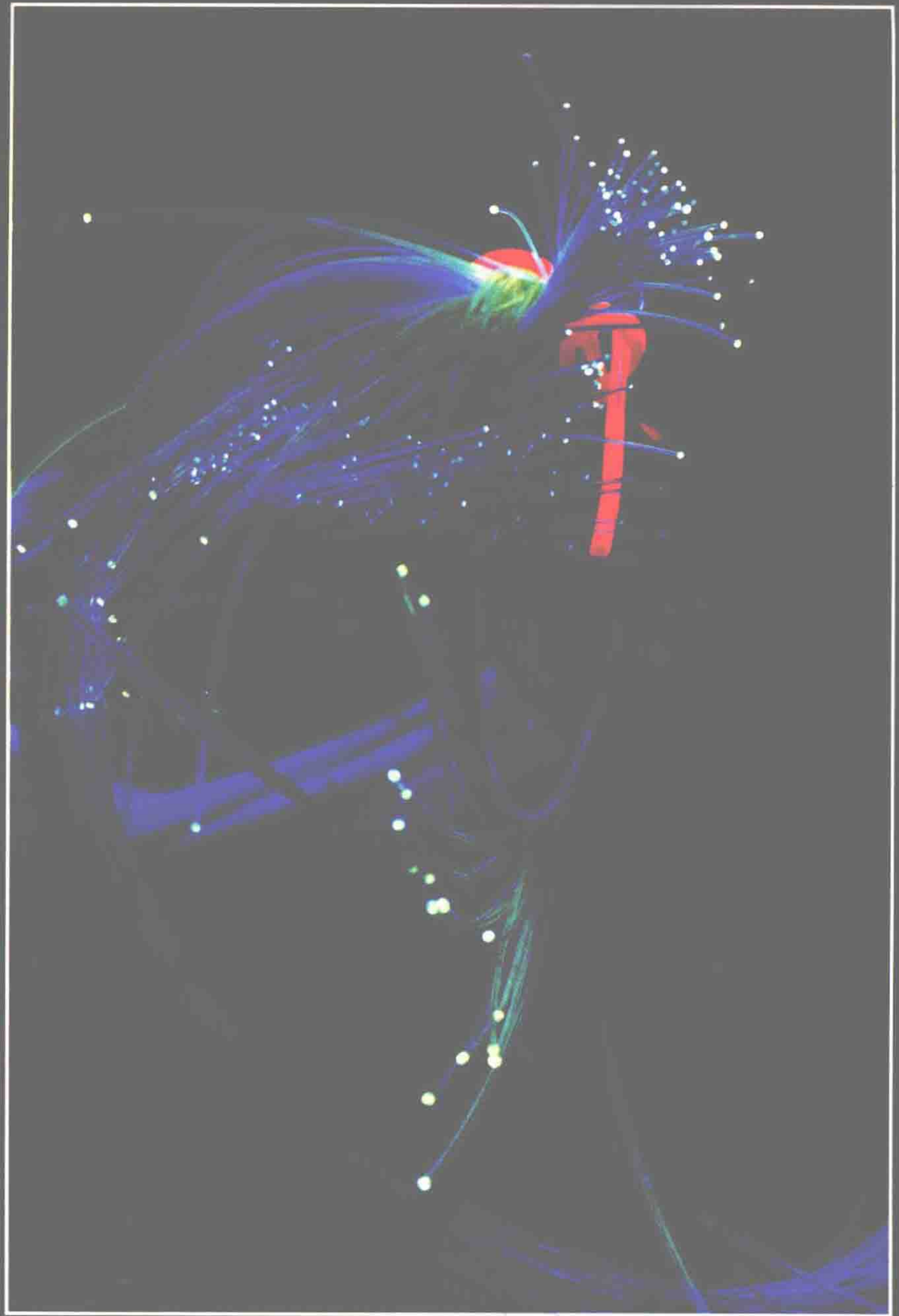


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Jack Lyle Douglas McLeod

COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND CHANGE

Communication, Media and Change

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International Data Corporation



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Preface

This book was written from our conviction that the rapid and often radical changes taking place in the communications field constitute an important area of study and career opportunity for today's students. This conviction was strengthened during the four years we taught a course called Alternative Systems of Communication at Boston University. Students came to this course highly motivated by expectations of learning about exciting new technologies but with little knowledge or understanding of the institutional contexts in which these technologies are used.

