Book review: Trends in World Communication

A. M. Merican
Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia

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Domestic digital-video cameras are now precise and effective in many of the functions that only the film camera could perform. Digital-video quality coupled with its availability, empowers many communities, giving voice through video making and animation and providing the option of distribution via the Internet.

While new technologies provide empowering opportunities that need discussing, to start to describe them in one book runs the risk of ending up with a digital technology and software manual. *Drawing Insight* might have done well to include more of the digital revolution in its animation case studies, while retaining its integrity and superb representation of specific community-tailored and empowering animation.

HAMELINK, Cees J (1994)  

*Reviewed by Ahmad Murad Merican*

If ever the majority of the world's populations sit in conference to discuss global communication, the organizer would probably be bombarded with a litany of questions, all of which may sound like: "Have we been invited?" Hamelink's view of contemporary discourses on the state of global communications runs counter to conventional wisdom, describing it as a metaphor which is "attractive, lucid, simple, and wrong".

As seen in most of his writings, Hamelink is much an activist as well as a scholar conscious of movements and problems in society. Given the state of the present global communication environment Hamelink's book is a valuable study in analyzing the current agenda of culture, identity and democracy all of which impinge upon the information and communication order.

Hamelink is chiefly concerned with human rights in relation to the disempowering processes of world communication. The process "operates through censorship, deceit, victimization and information glut. The withholding and distorting of information obstructs people's independent formation of opinion and undermines people's capacity to control decisions that affect their
daily lives" (p.11) For instance, the very common forms of stereotypical treatment of women or ethnic minorities puts the social groups in submissive social roles. The resulting dependence, intimidation, and vulnerability victimizes and disempowers them.

Disempowerment, Hamelink emphasises, can be caused by overpowering people with an "information glut of unrefined, undigested information flowing in from every medium around us" (p.11, quoting Roszak, 1986:162). Hamelink leads us to rethink and question the philosophy behind the "global village" phenomenon.

Hamelink asks that if people want fundamental rights to be recognized and enforced, they cannot escape from the responsibility to actively contribute to the defence of these rights. He seems to emphasise the two-way process of the dominant system recognizing the rights of the other, and that of the disempowered being responsible in demanding such rights. He notes that people cannot expect others (the state or the media) always to defend their rights and liberties.

Hamelink's arguments lead us to an understanding that the current communication and information order converges towards the disempowerment of people, that they contribute to the establishment of a new world order which is inegalitarian, exclusive and elite-oriented (p.121).

In this respect, Hamelink explores the concept of local space. He says that it has been increasingly difficult to separate the local from the global. Today's world politics is characterized by the interconnectedness of the global and the local. Similarly, world communication affects the local space in which people around the globe lead their lives. For instance, he says, people constitute the raw material for world news reporting, for TV documentaries or for book publishing. As such, world attention may be focused on their drama (if they are Bosnian refugees, for example), on the problems they cause for foreign tourists (if they are Brazilian street children), on the risks they pose (if they are young Thai prostitutes), or on what we can do for them (if they are political prisoners adopted by Amnesty International). The global market formats people, their culture and their local environment. It formats local space. That is disempowerment.

In further defining "disempowerment" as making people powerless and reducing their ability to define themselves and construct their identities, Hamelink cautions that it can be both the outcome of a deliberate strategy or the unintended outcome of human action. It may even be that acts aimed at enabling people have an unintended opposite outcome. This brings to mind the following questions: Is technology for development? Do digitization, consolidation, regulation, and globalization of the economy and technology affect people's lives positively? Does it
necessarily lead to empowerment?

Take consolidation. Hamelink argues where consolidation occurs as vertical integration, in that production and distribution are controlled by the same actors, the real danger exists that they will exclusively offer their own products to the market. One example is the newspaper, which, as part of a conglomerate, publishes reviews of its own books. The growing influence of institutional investors and commercial interests not genuine to the information sector tends to lead to an emphasis on the profitability of the commodity, rather than on its socio-cultural quality (p.93). Product diversity is a myth. The "Rambo" and "Madonna" tendency only reinforces homogenization.

Hamelink criticizes the idea of global culture, describing it as inherently weak, with no historical and spatial location. The ingredient missing in the global culture project is a sense of identity and a past. Culture is bound by time and space. McDonaldization, he maintains, is historical and spatially non-located (p.111). It reduces local cultural space, and therefore denies culture itself, identity, and rights.

But then, communication, which is an important tool of disempowerment, also plays a significant role in empowerment. With that in mind, Hamelink suggests a variety of approaches, namely the Regulatory Approach, the Education Approach, the Alternative Approach, the Access and Participation Approach, and the Technical Assistance Approach.

One somehow tends to think that Hamelink's 'prescriptions' are rather naive and not conceivably practical to achieve. He passionately calls for local communities to reach beyond the borders of their local space and jointly create a global public sphere in which people can freely express themselves, share information, opinions, ideas, and cultural experiences, challenge the accountability of power holders, and take responsibility for the quality of "our secondary environment" (p.149). A global response may not actually be forthcoming. Local spaces, local cultures, local sentiments will still exist. The "uninvited" will still persist. The ideal, if actualized, may yet sustain another metaphor.