THE 1989 SOUTHAM LECTURE: WORLD INFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny
Assistant Secretary General,
The United Nations Organization

Last year's Southam speaker said how bewildered she was that the Canadian Communication Association had invited her to deliver this prestigious conference. I thank you for having invited me this year and, without being at all pretentious, I must say that for my part I am not surprised. It seems to me that your choice reflects the upsurge in prestige and strength of the United Nations Organization. It also reveals a general and growing understanding of the need for multilateral cooperation to counter the fear which strangle our threatened world and to allow the family of nations to move forward on the road of economic and social progress. Whoever says peace, says mutual understanding, dialogue and obviously communication. Communication theory and practice have evolved a great deal since the creation of the U.N. at the end of the Second World War. The World has grown remarkably more complex, the number of independent nations has increased threefold and the gap between have and have-not countries has widened, not narrowed. The technological revolution which has touched every facet of our lives has been especially active in the areas of information and communication.

Who would have believed that in 1989 the world would still be debating such issues as freedom of speech and national cultures, information and powers of State, protectionism and transparency. Yet, these issues remain real objects of concern because there can be no doubt that information access and the right to communicate are indispensable to growth both individual and collective. Since taking office, two years ago, as Assistant Secretary General this is the first opportunity I have to comment, on a more personal level, what is at stake in the international information market. I would first like to make a few general observations on the state of world information and communication. Secondly, I want to present my personal view on
the role that an organization such as the U.N. plays in this debate, and examine the
mandate of its Department of Information on the international scene. Finally, if I
may, I would like to say a few words about the responsibility which scholars and
journalists bear in this world-wide undertaking.

THE STATE OF WORLD INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

How naive I was between the ages of 3 and 20 when I firmly believed that speech,
the spoken word of preachers, political leaders, radio announcers, actors, company
directors, union bosses, had but one true purpose to persuade. A handful of ideas,
an audience of 50 or 500, a microphone and behold, a miracle took place. After
all, didn’t Lacan himself write some 20 years later, in the early seventies, "what I
am looking for in speech is the other person’s answer." As far back as I can
remember, I have always fallen under the seductive powers of the word. The
interplay between questioning and answering always fascinated me. Then came
the rude awakening of real life in daily newspaper. All of a sudden, every night,
every weekend, a local community fights for as many lines as possible, for the
biggest headline, for every square inch of space. I began to experience the
double bind. From 1952 to this day, I have witnessed the unending battle between
economics and politics, between religious beliefs and lay opinions, between the
elite and the masses. Is it surprising that in 1989 over 60% of the content of
the major daily newspapers in the world is the result of everyday negotiations? Should
we be surprised if, in such circumstances and according to Baudrillard, the masses
chose to remain silent? History teaches us that the temptation of censorship will
always exist, regardless of who manages information, State or private enterprise.
Media studies specialists have calculated that during these last decades of the 20th
century one third of newspapers in the world and more than half of the broadcasting
media are not free to print or broadcast information which offends government or
private media owners.

The relative extent and sources of restraints might vary from one situation to
another. Their long term effects remain the same: whether it is self-censorship or
directorship-imposed, ultranationalism or isolationism, repressed silence or revolt
of the mind, the cumulative effect of having to live each day with restraints of this
kind undermines the credibility of the media and creates a feeling of powerlessness
among the people wherever they live. Even though political analysts may consider
information to be "subversive or disquieting" biased or partial, information
remains nevertheless an area which offers us, at any given time, a global view of
the state of the world, an insight into human experienced of our time. Communication
and information, like culture, are rooted in time and space: they invite us,
every hour of the day, to partake of a local feast as of an international banquet, for
if territorial borders exist, information technology knows no boundary. New
technologies have added to our daily menu and have refined our tastes. As
Jean-Jacques Rousseau once noted, only the guests can appreciate the quality of the feast.

Now obviously the technological revolution has substantially increased not only the speed and the means with which we can communicate but also our expectations regarding information. If it took a hundred years to go from linotype to photocomposition then to offset, the advent of fully-computerized editing systems will barely take 20 years. First in the United States, then in Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Austria, France and elsewhere. One need only to read, for example, the account that appeared in the New York times of last April’s New York exhibition of pictures published in Life Magazine during the 60’s. Critics from around the world who attended the exhibition, who saw those pictures from another era, testimonials to the war in Viet Nam when Richard Nixon took office, were pitiless: "This exhibition is proof that photojournalism is past history." Voilà

Indeed, during the past 25 years we have become so accustomed in the industrialized world to live images, pictures shot and shown within minutes, showing life and death situations anywhere on earth, that all other means of transmission appear less than truthful and lifeless.

Another indication that traditional technologies are obsolete is the fact that during the 80's TV guides were among the 10 best selling magazines in 13 European countries (Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Switzerland) as well as in other countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, Egypt, Mexico and probably Canada. One cannot reasonably pretend to summarize in a few minutes what the world situation of information is today. Any such attempt would only lead to a partial and no doubt subjective account; besides, specialized publications on that subject exist.

