'What is it that we wish to communicate?'

an after-dinner speech
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by Professor Don Aitkin
Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

There are, I think, two kinds of after-dinner speeches, the funny ones and the serious ones. Tonight you are getting one of the serious ones. It's not that I can't be funny, or that there is not a funny side to communications, or even that there is not a good deal of light-heartedness about at the Conference. It is, rather, that something inside me wants to say something serious about 'the communications revolution'. The cause is connected with the theme of the Conference, and it is connected also with a strong theme inside universities at this time — the theme of the likely impact of 'information technology', broadly defined, upon higher education.

I made an oblique reference to this issue this morning, when welcoming you all to the Conference. Now I would like to set it out for you more fully. Let me start with the theme of information technology and the university. For the last ten years or so I have been told, or have read, that we are entering the world of the 'virtual university', in which students will not need to visit the university, or meet their teachers or classmates — rather, they will simply log on, and interact electronically. They will not visit the library; rather, they will consult all the world's libraries on the Net. They will not hand in their assignment; rather, they'll send them by e-mail. We must be ready for all this, the sages instruct us. The more fearful see an end to the bricks-and-mortar university, an end to nearly a thousand years of activity in actual universities where people met one another. They fear for their jobs, they fear for their futures, they fear for the university itself.

I think that these fears are misplaced, and that at bottom such anxious people confuse ends with means, purposes with instruments, and education with the means of instruction. I can remember an early episode of a similar kind, in the 1960s, when the new medium of television was going to revolutionise higher education. It did not do so. Higher education has found a place for television, and it is not an unimportant place, but anyone who looks at the way in which Australian universities carried out their basic work in the 1950s, say, and also at how they do it now will be struck more by the similarities than by the differences.

Universities are places at which people gather to learn and to meet one another. Only the staff stay there for a long time, while the students come and go. But during the time that they are there the students gain enormously from one another as well as from their teachers, and they gain also from the physical presence and environment of the university, which they should find to be a place in which their study and aspiration are encouraged, enhanced and validated. It

is for this reason that graduates generally retain a high level of affection for their *alma mater*, and that they tend to keep in touch. Universities are intensely *social* places, as well as places where individuals pursue their own dreams.

Were that not so the university would not have survived the much more powerful technological revolutions which came first with the introduction of printed books, in the late 15th century, and second with really accessible and cheap printed material of all kinds, in the late 19th century. Books and accessible literature generally have enabled the direct study of existing human knowledge without any necessary mediation by the teacher. Yet universities have continued to flourish, and indeed have accommodated the book, the journal article and the newspaper to the purposes of higher education. In my view that will happen also in the case of the computer terminal and the Net.

Universities, it seems to me, have amongst other purposes the provision of an environment in which people come to understand things. Understanding is possible in other ways, and I do not mean to suggest that universities are indispensable for this purpose, only that they are great facilitators of that purpose. If, on the other hand, universities are there to set tests and to see whether or not people can pass them — what you might call the 'credentialling' role of universities — then that can be done without much human or physical presence, as we all know. But if it is understanding we are after, then the presence and inspiration and comfort of other people seem to be a marvellous aid, and technology cannot replace that. At best it can serve to assist.

Why do we assume so readily that technology will fundamentally change what we do? One explanation is that we are fascinated by technology, as the most potent example of man's handiwork, and thus we accord it greater powers than it really possesses. Another explanation, in contrast, is that technology really is powerful in changing what humans do, and we only have to consider the effects, intended and unintended, of the motor car and the birth control pill to realise that this can be so. I ask, nevertheless, that we always look past the surface appeal of the technology to ask what good human purpose the technology in question is intended to serve or could serve. For human desires, ends and purposes do not seem to change very much, even though the technology does.

Tha brings me closer to the more central theme of the Conference. As I said this morning, communications have been instrumental in the building of the modern nation state. But the nation state is not an end in itself. It is, or has been, a means through which human beings have sought to govern themselves effectively. It might be argued that the time during which the nation state was an effective means for human government has passed, or is beginning to pass. And technologies of various kinds have been instrumental in making us think about concepts like 'the global village' on the one hand, and about the need for local community, on the other hand, which are somewhat at odds with the nation state.

