

Communication as Web of Government for the Good of the People

PAZ H. DIAZ*

Communication and information technology are essential links in people's daily lives which the government could harness to bring about human, technical and economic development. Despite the government's policy pronouncements to support the communication and information network of the country, meager budgetary allocation for building communications and information-related infrastructure indicates the low priority given by the government to this sector. Rapid advancement in equipment, knowledge and skills in telecommunications and information technology further poses challenges to the government to catch up with these developments and be able to utilize them for the benefit of the people. There is a need to rationalize government policies and programs concerning communications and information technology to keep pace with current developments and harness existing resources to attain national development.

Introduction

The study of communication brings to light the many kinds of links which exist among humans, links which are sometimes taken for granted in the daily business of life. Communication research attempts to answer how these links are created and maintained, describing how humans are able to maintain these links in order to carry out the many and varied kinds of interactions they encounter with one another.

Most disciplines neglect communication because it is felt to be a given among humans, something they are all competent in, anyway, and therefore, something that does not need much attention. But in the daily ebb and flow of human life, one finds how everything, governance included, hinges on communication to a high degree.

Today, on casual examination of the various aspects of human life, one will certainly find that most everything rests largely on the production, processing, and dissemination of information. Individuals are able to steer their way through life with the aid of communication, no less. It is now accepted that communication and information technology are essential to bring

*Assistant Professor, College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

about social, economic, political, educational, and total human development. All indications are that human, technical, and economic advancement worldwide is happening through greater and greater exchange of information and communication.

How government uses the technologies of communication and information as resources to bring about peaceful and satisfactory relationships among its people is, thus, an interesting and worthwhile study to undertake.

Objectives of the Study

Given this importance of communication in the lives of the people of a nation, this paper aims to study the various ways by which government is able to use this valuable resource for their good.

Specifically, the study:

- (1) looks into the policy framework which the government uses to be able to maximize the benefits of communication and information vis-à-vis the needs of the Filipino people;
- (2) analyzes some of the activities undertaken by government to bring the positive effects of communication and information technology to the people; and
- (3) critiques the results of these policies and activities and recommends courses of action for the improvement of the communication environment in the Philippines.

The Policy Framework of Communication in the Philippines

Three fundamental sources make up the policy framework of communications in the country: (1) the constitutional, legal and regulatory pronouncements aimed at ensuring and controlling the operations of communications endeavors and enterprises; (2) the setting of the overall communications environment arising from the administration's development plans for the country; and (3) the supporting and stimulating activities organized by the Executive Branch of government itself.

Constitutional, Legal and Regulatory Pronouncements

Constitutional Foundations. The 1987 Philippine Constitution declares: "The State recognizes the vital role of communication and information in

nation-building" (Art. II, Sec. 24). This statement sets the policy environment on communication and information in the Philippines. Communication and information are here seen as vital links in bringing about desired results for nationbuilding. The statement puts communication and information in the forefront of human development in the Philippines.

As such, the people's right and access to the benefits of communication and information are assured. Implicit is the recognition of the important role of communication and information in the social and political life of the people.

a) The Bill of Rights

A Bill of Rights enumerates the private and inalienable rights of citizenship. It tells its citizenry what it can and cannot expect of its government. The provisions therein speak of rights that may not be taken away by government and which the government has a duty to protect. The Bill of Rights in the Philippine Constitution assures the citizenry of freedom of expression and of disclosure of information from government:

No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the Government for redress of grievances (Art. III, Sec. 4).

and

The right of the people to information on matters of public concern shall be recognized. Access to official records, and to documents, and papers pertaining to official acts, transactions, or decisions, as well as to government research data used as basis for policy development, shall be afforded the citizen, subject to such limitations as may be provided by law (Art. III, Sec. 7).

These provisions, which declare that the people have an inalienable right to communicate freely and to be informed intelligently, are far-reaching in a democratic society like the Philippines. Protection of the right, of course, upholds the fact that this is not done in disregard of the rights of others, something which is also mandated by the law.