However one can underscore how modern technology has both an accelerating and a reductionist effect, thus too often trivializing many human tragedies. Paradoxical as it may be, part of humanity is threatened of becoming blasé, or of being unable to sift the truly essential from the great mass of information. Depending on our station in life, we are enticed or obliged, every day, to consume hundreds of thousands of facts, charts, articles, sounds and pictures, all of which can be measured in micro-seconds and in centimeters. What is at stake as we enter the next century, even in the most developed societies, is the clash between transience and permanence, between the ephemeral and the historic, between the fleeting and the permanent. These struggles are at the core of an irreversible process.

For the first time in history changes in the ways that we glean, process and disseminate data, sounds, video images and photos are accelerating at such a pace and are being circulated at such a speed that information is suddenly not only
internationalized, but globalized and standardized. Before new-born states or even old countries such as those of Western and Eastern Europe could set up their own regional information networks, some ten international news agencies, some fifteen international radio services, a dozen giant TV networks and some twenty of the largest daily newspapers were already vying for control of world opinion. Be it through news stories or entertainment items, sport coverage or how-to chronicles. Today, these "opinion makers" are even fewer in number as a result of recent mega mergers of large media corporations.

Since the radio broadcast of Orson Welles' War of the Worlds many paths have been opened, a great deal of research has been carried out. After some fifty years of changes and upheavals in the media business, where do we stand? A study published in the December 1988 issue of World Press Review points out the very high degree of agreement on what was considered the major news events of the year. Such a coincidence is quite astonishing. Of the ten news items earmarked as the most important in 1988, seven were identified by people of all national origins: American, Latin American, African, Chinese, French or English. One can thus conclude that there is actually a converging tendency to uniformly appraise newsworthiness and to process news items. The United Nations, whose peace keeping force was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988, is listed in each of the seven news items singled out by the eleven editors in chief who participated in the World Press Review survey.

The U.N. was directly involved in the following news events:

- the cease-fire between Iran and Iraq, the end of that war and the ensuing peace negotiations: a news item selected by all eleven editors;
- the negotiated settlement in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of Soviet troops: selected by eight editors;
- the breakthrough in Namibia's demands for independence and the ensuing agreement with South Africa: selected by seven editors;
- environmental issues (growing concern, fears, spilling of toxic wastes) singled out by five editors, two of them including in their list two such issues among the top ten;
- the agreement involving the Western Sahara region and the perspectives of peace in that area: selected by two editors.

As an important news maker the U.N. played an indirect role in the news reports on Mr. Gorbachev's visit in the United States: news items selected by eight editors, and on the PLO's recognition of the State of Israel: selected by ten editors.
It should however be mentioned that in spite of this consensus and the huge amounts of available information of all kinds, the media do behave as gatekeepers, trickling out only the information they think will interest their readers or audience. The most developed countries suffer simultaneously from an overflow and a shortage of information. Every morning outside my apartment building in Manhattan I can buy a copy of all the major newspapers in the world including the Globe & Mail. I can watch, on television, programmes from Paris, Latin America, China or Japan. But the news carried on national networks, with the exception of CNN (Cable News Network), tend to concentrate heavily on American events while covering very few events in Africa or China. The same thing happens when from my hotel room in Tokyo or in Sydney I am informed on the events happening in South East Asia or in the Pacific but hardly on those taking place in Europe or Africa.

So, even though freedom of the press does exist, the news media select information according to their own criteria, forcing their audience to reach out to other, specialized, publications in order to complete their information. Fortunately, in democratic societies, people can voice their discontent and demand that the media give fuller coverage of particular events. For example, people in Canada and elsewhere were outraged by the disproportionate television coverage of the rescue operations of captive whales in the Arctic while human tragedies such as the famine in Sudan received very little attention. It must be said that there are limits to how much information one can take in and that the privileged few of democratic and developed countries have reached the point of information overload. Media consumers have become more selective and tend to treat information as any other consumer goods and services. On this subject, I would like to quote the comment of a fellow Canadian citizen in her application for a Gemini scholarship.

When I applied for a traveling grant, I noted how isolated I felt from the Third world while watching Hockey Night in Canada on Saturday night. By some weird quirk of fate, hockey news throughout that Summer continued to isolate Canadians for news about the Third World: news about Wayne Gretzky’s defection to the United States made headlines and barely a world was said about much more important events such as the twenty centimeters of rain within 24 hours in the capital city of Sudan, Kartoum, the unending famine and civil war in Ethiopia, the earthquake which wrought disaster in India and Nepal, the uprisings which broke out in Pakistan after the bombing attempt on President Zia’s aircraft. Catastrophes all over the world were occurring, including drought in North American, but the media in Canada were drawing attention to the loss of a national hero.

It goes without saying that the situation is quite different in the developing world which numbers more that 125 countries and holds about three quarters of
the earth's population. Regarding these countries, one basic fact must be kept in mind: the rate of illiteracy fluctuates between 20 and 80 percent. In the early 1980's, according to my own Department of Information internal services, more than 30 countries were below a mean level of development in terms of their capacity to gather and produce published and broadcasted news. This being the case, it seems worthwhile to put into perspective a few statistics on world illiteracy.