But at heart what we human beings want doesn't seem to change very much, whether we live in Australia or in Thailand or in places further afield. We all

want a recognisable version of 'the good society', a society in which people can live their lives free from the arbitrary use of force by others, free to exercise their own desires to do this or that, tempered only with the recognition that others cannot be asked to have less freedom than themselves, free to believe what they will about the reason for their existence, free to enjoy the world, and able to be supported by the undoubted virtue of the division of labour when the fruits of that labour are decently shared.

And that has been true for thousands of years. What we know of the worlds of Ancient Greece and Ancient China suggests that people talked like this then, and that what we want from life has stayed pretty much the same. Of course, some details change. The 19th and 20th centuries, for example, have seen great advances in the human understanding of health and ill-health, and we now take for granted certain kinds of technological aids, in diagnosis, in treatments, in recovery, which were unknown to past generations. We have much the same attitude towards our very new capacity to travel quickly and to communicate with one another instantly. Yet, to make the point again, these capacities are important mostly because of their contribution to what it is that human beings really want — to live a benign existence.

I do not have to persuade you that technologies of themselves have no inbuilt tendency to help or hinder human goals. They are instruments, not ends. So about all of them we ought to ask: how can this be used best? I know that we rarely have a practical opportunity, but we should nonetheless ask the question, especially when gathered in meetings like this one. How do the communications technologies that we have, and the ones that we can see coming, assist us in building better societies? The answers vary. I am not as enraptured with the virtues of competition as the Minister [Tim Fischer] was this morning, and when I look at our country I seem to see less competition rather than more, especially in the fields of television and the print media. It needs to be said, too, that competition, like technology, is an instrument for human purposes, not an end in itself or a kind of greater good which needs no examination.

I do not think that these new communication technologies have as their central purpose the making of profits, the widening of competition, the expansion of trade or the development of economies. These are only instruments, and it is important to ask what it is that they are instruments of. I am also not one of those who believe that political and social freedoms are the same as, or that they necessarily derive from, the freedom of the market, and as a political scientist I know that what counts as the 'freedom of the market' varies very greatly from country to country.

I put to you an alternative. We need these new technologies because humanity is facing a crisis. It is a crisis that we have brought on ourselves through the success of some of our older technologies: there are very many of us, and there will be very many more: we are crowding the planet. We are competing all the time for natural resources, for good air, for water, for food, for fuel, for space. These scarcities provide markets (we can buy bottled water in both our countries, even though Australia still has abundant amounts of good, stored,

fresh water) but they do not, it seems to me, provide very much of the good society. Our problems are not insoluble, though they are very difficult. To solve them requires knowledge, and understanding, and sympathy, and political will.

To another audience I would add that universities are indispensable if these problems are to be tackled, let alone solved. But I do not need to do that here, and I mention it only to be able to applaud the foresight of the Government of Thailand, which has made the development of higher education the key component of the modernisation of Thailand itself. The University of Canberra is honoured to be associated in partnership with so many of the universities of Thailand.

But back to my subject. You will have observed that the new communications technologies, as well as the old ones, need to be employed if humanity is to solve its problems. We need well educated citizens. We need an attitude of mind that says that human knowledge can be mobilised to solve human problems. We need rapid communications so that help and knowledge can be provided where there is need. We need to be able to move knowledge about quickly, and that is now possible through the Net. Above all, we need to be able to talk to one another easily, from place to place, from country to country, and we are beginning to have the means to do so.

So I welcome the new communications technologies, and want to put them to use for humanity's sake, not just to make money. I greatly admire what Thailand has done for its citizens in the period since the second world war, and I believe that Australia has itself achieved a great deal in building a decent, progressive, creative society in the same period. But we all know that there is a lot more to do, and that there is always the dreadful prospect of slipping back, of failing to preserve what is good in the old, in our nervous haste to embrace the new.

That is the task for ourselves and for the next generation. I am grateful that such powerful communication technologies exist, but I ask for a nobler use of them than simple profit.