

# **South African Communication Policy: Strategies for Influencing Government Policies**

by Eronini R. Megwa

## **Abstract**

This is an analytical appraisal of the making of a vibrant media industry in South Africa. The author commends the government effort to repeal oppressive legal regimes that served the defunct apartheid system in stifling press freedom and fundamental human rights.

While extolling the virtues of the new democratic culture in the country, the paper also underscores the centrality of the press, especially the media, in nurturing and safeguarding the new plural political system.

The author argues strongly that the formation of a more media friendly communication policy, to create a final and rapid break with the divisive past, is imperative. The paper enjoins the new government of national unity to devise comprehensive communication policy and profound training packages for journalists to strengthen and professionalize the media industry, as an instrument of national development.

It contends that democratic growth requires a free and authoritative press to provide a forum for national debate, where people can exchange critical and competitive views, to enable them to make rational or informed choices on various matters critical to national cohesion. This, the author says, is only possible if the new communication policy establishes efficient information feedback mechanisms.

The paper also highlights various legislations put in place to ensure that national interest is catered for in programming in a liberalised broadcast media. The issues of ownership and media accessibility to the poor are discussed.

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# **Plans de Communication de l'Afrique du Sud: Stratégies pour Influencer sur la Planification du Gouvernement**

**Par Eronini R. Megwa**

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## **Résumé**

L'auteur de cette communication s'efforce de faire une analyse critique, qui montre comment établir une industrie dynamique des médias en Afrique du Sud. Il commence par louer les efforts du gouvernement qui menèrent aux changements des lois tyranniques qui soutenaient l'ancien régime de l'apartheid. Ces lois avaient beaucoup contribué à l'abus de la liberté de la presse et à la violation des droits de l'homme.

Cependant, Megwa souligne l'importance du rôle de la presse, notamment les médias, dans la perpétuation de la nouvelle culture de démocratie et de multi-partisme.

A son avis, il faudrait formuler des plans de communication qui soient réalistes et pratiques, afin de sauvegarder le nouveau système politique. Ces plans s'avèrent aussi nécessaires, afin de pouvoir couper les ponts avec l'ancien système. Megwa préconise la conception des plans de communication compréhensifs et profonds. Celles-ci devraient avoir aussi comme but, la promotion de la formation des journalistes afin de fortifier et rendre professionnelle l'industrie des médias. Car celle-ci constitue l'un des outils indispensables du développement national.

L'auteur soutient qu'un Etat démocratique a besoin d'une presse libre et efficace, qui offrirait le forum qu'il faut pour des débats, permettant des échanges critiques et comparatifs. Cela servirait à sensibiliser les citoyens, pour qu'ils puissent faire leur choix en connaissance de cause. Ceci n'est possible qu'avec un mécanisme efficace d'échange d'informations, doté d'un dispositif de *feedback*.

L'exposé de Megwa fait une comparaison de diverses législations, mises en place pour sauvegarder les intérêts nationaux, dans un pays où les médias sont libres. Il n'oublie pas, non plus, de discuter les questions telles qu'à qui devraient appartenir les agences de presse et l'accessibilité.

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## **Introduction**

The process of democratization in South Africa, which began in earnest with multi-party negotiations, culminated in the first democratic elections in April 1994 and in the certification and signing of a new Constitution in December 1996. The new Constitution is important because it guarantees all South Africans their human rights, including freedoms of expression and association. In addition, it provides for universal adult suffrage, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government to ensure responsiveness, openness, and accountability.

One of the cardinal principles of the new South African Constitution is that it requires the Government to respect the law and the fundamental rights of everyone. The new Constitution has also created a Constitutional Court to ensure that all branches of Government obey its principles. The Constitutional Court has the powers to nullify any act of Government, which violates the Constitution.

## **Government, Communication and Development**

The guarantee of freedom of expression by the new Constitution is consistent with a democratic system of Government. The South African Government recognizes the role of information and communication in national development. It's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) recognizes open debate, transparency and accountability in Government and society, as critical elements in rebuilding, developing and reconciling its citizens. The RDP encourages active exchange of information among the Government, the people and communities, thereby encouraging competition rather than monopoly of ideas.