"Expression" is used in the current Bill of Rights, a 1986 addition by the Constitutional Convention, which is an expansion of the traditional speech and press freedom of the former constitutions. The citizenry is thus not only to be a "speaking" one; it is to be an *expressive* one: one that engages in intelligent and sensitive interaction and exchange between and among people as well as government instrumentalities. Thus, an informed citizenry enhances a country's bid for development, rendering the people's judgments and decisions rational and effective.

b) General Provisions

Where the Constitutional statement and the Bill of Rights give the broad setting of the role of communication and information in the country's movement to development, the General Provisions Section now specifies what the Constitution desires:

The State shall provide the policy environment for the full development of Filipino capability and the emergence of communication structures suitable to the needs and aspirations of the nation and the balanced flow of information into, out of, and across the country, in accordance with a policy that respects the freedom of speech and of the press (Art. XVI, Sec. 10).

This provision is not found in previous Constitutions. It shows the deep involvement the state must have in providing the policy environment for communication and information to be integrated into the people's lives. Communication and information are seen as necessary for national integration and cultural identity as well as instruments for desired social changes.

Legislation. Laws and regulations affecting communication and information in the Philippines are not very numerous. The Revised Penal Code (Section 1, Articles 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358 and 359 and Section 2, Articles 360, 361, and 362) forbids libelous, defamatory, obscene and seditious materials as well as immoral doctrines, obscene exhibitions and indecent shows. Republic Act No. 53 exempts the publisher, editor or reporter of any publication from revealing the source of published news or information obtained in confidence.

Commonwealth Act Nos. 365, 571, and 582 provide for the regulation of radio stations and radio communications in the Philippines. During Martial Law, one Executive Order, a Letter of Instruction, and two Presidential Decrees gave visitorial and investigative authority and power to impose fines and surcharges to the Radio Control Office; created the Ministry of Transportation and Communications and the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC); and regulated the ownership and operation of radio and television stations as well as promulgated the "Anti-Dummy Law." Likewise, during Martial Law, Presidential Decree No. 1986 created the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board.

Department Circular No. 87-188 of the Department of Transportation and Communications contains all its telecommunications policies. NTC Circular No. 1-04-88 provides all the rules and regulations governing equipment for public networks and keeps track of supporting telecommunications sector development.

Currently, there are two Senate Bills and one House Bill presented to the Philippine legislative body relating to telecommunications development legislation. Senate Bill No. 376 seeks to promote and govern the development of Philippine telecommunications and the delivery of public telecommunications services.

Meanwhile, Republic Act No. 6849 was signed into law in 1990 by then President Corazon C. Aquino, providing for the installation, operation, and maintenance of public telephones in each and every municipality of the Philippines.

A study of bills enacted into law during the Ninth Congress (1 July 1992 to 30 June 1995) relating to communication shows that 74 pertained to requests for franchises, 28 dealt with public information, seven were on rules, three on transportation and communications, and one on government reorganization.

Development Plans. The medium-term development plans and the Philippines 2000 Vision Statement are vital components of the policy framework within which the communications industry and information technology operate.

a) Medium-Term Philippine Development Plans 1987-1992 and 1993-1998 (MTPDP)

The Constitution, the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) 1993-1998 provides broad policy guidelines for government and the civil society as they work towards the attainment of the all-important task of nationbuilding. In the MTPDP, there is only one pronouncement on communication. It is found in the chapter on Development Administration, Chapter 5, Section 5.4.5, directing government to

undertake a massive and sustained Communication and Advocacy Program on the goals, development strategies, targets and priority thrusts contained in the MTPDP.

The following lines are devoted in the MTPDP 1993-1998 to the implementation of this policy, exhorting government to "effectively use development communication" and to

formulate and adopt a national and local communication plan and advocate development goals, strategies, policies, programs and projects; and reinforce information networks by:

- (1) strengthening government information centers;
- (2) forging linkages with relevant private institutions to complement government information activities; and

- (3) promoting greater collaboration between media practitioners and government information officers (MTPDP, Chapter 5: 8).

