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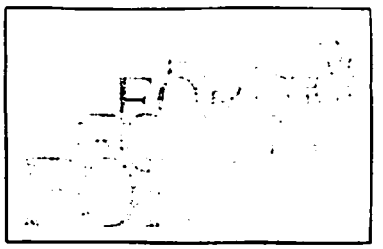
Pro-development soap operas: a novel approach to development communication



Recently there have been encouraging signs that indicate television can become a useful tool for development in the Third World. Producers, writers, and government leaders have created an innovative kind of television programme called the pro-development soap opera. Unlike traditional soap operas that are designed primarily to entertain, pro-development soap operas are designed to educate as well as entertain. The term 'pro-development' specifically refers to the communication strategy of combining entertainment and educational content to promote development practices, and is alternatively called 'enter-educate', 'edu-tainment', and 'entertainment-education' by other scholars and development specialists. The idea of the entertainment-education strategy is to combine certain advantages of the entertainment and educational media.

The present article examines the origin of pro-development soap operas in Mexico, traces their diffusion in the Third World, evaluates their theoretical orientation, and considers implications of their use.

A soap opera is a form of dramatic serial mainly intended to entertain, and represents a unique genre of television programming that has very specific characteristics. Three of these characteristics are: the sponsorship and broadcasting of soap operas are usually controlled by advertisers or commercial networks; their production costs are relatively low in comparison to other television serials; and their content is composed of slow-moving, multifaceted plots of women's fiction (Cantor and Pingree, 1983).

The beginnings of the television soap opera can be traced to a number of sources, including the eighteenth-century English novel, newspaper comic strips, traditional melodramatic theatre, and the radio soap opera (Cantor and Pingree, 1983; Keeler, 1980). Although television producers in the United States have successfully utilised the soap-opera format, the original melodramatic genre of the soap opera was not completely adapted to the medium of television (Berrueta, 1986). Key elements of the melodramatic genre, such as the moral and dramatic coherency of the characters in a story, are often ignored in American soap operas.

Soap operas have consistently been one of the most popular types of television programmes in the US. A survey by Whetmore and Kielwasser (1983) indicated some 50 million Americans considered themselves fans of at least one soap opera. Soap operas are also the most popular genre of television programming in Latin America and India, and have expanding audiences in many other Third World nations. Because of the ubiquitous nature of the soap opera as a communication phenomenon (Chesebro and Glenn, 1982), and its widespread popularity, it is important to trace its historical development and diffusion in the Third World.

The introduction of the soap opera into the broadcasting media of the Third World can be traced to the influence of American radio soap operas as they spread mainly through Cuba and into South America during the 1930s. These popular short dramatic stories, called *radionovelas* (radio novels) in Spanish, became a staple of the airwaves in Latin America during the 1940s (Caparelli, 1982).

With the diffusion of television throughout Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s, *radionovelas* eventually gave way to *telenovelas* (television novels). *Telenovelas*, the Latin equivalent of American soap operas, are the dominant genre of television programming in Latin America. They are extremely popular with television audiences and have generated large profits for sponsors (Rogers and Antola, 1986). For example, typical prime-time *telenovelas* have been watched by an estimated 50 to 60 million viewers in Brazil (Caparelli, 1982; Rogers *et al.*, 1989), have received audience ratings of over 30% in Mexico (Sabido, 1981), and have generated lucrative profits (Singhal and Rogers, 1988).

Although both American soap operas and *telenovelas* have shared popularity and financial success, the social content of *telenovelas* does not reflect the social content of American soap operas. With the exception of a few dramatic serials produced by the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), and a few isolated episodes of network television serials, American soap operas are not designed to promote pro-social beliefs and behaviour.

Pro-social content has appeared in a small portion of American-produced television programmes. For example, situation comedies such as *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *The Cosby Show* focused discussion on important American values and beliefs such as equality, freedom of choice, and family harmony. The highly viewed ABC mini-series *Roots*, and its sequel, *Roots: The Next Generations*, also focused on the values of equality and freedom (Ball-Rokeach, Grube, and Rokeach, 1981). Such values are considered to be pro-social because they promote beliefs and behaviour that are socially desirable and beneficial to members of society (Rushton, 1982).