The Government has taken a number of steps to realize the objectives of the RDP. Before the April 1994 democratic elections, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) Board was reconstituted after public hearings chaired by a judge. The

Government also set up the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in 1994. In addition, it has done the following:

1. set up a task force in October 1994, to manage the process leading to the adoption of a Freedom of Information Act. The Freedom of Information Act recognizes peoples' right to access to information held by the Government, its institutions and other public bodies. The task force also recommended the following:
  - that an Open Democracy Commission be set up to monitor the effectiveness of the proposed Information Act and to report to Parliament annually .
  - that basic and necessary official information be included in a supplementary information guide included in telephone directories, and should be made available through post offices, mail collection points and schools.
  - that the Public Protector and the Human Rights Commission be granted powers of facilitation and intervention in particular cases.
2. passed legislation encouraging the development of public, community and private commercial media.
3. organized a Conference of Communicators in August 1995 in Arniston, Western Cape. The conference called for an extensive examination of the South African media, including its ownership and affirmative action. It also recommended, among others, the setting up of a task group to review Government communication systems.

In addition, the Government revised its telecommunications policy after the publication of the Green Paper. This new policy is underpinned by the following: providing universal and affordable telephone services; contributing to the development of the economy and creating security for investors; facilitating



and reducing the cost of health care and business information; empowering historically disadvantaged individuals and communities to participate actively in the economy. In 1996, it set up the South African Telecommunications Regulation Authority (SATRA).

In January 1996, the Government established a Communication Task Group (Comtask) to investigate:

- the existing government communication policies and structures at national, provincial and local levels;
- the relationships between Government communication functions at national, provincial and local levels;
- the existing Government budgets with special reference to personnel, operations and equipment;
- the relationships between Government communication structures and non-governmental information providers;
- the Government communication training and capacity building, with special emphasis on Affirmative Action;
- the ownership and control of the media and to interpret how these affect Government communication and;
- the existing information delivery systems.

Comtask was also mandated to make recommendations on new Government communication policy functions, structures, personnel and budget at national, provincial and local level. It submitted its report to the Government in December 1996. In early 1997, the Government accepted, in principle, the recommendations of the task group and subsequently set up an implementations committee to study and implement the recommendations.

The findings and recommendations of Comtask were underpinned by (1) the new democratic constitution and the citizens' "right to know", (2) the legacy of apartheid, (3) the nature of South Africa's communication systems, (4) the need to expand communication access to all, especially the disadvantaged black communities, (5) the political and socio-economic imperatives in

the new dispensation, (6) the Government objective of creating leaner and more efficient public service and Affirmative Action, (7) the importance of pluralism in media ownership and control. (Communications 2000, 1996)

Comtask summarized its findings and recommendations thus:

"A new communication system is an economic and political imperative for the 'Information Age'. Its purpose must be to provide a network throughout the country which provides every citizen with the information required to live and control their lives. The new Government communication and information system needs to be better coordinated and more focused in its messages. It should strengthen the capability of Government to communicate its policies to the people, and be streamlined, credible, cost-effective and highly professional. To do this, it will need to engage better with civil society, creating a dialogue between Government and the public..." (Communications 2000, 1996)

The report identified what it calls "critical constraints" which the Government must take into account: outmoded media legislation, rigid and inward looking bureaucracy, monopoly of media ownership, the low status of Government communicators, journalism profession impoverished by official policy of racial discrimination, and severed budgetary constraints on the Government.

The task group made a total of 83 recommendations relating to structures and functions of Government communications, personnel and training, media ownership, public access to Government held information and regular flow of communication from the public to the Government, at all levels. One of its major recommendations was for the South African Communication Service (SACS), which served the erstwhile apartheid Government, to be replaced by a new structure—Government Communication and Information Service (GCIS). The new structure, the group recommended, should have three components: media liaison, communication service agency, and provincial liaison.

The GCIS, the task group recommended, should be coordinated



and managed by a small unit, to be located in the Presidency and made up of senior officials, who will be responsible for media and provincial liaison and communication service agency. It also recommended that each ministry have a Head of Communications responsible for all aspects of departmental communications.

