

The Citizen's Right To Communicate¹

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The Right to Communicate

The initial acknowledgement of a right to communicate is Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, (Birdsall, 1998a) which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19 arose out of a post-war concern for the freedom of speech, the press, and other media. However, in the late 1960s, with the advent of satellites, it was recognized that Article 19 was too limited to encompass the newer media of interactive or two-way telecommunications. Power belongs to those who control the channels of communication. It was realized that the possibility of greater access to interactive communications opened the means of creating structures that dispersed communications and power among the general population (Fisher, 1982, p. 13). Consequently, in the 1970s and 80s, there were extensive efforts, primarily within UNESCO, to formulate a right to communicate. These efforts collapsed due to east/west and north/south ideological differences and power conflicts over the issue of the free flow of information. Under pressure spearheaded by the United States, UNESCO withdrew its support for a right to communicate initiative.

Canada was an active participant in these early efforts. The first official document in the world to attempt to define a right to communicate was a report issued in 1971 by a major Department of Communications task force, the Telecommission. In its report, entitled *Instant World*, (Canada, 1971) the Telecommission recognized that interactive networks based on the convergence of telecommunications and computing raised new issues about democracy, citizenship participation, and access to communications media and information. Early drafts of the report contained a strong endorsement of a right to communicate. However, the final report was toned down because it conjured up, as one of the drafters observed, "visions of a rabble demanding more, ever more, from a beleaguered established order" (Howard, March 19, 1971).

Nonetheless, the report did assert that the right to hear and to be heard, to inform others and to be informed, "are among the most valuable privileges" of a democratic society and essential elements of a right to communicate (Canada, 1971, p. 3). Canadian policy makers and politicians did not pursue the implications of a right to communicate in subsequent telecommunications policy processes. Perhaps they were fearful of the "rabble demanding more, ever more, from a beleaguered established order." As the Telecommission's Executive Secretary later noted, "resounding declarations" gave way to "practical limitations" (Harms, Richstad, & Kie, 1977, pp. 114-115).