While it is true that illiteracy today represents one of the most persistent problems in the developing world, there are some 20 million illiterate adults in the developed countries and many more who are functional illiterates. According to a 1985 UNESCO report, over a quarter of the world's adult population are illiterate, unable to read or write even the shortest and most simple account of their daily lives. The rate of illiteracy had dropped a meager 5 points since 1970, from 33 percent to 28 percent. During the same period however, the total number of illiterate adults rose from 700 to 889 million, of whom 98 percent (869 million) live in the developing world and 63 percent (561 million) are women. In the least developed countries, more than half of the men (57 percent) and three quarters of the women (78 percent) can neither read nor write. Just as disquieting is the knowledge that in every region of the world, the rate of illiteracy is higher, often much higher, among women than among men. The fact that one out of three women in the world today can neither read nor write is, to say the least, alarming.

These facts must be taken into account when we survey the state of world information and when an organization such as the U.N. must devise communication policies for these countries. The figures I have just mentioned don't begin to describe the problem. In order to proceed, distinctions must be drawn between levels of media development and between media access in the urban and rural areas. An even sadder fact must be recognized, namely that in many countries, television, with its remarkable capacities to teach, alert and inform, is not available. There are approximately 750 million TV sets in the world and more than two thirds of these can be found in developed countries. In the most advanced industrial countries, television news attracts a larger audience than either radio newscasts or the press. Proof that people are prone to believe the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. During the mid 80's, it was estimated that thirty or so developing countries and territories had no television broadcasting capability, reaching only a small fraction of their urban population. In some cases, this small urban audience already owns a video tape recorder and has access to direct satellite broadcasting either through cable distribution or a small dish antenna which according to specialized magazines will only cost $300 in the near future.

Admittedly radio had made a remarkable breakthrough in many developing countries where it has become the preferred media. But a radio receiver than cannot tune in to the BBC, Beijing Radio, Radio Tirana, the Voice of America, Radio Havana, Moscow Radio, Deutsch Welle, Radio France or CBC International is of
little use. And, to be able to tune in to one's own national radio in areas without electricity requires money to replace the dead batteries. And that's not all. Many radio transmitters are not powerful enough to reach every corner of their national territory. The situation in Namibia where my Department is presently involved in an extensive information programme is a prime example. Moreover, nearly three decades of UN Funded research have shown that the least developed countries are faced with extremely painful choices when it comes to dealing with new technologies. Choices between building roads, supply electricity to rural areas, setting up telephone lines and supplying television sets for community viewing. Consider this for example: while some of the most developed industrialized countries, like the United States, today number more television sets than household telephones most developing countries have fewer that six telephones per one hundred people.

In their search for an improved communications infrastructure for which there is a dire need, many developing countries are faced with the challenge of also having to keep pace with new and highly sophisticated telecommunication systems which require linking together telephone and computer technology presently being installed throughout the world at an accelerated pace. According to specialists, DNIS will be able to convert all of the news and entertainment programmes of any given society onto "one - line transmission feed" from which it will be possible to extract information and re-convert it into words, pictures and sounds. In many developing countries, especially in those with a wide territory to cover, capital investments and operation costs limit their capacity to go beyond basic applications for satellite technology such as telephone and telex systems: broadcasting television programmes is still out of reach. They cannot afford the utility costs of transponders owned by global service consortiums. The developing world is taking steps to resolve these problems through cooperation at a regional level. An example of this is the Union des radiodiffusions et télévisions nationales d'Afrique (URTNA) which works in close liaison with the PanAfrican Telecommunication Network (PANAFTEL).

Besides the world-side services provided by INTELSAT and INTERSPUTNIK other satellites such as TELESAT, as early as 1973, EUTELSAT and ARABSAT play an increasingly important role in the flow of information at a regional level. There are some 100 communication satellites in geostationary orbit today but only a few developing countries, such as Brazil, Columbia, India, Indonesia and Mexico, have domestic systems in operation. Ten of the fifty some satellites schedule to be launched over the next five years are programmed to serve developing countries specifically. One of these satellites is the Chinese ASIASAT-1 scheduled for 1990. Although it will mainly serve China it will also be available to the greater part of Southern and South Eastern Asia. According to specialized studies, ground stations for ASIASAT-1 will only cost $200,000 (US) compared to millions of dollars for INTELSAT stations. The developing world must benefit
fully from these modern means of communications which are in constant flux. As we are on the verge of entering a new millennium, the extension of direct satellite broadcasting has already introduced developing countries into the age of television but it will undoubtedly take another two or three decades before that medium becomes available to most of the rural regions of the world. However, when television does become fully worldwide it will perhaps prove itself to be truly capable of broadcasting world events to literally every region, and to every citizen, of this planet. When that day comes, one wishes that information will be bi-directional and that viewers in developed countries will become more sensitive to the important issues in developing countries and more aware of the measures that the Third World countries are taking to deal with these issues.

I would now like to deal with the question of news sources. The creation of more than one hundred news agencies over the last twenty years. The regionalization of their services have helped hundred of journalists while fostering an increased flow of information within non-aligned countries. Today these agencies struggle under the same constraints as those of my own U.N. Department and its network of 67 information centres throughout the world: we must, day in and day out, avoid displeasing any of the 159 member states while at the same time attempting to work as best we can with insufficient computerized capabilities for the retrieval, stockpiling, processing and distribution of information. When I meet the directors of these regional news agencies, we invariably discuss common problems we have with our respective clientèles.