## **The Communication Environment**

South Africa has one of the freest and the most developed media systems in Africa. Since the April 1994 elections, the South African media industry, particularly the broadcast sector, has been undergoing tremendous transformation to make it more accessible to all segments of the population. Prior to the setting up of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), the South African media was considered one of the most highly monopolistic and controlled systems in the world with entrenched practices, which stifled competition and restricted editorial delivery. The task group on Government communication recommended that monopolistic practices within the media industry be referred to the Competitions Board and the task group drawing up anti-trust law for the country. It also recommended that specific recommendations on monopolistic control be made by this group.

In the print and broadcast sectors, there are clear indications that the dynamics of ownership are increasingly changing, allowing black and foreign ownership and acquisition of controlling shares in three of the big four press groups: the National Press, the Perskor, the Anglo American and the Times Media Limited. This has broken the stranglehold on media ownership by the groups.

## **Broadcasting**

The IBA Act provides for active community involvement and participation in broadcasting, by requiring the IBA to "encourage ownership and control of broadcasting services by persons from

historically disadvantaged groups" and to ensure that private and community broadcasting licenses are controlled by persons and groups from a diversity of communities within the country. Section 2 of the IBA Act requires community broadcast license applicants to be, among other things, non-profit making, serve the interests of the community in which they wish to operate, have the support of the relevant community and encourage the participation of this community in the production and selection of programmes.

The establishment of the IBA on January 12, 1994, ushered in a new era of broadcasting. Its mandate was to create a dynamic broadcasting environment. Specifically, the IBA was to (1) ensure, *inter alia*, that all South Africans receive the fairest and best possible broadcast services, free of undue bias and protected from Government interference, (2) promote the development of public, private and community broadcasting services, which are responsive to the needs of the public, (3) hold public inquiries into broadcasting and its funding, including the funding of the SABC, and local content and cross-ownership of private media.

Since its inception, the IBA has issued more than eighty broadcast licenses to community radio operators, and it is estimated that more than 45 of these operators have set up stations that are currently broadcasting to their respective communities. Licenses are issued after public inquiries have been made by the IBA.

The IBA Act was amended in 1995 to give it more power to act against broadcast offenders. It has the power to seize the equipment of pirate stations, bale and to summon witnesses during inquiries. The amendments vested in the IBA all powers relating to broadcasting frequency bands. These were the powers previously held by the Postmaster General and the Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting. (SA Yearbook, 1996)

The IBA has also issued licenses to a few private commercial radio operators, and is set to issue broadcast licenses to private



television operators before the end of 1997. The SABC has assumed the role of a public broadcaster, and is currently transforming itself from a state to a public broadcaster. This process began in 1993 when the new board was appointed, after candidates were interviewed in public. A colloquium on the future of public broadcasting in the country took place in 1995.

In the same year, IBA released its report on how the broadcasting industry would be transformed. The report recommended, among other things, that the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which under the apartheid regime was a state broadcaster, convert itself to a public broadcaster, sell seven of its regional radio stations, including Radio Good Hope, KFM and Radio Jacaranda in accordance with IBA licensing criteria. The SABC has so far sold its regional radio stations, and is currently engaged in the process of converting to a national public broadcaster.

In 1994, two bills: Public Broadcasting Services Act and the National Public Broadcasting Service, were tabled before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communications. The Committee has yet to take action on these bills (Reddy, 1997). If adopted, the Acts would allow the SABC to operate as a public rather than a Government broadcaster. The IBA report also recommended that the nine African language radio stations be upgraded; a multi-lingual youth radio station be established; provinces be served with prime time provincial slots on radio and television for viewers until the feasibility and desirability of provincial broadcasting is thoroughly investigated and discussed; that radio Xhosa, Radio Ciskei, and Radio Transkei merge and provide a single Isi-Xhosa language service; one of the three terrestrial television channels must cease operation by the end of 1997.

In addition, the report recommended that a new private terrestrial channel be licensed in January 1998 with substantive public service, language and local content obligations; that within three years, the national public broadcaster must ensure that 50 percent of its television programming is South African;

40 percent of local television should be commissioned from independent producers; private terrestrial 'free-to-air' television stations must broadcast a local content of 30 percent; that existing radio stations must, within six months of the regulations coming into effect, play 20 percent local music; television stations will play a prescribed quota of local music in their respective music programmes; by the year 2000 all private broadcasters and music formats be required to play 40 percent local music; that the signal distribution industry be made open and that Sentech—an SABC company which has monopoly of signal distribution in the country—be separated from the SABC. It also recommended that the services of the SABC be funded by sponsorships, advertising, license fees, government grants and other sources of funding.