In many Latin American television soap operas, pro-social content is purposefully designed into the programmes. One of the first television producers to utilise pro-social messages was Miguel Sabido, Vice-President of Research at Televisa, the private Mexican national television network. Sabido and a team of researchers created six series of *telenovelas* with educational and pro-social content. By using the soap-opera entertainment format to attract large audiences and commercial advertisers, Televisa's soap operas promoted educational themes and pro-social values that encouraged development practices in Mexico.

Sabido's innovative idea of combining educational pro-social content in an entertainment-oriented dramatic serial was sparked

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in part by a lesson learned from *Simplemente María, (Just Simple Mary)*, a Peruvian *telenovela* (Brown, 1988; Singhal and Rogers, 1988). This television series told the rags-to-riches story of a slum girl, Maria, who became successful by using her sewing skills to make clothing for the family by whom she was employed. As Maria's customers expanded to friends of her employer, she purchased a Singer sewing machine; and in turn, Singer purchased advertising time on the programme. During the 1970s, when *Simplemente María* was broadcast in other Latin American nations outside Peru, the programme achieved high audience ratings and the sale of Singer sewing machines sky-rocketed, much to the delight of the Singer company.

Sabido, an astute observer of the *Simplemente María* success story, reasoned that if a soap opera could motivate people to buy sewing machines as a means of increasing their income and standard of living, then a soap opera could also be used to promote literacy, family planning, and health education. Sabido believed more people would adopt development practices if television could promote the pro-social values and beliefs that encouraged such behaviours.

The first pro-development television soap opera produced by Sabido and his research group was *Ven Conmigo (Come With Me)*, and was aired by Televisa in 1975-76. One of the major purposes of *Ven Conmigo* was to promote adult literacy (Rogers & Antola, 1986). The programme was extremely successful, achieving an average ratings of 33. *Ven Conmigo* was a major influence in motivating 600,000 more people to enrol in adult literacy classes in 1975-76, than had enrolled in the previous year (Rogers *et al.*, 1989). This represented a 63% increase in the number of enrolments, a percentage which contrasts sharply with the 7% increase in enrolment the year before *Ven Conmigo* was broadcast, and the 2.5% increase the year after the broadcasts had ended.

Given these encouraging results, Televisa produced a second pro-development soap opera called *Acompáñame (Accompany Me)*, which was broadcast in Mexico in 1977-78. *Acompáñame* achieved audience ratings of 29% and promoted family-planning practices (Sabido, 1981). During the time it was broadcast, the number of family-planning adopters at government health clinics increased by about 560,000; and there was a marked increased in the sale of contraceptives throughout the country (Sabido, 1981).

The successes of *Ven Conmigo* and *Acompáñame* were followed by the production of *Vamos Juntos* in 1979, which promoted better treatment of children; *El Combate* the same year, which promoted the themes of adult literacy and nationalism; *Caminemos* in 1980, which promoted sex education for teenagers; and *Nosotras las Mujeres* in 1981, which promoted the welfare of Mexican women.

The impact of Mexico's pro-development soap operas spawned the production of similar soap operas with pro-social messages in other Third World countries. The first country to learn from the Mexican experience was India. In 1983 S. S. Gill, then the Secretary of India's Ministry of Information and Broadcating, visited Televisa's research institute in order to learn how Mexico created their pro-development soap operas. Gill and a number of other Third World government officials were invited to a meeting in Mexico by David Poindexter, President of the Centre for Populations Communications-International (CPC-I), a non-profit organisation headquartered in New York which provides consultation on communication and development projects. Poindexter made an arrangement with Televisa for these Third World officials to learn how Mexico was using television to promote family planning.

When Gill returned to India, he decided to implement what he had learned at Televisa by organising a team to create an Indian soap opera that promoted pro-social beliefs and practices in India. Gill's efforts resulted in the production of *Hum Log (We People)*, India's first television soap opera, which was broadcast in 1984-85. *Hum Log* was designed to address some of the social problems that plagued Indian society, such as uncontrolled family growth, the mistreatment of women and children, the evils of dowry, and alcohol abuse. *Hum Log* went on the air in India on 7 July 1984, and ended on 17 December 1985, after 156 episodes.

Like the Mexican pro-development soap operas, *Hum Log* was both popular and financially successful. Broadcast in Hindi, one of several major languages in India and spoken predominantly in the North, *Hum Log* achieved audience ratings of 65 to 90% in North India and 20 to 45% in South India. Doordarshan, the Indian television network, producers of *Hum Log*, and the *Hum Log* cast received an estimated 400,000 letters in response to the programme (Singhal and Rogers, 1989). *Hum Log*'s popularity in India was unprecedented (Mitra, 1986).