A great number of developing countries are still trying to overcome their dependency on foreign news agencies for information. Among them, the "Big Five:, along with VISNEWS and the CBS Network, have dominated the international news flow for some time. But other agencies, such as the Pool of News Agencies from the non-aligned countries and Inter Press Service, must be singled out for their important contribution as a news distribution center for the written press. Regarding the Pool of news agencies from the non-aligned countries, it is now made up of some 101 members. The distribution centres, directed by Tanjug (Yugoslavia), are headed by the following: Prensa Latina (Cuba) ZIANA (Zimbabwe), INA (Iraq), PTI (India) and KCNA (Democratic Republic of Korea). TELAM agencies (Argentina) and ANTARA (Indonesia) will probably operate as distribution centres in the near future. In 1988 Tanjug distributed 35,940 news dispatches in English, French and Spanish. More and more of the world-wide circulated news items are produced by regional press agencies. The Pan-African News Agency (PANA), the Persian Gulf News Agency (GNA), the "Agence latinoaméricaine de service spéciaux d’information" (ALASEI) and the Caribbean News Agency (CANA) are fine examples of such agencies.

Since the beginning of the 1980's, Latin America has made substantial headway in correcting the biased focus ingrained in television news and
entertainment programmes. During a recent meeting in Mexico with Latin American representatives from my own Department, I was interviewed on the Spanish language ECO Network. This network was set up by Mexico's TELEVISIÓN in September 1988. Initially set up to reach, through cable stations affiliates. The 20 to 25 million hispanics living in the United States, ECO now reaches an audience which covers all of Latin America and Europe, but particularly and quite understandably, Spain. ECO with is 90 correspondents through the world broadcasts news programmes and live coverages from its Mexico studios. Terms such as national pride, national culture, cultural production, and international circulation are not necessarily contradictory.

The solid success of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is almost comparable to that of its counterpart in the Federal Republic of Germany, to the successes of the British Broadcasting Corporation, of Radio Télévision de France, of the Public Broadcast System (U.S.A.) and of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The well known series "The Nature of Things" is sold to 30 countries, half of which are developing countries. "The Man Who Planted Trees" by Oscar Award winner Bach for his animated film in 1988 is sold in 35 countries. The drama "Danger Bay" is broadcast in 57 countries, the documentary titled "American Century" in 12 countries. Even without someone in charge of promotion and sales, news programmes like "The Journal" and "Le Point" are in great demand. Educational television in Ontario and Québec have not only succeeded in establishing a market in Ontario and Québec but are also reaching many audiences in both developed and developing countries.

According to its president, Mr. Bernard Ostry, TV Ontario's objective is to inform and familiarize the public in matters of science and culture. He believes that stronger ties, both professional and financial, between his television organization and foreign televisions will enable TV Ontario to strengthen its position not only on the national but also on the international scene. TV Ontario benefits greatly from its association with such prestigious partners as NHK, BBC, and ABC. Its list of international clients alone is impressive. The wide range of its educational programmes on subjects such as sciences, computers, geography, language learning processes, mathematics, sociology, are broadcasted in over forty developing countries and in more than a dozen developed countries. As for Radio Québec, according to its President, Ms. François Bertrand, the past slow rate of sales to foreign countries began to rise sharply in 1988-89. A total of 598 programmes were sold to 15 countries: Columbia, Brazil, Sweden, the United States, Australia, Belgium, South Korea, France, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Denmark, Greece, Israel and Japan. Following the sale of the "Octopuce" series to Belgium, Switzerland, Morocco, and Tunisia the new "Octogiciel" series is currently being sold to Belgium, Switzerland and Morocco. And again, last year's documentary on the conquest of space and several episodes from the public affairs
series Nord-Sud penetrated more than a dozen markets in Europe and Africa. News programmes, live coverages as well as documentarics produced by Radio-Québec easily attract foreign markets. Presently, it is negotiating with three African countries the coproduction of episodes in the "Passe Partout" series.

These Canadian success stories, this capacity of Canadian public televisions to inform, educate, entertain and to export their products would probably double if we were to include privately-owned networks. If we added the combined capacities of the Americans, Germans, French, British, Australians, Swiss, Italians, Japanese, Brazilians and Mexicans the final tally would be fiftyfold. One can therefore conclude that if competition between urban daily newspapers is strong, competition is equally strong between large national television networks like those in North America, Europe, Asia and Latin America. Attempts at cooperation, to insure the participation of a new continent such as Africa, have always existed in the fields of radio and television broadcasting. But in television, national production and international trade have always been extremely difficult. TV5's experience in North Africa must be monitored carefully. Will it allow global transmission of programmes produced in each host country? Algeria has already taken a stand on this issue which became unraveled at last May's Summit of the Francophonie in Dakar.

