

The Information Society Conference – Remarks by Vice President Al Gore

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My friend, James Burke, the historian, tells a compelling tale about the last information revolution and the changes it wrought.

Over five hundred years ago, not far from here in Germany, a goldsmith who had bungled a sure-fire money-making venture by getting a crucial date wrong, was looking for a way to mollify his business partners. He decided to use his goldsmithing skills to mold what became known as movable type and to use type in his new printing press to print the one book he knew would sell -- the Bible.

In this case, the Gutenberg Bible.

Now, inventions rarely spring full-blown from one brain totally without precedent. Gutenberg's invention is no exception.

After all, movable metal type has been invented in Korea 200 years earlier. But conditions conspired to keep that first movable typeface from spreading. Confucianism prohibited the commercialization of books and the Korean royal presses would print only classical Chinese literature, not the more popular Korean literature.

By Gutenberg's time, there were better conditions: better paper, better metals and eyeglasses. And Europeans were ready for a cheaper way to copy books than using scribes who charged for one copy what a printing press would charge for a thousand.

The result: not only books, but enlightenment; the scientific revolution; the Age of Reason and the political revolution symbolized by the document I am sworn to uphold some 200 years after its drafting -- the Constitution of the United States.

All, in a way, from a goldsmith's mistake.

What lessons can we draw from Gutenberg's spectacular success? Let me name two.

First, our view of the future and our ability to exploit and develop a new idea are always constrained by the circumstances we find ourselves in at the moment. Yes, Gutenberg had a great idea. But he is given credit for revolutionizing our culture because he exploited his idea at a moment when the circumstances were conducive to the rapid spread of print technology.

Second, change is incredibly hard to handle, manage and predict -- or, as the physicist Neils Bohr once said, "Prediction is very difficult, especially when you are talking about the future".

We gather here today to chart a path to the future -- at a time when prediction is as difficult as ever, but also at a time when our circumstances are clearly conducive to the rapid spear of a new capacity to process and communicate information that will benefit all humankind. It is a path that will take us from our shared vision to a new reality. Just as human beings once dreamed of steam ships, railroads, and superhighways we now dream of the global information infrastructure that can lead to a global information society.

But our dream today is not fundamentally about technology. Technology is a means to an end. Our dream is about communication -- the most basic human strategy we use to raise our children, to educate, to heal, to empower and to liberate.

In its most basic form, communication is the transfer of information from one human being to another. Information, in turn, is the raw material of knowledge, and knowledge sometimes, if we're lucky, ferments into wisdom. And of course, in all of our countries it is by now a cliché to note that the information revolution now in its early stages will ultimately transform our concepts of both communication and information.

The changes wrought by Gutenberg are our common heritage. The changes we are here to discuss will become our common legacy. Today I would like to outline some principles that the Administration of President Bill Clinton believes ought to determine the kind of legacy we leave.

Last year in Buenos Aires I attended the first World Telecommunication Development Conference to present the United States' vision of a Global Information Infrastructure that will promote robust and sustainable economic progress, strengthen democracies, facilitate better solutions to global environmental challenges, improve health care and, ultimately create a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet.

The Buenos Aires Conference adopted a set of basic principles we believe are the building blocks of the GII:

- Private investment.

- Competition.

- Open access.

- Universal service.

- Flexible regulations.

These principles have been central to the discussions about the GII in bilateral, multilateral and regional fora, most recently at the APEC meeting last week in Vancouver, but also at the Summit of Americas meeting in Miami last December and in memoranda of understanding between the United States and both Russia and Ukraine.

They will be central here in Brussels, at this meeting, proposed by President Clinton, and graciously hosted by the European Union under the leadership of President Santer and former President Jacques Delors. For the first time, more than forty representatives of the private sector are formally participating in this conference. They and the hundreds more who are participating informally are demonstrating at this conference an impressive array of applications that signal to the world that the G7 nations are committed to leading the development of a GII by their example in word and deed.

The very act of holding this conference is in keeping with the advice given to dreamers long ago by Mahatma Gandhi: "You must become the change you wish to see in the world."