Like many other such institutions, Boston University's College of Communication is divided into traditional departments of journalism, broadcasting and film and mass communication (which encompasses advertising, public relations and communication theory). The curriculum forced each student to major in one media area. As a result their courses were organized to prepare them to be print journalists, radio or television staffers, film producers or advertising or public relations account executives.

We wanted to prepare students for a future in which new technologies remove such institutional and career boundaries. Knowing that there are limits to what the new technologies can accomplish, we wanted our students to develop an appropriate balance between pragmatism and visionary expectations. We realized that it was the visionary expectations that attracted the students to the field. The challenge we faced was to acquaint them with the practical limits imposed by the past and the present while capitalizing on their interest in the new.

This book is our attempt to meet that challenge. Our strategy is to start with an overview of the functional needs for communication by individuals, groups and societies: news, persuasion, education and entertainment. The students' own enthusiastic communication activities provide a variety of avenues for exploring these needs. Next we look at the major technologies that have made the Communication Revolution possible: semiconductors, satellites, optical fiber, personal computers and high definition television. We discuss how these new technologies can be used across all of the institutions and media of the communications sector.

Having suggested how these technologies may revolutionize our communications world, we turn to some of the facts of life within that world. Students must understand that technology is a tool used by institutions that operate within the constraints of a complex structure of systems. Any tool must overcome the barriers of resistance inherent in the status quo, factors we loosely group under the headings of policy, systems and money.

After providing this background, we turn our attention to the potential of new technologies within the context of the communications functions listed in the Introduction. This survey allows the student to examine changes within and across media, as well as to speculate on how existing media may be forced to change in response to new competition.

Our conclusion brings us full circle: We attempt to get readers to look beyond existing communications services and institutions and speculate on the future. In our progress through the circle, we have had these three objectives:

1. To help foster an ability among readers to anticipate change rather than to be satisfied with adapting to a status quo that is in fact transitory.
2. To stimulate readers to think about how they can use new technologies and alternative applications to build a fairer, more efficient and smarter world of communications.
3. To help other teachers impart an understanding of a subject as fragile and quickly changing as communications systems.

An inherent problem in discussing a subject as dynamic as communications technologies is that details change daily. Recognizing that much of our specific information will be outdated before the book is published, we have stressed general principles. In our own classes we used weekly current-events assignments as the springboard for discussion that expanded and updated lectures and reading assignments. These assignments reinforced students in acquiring the habit of reading the trade publications, such as *Advertising Age*, *Broadcasting*, *Variety*, *PC World*, *MacWorld* and *Network World*, as well as watching for news of professional interest in the daily press.

Revolution is a strong word, as are *age* and *era*. Nevertheless, we have repeatedly used all three throughout the book. Researchers and analysts may think our use presumptuous (as if it were possible to recognize the passing from one era to another as being the result of revolution), but we feel that the potential of the new communications technologies justifies strong language. Future historians will be the ultimate judges of the extent to which we entered a new era during the latter decades of the 20th century. They will have the perspective to evaluate the success or failure of any such revolution.

We have used attention-grabbing terminology for a pragmatic reason: to stimulate our students to strive for the richer, more equitable society that new communications technologies can provide *if* they use these technologies with skill and imagination that transcends the barriers of the status quo. Ithiel de Sola Pool referred to them as "Technologies of Freedom"; it is we who must seek, use and protect the freedom.

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For a year and a half, our friend Philippe Delarue, now back in Paris, worked as our research assistant. By doing the detective work of tracking innumerable facts and citations, he helped us enrich the text as well as speed up the writing process.

Our greatest debt, however, is to the students who studied new developments in media and communications technologies with us in BF521 classes at Boston University. Their reactions provided real-life testing of draft chapters used as text materials. Their in-class reports and term papers helped us keep up-to-date on developments. Most important, their interest and enthusiasm kept us going.

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Communication, Media and Change

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