One must come to realize, not surprisingly, that were public corporations and State television networks have failed in their attempts to reach agreements in joint production ventures with countries from the South, the emerging European private corporations, the new television networks in Africa financed with funds from both the public and private sectors, and television from the private sectors everywhere will succeed under the pressures of mounting viewer demands. At the end of 1988, for example, France's TF1, Morocco's private network and a few other African television networks broadcast two productions from AVISION, Jeune Afrique's new television subsidiary. Also to be watched in the new network Canal Plus, now available in North Africa, to see if its programming will include African productions. Speaking of popular television programmes, Latin Americans have been watching, for almost twenty years, a kind of local soap opera called "telenovelas". "Telenovelas" have sharply cut into the importation of foreign TV programmes, most American. Furthermore, "telenovelas", produced mainly in Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Peru, have contributed to a rise in the South-South circulation of television productions. "Telenovelas" produced by TV-GLOBO in Brazil have been broadcast in more that 50 countries including all Latin American countries, Portuguese-speaking African countries and nearly all European countries. Brazilian "telenovelas" have also been dubbed in many languages such as Catalan, Basque and several Chinese dialects. Like Mexico, many other developing countries such as India, have produced their own "telenovelas" with
an educational bias in order to promote development issues such as family planning.

No one should be surprised, as we enter this new decade, if national communication and information policies, especially in developing countries but also in the two European blocks and in Latin America, are no longer defined within the ideological framework of the Cold War or repeat the past experiences of the superpowers. The goals of national communications policies must be set more and more in accordance with certain realities which have become more intrusive, pressing, forceful, irreversible, because more interconnected and interdependent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: THE ROLE OF THE U.N.

I have just given you a quick survey of the situation which exists in today’s world in regards to the question of news sources and communication networks. I do not wish today to revisit proven grounds: the workings of the Fourth Estate, the high synchronic level of media contents, the history of modern telecommunication and information distribution networks. Other fellow Canadians, eminent scholars, such as Sauvageau, de la Garde, Tremblay, Méar, Desaulniers, or pioneers in the area of Canadian regulation, such as Dunton, Stewart, Ouimet and Juneau, can do it better than I. Critical culture studies have a long tradition in Canadian universities: one need only mention the pioneer work of Harold Innis in political economy and geography, Northrop Frye’s contribution to literary criticism. Thanks to scholars of Dallas Smythe’s caliber, Canada has played an important part in the evolution of communication studies from critical theory to prospective telecommunication policies for the XXI century, matching the contribution of other world scholars such as Armand Mattelart, Herbert Schiller and Nicholas Garnham, to name but a few. Their research is of great importance for the international community as witness the investigation by many of the UN bodies of issues such as the use of DNIS, the regulation and structuring of the mass media and other service industries such as banking, retail trade and the concerted management of radio wave frequencies.

Since the 24th of October, 1945 the United Nations Organization has been a forum for debating, evaluating and learning the use of newly emerging techniques of communication in order to improve the lives of people and to preserve the diversity of world cultures. This concern has enormous implications. What is at stake is nothing less than the world’s cultural environment as we approach the XXI century. Most university scholars and researchers throughout the world associate U.N. activities in communication matters with UNESCO and the New World Information Order. Facts support this view as justified. To illustrate, allow me to review Unesco’s major undertakings in the field of communications over the
passing years. In 1962, UNESCO completed a four year long study requested by the U.N., on the "shortage of information" in the world's three most underdeveloped regions, technologically speaking: Africa, Asia and Latin America. This study underlined the fact that 70 percent of the people in the work, that is about two billion people at that time, did not have access to "adequate" information services. According to a minimal standard proposed by UNESCO and adopted by the U.N. at that time, "adequate" services meant a ration of at least 10 copies of a daily newspaper, five radio sets and two seats in a film theatre per one hundred people. More than 100 countries or territories were below this minimum. Innovative measuring techniques of this kind have become part of basic communication research throughout the world.

Communication students are perhaps less aware of the work being done by the Information Committee of the U.N. which has met on a yearly basis since it was set up in 1979 to discuss the directives and to establish the priorities of all information programmes within the Organization. Since 1946, and as an integrated service of the U.N. General Secretariat, the Department of Information works in cooperation with the specialized bodies of the U.N., namely peace and security throughout the world, mutual understanding as well as the respect of individual rights and fundamental liberties among all peoples of the world. The most recent example of cooperation between the Department of Information and UNESCO is the information campaign to promote support for a worldwide effort in 1990 to eliminate illiteracy, which the U.N. General Assembly has proclaimed International Year to Combat Illiteracy. It was the developing countries who, nearly ten years ago, proposed to UNESCO the innovative concept of a better balance in the international flow of information. The initial impetus to promote a New World Information Order (NWIO) and to increase the role of communications in matters of development dates back to 1955, the year when the proposal for creating the Movement of Nonaligned Countries was adopted by Asian and African leaders meeting in Bandung, Indonesia.

Officially established in 1961 - the year which would usher in a decade of UN development - the Movement of Nonaligned Countries began playing a decisive role not only in giving economic and social development top priority on the international agenda but also in introducing the concept of collective autonomy in debate over development. The crucial role of the Movement in this area, coupled in 1974 with the formation within the UN organization of the Group of 77 as the main conduit for the promotion of Third World economic and social interests, resulted in the adoption by the General Assembly, during that same year of the Declaration and the Programme for the establishment of a new International Economic Order (NIEO).

