By Stewart Ferguson

On November 10th and 11th, the Institute for Canadian-American Studies held its annual seminar at the University of Windsor. The occasion, formerly known as the Canadian-American seminar (Can-Am seminar) brings together experts from business, government, and academia to discuss issues relevant to cooperation and understanding between Canada and the U.S. The topics of these annual seminars are chosen from competitive submissions, and this year's seminar was designed and organized by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Windsor. The title of the seminar was "Accountability and Responsibility in North American Communication Systems: Future Perspectives."

It is appropriate that Canada should be committed to developing better understanding of the processes and social consequences of communication systems. The history of the development of Canada is, in large measure, the history of the development of communications. The geographic and ethnographic makeup of Canada makes it particularly sensitive to communication processes and to the implications for new dimensions of communication inherent in the new and projected technologies. The development of Communication Studies as an area of academic study and the bringing together of scholars and experts of international reputation in communications in this latest seminar are encouraging indicators. They point to a new level of awareness of the importance to society of better understanding and appropriate management of communication systems. Presentations and discussion took place under the following headings:

- The Implications of Expanding Communication Delivery Systems
- Communications as a Public Utility: Reconsiderations
- Private Industry and Government: The Optimum Mix
- The Future Roles of Regulatory Agencies and the Courts
- Public Intervention: Who Speaks for the Consumer?

In many ways, the direction of the discussion was predictable. Early in the proceedings, the official American approach of the sanctity of the first amendment and the infallibility of the free market place as the ultimate form of control were expounded by Professor De Sola Pool. This stimulated the equally predictable response that the cost structure of the communications industry made the market place far from free. Although appeals were made "not to waste time redefining freedom," at times the discussion showed a disregard of the accepted definitions of freedom and the long-respected distinction between freedom and license. Areopagitica was championed as the model of a justification for the removal of government control. It was suggested that differences between the Miltonic government and the twentieth century democratically elected government and between the purposes of the controls of the two types of government were not mentioned. On the other hand, much of the discussion on the need for socially responsible media was also somewhat unrealistically
The dilemma is best captured in the section heading "Private Industry and Government: The Optimum Mix." Perhaps the question could be restated as "What is the optimum level of compromise?" The endless and monotonous debate on this issue comes about because, although the need to serve the public welfare is widely accepted, no one is particularly anxious to pay for this service. Further complicating the issue is a belief that commercially sponsored communications are free to the public. The parsimony of public interest is also seen in the discussions of the roles and responsibilities of the industrial communications giants such as Bell and A.T. & T. They are accused of operating on self interest rather than serving a public interest for which the public is unwilling to pay knowingly.

To describe this recurrent dialogue as a debate is singularly appropriate, as the form has many of the ritualistic characteristics of the formal debate. One of the conference participants, in a somewhat different context, made reference to the ritual of the potlatch. In some regards, the collection of figures at a conference of this kind tends to stimulate potlatch form, where the objective is the confirmation of status. This is a consequence of the form of the event, rather than fault on the part of the participants. The effect is reminiscent of a Nijinski Benefit Gala Performance held in London in 1950. Just about every distinguished dancer in the world was on the program and appeared on stage for a minute or so and indulged in what were, in effect impersonations of themselves. It does seem unfortunate that no satisfactory way has yet been evolved where the collective talents of such a distinguished group of participants could better be canalized.

There were, however, some very positive aspects to the seminar. Students who attended the conference were enthusiastic about the opportunity to hear and meet figures whom they had previously only heard of or met through their readings. Many students also remarked on the way the conference had put their readings and class discussions in a much larger social context and consequently reinforced their relevancy and immediacy.

It would be remiss in such a distinguished gathering to mention some participants and omit others; so a full list of the contributors follows:

JEAN J. FORTIER, Vice-Chairman of CRTC
JOHN M. GALVIN, Senior Vice-President of Aetna Life and Casualty, and Chief Executive Officer of the Diversified Business Division
HENRY GELLER, Communication Fellow at the Aspen Institute Program on Communication and Society
PETER GRANT, Practices law with McCarthy & McCarthy, and is a special counsel to the CRTC
HARTFORD N. GUNN, Vice Chairman of the Public Broadcasting Service
BENJAMIN HOOKS, Head of the N.A.A.C.P., and a former commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission
GREG KANE, General Counsel of the Consumer's Association of Canada
L. DUANE KIRKPATRICK, Vice President of Dean Witter, and a senior member of the Technology Research Group
F. GERALD KLINE, Professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan
C. J. FREWST, Chairman of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters

ALEX REID, Deputy Director (Long Range Studies) at Post Office Telecommunications Headquarters, Cambridge, England

ROBERT C. SCRIVER, Chairman of Northern Telecom

ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON, Professor of Communications at the Annenberg School of Communications

GRAHAM SPRY, Member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Broadcasting League

ANDRE LAPOINTE, Senior Assistant Deputy Minister with the Department of Communications

THOMAS McNULTY, Account Executive for Frank Magid Associates

WILLIAM H. MELODY, Professor in the Communication Studies Department at Simon Fraser University

ITHIEL DE SOLA POOL, Director of the Research Program on Communications Policy

KAREN B. POSSNER, Staff Assistant on the House Sub-Committee on Communications