Besides these two policy declarations, no other statements regarding communication and information are made except in Chapter 4 on Infrastructure Development where telephone and postal services alone are mentioned as targets for development. Telephone density is targeted at 4 lines per 100 population while postal density is set to be at 1:27,000 persons by end of 1998. In addition, all Metro Manila mail will be delivered within 24 hours, and interregional mail within 2 days.

b) The Philippines 2000 Vision Statement

In the Philippines 2000 Vision Statement which is the present administration's vision of growth from the Philippine Development Plan, the infrastructure program covers the nationalization of the telecommunication industry so that facilities and services are provided to all municipalities of the country. More or less the same goals are stated: telephone density from 1.4 lines to 4 lines per 100 persons by the year 2000. The other concern stated involves the efficiency of the postal services in the entire country, also found in the MTPDP.

Executive Branch

The Philippine Information Agency (PIA) is the main arm of the administration for the dissemination of information. The PIA was created through Executive Order No. 100 on 24 December 1986 to provide people with adequate information that will help them "make better decisions and identify opportunities that could improve their quality of life" (EO 100, 1st paragraph). The agency is mandated to create an enlightened citizenry who can "participate meaningfully in the democratic process" (EO 100, Section 2).

The PIA, which is under the Office of the Press Secretary, is responsible for formulating and supporting the Social Reform Agenda (SRA) of the government. As such, it focuses its attention on the five thrusts of government, namely, political stability, economic growth and development, environmental protection, people empowerment and responsive bureaucracy. Extensive media coverage supported the launching of the SRA as well as the Peace Summits held in the country.

Self-Regulatory Bodies

The most active self-regulatory bodies in the field of communication and information are the National Press Club (NPC), the *Kapisanan ng mga*

Broadcaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) and the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB).

The policies of these bodies are more or less binding on its members. Their statements of intentions are very encouraging and inspiring, to say the least. For example, Ricardo Torres, National Press Club president in 1975 was quoted as saying:

the National Press Club is not really a social club, we have a court of ethics, we have an Internal Affairs Committee to rid the profession of undesirables. We are fighting for press freedom. It is hard to rid the profession of undesirables (interview by Richard Shafer; quoted in Shafer 1991: 137).

The KBP has a set of standards to be maintained by radio and television broadcasters in the Philippines. Its preamble is very idealistic. There are fifteen basic rules or codes of conduct which cover ethics, responsibility, and the preservation of freedom to speak out whenever topics are legitimate and true.

The Board of Censors for Motion Pictures and Television was created by Congress in 1961 under the Office of the President of the Philippines. Several revisions were made on its structure and mandates, the latest being in 1985 where the Board's functions included, besides its censorship duties, initiation of plans and "cooperation with the Industry to improve, upgrade, and make this Industry viable as one source of fueling the national economy" (MTRCB Primer 1987).

Government Efforts at Operationalization

Filipinization of Communications Handling and Distribution

Indigenous handling of communications is assured by the MTPDP (1987-1992). It expresses the need for an indigenous communication industry capable of producing hardware and software using local materials and talents. The plan calls for the limitation of ownership and management of mass media to Filipino citizens or corporations. It counsels Congress to regulate or prohibit the establishment of monopolies as well as combinations of common ownerships in commercial mass media which will restrain trade and give undue competition where public interest is at stake.

According to the MTPDP,

only Filipino citizens or corporations or associations, at least 70 percent of the capital of which is owned by such citizens, shall be allowed to engage in the advertising industry. The participation of foreign

investors in the governing body of entities in such industry shall be limited to their proportionate share in the capital thereof, and all the executive and managing officers of such entities must be citizens of the Philippines (RP 1986: 306).