The first paragraph of the NIEO Declaration, which according to certain observers served as a mode and as a precedent for the NWIO, lays down the basic
principles regarding the new information and communication order. Allow me to highlight its main elements:

(1) the benefits of technical progress are not equitably distributed among the members of the international community;

(2) developing countries which hold 70 percent of the world's population, receive only 30 percent of the world's revenues;

(3) a harmonious and balanced development of the international community is impossible within the framework of the present international economic order;

(4) the gap between developed countries and developing countries grows wider in a world dominated by a system which was set up at a time when most developing countries didn't even exist as independent States and which perpetuates existing inequalities.

In fact, many developing countries became independent States during the 60's and 70's. In the late fifties there were 83 member States in the U.N. as compared to 152 in 1979. Today there are 159 permanent members.

If we take a look at the worldwide distribution of radio and television sets during the past twenty years, the changes brought about in developing countries are rather encouraging. On the whole however, there remains a disproportionate inequality between both developing and developed worlds. According to UNESCO, in 1986 there were 39 television sets per 1000 people in the developing countries compared to 500 in the developed world. Numbers pertaining to radio sets reveal a quite similar situation. "Developed countries" in this study refer to all European countries (except Yugoslavia), the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, Israel, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; the rest of the world is made up of "developing countries". Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister at the time, voiced in a terse fashion the developing world's viewpoint on the imbalance which affects the international flow of cultural products:

Taking into account the views of the international community regarding ethical and social responsibilities of professional journalists and press organizations, UNESCO adopted in 1978 a Declaration of principles with emphasis particularly on the role of the mass media in strengthening peace and international understanding, in promoting human rights and in combating war propaganda, racism, and apartheid.

In 1980, having completed the awesome mandate to investigate the current state of "problems surrounding communications in modern societies", the MacBride Commission submitted its report to the UNESCO General Conference. All over the world, communication students and media policy makers will find in
this report a critical analysis of incisive questions and issues such as information accessibility, a closer examination of the "international duty" of large business corporations regarding their use of allotted wave frequencies and orbital "windows" for satellite broadcasting, and how media may become vehicles for helping people "understand and resolve the inevitable problems of our times". This particular responsibility of the media is an extremely important issue for the U.N., insofar as one of its primary goals is to reach public opinion who has the right to know what is being done to safeguard the future of this planet and its civilizations. Indeed, the U.N. relies on mass media, on their high-tech capabilities, to reach world opinion.

In light of this, the only way to judge whether mass media are adequately fulfilling their social responsibilities is to consider what impact their contents have on international opinion. I believe it is the duty of researchers and communication students throughout the world to produce critical in-depth analyses of mass media performances everywhere. UNESCO took a more practical step when in June 1981, on the basis of an American initiative, it launched the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) with the idea of devising and carrying out projects in international technical cooperation. Since 1980, the Information Committee voiced some of these concerns in its deliberations and in the priorities it has set for the Department of Information. Over the past few years however it can be clearly seen that passionate debate is giving way to pragmatic discussions. Developed and developing countries have begun to listen to one another. Their mutual interests are becoming more and more obvious. I believe we are moving from an era of discussion to a time of action. Among the recent developments that testify to this new documentation which raises the hopes of many, is one that concerns the resolute search for solutions to improve communication infrastructures in developing countries. In this context, UNESCO's International Program for the Development of Communication has played a useful role. This uncontroversial programme allots voluntary contributions to projects aimed at improving installations and at raising the professional qualifications of news services in developing countries. The successful establishment and firm support of regional news agencies is a prime example of such projects.

Another example of this new pragmatism can be seen in the firm commitment to take into account the concerns and interests of all members of the international community when discussing questions of communications development and of telecommunications policies. This new attitude is being felt not only in the activities of the Information Committee but also, and specifically, in organizations such as the International Union of Telecommunications (IUT), the United Nations Conference on Commerce and Development (UNCCD), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space (COPUOS) and the Commission of Transnational Corporations which comes under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Coming back to the
Information Committee, the legislative body to which my Department is accountable on a yearly basis, I should like to review its most recent achievements falling under the aims and objectives of the U.N. in the area of information. In this regard this past year, as I mentioned earlier, has certainly been plentiful in events related to the Organization. Changes on the political scene have restore a more positive image of the UN in sharp contrast with previous years of negativism, despair and morosity.

THE MANDATE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Under the direction of the Secretary General, Mr. Javier Perez de Cuellar, priority has been given to ways and means of instituting and maintaining peace. My Department was called upon to secure coverage of the positive turns of events in several regional conflicts and to this end set up various campaigns aimed at informing the media. Among these, I should like to mention our press releases on the signed accord in Afghanistan, the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the U.N. peace keeping force. I would also mention other similar activities such as the meeting, organized by my Department in cooperation with the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun, which was attended by a group of policy makers, journalists and scholars to examine U.N. peacekeeping operations. From this meeting we produced two 26 minute films, now available in five languages to foster a broader understanding of this question.

