

# Chapter 11

## The Electronic Pontifex Maximus: Social Networking and the Hope of a Right to Communicate

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### ABSTRACT

*Drawing from the work of Canadian political economist Harold Innis, as well as the French activist, Jean d'Arcy—the father of the right to communicate, this chapter argues that it is almost impossible to have (and maintain) a right to communicate with the presence of a modern form of Pontifex Maximus: the media conglomerates. More particularly, it highlights the various possibilities of enforcing a human right to communicate with the introduction of the new social networking sites—such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Yet, it also underscores the challenges posed by global corporations that tried to capitalizing some popular social networking sites and user-generated content, and hence threatening a full and equitable participation of citizens in the democratic discourse, which is key to a fuller participation by the communicative citizen in democratic dialogue.*

### INTRODUCTION

More than forty years ago, Jean d'Arcy—the father of the right to communicate—admitted that controlling the different means of communication is imminently threatening the practice of democracy and the human right to communicate arguing that historically, “control of bridges gives control of roads and thus communications” (1977, p. 49). Drawing from this argument, this chapter aims

to analyse from a political economy perspective the obstacles that might face a real practice of free communication using the case study of social networking sites that have arguably enabled more free and unrestrained communication than conventional forms of electronic media.

Harold Innis, one of the prominent figures of the political economy of communication in Canada, underscored the historical relationship between power, political organizations and communication technology, asserting the importance of the different powers in facilitating or impeding the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-037-2.ch011

human communication. In such cases, the ideas of access to the different means of communication; and, the right of citizens to participate effectively in society via means of communication would be in a real danger.

Drawing from the work of Innis, this chapter argues that it is almost impossible to have (and maintain) a right to communicate with the presence of a modern form of *Pontifex Maximus*: the conglomerate media giant. Their existence transformed the use of information from a tool of human communication to a pure commodity available to the highest bid and a means of social control. Most recently, French President, Nicolas Sarkozy fires many criticism to the state of capitalism in the international realm, arguing that it “has gone ‘badly wrong’”, and calling “reforms to restore [the] ‘more dimension’ to world economy” (Akin, 2010, p. d-3). For that, this chapter underscores the possibility of a human right to communicate with the introduction of the new communications innovation, particularly social networking sites—such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Not surprisingly, global corporations showed great interest in capitalizing and dominating the trends of social networking and user-generated content. Such corporate concentration reinforces a mass media mentality thereby limiting the full participation of citizens in the democratic discourse, which is key to a fuller participation by the communicative citizen in democratic dialogue.

However, the trend to greater corporate concentration of the media is in tension with the growing impetus of citizens seeking greater opportunities to access and participate in global electronic, interactive communication. Early efforts to promote a right to communicate were hindered by the lack of experience most people had with electronic modes of interactive communication. However, this situation dramatically changed in the 1990s with the convergence of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the widespread use of the personal computer. As well, there has been during the closing decades of the twentieth cen-

tury a growing attainment of basic human rights throughout the world. These developments have profoundly changed the technological and political landscape surrounding the concept of a right to communicate. Consequently, there is a renewed interest in achieving such a right for everyone and in overcoming the socio-economic constraints limiting access. Indeed, as the chapter will articulate, and as envisioned by the early advocates of a right to communicate, over the last few years, users of communication technologies, particularly internet users are creating a “space-less” public sphere, an arena where the utopian Habermasian conceptualization of public discussion is created. Of equal importance in this discussion is the pioneering efforts of Jean d’Arcy who predicted in the late 1960s of the great promise and extraordinary possibilities of new technologies to disseminate both images and sounds and ultimately to facilitate communication between human beings. In its 2008 editorial, *VSD*—one of the French news Magazines—published a rare interview with d’Arcy on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1969, titled “L’homme qui avait vraiment prédit l’Internet” in which he thought that communication should ultimately aim to “serve” human beings: “Un outil de communication au service des hommes” (as cited in Dakrouy, 2009, p. 15). Although this statement was made more than thirty years ago, to a great extent it reflects the hope and firm belief in the freedom of communication between human beings that d’Arcy held.

## **THE RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Many scholars argue that the concept of the right to communicate is the legal child of the twentieth century’s various languages and legislations starting from the Post World War II period. They consider Article (19) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations in December 1948, as the first launching of that

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