

COMMUNICATION'S AMBIGUOUS DYNAMICS

**BERNARD
MIEGE**

Introduction

The theme of the 1995 IAMCR conference comes naturally to mind as soon as one begins to examine the various initiatives which have marked European communication over the last twenty years. Bringing with it the promise of less hierarchical social relations, communication has, indeed, had a whole series of consequences, thanks to the flexibility of its methods and the malleability of the techniques which it promotes. Few observers — apart from a small number of authors well-informed about the theories and strategies of “transnationalisation” — had hitherto imagined the extent of these consequences. For it would appear that the development of communication has not only upset established practices and out of date structures, it has also “undermined” national and cultural identities which, reinforced by two world wars, had previously seemed particularly resistant to change. The most obvious effect of the growth of communication has been to weaken the nation-state, until recently well-entrenched in its certainties. Handmaiden of liberal ideology, communication has considerably accelerated cultural and commercial exchanges in the West. And in Eastern Europe it has helped prepare the way for overturning what everyone had previously thought were well-established authoritarian political regimes.

It is worth examining the powers which we habitually associate with communication: powers, which are as often associated with the virtues of modernity as they are feared or criticised for their possibilities of manipulation when placed in certain hands. For communication is commonly considered as having the power to transgress national frontiers and identity differences and to create new horizons. A reliance on communication carries with it an implicit, **a priori** assumption that the changes thus facilitated and brought about will break down existing frameworks. Inversely, the leaders of closed or backward-looking political regimes are acutely aware of how difficult it is to control currently available, low-cost and potentially accessible techniques. The model of the

**Bernard Miège
is Professor of
Communication
and Director
of GRESEC,
University Stendahl,
Grenoble.**

**Translated by
Alan Marshall.**

“global city” would thus appear to be in the process of establishing itself with the result that, in Europe at least, an entire period characterised by inward-looking attitudes and centuries-old oppositions is now being called into question.

Numerous studies, which have been carried out in this field, raise many questions and provoke a certain anxiety. Above all, however, it seems to me that this subject should only be approached by way of a detour, for it is necessary, first of all, to evaluate the importance of several deep-rooted, long-term, movements which affect communication or are implied by its development. Only once we have done this, can we begin to analyse the “territorial” impact of communication: an impact which is all the more difficult to apprehend given that predictions and assertions are rather more common than hard facts in this particular field of study.

Before dealing with these movements, I would like first to make three observations.

Firstly, as we approach the end of the second millennium, world communication is on the point of entering a new stage, or at least of passing a new “threshold,” which can be easily enough perceived in the actions, strategies, and policies currently being pursued by various actors. The economic and social stakes involved in the creation of new systems are at the heart of a debate, whose impact is felt well beyond the restricted milieu of communication specialists. In Europe at least, the society which is taking form will be increasingly influenced by communication and its techniques. Needless to say, utopian assertions are as omnipresent as they always have been in the past and continue to do little to clarify the debate: we know that virtual images are not about to replace “real” images and that high capacity networks are not on the point of creating a society in which communications techniques will be universally available and in which each and everyone will be able to communicate freely in real time. Over the last twenty-five years we have become accustomed to such largely promotional assertions, and we have acquired a rather more critical approach to them. (It should be remarked that not all intellectuals share such a justifiably prudent attitude: some are excessively fascinated by technological promises while others are excessively apocalyptic in their outlook.) However, our prudence should not prevent us from identifying a certain number of real changes which have taken place recently and whose exact nature it is important to analyse.

My second observation is that, in accounting for movements in the field of communication, there have been a certain number of “partial” scientific advances. The range of theories which we now have at our disposal is undoubtedly richer than that twenty years ago. It has widened and is no longer limited to the empirico-functionalist or cybernetic models which were dominant in the past. Numerous disciplines are now closely involved in analysing the media: the sociology of technology, culture and social interactions, the semiotics of sound and images, industrial economics, public policy studies, and the pragmatics of linguistics, to name only a few. These various fields often adopt a comparative methodological approach, when they are not actively co-operating in joint analyses. In addition, philosophical approaches and social theories (such as the various versions of post-modernism) are also closely involved in communication studies, in conjunction or in parallel with the above-mentioned disciplines. Though conceptual diversity encourages a more open approach to the complexity of phenomena, it has not necessarily led to a better understanding of the