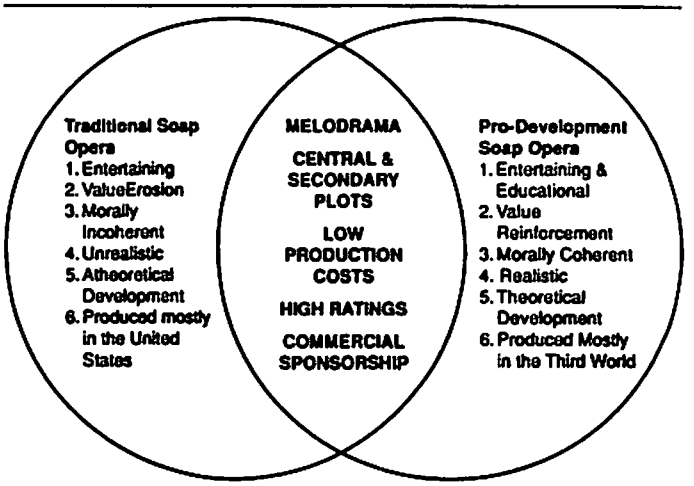
In May of 1987, Kenya followed the Mexican and Indian experiences and began broadcasting *Tushauriane, (Let's Discuss)* Kenya's first pro-development soap opera. *Tushauriane* is promoting family-planning practices and is the most popular television programme on Kenyan television.

Both Mexico and India are currently producing new pro-development soap operas. India's new programme, *Hum Rahi (Fellow Travellers)*, will focus issues related to the status of women and family planning. The new Mexican pro-development soap opera, called *Sangre Joven (Young Blood)*, will focus on family planning (including an AIDS sub-theme), and is scheduled to be broadcast throughout Latin America in 1990. Other Third World nations such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, and Egypt are also presently planning to produce soap operas as a means to promote pro-social beliefs and practices.

Differences between traditional and pro-development soap operas

The pro-development soap operas produced by Televisa in Mexico differ in several characteristics from American-produced soap operas. Overall, pro-development soap operas are more educational, value specific, morally coherent, realistic, and theoretically designed than traditional soap operas produced in the United States. Although there are similarities between traditional and pro-development soap operas, the present analysis will focus on the differences (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Similarities and Diffrences between Traditional and Pro-Development Soap Operas



SOURCE: Partially based on Berrueta (1986) and Sabido (1982)

The first distinction between traditional and pro-development soap operas is that the former type are entertaining but not deliberately educational. Traditionally, soap operas were designed primarily to attract large audiences and sell commercial products. Even the coining of the term 'soap opera' was derived from the major soap manufacturers that sponsored them. The attraction of large audiences achieved by producers of American soap operas is almost exclusively through entertainment. Education has not been much of a concern to American soap-opera producers.

In contrast, pro-development soap operas have had a dual purpose from their inception: first, to attract large audiences and become commercially successful; and second, to subtly yet purposefully convey educational themes and pro-social messages that promote development. Although educational benefits can be obtained by watching American soap operas, such learning is

incidental and not planned.

The second major distinction between traditional and pro-development soap operas is the nature of their value content. Pro-development soap operas are designed to promote specific pro-social beliefs and practices. For example, *Hum Log* promoted the values of family harmony and female equality in India (Brown, 1988). Manohar Shyam Joshi, the scriptwriter for *Hum Log*, had these values in mind when he created the characters in the television series (personal communication, July 1987).

In contrast, American-produced soap operas are not intended to promote specific values. Although communication researchers have contended that specific values, beliefs, and behaviour are reinforced and disseminated by American soap operas (Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes, 1981; Cantor, 1979; Cantor and Pingree, 1983; Carveth and Alexander, 1985; Goldsen, 1977; Sutherland and Siniawsky, 1982; Tan and Tan, 1986), social messages have been incidental to the primary focus of attracting large audiences. Isolated episodes of certain American soap operas have focused on socially relevant problems such as AIDS, alcoholism, cancer, child abuse, drug addiction, and rape; but generally have not attempted to promote values and moral beliefs that alleviate such problems.

A third major distinction between traditional and pro-development soap operas is with regard to the moral dilemmas dramatised in the content. Traditional soap operas are oftentimes morally incoherent, meaning no clear moral distinctions are made between good and bad moral choices (Berreuta, 1986). Even the 'good' moral characters of soap operas frequently violate social norms of good moral behaviour, confusing the audience about what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' behaviour.