Citizens' Access to Communications

According to Factbook 94, published by the PULSE Research Group, most of the households in the Philippines belong to the D and E market segments, living below the poverty threshold of ₱6,000 a month for a household of six (6). In 1994, 52.9 percent of Filipino households were reported to belong in class D while 37.5 percent belonged to class E. The AB segment went up from 1.2 percent in 1990 to 1.8 percent in 1994. Class C represented only 7.9 percent of Filipino households. Very easily, class C households can slide down to class D.

Urbanization in the country is forecast to proceed faster: the 49 percent urban and 51 percent rural split of the population in 1990 is projected to change to a 60 percent urban and 40 percent rural split in 10 years. It is important to see that urbanization does not necessarily mean improvement in social and economic status.

Plumbing facilities were found in 22 percent of total Philippine households in 1994. Disaggregated according to location, the ratios are as follows: in the Metro Manila Area, 71.48 percent of households have plumbing; further, 45.31 percent in all the urban areas throughout the country while only 5.60 percent in the rural areas have plumbing.

Electricity is enjoyed by 71.90 percent of total Philippine households. Locationwise, 94.40 percent of households in Metro Manila area are serviced by electricity; 87.81 percent of urban areas throughout the country and 56.90 percent of rural areas are reached by electricity.

Media infrastructure for the entire country has been reported by the UNDP Human Development Report 1995 and the Asian Communication Handbook 1994. There are five newspapers circulating per 100 people in the Philippines, according to the Human Development Index 1995. According to the Asian Communication Handbook, circulation of dailies in 1992 totaled 4,173, 945. Eighty-seven (87) non-dailies per 1,000 population circulated in the same year.

Urban households showed a 79 percent ownership of radio and 64.9 percent ownership of television sets. In the rural areas, radio ownership was found in 66.6 percent of households and television ownership in 29.4 percent. Metro Manila showed a high rate of television ownership as 9 out of 10 households owned a set. Meanwhile, about 17 out of 20 households, had a radio set.

The whole land area of the Philippines (100 percent) receives radio signals; there are 303 AM radio transmitters and 208 FM radio transmitters all covering 77.7 percent of the entire population. Between 90 to 95 percent of the total Philippine land area is capable of receiving television signals but only 40 percent of the population is covered.

Cinema attendance per 1,000 population was 305 in 1992; annual cinema attendance was 18,372,000 throughout the country.

A Telephone for Each Community

The central role of telephone services cannot be underestimated especially these days where communications are necessary in most phases of human life: social, political, as well as economic. Access to standard telephone services on equitable basis and at affordable prices is of great importance. The fulfillment of community service obligations and generation of appropriate return on investment, however, should be balanced and maximized. Republic Act No. 6849 ensures highest levels of accountability and responsiveness to customer and community needs and provides capacity for the telephone services to achieve optimal rates of expansion and modernization. The rights of first option are given by the Act to domestic carriers or utilities existing in the municipalities wherein they have a franchise and where they have been certified by the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) as rendering competent service in their specific areas of operation.

Press Relations

The MTPDP proposes to improve the relations between government and private media. There is always the romantic overtone (or more accurately, perhaps, a love-hate relation) whenever the press and the mass media channels are invoked in the Philippines. The government wants its programs and accomplishments to be featured by the mass media. What the plans call coherent campaigns focused on specific views in support of government programs will be undertaken to make the public know about the good that government is doing.

That unpopular or unsavory messages should be sanitized is desired by the plan. The MTPDP stresses the need for "promoting greater collaboration between media practitioners and government information officers" (RP 1986: 412). It further elaborates:

A more effective sharing of information between the government and the general public shall be emphasized. This is vital in instituting a more

democratic process towards the attainment of national development goals (RP 1986: 411).

And where mass media are not available, barangay officials, health and nutrition workers, and informal leaders of the community shall be tapped as agents of information to serve the requirements of both people and government. However, the preparation of these people is merely implied and no program is set for serious training on communications.

The MTPDP talks about the adaptation of a Development Planning and Implementation Manual which can be used at the lowest levels to guide municipalities, towns, and cities in planning for their development programs. As of the moment, no one has seen or read this Manual. And if it exists at all, no one has used it among local government units in the country.