To make sure that all eleven constitutionally sanctioned languages received equal television attention, the SABC has given broadcast times and resources based on demographic composition of the population. It has relaunched its three channels to operate as public broadcasters but with different emphasis with one of the channels devoted to Nguni languages, another devoted to Sotho languages and Afrikaans. The third channel broadcasts mainly in English.

The IBA report further recommended that M-Net and any other terrestrial based subscriber television devote at least five percent of its programming to local content for each year of their license or must spend a specified amount of money on local content increasing annually with inflation.

In terms of media ownership, the IBA ruled that no single person or entity may control more than one television station, two non-overlapping FM radio stations and two non-overlapping medium wave radio stations. And any person who controls more than 20 percent of newspaper circulation in any particular license area may hold not more than fifteen percent or more of equity in broadcasting service in that license area.



## **Print Media**

The print media in South Africa have a long history. They are organized into four major press groups: National Media, Times Media, Omni Media and Perskor. However, in the past two years some of the monopolies have "unbundled" to allow black empowerment groups to take over, in some instances controlling equity.

### **Newspapers and Magazines**

There are more than 5,000 newspapers, magazines and journals registered in the country today. At present, there are no government owned newspapers and no national newspapers in the true sense. However, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Independent* and *Rapport* (Afrikaans language newspaper), all Sunday newspapers, serve as national newspapers. There are 33 dailies and weeklies in the country and about 100 provincial or local newspapers, which serve particular towns or districts, and are mostly bilingual, usually in English and Afrikaans. There are more than 70 'knock-and-drop' publications distributed free of charge, mainly in the urban areas with advertising as their only source of income. (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 1995) English language newspapers in the country are facing dwindling readership. They showed considerable decline in white readership. (All Media Products Survey). Those targeted at black readers have however recorded increased readership.

In the cities, newspapers are distributed on the street, door-to-door, cafes, general stores and by post. In other areas, newspapers are distributed by special truck and railway services. Air services are also used, but their costs are high. Afrikaans-language newspapers do their own distribution while Allied Publishing Company, owned by a consortium of media proprietors, is the main distribution channel for most of the English language newspapers.

In general, the magazine sector has registered appreciable

growth, particularly those targeting black readers (e.g. *Drum*, *Tribute*, *Pace* and *Bona*). There are approximately 300 consumer magazines and 500 trade and professional publications distributed in South Africa, including weekly, fortnightly, monthly, quarterly and yearly magazines (Media Yearbook of South African Rates and Data). It is estimated that 'girlie' magazines number up to 60 in the country (SA Yearbook, 1996). The largest circulating magazine is the *M-Net TV Guide* with more than a million circulation figure. The Afrikaans consumer magazine *Huisgenoot*, considered one of the best-selling magazines in the country, sold an average of 516,941 copies per week during the first half of 1995. Its English counterpart, *You*, which was launched in 1987, had a circulation of 301,411 in 1995. The magazine industry has seen new titles and there seems to be an increasing tendency for magazine publishers to target specialized groups (Oosthuizen, 1996). There were new publications in the trade and sports areas. And in December 1995, *Ebony*, the largest selling black magazine in the United States of America, started publishing in South Africa. It is published by Publico and Real Africa Holdings - a black company with 66 percent majority shareholding.

## **Media Organizations**

There are several press and media organizations operating in the country, including the Press Council, which has now been replaced by the Press Ombudsman, South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), which is an offspring of a merger of two media associations: the Conference of Editors and the Black Editors Forum. There is also the South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ), the Media Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA), the Foreign Correspondents' Association of South Africa, and the recently formed Forum of Black journalists.

The International Press Institute (IPI) set up a national network committee in 1995 and the Freedom Forum based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, opened a national office in the country in 1996.