Perhaps the most graphic example of this incoherence was created by the producers of the American soap opera *Dallas*. During the 1986 television season, Bobby Ewing, a character of *Dallas*, was typecast as a relatively good moral character whose behaviour was contrasted in the series with his brother, J. R. Ewing, who represented an immoral character. After Bobby was killed in the 1986 season and then resurrected in the new 1987 season, his character was totally changed, and he became worse than his brother JR. Although this is a very unusual example, the existence of moral incoherence is common in American soap operas.

The characters in pro-development soap operas are more morally consistent because they represent role models of pro-social and antisocial behaviour. Although there is change in the moral development of characters over time, the positive and negative consequences of moral choices are more clearly portrayed and the use of stereotypes is more graphic (Berrueta, 1986). Table 1 provides an example of the nine major stereotypical characters created in *Hum Log*, and what percentage of viewers identified with them as role models.

A fourth distinction between traditional and pro-development soap operas is in the story plots of the programmes. Traditional soap operas are commonly unrealistic because they do not give an accurate portrayal of life as experienced by most of their viewers. Content analyses indicate American soap operas distort images of the real world and relay misleading information, such as information about social problems and health-related matters (Alexander, 1985; Cassata *et al.*, 1979; Estep and MacDonald, 1985; Goldsen, 1975; Greenberg and D'Alessio, 1985; Pingree *et al.*, 1979; Tan and Tan, 1986).

Rather than depicting the lives of the social élite and misrepresenting the majority of the public, pro-development soap operas have concentrated on the lives of the middle- and lower-class urban dwellers. Although content analyses of pro-development soap operas are not readily available, our content analysis of *Hum Log* reveals that most of the characters were depicted as middle-class urban dwellers; and the programme themes dealt with typical problems faced by Indian families living in urban areas.

The fifth distinction noted here is that traditional soap operas have little or no theoretical foundation; whereas pro-development soap operas are theoretically based. Rather than being guided by a systematic theoretic orientation, American soap operas are

Table 1

Family Members	Characterisation	Percentage of survey respondents who said this character was the best role model*
1. Grandfather, Rijjak Ram	A World War II veteran, a strict disciplinarian, self-sufficient, highly moral, hardworking.	37%
2. Grandmother, Imarti Devi	A beautiful, indulgent person believing in tradition and rituals, but who is in poor health and eventually dies of cancer. Somewhat selfish and sarcastic.	6%
3. Father, Basesar Ram	He has three faces: Boorish drunkard, sheepish sober, and sweet ingratiating. He treats his wife and children badly.	4%
4. Mother, Bhagwanti	A self-effacing, self-neglecting, and silent woman who serves the needs of the family. She suffers at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Portrays the stereotypical Indian wife/mother.	18%
5. Eldest son, Lalloo	Lethargic, timid, and stupid to the extent of being hilarious. A failure in life who believes that dowry will solve his economic problems.	6%
6. Eldest daughter, Badki	Hard-working, brilliant, and proficient in sewing. After she is rejected by prospective grooms because her parents cannot afford a large dowry and she is plain-looking, she works hard, marries a medical doctor, and is successful.	11%
7. Middle daughter, Chutki	Beautiful, sophisticated, glamour-struck, and loose morals. A failure in school, she has a warped sense of modernity.	1%
8. Youngest daughter, Chutki	A studious, no-nonsense, practical type of girl whose goal is to be a medical doctor.	5%
9. Youngest son, Nanhe	A fun-loving sportsman, and a 'know-all' in wheeling and dealing. He is a smart, lovable rascal who wants to get rich quick.	10%

* Two percent chose another character as the best role model.[2]

produced by a negotiated struggle between those who value the content for its commercial purposes and those who value the cultural, social, or artistic aspects of the content (Cantor and Pingree, 1983).

In contrast, producers of pro-development soap operas employed the use of theory to persuade viewers to adopt pro-social beliefs and practices. Mexico's pro-development soap operas emphasised five essential components: a large audience appeal; an emphasis on cultural archetypes and stereotypes; an emotive nature; a promoter of pro-social values; and a promoter of pro-social behaviour (Sabido, 1982).