Budget Allocations

Budget allocations are a strong indication of the amount of attention paid by government to communication and information. The government's infrastructure program from 1990 to 1992 allocated P15B to communications, a meager 6.07 percent of the total funds allocated to the rest of the country's infrastructure sectors which was P251B. It would seem that the first question to pose is: With the new environment of communication technologies in the Philippines (and, of course, throughout the world), how come the MTPDP leaves the so-called "vital link" to take care of itself?

The possibility of a monopoly structure for a communications system still looms above the Philippine horizon. This brings to mind considerations on government regulation and control. The central issue is the adequacy of the regulatory scheme, though. For many years doubts have been raised as to adequacy, in terms of size and professional capability of present regulatory agencies to cope with the increasingly complex problems of communications.

The Philippines at the Threshold of the Information Age: A Critique of Government's Plans and Activities

Communication and information indeed play significant roles in the life of the ordinary Filipino. But the question to ask is whether or not the average Filipino is able to participate meaningfully in the democratic process through effective and efficient communication and whether or not he is able to secure the information he needs to improve the quality of his life at the time that he needs it, at the cost he can afford, and at levels of adequacy and accuracy that he requires.

To broaden the people's access to information, the MTPDP states that in the rural areas, radio and television listening and viewing centers should be encouraged basically through the efforts of community members themselves. Also, the MTPDPs encourage citizens to set up information centers to serve as publication outlets and reference libraries which can provide audio-visual presentations and related information services.

However, the possibility of communications networking has started to expand beyond these traditional boundaries. It has become evident that in this Information Age, communications no longer simply mean the traditional telephone, telegram, and telex services. It now includes access to information, computers, electronic mail, entertainment and the world's markets. Success in both providing and using these wider services will be crucial to success in restructuring for growth in advanced economic activities. In fact, telecommunications has become a main channel by which communication and information are delivered not only by faster means but also by more reliable and less costly hardware and software.

Today, communications and information technologies offer substantial economic and environmental benefits for the ordinary Filipino. These include low energy alternatives to certain types of travel, important innovations in education, health and welfare services, and the potential for speedy means of gathering data to make relevant and effective decisions. Facsimile services are available for fast, reliable document transfer. Highly mobile and lightweight communications equipment are here to stay. Cable television services and video conferencing are already a reality.

Rapid technological advancement is revolutionizing the way signals are transmitted, the manner in which these signals are routed and the means by which they are processed at either end. This process is achieving large increases in the speed and reliability of service. It is leading to a substantial upgrading of the network intelligence, and hence of the number of functions built into the network, and is broadening the range of types of information that can be transmitted. The outcome will probably be an increasing integration of computer and communications technologies so that the differences between these industries will progressively, and rapidly, disappear. Telecommunications has changed from a largely single-product (voice-telephones) industry to such diverse technologies as microwave, satellite, microprocessor, coaxial cable, or optical fiber, servicing the increasingly diversified markets of information communications and processing.

And yet when one examines the government's plans and implementation activities flowing from its policy frameworks on communication and information, one finds that these plans do not prepare the citizens for the fast pace of technological change occurring all around them. The MTPDPs, for

example, do not in any way mention the information revolution which started in the 70s and which has inevitably led the 90s to an entirely new path as far as communication is concerned. The computer and its component technologies are nowhere mentioned in both plans. Meanwhile, the "micro-processor revolution," "intelligent terminals," and "teleprocessing networks" have become bywords, if not household terms. The combination of information-processing (computing) and communications functions in new hardware devices and systems has arrived and is already being used in many places in the country. But the plans do not even mention that. In fact, only telephones, telegraphs, and the improvement of the postal services in the country are specifically mentioned.

Long-distance transmission and communication lines have overtaken the MTPDP. Not only are these available, they are even more flexible and less costly than anyone dreamed they would be. Local terminal markets grew by themselves, without government policy statements, and even less supervision. Hence, access is there, but on a very uneven and a quite unplanned basis. In fact, electronic alternatives to the postal service abound all around us, oblivious of whatever policy statements may or may not say about them.

