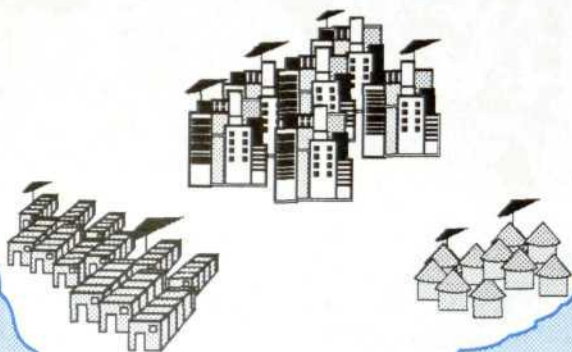


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Broadcasting and Telecommunications Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa



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***Broadcasting and Telecommunications
Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa***

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Editorial:

Broadcasting and Telecommunications Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa

***Richard Collins, Eric Louw, Keyan Tomaselli
and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli***

A new mode of production — centred on information technology and instantaneous world-wide electronic communication — has become dominant in the era of multinational capitalism. Today's key economies in North America, Western Europe and the Pacific Rim are all effectively 'information societies'.

South Africa is located in a curious position of duality — it is a partially underdeveloped Third World society and partially integrated into the international information economy. For example:

The majority of the population in South Africa - the black people, have been deprived even the very basic information and telecommunication services. Telecommunications in South Africa have been the monopoly of the state and were therefore used to effectively entrench apartheid policies. Needless to mention that while costly schemes were implemented to ensure that white farmers in the very remote areas had access to a phone whilst the large community of farmworkers surrounding the very farm had no access to such a facility whatsoever.¹

Further, South African industries like the M-NET pay TV service, Sun International hotelling and casino and cinema holdings, are rapidly making inroads into First World locations and markets and electronic information commodities. The South African banking sector, as well as newspaper companies (who are also shareholders of M-NET) are rapidly moving into the selling of information via

telephone, teletext, Value Added Networks (VANs), and so on. This multi-directional globalisation of commodified information imposes important choices for policy formulators in the 'new' South Africa. This is especially so as it emerges from decades of growth-sapping sanctions and boycotts. Two crucial questions arise out of these processes:

- Will an over-emphasis continue to be placed on the infrastructural needs of non-information modes of production? Much of the discussion amongst the South African Left involves debating ways of restructuring obsolete (Fordist) modes of production rather than considering ways of fundamental restructuring in the direction of post-Fordist relations of production. A prime example is the Left's debate about broadcasting is essentially concerned with restructuring 'modernist' broadcasting rather than with considering the possibilities of the latest developments in telecommunications; or
- Will a future government place emphasis on reinforcing and expanding the technological and sectoral infrastructures required to further the development of a post-Fordist South African information economy? Within that latter economic arrangement, wealth is derived from knowledge, effective use of time and an efficient flow of electronic information to manage factories. Under post-Fordist structures of production, factories are computerised, and linked into the electronic information grid, so as to allow for shorter and shorter production runs.
- The second course of action — emphasizing a modernist industrial base at the expense of the information economy and communications technologies or post-Fordism — could effectively doom South Africa to a slide into 'Third Worldism' as the rest of the world moves into a new post-industrial era. South Africa has a rudimentary post-Fordist infrastructure; sufficiently developed to offer a launching pad to propel South Africa into a Pacific-Rim type future. A failure to expand this infrastructure, or worse still to let it run down, will effectively remove South Africa from the map of the developed world and so condemn South Africans to the status of second-class world citizens.

- A recent publication on economic policy, *Transforming the Economy: Policy Options for South Africa*,² gives little reason for hope. The debates in this book show no recognition at all of the need to at least consider the implications of the Information Age for South Africa. The term, 'telecommunications', was mentioned only twice, while words like communications, media, information and so on, never featured at all. If this book is anything to go by, it seems that likely planners of South Africa's future economic policies are content to cast South Africa in the mold of an underdeveloped Third World nation tied to economic relations associated with the modes of production which are remnants of earlier historical eras.

The lack of awareness by these economists of the role to be played by telecommunications and the new communications technologies in development on the part of South Africa is not entirely paralleled by a similar naivety of South African communications scholars. The early³ and more recent work of the Tomasellis and their colleagues;⁴ Harry Marchant's call for the use of satellite's and other communications technologies in development projects in Africa;⁵ the more recent analyses of Ruth Tomaselli,⁶ and Eric Louw's⁷ work on how the superstructuralism of the Information Age can be used to construct a development strategy for South Africa, are but some examples. Allied to this is the applied research of political economists like Dave Kaplan,⁸ Mike Morris and Ike Stavrou's⁹ on telecommunications and telephone systems.

Stavrou reveals some of the problematic thinking associated with the South African left on wealth re-distribution when applied to telecommunications — that is, we need to consider the possible negative implications on South Africa's urban information economic infrastructure having urban users 'subsidize' rural users. This sounds like a left-wing version of the National Party's (NP) vision of South Africa as a rural society. Demographically, South Africa is an urban society. What is more, because of South Africa's geographical location it is a dry semi-desert country, which effectively rules out a successful agriculturally-based economy. A rural (agricultural) economy is only viable in South Africa if massive state subsidies support it — by transferring wealth from the urban to the rural sectors. The National Party government did this for white farmers who numbered only in the hundreds of thousands. Now the South

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3. See, eg., Van Zyl, J.A.F. and Tomaselli, K.G. 1977: **Media and Change**. McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg. This multidisciplinary book, written from an essentially liberal humanist perspective, offers analysis of new technologies and their impacts on economic and spatial development, city structure, democratisation of access through telecommunications etc, and different ways of analyzing and applying new technologies.
4. for Marxist orientated analyses of the way broadcasting technologies were used by the apartheid state in skewing developing towards whites, see Graham Hayman and Ruth Tomaselli's chapters in **Currents of Power: State Broadcasting in South Africa**. Anthropos/James Currey, Bellville/London.
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