## **National and International News Agencies**

National news agencies are private, (e.g. SAPA which is a cooperative, receives its foreign news from Reuters and the Associated Press). Reuters and the United Press International, Agence France Presse, Associated Press and Deutsche Presse Agentur have bureaus in the country. Regional press agencies like the InterPress Service (IPS) also have bureaus in the country. Recently, a new national news agency, Southern African News Agency (SANA), was formed to serve the broadcast sector, particularly the fast growing community radio sector.

The advertising industry in the country, which started about 60 years ago is a very competitive, dynamic and fast growing sector. It provides significant support to the media industry in the country. It is served by various organizations, including the Association of Advertising Agencies, the Association of Marketers, the Advertising Standards Authority, the South African Advertising Research Foundation and the South Africa Market Research Association. In 1995, Bosman Johnson Advertising, formerly, Wilson Keller Advertising, became the first internationally non-aligned agency in South Africa to set up an African network by signing association agreements with agencies in Zambia and Kenya, and negotiating with potential partners in Zimbabwe and Malawi.

## **Telecommunications**

South Africa is considered to be the telecommunications leader of the continent with approximately 5.3 million telephones and 3.87 million installed exchange lines. This represents about 39 percent of the total installed lines in Africa, with nearly 90 lines for every 1000 inhabitants. The country has one of the most modern and most developed telecommunications infrastructure on the continent, including a large transmission network covering approximately 120 million circuit kilometres. About 95 percent of this network is digital with about 40,000 2 MB bits circuits in operation (SA Yearbook, 1996).

South Africa's telecommunication giant is Telkom SA Ltd. It provides all telecommunication services in the country, while the South Africa Post Office Ltd. provides postal services. The 28th largest telecommunications operator in the world, Telkom SA is currently engaged in negotiations aimed at privatization that would involve going into partnerships with Malaysian and United States telecommunications companies. There are other private postal and delivery companies providing mail services.

Telkom provides an international telecommunications service to 228 international destinations, 226 of which can be dialed direct. Its modern telecommunications infrastructure handles more than 29,000 million call units each year (SA Yearbook, 1996). It also provides telegram, telex, and teletex services as well as public e-mail and electronic data exchange services. Telkom introduced a new facsimile service in 1995, which provides customers with the facility to send a single document from their facsimile machines to several other facsimile machines nationally and internationally.

Telkom has entered the Internet market as a service provider making available to clients Web page creation and hosting services. In 1995, it launched a new-high speed communications technology called Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), which allows simultaneous high-speed transfer of live video, data and fax via conventional copper cable. In addition, Telkom provides the following services: a world-wide radio communications service (radiotelephone, radiotelex and wireless telegraphy) to international and local shipping, amateur radio stations, citizen band radio communication service (over nine channels are available), maxinet 089 (increase the success rate of telephone during major phone-in competitions giving every participant equal chance of reaching the competition number).

It also provides toll-free service, voicelink (a voicemail service which gives people without telephones a virtual telephone service using a voice mailbox which stores retrievable messages), telecards and cellular phone service (this service has experienced in a short period of time tremendous growth), and satellite communications.



## **Communication and Government Policies: A Systems Approach**

In an open and democratic political system, such as South Africa's, information and communication play a crucial role in systems regulation and maintenance, particularly in facilitating mutual adaptation between the public and the government, and in providing a monitoring and corrective mechanism.

South Africa's Constitution and the country's socio-economic policies are built on a framework that seeks to provide equal access to its citizens irrespective of gender, race and religious persuasion. These policies take cognizance of the country's past apartheid policy, notorious for its extreme racial discrimination, denial of human rights and a rigid Government communications system.

In contrast, the new political system, actively supports and encourages people-centred and participatory governance at the national, provincial and local levels. It also, unlike the previous system, places emphasis on openness and accountability. This open system is likely to generate, and so far, has given rise to a high level of uncertainty and constraint, providing opportunities for actors within the public arena and in government to challenge each other, using legal, political and, sometimes, illegal means to construct, expand and deliver their agendas. The ultimate goal, however, is for the system to attain homeostasis.