Against this background of rapid technological change, with all its implications, the need for a new approach in long-term communications planning in the Philippines is clear. Such effort must also extend to the municipal or provincial or regional levels. There is mounting evidence that a major transformation is occurring in the economic base of the country today. At the heart of this transformation are information-based industries and occupations. Telecommunications and computers are the key technologies of this transformation. Whether such changes/transformations will bring us closer to a form of active, participatory democracy or to social isolation or totalitarianism depends very greatly on how we manage and organize technology and information infrastructures.

In addition, the opening up of trade and industry to foreign investors and the inroads by transborder flows of information are realities to be contended with. Neither the MTPDP nor the vision of the Philippines 2000 mentions anything about these developments on a regional, intercontinental, or worldwide level.

A serious stocktaking of current and anticipated situations should be undertaken to ensure the best future arrangements throughout the country. These changes should not be concentrated in Manila and other major urban centers alone.

Having policies within the national and local contexts is one thing, however. Implementing and operationalizing them is totally different, though

highly necessary. It is unsettling to read from one of Braid's (1987) papers that in 1977, a Communication Planning Workshop was held in which issues discussed and examined were very similar, if not exactly the same as those discussed in another seminar workshop held ten years later in 1987. She even says that there were eight other fora held in between those ten years, also talking about the same issues. Braid says:

After going through several background documents and proceedings, we discovered that we have been discussing the same issues and problems over the past decade. Despite the time and effort spent in all these meetings or conferences, very little has been achieved in rationalizing the communication sector in the country. The lessons of the past decade can therefore be summarized into two: (1) there should be less talk and more work; and (2) there is a need to dialogue and work with various sectors or stakeholders not only in communication and development (Braid 1991: 251).

Almost another ten years have passed since these words were uttered. Hardly any change has occurred and the issues and problems confronting communications are still the same: policies are set but little trickle effect happens in the sectors and localities where implementation is needed.

Towards a Workable Policy Framework for Communications Development

Change is ongoing, its pace increasing rapidly. Advances in communications and information have brought about the replacement of analogue with digital technology. In computing, customized equipment and value added services have brought the country into the Information Age. This continues to provide pressures—with increasing intensity—on the existing policy and regulatory arrangements regarding communications and information in the Philippines. Only a stocktaking of current and anticipated situations will ensure that the entire nation will be able to effectively use communication and information as resources for sustained advancement.

Equipment, knowledge and skills in handling electronic communications have arrived in the country, without the MTPDP or other policy pronouncements by government taking any notice. This is relentlessly pressing government to change its ways of thinking about communications and information. For example, the 1936 Communications Act (Commonwealth Act Nos. 365, 571, and 582) was premised on technologies of limitation. Since radio waves easily nullify each other, radio stations were required to be licensed. Because one network of wires easily connects all telephones, point-to-point communications markets were regulated to discourage duplication. But the philosophy behind these restrictive provisions was not conceived or designed for such diverse technologies as microwave, satellite, microprocessor, coaxial cable, or optical fiber.

The explosive growth in data communications generated by the computer was not considered at that time. Services such as broadband cable, citizens band radio, electronic fund transfers, video discs, facsimile transmission, teletext, or telemedicine or teleshopping were not anticipated. This mix of old regulatory concepts with new technologies has yielded the current anomaly of rationed abundance.

Advances in communications technology are bringing us more transmission capacity and more choice of transmission modes. There is, however, a tension between greater capacity and choice of different modes—a tension that exposes a basic policy issue that must be confronted. The enormous capacity of modern transmission technologies such as optical fiber suggests to some a future convergence of communications modes: optical fiber that provides greater and cheaper broadband capacity capable of handling both telephone and television services. Further implication is that one system is quite capable of handling all or substantially all transmission needs and therefore future communications delivered shall be organized monopolistically.