In order to create the promotion of pro-social values and behaviour, Mexican researchers made direct use of Albert Bandura's (1977, 1986) social-learning theory, Eric Bentley's (1964) dramatic theory, and Miguel Sabido's (1982) theory of tones. They also incorporated a number of important principles based on Milton Rokeach's (1973, 1979) belief system theory of value stability and change. Using principles derived from these four theories, Sabido and his team developed a persuasive communication strategy to build a theoretical framework for pro-development soap operas (Sabido, 1982).

Indian producers in part utilised a similar theoretic framework in creating *Hum Log*, although the incorporation of theory by the creative producers at Doordarshan was not as methodical as was the use of theory by the programme producers at Televisa. S. S. Gill and Manohar Shyam Joshi, the originator and writer of *Hum Log* respectively, indicated that they were quite aware of the theoretical orientations used to develop the Mexican soap operas, and stated they used similar theory in the creation of *Hum Log* (personal communication, July 1987).

Finally, the last distinction to be noted in the present analysis is that traditional soap operas are produced mostly in the United States, whereas pro-development soap operas are produced mostly in the Third World. Although many soap operas produced in the Third World have been solely for entertainment, a large percentage have promoted educational themes. In contrast, no soap operas in the United States to date have consistently and purposefully incorporated educational themes or promoted pro-social beliefs and behaviour.

Future developments and their implications

Proceedings from a recent international conference on the use of entertainment-education strategies for social change indicated that in the 1990s there will be an international proliferation of pro-development media (Rogers *et al.*, 1989). The number of people world-wide who will be affected by pro-development soap operas is expected to increase dramatically during this next decade. This raises two important questions. First, what factors have contributed to the growing use of pro-development soap operas; and second, what are the implications of the use of such programmes for development?

The answer to the first question is found in studies on the effects of pro-social television content. Research on pro-development television programmes indicates that a mixture of entertainment and educational message content can attract large audiences, earn high profits, create knowledge of educational issues, influence attitudes, values and beliefs, and promote development practices (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube, 1984; Brown, 1988; Rogers and Antola, 1986; Rogers *et al.*, 1989; Rushton, 1982; Sabido, 1981; Singhal and Rogers, 1988, 1989, in press).

A second reason for the rapid growth of pro-development soap operas is because traditional, educational media programmes have not been very effective in promoting pro-social beliefs and development practices. The few success stories around the world are far outnumbered by the many failures of educational programmes. The pattern of media use throughout the world indicates that entertainment-oriented programmes are much more popular and attended to than educational programmes. Experience with pro-development soap operas in Mexico and India provides evidence that the entertainment-education communication strategy is effective because it induces a high degree of audience involvement.

Thirdly, the production of pro-development soap operas, most of which are indigenously produced, reduces the need of Third World nations to import American television programmes for entertainment. The importation of American serials such as *Dallas*, *I Love Lucy* and *Kojak* has not contributed toward development in Third World countries. Many Third World leaders and media scholars believe the exportation of American television programmes is a form of cultural imperialism and has sparked negative feelings toward American culture. Therefore pro-development soap operas are an attractive and beneficial alternative to imported programmes, even though the financial cost may be greater. In fact, because of the success of entertainment programmes produced in Latin America, Americans are now receiving broadcasts of several *telenovelas* (Rogers, 1987b).

The growth of pro-development soap operas in the Third World has important implications for scholars, mass-media officials, and others interested in development communication. First, pro-development soap operas break down the false dichotomy between 'entertainment' and 'educational' media. Media effects research indicates that educational programmes can be highly entertaining, such as *Sesame Street*. Likewise, entertaining programmes can be highly educational, such as in the case of Latin America *telenovelas*. Most media programmes have both educational and entertainment qualities. Therefore, television, radio, and other programmes should not be identified as either 'educational television, radio, etc.,' or 'entertainment television, radio, etc.' The entertainment-eduation strategy employed by pro-development soap operas eliminates this false dichotomy.

A second implication addresses the moral issues that surround the use of pro-development soap operas. Who is going to decide what is pro-social and what is antisocial? Should governments that control media decide; or private television companies? How about the mass audiences? The answers to such questions are not simple. Although most people would agree that AIDS prevention is good, drug abuse is bad, dowry is wrong, and so on, the issues of AIDS education in American schools, drug testing in Britain, and women's equality in India are all controversial.