Our involvement in the area of economic recovery programs for Africa constitutes one of our most important achievements this year. We strive to give the world a better understanding of this continent’s efforts to combat drought and desertification and to overcome problems related to its deficits. In dealing with the economic crisis in Africa, the Department of Information publishes, both in French and English, a magazine entitled La Relance de l’Afrique, which has become a recognized authority on the subject. Besides preparing press releases on this subject, my Department has recently co-produced a documentary film in French, English and Spanish on Africa’s recovery. As the World witnesses the birth under UN supervision of a new country in the Southern African hemisphere, my Department makes available factual and detailed information on that country’s progressive rise to independence. At U.N. headquarters we coordinate efforts to ensure worldwide dissemination of all new facts relative to the progress of this particular undertaking.

We also organize symposiums for editors in chief and implement programmes aimed at journalists from every geographical region. A symposium for French speaking editors in chief was held at U.N. Headquarters in October 1988. This allows 20 top ranking correspondents from French speaking African countries,
Europe, Asia and Canada to benefit from three days of briefing sessions, led by high-level U.N. officials, on all current events. Last March, the Department was instrumental in organizing a meeting with journalists on the occasion of the opening of the annual session of the (U.N. Commission on Economic and Social Affairs in Asia and the Pacific). This was an especially effective way of stimulating press interest and issues related to development, such as the environment, human settlements and demographic growth as well as the needs of the region. Still on the subject of economic and social development, I should like to underline the fact that the Department of Information carried out, solely or in liaison with other U.N. divisions, information campaigns on a certain number of issues, including the reduction of the enormous deficits which burden developing countries, the fight against AIDS and international push against crime and drugs.

In 1988, in order to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Department initiated and coordinated a multimedia campaign including different promotional material such as a public interest message for television, two ready-made television news items and a file of background information. The Department also enrolled the support of celebrities to promote human rights. To mark this event, many manifestations were held throughout the world and particularly in Paris - where the Declaration was signed - and where the Secretary General himself participated in activities that were coordinated by our local Information Centre. In order to express international opposition to the institutionalized racism that is apartheid, my Department organized conferences where well-known personalities and artists took a firm stand against the system of apartheid. We made available information regarding artists who had performed in South Africa and immediately informed the world of the names of those who decided no longer to do so.

Finally, I should like to mention an aspect of our work which holds a special interest for me, namely our endeavors to strengthen our cooperation with news agencies from Nonaligned Countries. After extensive consultation, we are laying the groundwork for a U.N. wire service, in English and in French, linked to five news agencies acting as anchor stations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These agencies, namely Prensa Latina (Cuba), Antara (Indonesia), MENA (Egypt), PTi (India) and PANA (Senegal), would serve as centres for the re-distribution of information from the U.N., throughout a network of affiliated news agencies and media in their respective regions. To summarize, we in the Department of Information, would fail in our duties, as media professionals, if we did not take advantage of every passing occasion - at a time when multilateralism acquires new meaning - to strengthen worldwide understanding of the UN positions and actions across the full spectrum of world affairs; from the conflict settlements and peacekeeping operations to the issues of environment and public health, including questions such as food supply, industrialization, industrial relations, the status of
women, the refugee problem, culture, human rights and education. We shall continue to do so while being well aware that we live in a complex world and our message must cross cultural borders while retaining an exact account of its content.

Having described the extent of our mandate, I hasten to add that we must carry it out - and this is of capital importance - with scanty resources. One cannot therefore be expected to produce programmes of the highest possible technical quality. To give you a concrete example, the McNeil Lehrer News Hour, an excellent programme of news analysis on American television, costs about 100,000 dollars a day. In comparison, with an annual budget of 100,000 my Department produces 26 programmes, each totalling 27 minutes, called World Chronicle dealing with international subjects such as security, apartheid, the environment, national deficits. Our programmes are broadcast free of charge over 65 PBS affiliated stations in the United States. they are also made available to the televisions of the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago and the Pacific Islands and are picked up by 45 radio stations in developing countries. To repeat, one cannot, as you can well imagine, possibly compare our production on the basis of technical quality but interest in international stakes, from disarmament to apartheid, from the environment to human rights, from health to maritime law, is continuously on the rise. Proof of this mounting interest is the success of Cable News Network (CNN) which has always supported U.N. action and production. The English version of our three minute news programme, The U.N. in Action, is broadcasted in some 75 countries thanks to CNN’s weekend programme, World Report. The U.N. in Action is but one of the many news items which over 100 organizations throughout the world contribute to the pioneer work of CNN in the area of international broadcasting.

Before concluding this conference, I would like to draw your attention to certain realities which must I must face as head of the Department of Information at the U.N. My mandate is to inform world opinion, more precisely a full spectrum of widely different audiences throughout the world, about the endeavors of the U.N. in practically every area of human activity. Of course, in the area of information, the U.N. neither can nor wants to do every thing by itself. Our action thus implies the best possible cooperating with press correspondents and with a large diversity of press organizations. As you can see, this mandate is not a simple one and the tasks it implies even less so. Everyday activity takes on dimensions far more complex than would be the case within a national organization such as ours. The Department of Information must strive to maintain a difficult balance between the often diverging positions and policies of its member States, between the rhetoric of the West and that of the East, of the North and the South. In the final analysis, it’s the General Assembly who establishes our work programme, who asks that we give priority to this or that issue; this doesn’t always please all the countries which make up the Organization. Every presse communiqué we release
must avoid offending, by its tone or its content, the 159 member States; otherwise, an offended party will not hesitate to make known to us its discontent. It follows that the Department of Information is, so to speak under constant surveillance.