The creation of communication and information framework is aimed at providing the government and the entire nation with the direction it lacks in terms of utilizing information and communications technology for people empowerment. This shall be undertaken while maintaining close coordination between all agencies involved while respecting and upholding the integrity and independence of each body, which is a must under a democratic setup.

Communication policies should be formulated to provide guidelines on ownership, distribution and utilization of communication resources; define the role of communication in our society; and define relationships among the media, government, and business sectors.

A framework for communications development should therefore be evolved to be able to:

- (1) sustain an adequate rate of innovation—based on local and overseas developments—to support society's increasing need for and dependence on a wide range of communications facilities and services; and
- (2) actively encourage user participation to develop mutual understandings about the specific facilities and services that will best serve our society.

This framework should:

- (3) recognize that, with increasing pervasiveness of telecommunications and consequent growing external economic benefits,

the current financial objective of requiring profitability for each type of service may become untenable in the near future;

- (4) plan the introduction of many types of telecommunications services in ways that will support social equity, so that the distribution of telecommunications services does not worsen the position of deprived segments within the society, reinforcing the power of an information elite; and
- (5) recognize that telecommunications and mass media communications will develop a much closer affinity in the future.

In fact, other policy areas affecting communications must include:

- (a) economic growth policies, concerning desirable rates of industrial automation, and productivity of information sector;
- (b) resource conservation, particularly energy policies;
- (c) decentralization policies, both for new growth centers and for encouraging decentralization generally by industry and government;
- (d) growth of knowledge industries—national information policies;
- (e) education, including questions of computer-aided instruction at existing institutions and the development of decentralized institutions, e.g. open universities; and
- (f) involvement of communities in the evolution of government policies and participation of the people in the setting up of telecommunications systems with adequate response capabilities which are important aids to national development and grassroots empowerment.

At the heart of this transformation are information-based industries and occupations. Telecommunications and computers are the key technologies of this transformation. Whether such changes/transformations will bring us closer to a form of active, participatory democracy or to social isolation or totalitarianism depends very greatly on how we manage and organize technology and information infrastructures. A framework—institutional, legislative, and technical—will need to be developed in the interests of the future.

This framework should attempt to strike a balance between the advantages of opposing views—for example, monopoly as against competition,

centralization against decentralization, widening information access against the desire for personal privacy. Responsibility for the development of the framework should be integrated into a commission to oversee such possible threats and disadvantages as well as penalties involved in new information and telecommunications development. This responsibility should not only be to inform but also to respond to society's views through ongoing and in-depth exchange of views not only among the experts but also with the users of such technology.

Technology provides cheaper ways of doing things. For example, optical fiber transmits high density traffic at a fraction of the cost of copper wire, and satellites carry traffic at costs wholly independent of distance. Technology provides the opportunity to do new things, especially by taking advantage of the convergence between computers and telecommunications. As a result, modern travel and tourist industry reservation systems and video information systems are highly successful because of such developments.

Communication has clearly been a part of every civilization in every stage of development. The importance of mass media channels, information technology and information dissemination cannot be overemphasized—the very reason for the emergence and constant use of the phrase, "*information is power.*" As a developing nation with the goal of achieving the status of a Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) before the turn of the century, the Philippines must be able to view information and communications as the *key to empowerment*. The Executive and Legislative Branches of government should facilitate such transformation with participation of the people at the local level.

The need for a policy framework and for the institutionalization of the country's communication planning efforts is a priority concern for the Philippines, now at the threshold of the information age. As part of the global village, it must keep abreast with the pace of these developments while using existing resources for the purpose of achieving its unified national objective of empowering its people.

The task of rationalizing the country's communications policies and programs is huge. But if these vital issues are not considered, this "vital link" may not only be underutilized, it may even be totally forgotten. It will gradually atrophy and it will lose its potency and strength. Vultures and other predators will profit from this and the loss will be the people's. The lack of appropriate mechanisms for communications to do its job is surfacing as a big deterrent to progress. It may not be the sole answer. But it can be a very crucial factor for national development.

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