Therefore, using a systems approach in examining South Africa's communications policy is adequate as it provides a compelling reason to look at one of the most critical elements in general systems theory-feedback. In other words, to examine the new communication policy as a strategy for influencing government policies, one needs to ask the following pertinent questions: (1) does the communication policy provide adequate feedback mechanisms for the people, particularly the rural poor and illiterate, to openly and regularly interact with government at the three levels: national, provincial and local?; (2) are there enough safeguards in the new communication policy to ensure

that the Government is committed to maintaining an open communication system and not use the policy as a rhetorical and persuasive strategy to achieve communications symmetry in the system?

Feedback and safeguard mechanisms are essential if national communication policies are to be used as veritable tools for influencing national development policies. They serve a surveillance role, monitoring and evaluating the system's performance, and, when necessary, providing regulatory and corrective action. Indeed, feedback serves as the central nervous system in a communication system. Furthermore, feedback systems perform a smoke detector function, sensing out trouble spots, and suggesting intervention strategies. Therefore, any national communication policy that does not make adequate provision for feedback-delayed or immediate-is as good as nothing.

The feedback mechanisms and safeguards in the South African communication policy are located in the new Constitution, the courts, Parliament, the media, Government communications services and departments, interest groups, pressure groups, political parties, community based information and communication nodes, traditional forms of communication, information and communication campaigns to educate the people on their rights to communicate with their government always ensuring that it is responsible and accountable to them.

## **Conclusion**

The South African Government, in setting up a task group to review Government communications, has sent out an important signal to the people that it values their input into the Government decision-making process. This is seen in the new and open system, engaging people in the process of national reconstruction, reconciliation and development. The task group's recommendations were based on the recognition not only of the fragility and susceptibility of a democratic system but also of the



shortcomings and threats inherent in the apartheid's system of communication.

There is need for active interaction between government and all its people. The following are integral parts of any credible communication policy: (1) legislation to create and nurture a free, open and vigorous information environment, (2) regular information and communication education campaign to enlighten the citizenry on the need to constantly monitor and challenge the system, (3) an intelligent, critical and perceptive Government communications workforce, which understands that an effective and meaningful communications feedback mechanism is one that provides opportunities for critical public input into the Government's policy-making process.

The new Government communications and information agency, by implication, therefore, and in order to carry out this important mandate, must be equipped with the following essential resources: (1) multi-skilled communications staff, (2) improved and relevant communications infrastructure, and (3) a creative and analytical Government communications workforce.

Training of government staff will re-orient them to the changing socio-political environment in the country and provide them with multiple skills to be able then to deal effectively with the new and expanded communication audiences. Training in interpersonal and intercultural communications; behavioural and management sciences, and social research, are critical and necessary.

In view of the Government emphasis on improving public access to information in its possession, the ability of its communication officers to (1) identify and analyze communications problems, (2) conduct information needs analysis, (3) segment and analyze manifest and latent audience behaviors and beliefs, (4) conduct formative and summative evaluation of communication campaigns, (5) design messages and methodologically choose channels based on research results, and (6) manage budget based on strategic objectives, are critically essential.

The Government must be responsive to the needs of the people if it genuinely wants to get their input into its policy-making process. This requires communication staff with relevant skills, orientation and courage to operate in the new dispensation, the commitment to achieve the communication objectives, and the ability and discipline to manage resources efficiently.

The Government should, therefore, resist the temptation to see all communications as modern mass communications. The Government Communication and Information Service (CGIS), the agency charged with coordinating state communications, as recommended by Comtask, should avoid the tendency to see communication campaign strategies as media-centric.

A research-driven public information campaign strategy ensures that the needs and the culture of the target groups, are taken into consideration at the channel identification and message design stages of the campaign. Using formative and summative research, it ensures that the campaign planners identify and use relevant and appropriate communication channel design, transmit needs-based messages and provide adequate feedback mechanisms. And given that a majority of South Africa's population is rural, illiterate and lack electricity, any public communications campaign aimed at this target group, for it to be effective, must be sensitive to these realities.

The implications of the foregoing argument and the realities to be addressed as a result are that the Government will initially commit enormous resources, financial and human, in order for it to successfully realize its objectives. Training its own communication staff and educating the people about the importance and necessity of regular public input in a democratic system cannot be overemphasized. If this is lacking, the system will gravitate towards *entropy*.



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