

This book contains the proceedings of the conference "Communication in the 80's" held at the University of Calgary from 29 April to 1 May 1984. The papers were divided into five sessions dealing with jurisdiction, competition, the role of regulators, communications infrastructure in Alberta and the future. The topic is obviously vast and the speakers were from diverse backgrounds - business executives, lawyers, politicians from all levels of government, academic and members of regulatory agencies - so there was no central focus for the papers. Nevertheless, the volume is useful because it brings out the complexity of the subject, and, in doing so, provides a healthy counterweight to many narrow, academic studies in the area.

One possible unifying theme - and the most contentious issue at the conference - concerns the nature and extent of government regulation. The keynote presentation was by lawyer (Gregory Kane) who warned that the regulatory mosaic for telecommunications in Canada defies logical explanation. The system includes federal and provincial, private and public, and Canadian and foreign companies; regulation, moreover, is by three levels of government - federal, provincial and municipal. Kane's discussion of the regulatory mosaic is as relevant for television, which was the focal point for several papers, as it is for telecommunications.

The sole academic paper, by a political scientist at the University of Calgary (Leslie A. Pal), takes a more sympathetic view of regulation. The illogical growth of regulation as charted by Kane becomes an attempt to preserve Canadian sovereignty when viewed by Pal. To support his view, Dr. Pal examines three recent federal documents dealing with telecommunications and shows that in each there is concern that advances in technology will erode, if not ultimately destroy, Canadian sovereignty. Although not altogether convincing, the paper does provide a useful survey of some of the issues in regulatory reform and is a useful complement to the Kane paper.

Whatever the basis for existing regulations, there was a feeling expressed in several of the papers that technology would soon make these regulations irrelevant. The most fascinating paper in the volume, given by the mayor of Manning, Alberta (Del Harbourne), shows that consumers do not have an easy time taking advantage of technologi-
cal advances when these advances make life difficult for regulators. The "need of consumer" may be a phrase cited by advocates of both regulation and deregulation, but the phrase has become almost meaningless.

The town of Manning is 560 miles north of Calgary, and, beginning in the mid-seventies, the citizens there tried to increase their television choice. At the time, only the CBC was available. By the early eighties, television choice had increased by four channels. Along the way, Manning investigated bringing in CTV from Edmonton, "canned" TV from Ontario (i.e., taped television that would be three to four days old), an earth station (TVRO) to pick up superstations from the U.S., CanCom and cable. They invested in sophisticated communications equipment and side-stepped a few regulations. (As Mayor Harbourne put it: "All this time you must realize the 'CRTC' and the 'DOC' were dreaded words; and every time I was wanted on the phone long distance or stranger entered town I was on the defensive." P.100.)

Some of the regulations that worried Mayor Harbourne have since been changed (for example, regulations covering satellite dishes). Technological changes may cause others to be changed, but regulations are still a fact of life for anyone attempting to introduce any new technology in communications. The head of QCTV of Edmonton (Edward Polanski) explained that it took two years to work through the regulatory morass to provide cable to a small Alberta community of 120 households. It then took eleven hours to build the cable system and two days to hook up every house. The cost per household of the cable plant was $800 and the estimated cost per household of fighting through the various tiers of regulation was $1,000.

The experiences of Manning, Alberta, and QCTV provide interesting anecdotes and some important questions - will communities use available technology to evade any regulations that limit their communication choices? and do smaller communities bear heavier regulatory burdens than larger ones? This conference will certainly be valuable if it prods researchers to search for more rigorous answers to these and similar questions raised at the conference. The volume is a useful supplement to more formal studies of communication.