Moreover, moving forward aggressively on a GII is the best way to deal with concerns highlighted during the G7 jobs summit in Detroit last year. At that conference we confronted the central dilemma facing every government: how do we make sure our economies provide enough jobs?

The initial OECD jobs study outlined the connection between jobs and what we do here. Those nations best able to adopt the new technologies for a knowledge-based economy have been the best at creating jobs.

The fact is that government policies based on faulty assumptions that try to block change or protect the status quo have themselves become job destroyers. This time we have a chance to get it right. We can open markets to create job opportunities. We can use education and training to enable more workers to adapt to the new workplace.

The liberating effects of these new technologies have been clear around the world. Satellite stations brought medical advice to those tending to the suffering in Rwanda. Radio and TV broadcasts in South Africa promoted the role of voting in a democracy. Wireless technologies are allowing emerging nations to leapfrog the expensive stages of wiring a communication network -- for example, in Thailand, where the ratio of cellular telephone users to the population is twice that of the U.S.

The effects are also visible in education. One of the biggest handicaps for those who want to learn has been distance. In Washington, the Library of Congress is a wonderful place. But we must ensure it becomes a tool for, let's say, a schoolgirl from my hometown in Carthage, Tennessee, 600 miles away.

Already, distance education is helping some citizens overcome geographic difficulties. In Japan, over 100 institutions are linked by computer and satellite, with some 150,000 students currently enrolled

In India, there are five open universities and more than 35 distance learning programs in conventional universities.

And in Canada, the Knowledge Network delivers courses to adult students living on islands in British Columbia.

In France, the newly-discovered cave paintings in Ardeche, almost impossible to reach in real life, are accessible on the Internet to scholars, teachers, and most important, children.

The Clinton Administration is committed to the goal of connecting every classroom, every library, every hospital and every clinic to the national and global information infrastructures by the end of this decade.

We must provide our teachers and our students with the same level of communications technology that shipping clerks, construction workers and government officials use every day.

Information technology is a critical element of economic policy. But there are great obstacles.

How do we begin the hard work of turning the obstacles before us into opportunities?

First, by focusing squarely on those who will drive the demand for information products and services: the users.

User demands will define the marketplace.

Competition to serve the users will speed up innovation and cost-effective deployment of new technologies. Private investment in diverse technologies will mean new sources of capital and expertise for rich and poor nations alike.

Computer networks have created whole new, rapidly growing markets. These networks help small and medium sized enterprises from both poor and rich countries to become more effective competitors in world markets.

In the United States, our spectrum auctions have speeded up the licensing of personal communication services and are leading to the creation of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the next several years -- one indication that communication is a source of economic change and growth, not just the result of it.

The GII will not be created in one place at one time by any one group. It will be the product of cooperation among governments, industry and citizens on a global scale.

But how do countries with widely varying needs, cultures, and technologies cooperate?

First, by acknowledging that the fruits of our cooperation should be open to access to markets for all provider and users of creative content and information products, equipment and services.

For the competitors in the 21st century global economy, there is no substitute for being in the marketplace and providing the users we represent the greatest variety of products, information and services for the least cost.

Second, building the GII is going to require robust competition. And you cannot create robust competition by excluding competitors, whether those competitors are at home or abroad.

It is vigorous competition -- which means global competition -- that creates jobs.

And so I say on behalf of President Clinton, let the message of this conference be clear: we support competition in open markets that allow any company to provide any service to any customer.

What concentric actions must be take to realize that goal?

First, we must drop our barriers to foreign investment together. For more than 60 years the U.S. has had limited restrictions on foreign investment in certain telecommunications services. In this respect, we are going to change and change this year. Whether by new law or new regulation, we intend to open foreign investment in telecommunications services in the United States for companies of all countries who have opened their own markets.

But we also recognize that the information society demands more than a piecemeal approach. The governments represented here and others have an historic opportunity to open telecommunications markets around the world in the negotiations within the

General Agreement on Trade in Services. The deadline for these negotiations is April 1996.