To this list of constraints I must add the basic problem of having to communicate the same message to widely diverse audiences. The question raised here is how do you communicate a message in a logical and coherent manner, using different media, in numerous languages while at the same time addressing yourself to vast populations with so many differing characteristics. We must do all this and still present the United Nations Organization to be the unique organization that it is in reality. The strategy that is to be adopted to attract a pluricultural audience must of necessity be multi-dimensional. Basic information documents describing the activities of the United Nations Organization must be written in the style of press releases, brochures, and booklets. It also means organizing seminars, establishing contacts with media representatives and inviting top level officials of the Organization to information sessions. The next step is to target a public in each country with the help of the 67 U.N. information centres we have throughout the world. We have decided that we must do more that what has been done since the Department was created 40 years ago. Firstly, there has been a revolution in information technology and we must adapt to it. We have used telephone lines, radio transmissions, satellite links, audio and video cassettes, diplomatic courier and standard postal services to reach our world audiences. We must follow ever more closely the pace of our times. It is indeed one of our objectives to make the best possible use of existing technology but what I want to stress is the need for a totally new strategy that would make this technology work for us. What is planned for my Department is to adopt an integrated approach in the dissemination of information whereby raw data supplied by our head offices are processed as is presently the case.

However, our integrated information programme must also be flexible so as to be in a position to reach countries and regions within countries with a personalized message. Certain news items, for example recent news concerning the conflict between Iran and Iraq and the ensuing cease-fire, can be broadcasted from New York through radio stations all over the world. However because of the routine but important work carried out by the U.N., we must follow a less direct course. We must concentrate our efforts on those institutions and people in each region and in each country who can act as anchor points. Through these anchor points which are directly connected to the cultural, social and political lifelines of the society they line in, we will be in a position to ensure a more effective and better adapted circulation of information. We may even have several anchor points in a country, each being, so to speak, specialized in a given area. Our goal is to create a community of interests within each country. We could also spread the same information through different channels; the media, the universities, public
organizations, the business community, other international organizations and private voluntary associations.

In our new strategy, a large part of the work will be assumed by our 67 information centres spread out throughout the world. In the past, the full capacity of these centres has not been exploited which is to receive a message and to transmit it within each country to groups ranked according to professional, regional, ethnic or demographic characteristics. What I want to say is that the Department of Information of the United Nations Organization must play the role of a catalyst. By strategically placing the right message at the right place we will create a situation whereby others will snatch it up. We must be sure that the message is accurate, that it will be clearly understood by those who will relay it and that additional information is available if need be.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenges facing international information in an era of multilateralism are innumerable. The mandates we are called to fulfill often are either too ambitious for our available resources or either to narrow in their reach, thus compelling us to adopt strategies and tactics that do not always correspond to the objective we wish to pursue. However, these constraints under which the Department of Information must play are unavoidable and they should not prevent us from improving the tools of our trade: words, pictures and sounds, which serve as our means of expression, and the channels which carry them.

Of course, it is not the business of international organizations to impose upon the media their news content nor a preferred way of processing them.

However we believe that it is the responsibility of the United Nations and of its Department of Information to make use of this remarkable tribunal that is called interdependence to prove to the World - through its accomplishments and its programmes - that it is possible.

a) to strike an acceptable balance in ways that human experience of international tensions are reported in the media;

b) to have a free flow of the kind of information that is sensitive to the historically grounded experiences of people the world over;

c) to define international norms that would oversee not only national systems but also international commerce and circulation;

d) to set a fair tariff on information so that it will become accessible to everyone.
Indeed, the achievement of real peace necessarily implies a new balance in the distribution of human wealth, both technological and financial throughout the world. And there cannot be true development if diversity does not exist in the opinions which are voiced and exchanged not only between more developed countries and developing countries but also between developing countries.

In fact my Department already bears the responsibility of reflecting the diversity of points of view when asked to set up international programmes. In my opinion, we have to encourage and intensify national debates on the role of rejuvenated, modernized and diversified media must play not only in helping development processes and in fostering dialogue between different societies but also in allowing each and everyone free expression of thought. In short, we must seek guarantees that the debate bearing on the growth of the media throughout the world will be heard by those who have a responsibility in these matters and that everyone through the media, can be touched by the experiences of different peoples everywhere. As we have seen, the problems of the 50’s endure. Canada’s experience over the past 40 years can testify to this. Our troubles are still not over but the work that remains to be done represents an exalting and enthralling challenge. We must continue our efforts with patience and perseverance. Above all, let us not forget that our best hope for success lies in the awareness that we live in a world of interdependence, and that this awareness will bring about a renewed involvement in multilateral cooperation, including areas such as information and communication.

Translated by Michel de Repentigny