? What should be the official languages of international organizations? Are written languages more important than spoken languages? These are just a few of the questions that language policy specialists study.

Although by the end of the century English had become the most popular second language in the world, the problems caused by language choice were far from resolved. Native speakers of other tongues were not abandoning their languages for English, and many countries were still trying to balance the demands of competing linguistic groups. Language has been a challenge to international organizations because they both help and harm the search for easy solutions. Organizations such as UNESCO help by paying attention to minority languages and developing programs to preserve linguistic diversity. But at the same time international organizations, in order to run efficiently, select specific languages as their "official" languages, effectively giving privilege to the speakers of those tongues.

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Biographical Sketch

Mark Dacosta Alleyne (BA, Howard; M.Phil., D.Phil., Oxford; Rhodes Scholar) has had an extensive career in international affairs and journalism, working for Caribbean media and being a freelance broadcaster for the BBC World Service in London in the Topical Tapes and Caribbean services. He has taught at Hampshire College, The American University, and Loyola University-Chicago, where he was Director of the National Center for Freedom of Information Studies. He held the prestigious Research Fellowship at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, Columbia University, 1993-94. Currently he is on the faculty of the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign). He is the author of two scholarly books - *International Power and International Communication* (1995), and *News Revolution: Political and Economic Decisions About Global Information* (1997) which was nominated for the Outstanding Book Award by the International Communication Section of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. His scholarly work has appeared in a number of journals, including the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Communication, Media Development, Journalism Quarterly*, and *Intermedia.* He has traveled extensively in the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and South America and is fluent in Spanish.