Let us resolve to meet this deadline to remove our investment barriers together.

Second, let's develop and enforce effective intellectual property rights for the GII. If our content providers are not protected, there will not be content to fill the networks and give value to services.

Third, all parties should participate in the development of private-sector, voluntary, consensus standards through the existing

international organizations, such as the International Telecommunication Union, the International Standards Organization and the Internet Society. The creation of truly global networks will require a high degree of interconnection and interoperability.

Governments are not the best arbiters of technology, and government intervention risks encouraging adoption of standards that are either ultimately inferior or inappropriate to demands of the market.

Our vision of an information society is one in which the most valuable resource -- information -- is also the most abundant.

My hope is that the open exchange of ideas of all sorts and the greatest access possible for all citizens to the varied means of communication will stimulate creativity.

Global communication is not about conformity. Some fear that in losing the distance between ourselves and others we lose our distinctions as well. But communication is about bridging the differences between nations and people, not erasing them.

It is about protecting and enlarging freedom of expression for all our citizens and giving individual citizens the power to create the information they need and want from the abundant flow of data they encounter moment to moment.

Communication is the beginning of community. Whether it is through language, art, custom, or political philosophy, people and nations identify themselves through communication of experience and values. A global information network will create new communities and strengthen existing ones by enriching the ways in which we do and can communicate.

Ideas should not be checked at the border. We have much to learn from each other and we should follow practices and policies that incorporate, not exclude, the greatest diversity of opinions and expressions. We all gain from the exchange of cultural viewpoints and experiences that occurs when open minds engage each other.

At the same time, users of the GII want and will demand privacy. When you asks Americans about information technology, it is their biggest concern. We must protect the privacy of personal data and communications.

Governments and industry need to work together to develop new technologies, new standards, and new policies that will provide privacy and financial transactions and ensure intellectual property rights, the GII must be secure and reliable. The OECD should continue its leadership in the area of computer security.

Fortunately, technology and human imagination keep providing us with new opportunities to enhance our communication capabilities. Take, for example, non-geostationary satellites. They hold remarkable potential, especially for remote or thinly-populated regions, and for societies eager to reap the benefits of 21st century technology even before completing expensive land-based networks. These advanced technologies can provide everything from basic telephone calls to remote medical diagnosis. Like the Internet, they have the potential to knit together millions of people in different locations and situations -- and do it economically.

Every one of the low earth orbit satellite systems -- and, in addition, the intermediate-orbit Inmarsat-P affiliate -- is multinational, and each satellite consortium welcomes and actively seeks out the participation of both developed and developing countries. Of course, each nation retains the power to determine whether the LEOs may serve it. But countries that license these international satellite consortia help their business communities become more competitive in the global economy and provide their citizens beneficial satellite services.

Our purpose in meeting here together is to advance our common goal of a Global Information Infrastructure that will bring to all countries the benefits of a Global Information Society.

Our challenge today is to create the commercial, technical, legal and social conditions that will establish the foundation for the GII.

As we work across our common boundaries and oceans to build a GII, we cannot think only of today's debates about wireless or satellites; we must perform our work in the service of a global vision that can be realized in every community and village in the world.

I began by talking about Gutenberg, whose voyage of discovery has influenced the lives of every person on this planet.

His was not an easy voyage. There were sceptics and enemies; when his financial backer took twelve Bibles to Paris the book dealers took him to court, arguing that so many identical books could only be the work of the devil.

His work challenged his society to change.

And they learned what we cannot ignore: that we cannot choose to delay or deny the future; we must make ready for it.

There is no better way to prepare for the future than to make the best of the present.

That is why a shared victory is so necessary. We have now a great opportunity to see the world in a new light and to re-think the way it operates and the way in which we should operate within it.

I have outlined today the concrete steps we must take to embark on this new voyage of discovery. Empowered by the moveable type of the next millennium we can send caravans loaded with the wealth of human knowledge and creativity along trails of light that lead to every home and village. I thank you for your devotion to this vision and look forward to our journey together.