

BOOK REVIEWS

Tomorrow, the world

Brenda Maddox

ANY writer who sits down to try to explain the public policy issues embedded in complicated technology has two contradictory censors inside his head. "Don't get it wrong", demands one. "Don't make it boring", shouts the other. Because the dilemma is so common, a common solution has evolved: to be lofty. Cast the questions in terms of the survival of the race and the future of the planet; the technical experts will thus forgive you for skating over tedious details, while the lay reader will work extra hard and re-read tough pages rather than giving up.

To be sure, Mr McPhail, who teaches mass communication and journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa, has set his chisel to the hardest stone: Unesco and the issue of the New World Information Order. For at least a decade, the countries of the developing world have been demanding a New World Information Order. This fuzzy concept expresses a legitimate grievance — that most of their communication with the developed world flows in one direction only: in. Little news about them of their own choice flows out toward the wider world, and even less entertainment. They fear eventual cultural swamping and, at the present, resent what is seen as constant misinterpretation by Western news agencies.

To right this balance, these countries are using their numerical strength in the United Nations where each country has one vote. Their favourite battleground is Unesco. Unesco's secretariat has so taken up the Third World's campaign for a re-ordering of information (of news-gathering in particular), that it has come up with proposals which to Britain, the United States and other countries committed to a free (well, fairly free) press amount to nothing less than a Unesco endorsement of government control of the media. In 1980 at Unesco's general conference in Belgrade the West reluctantly, with many doubts and qualifications, allowed the barest acknowledgement that something like a New World Information Order may be needed.

All this sets a very demanding exercise for a writer, especially as Unesco obscures its own activities behind dense screens of jargon. Earnestness so permeates Mr McPhail's efforts that it is sad to have to declare that his book does not meet the challenge. For example, what did the West surrender in the way of press freedom at Unesco's general conference in Belgrade in 1980? The Western press tried analysis (duly quoted in Mr McPhail's text) and was

Electronic Colonialism: The Future of International Broadcasting and Communication. By Thomas L. McPhail. Pp. 260. Hbk ISBN 0-8039-1602-7; pbk ISBN 0-8039-1603-5. (Sage: 1981.) Hbk \$22.50, £15.50; pbk \$9.95, £6.50. *Global Talk: The Marriage of the Computer, World Communications and Man.* By Joseph N. Pelton. Pp.336. Hbk ISBN 0-7108-0371-0; pbk ISBN 0-7108-0347-8. (Harvester: 1981.) Hbk £17.95; pbk £7.95.

hampered by the differing views, even between Britain and the United States, as to what happened. For its part, the developing world is not sure what it has achieved in securing within Unesco the creation of the International Programme for the Development of Communications: a talking shop, a funnel for practical aid or its own power base inside the secretariat? And neither is Mr McPhail. All he can conclude is that the New World Information Order is not going to go away.

For a book on the future of the media, Mr McPhail gets off to a disastrous start. In his very first two words, he spells a man's name wrong — and not just any man, but the legendary Lord Copper, the archetypal Fleet Street press baron of Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*. Mr McPhail calls him Lord Cooper, somewhat spoiling Waugh's point. He then gets others wrong (President Kekkonen of Finland) but these could be the computer typesetting.

Another device which Mr McPhail's book would have been better without is the use of ponderous lists, with scarcely a verb at all:

The questions of transnational data flows, computers, data processing, privacy, and computerization effects on the work place and labor are central to policy concerns of several industrialized nations.

The third stylistic flaw which makes the book unreadable is the excessive use of long quotations, with little guide as to how the extracted material furthers the author's argument.

At the start of his book, Joseph Pelton looks like falling into the same traps. *Global Talk*, he declares, "is only my third book on science policy and applications". But it was his hardest — because he says he has tried to be funny, and sophisticated too, without being as tedious as the *New York Times*. What a relief, therefore, to wade in and find that Mr Pelton, an executive of Intelsat, the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization, has assembled much hard-to-get and fascinating information —

studies of telecommunications plans and expenditure in developing countries; similar statistical profiles of "the information societies" and on the technical and economic outlook for satellites.

Mr Pelton, too, dips into the slough of the UN conference — specifically the WARC's, the world radio conferences of the International Telecommunications Union. He knows, unlike Mr McPhail, that the "A" in WARC stands for "administrative" and not "administration" and he is, moreover, unafraid to use his own words, instead of quoted material, to draw conclusions. In the case of the 1979 WARC, his judgement is that, for their own purposes, more and more countries are willing to tax the ITU's cumbersome regulatory mechanisms — such as the mammoth WARC conferences — to the maximum, yet he sees this as no cause for despair. In spite of their complexity, the issues of international management of technology are no harder than those which international institutions have dealt with successfully in the earlier part of the century. Not a bold conclusion, perhaps, but a clear one.

In sum, Mr Pelton's grasp of his subject triumphs over his whimsy (although, in some cases, just barely: an excellent chapter on the worsening problem of incompatible international technical standards contains an awful poem, "Electronic Gumbo Stew"), and has allowed him to produce an ambitious and original work of reference. □

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Tasteless behaviour

Mark Ridley

The Foundations of Ethology. By Konrad Z. Lorenz. Pp.380. ISBN 0-387-81623-2. (Springer-Verlag: 1981.) \$21.95.

The Foundations of Ethology, a translation of a book that appeared in German a few years ago, is a monograph of Lorenzian ethology. The text reads well, unlike most translations, although "selfish", which becomes *egoistische* in German, returns in "The egoistical gene" has become the popular phrase. . . . All in all there is not much about natural selection