Finally, positive role models are needed to produce pro-development soap operas. This blurs the distinction between an actor or actress's private life and role as a television character. For example, producers of *Hum Log* had to drop the family-planning theme in the programme when one of the actresses, a role model for promoting birth control, became pregnant in real life. Audiences influenced by pro-social beliefs and practices embodied by television role models are affected by the private lives of these individuals. This necessitates finding special entertainers willing to fulfil such demanding public and private roles.

As more countries produce pro-development soap operas, these as well as other implications need to be considered (Brown, 1988; Singhal and Rogers, in press). Before such issues can be fully discussed, however, we need to know much more about the effects of pro-development soap operas and their impact on development. ■

1 The present research was supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. This article draws on Brown (1988) and Singhal and Rogers (1988, 1989, in press).

2 Table 1 is based on a national survey of 1,170 respondents in India. Data was obtained from a stratified random sample from both rural and urban areas of Northern, Central, and Southern India.

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Informatics replaces communication

There has been much talk recently, about global village and global communication revolution. Despite this, is the human condition any better now than it was, say, 50 years ago? The large majority of this village are illiterate, poor, diseased, hungry, malnourished, ill-informed, unemployed or under-employed and living in undignified surroundings unfit for human beings. Water – pure, drinking water, the very basis of life – is becoming a scarce commodity throughout the world. The environment is polluted with pesticides, toxic wastes and nuclear radiation.

If there were 100 residents in this global village, only one would get the opportunity for education beyond school level, 70 would be unable to read and write. Over 50 would be suffering from malnutrition, and over 80 would live in sub-standard housing. Six of the 100 would hold half the entire income of the village. How would these six live in peace with their neighbours without arming themselves to the teeth and supplying arms to those willing to fight on their side? This is the dilemma facing the globe and the NIICO is having a difficult time convincing the 1% of India or any other developing country about this real dilemma. Unless such conscientisation takes place, revolutions for emancipation from national tyranny will be misrepresented through under-reporting, ahistorical interpretations and purely biased reporting.

Towards cultural autonomy

Such conscientisation can come about only when the developing or non-aligned countries achieve or work towards cultural autonomy. Today's frontline media in developing countries are dependent on the financial, technological and marketing and communication systems of the developed countries. Despite their outward support of the NIICO, they cannot achieve much because they cannot be self-reliant. The question is a complex one indeed, because as pointed out by Hamelink, after analysing contemporary national initiatives to resist cultural synchronisation in Canada, Australia, Cuba, Peru, Mozambique, Tanzania and China, 'there is no case where all the conditions for bringing about a total cultural autonomy are fulfilled' (1983).

Stronger economies like those of Canada and Australia may resist synchronisation to some extent, but because of the cultural consanguinity between them and the leading industrialised country, namely the US, it is not easy for them to define their national culture *vis-à-vis* the culture of the US. Moreover, it is not just the sum total of art, social practices and religion. Culture is as much a product of technology as of sociology. Because of the technological identity among the advanced countries, a common cultural syncretism is inevitable in those countries.

A grammar without a language

Modern communication technology – with all the latest additions to the science of informatics such as videotex, home computers, teletext, direct broadcasting satellites – has come out of its national linguistic cocoon and assumed a global grammar without a national language. People of the technologically advanced countries – whether they belong to the geopolitical East or West – use a new language which has its own grammar of global communication. Modern communications cannot be confined to radio, televison, film and the print media. The mass media themselves are on the way to extinction as far as the advanced countries are concerned. They are becoming more personalised. People can do away with books, magazines, and the mass mediated messages. They can sit in their drawing room or bedroom and call for information on any subject or entertainment of their liking without going to an assigned place for it.

As Szecsko has observed, 'the complex restructuring of the information and communication industries . . . has some implications which . . . react on the structures themselves . . . There is a shift, at an almost exponential rate, from handling materials to handling information' (1982). According to Szecsko and Simone Weil (quoted in Szecsko 1982), this shift from mass communication to informatics can 'evoke the menace of a new imperialism in the field of informatics'.

The use of computers in every field of human endeavour, particularly in all forms of communication, has become so widely prevalent and routine in Western societies that some communication researchers have suggested that the term communication be replaced by *compunication*. ■

Hamelink, Cees J. *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications*. New York: Longman, 1983
Szecsko, Tamas. 'Grammar of Global Communications' in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, September 1982.

From **Reporting a Revolution: The Iranian Revolution and the NIICO debate**, *by J. V. Vilanilam. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989, pp.171-3.*