

# The way we were in the 20th century



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**T**HE FOCUS of the 3rd United Nations World Television Forum held in New York was the "Future of Audio-Visual Memory". The aim of the conference was to look at the social role that film and television play in creating images of who we are, of the issues that are important to us, and the values we have. It posed questions about what images we (at a local, national and international level) want preserved and recorded for future generations, that could provide a kind of audio-visual memory of who and what we were in the 20th century.

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, opened the conference by urging television producers to produce more international news which show both the inter-connectedness of humanity and its human face. Globalisation,

he argued, should also produce a sense of global citizenship and responsibility. This, he urged, demands new images of heroism that reflect the strivings of those who struggle for these larger issues — and in his view, sportsmen are not good enough for this heroic task. He thus called on broadcasters to look beyond their commercial interests (and the costs of international reporting) and to consider their tremendously important role as com-

municators whose responsibility is not only to a planet of current viewers, but whose broadcasts also provide a diary of the present for future generations.

Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lamberto Dini, emphasised the role that the media play in constructing and affirming our sense of who we

are. Given this, he said the challenge to both politics and the media is "transparency and truth, justice and freedom, memory and identity". He suggested that globalisation "does not mean wiping out or confusing different identities". "The media," he said, "are capable of straddling borderlines, interweaving languages, reformulating symbols, and preserving memories without confusing them." He recognised that "every country, and every community is committed to preserving its autonomy, its capacity to combine values and practices, to participating in the world of technology and the markets while preserving its own identity and cultural memory."

The conference thus raised fundamental issues concerning who produces what for whom. It is noteworthy that most of the participants were from the North, and represented the major network news corporations. The managing director and chief executive of Shalimar Television Network in Pakistan pointed out that there is a power imbalance in the world, and that Third World cultures are under threat from powerful media corporations who operate globally. Contrary to Annan's call for media-sharing and mutual participation, he said that in fact there is a one-way "torrent that sweeps away everything in its way". He argued further that "satellite and the Internet don't necessarily translate into wisdom and knowledge". It's what we do with information, and how we use it — for collective benefit, or commercial gain — that is the greatest challenge facing media producers. This view was endorsed by Bob Collins, Director General of Radio Telefis Eireann from Ireland, who emphasised that television gives a mediated version of the world — a fact we too often forget.

Responding to this, Denise Epote Durand, Director of TV5 Afrique in the Cameroun, said Africa is generally not reflected in world TV, and when it is, then it is by northern TV networks which project their images of poverty,

corruption and drought. If only these images are recorded and preserved for posterity, then this will be the "memory" of Africa in the 20th century that will be taken into the 21st century. There are several problems with this: 1) Africa is a vast continent with many different peoples and different histories, and the complexity of this is not conveyed by current television news reports about Africa; 2) because most of the news crews are non-Africans, they report their version of what is African news; 3) what is thus produced and recorded is not Africa's memories of its multi-faceted self.

The importance of what is recorded, and thus what becomes the collective "memory" or history of a nation is crucially important, not because it refers to the past, but because it impacts on the present.

Robert Rosen, Dean of the School of Theatre, Film and Television at the University of California, Los Angeles, reminded a panel of filmmakers of the Italian historian Bernadetto Croce's insight that "all history is present, all history responds to something now". In view of this the panellists (Australian Gillian Armstrong, Frenchman Olivier Assayas, the Japanese Masato Harada, the American Sidney Lumet, the Iranian Dariush Mehrjui, and the Italian Giuseppe Tornatore) were asked their views on the relationship between past and present in filmmaking.

Although film and television appear to be similar media, what this panel highlighted was the difference between them. A criticism of television news was that because of commercial pressures and the structures of television news production, events are recorded without any context, and thus it has become increasingly difficult to "make sense" of television news. This is why the question was raised by marginalised television producers of the historical value of mainstream news — whose news, whose memories? Filmmakers work differently. Even though they too operate in a commercial industry, it is possible, at least for some filmmakers, to use film as a medium of expression for reflecting on a range of issues which are important to our experience as human beings.

Sidney Lumet, whose films *Network*, and *Running on Empty* were recently broadcast on SABC, said that his films reflect his concern with the problems of power (economic, social, governmental) and how to maintain one's individuality in the face of it. For him, the most interesting films are those that pose questions, not the ones that give answers.

The major problem that the filmmakers encounter, similar to that of the Third World television producers, is the way in which a market-driven industry makes it possible not only for some voices to be heard, and others to be side-lined, but also for some modes of storytelling to be promoted, while others are marginalised. The filmmakers were also concerned about the general lack of access both to films that were marginalised commercially, and to

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## What, how and for whom do we save the past?

**A**NOTHER major issue of the conference was archiving. Here the major questions were:

- what should be selected to be archived?
- on what basis does one make the decision about which programmes and films to keep and preserve?
- who makes these momentous decisions?
- who keeps the archives — national institutions, private ones, the producing companies themselves?
- how should material be archived — on film, on tape (what kind of tape — digital or analogue)?
- what kinds of retrieval systems should be put in place for use by researchers and other future users?

- where do the costs come from?
- how is access to the material ensured?
- what about copyright?

The way in which these questions are answered by the rich nations of the world, is likely to be very different from that of the poor nations.

Roberto Zaccaria, Chairman of the Board of Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) noted that there were three challenges for safeguarding our audio-visual heritage: 1) to guarantee the greatest possible access by all citizens to all audio-visual material produced; 2) to create a new model for audio-visual archiving which regulates retrieval of material, while safe-guarding the rights of authors, producers, and distributors;

3) to give special attention to the preservation and restoration of the technical quality of archived material, so that it can last into the next millennium, and beyond. In view of this he proposed the establishment of a common video library jointly set up by all the nations of the world, which would house the most cherished sounds and images that have made up the history of this century.

### USEFUL ARCHIVING ORGANISATIONS

- Association of Moving Image Archivists
- Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers — study group devoted to archiving
- European Strategic Program for Research in Information Technology — Euromedia project
- International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT)

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what might be called the "classics". Here a debate arose about the relationship between film and television. On the one hand television could be seen as a "preserver" or promoter of film, in the sense that it can broadcast films that are no longer current. But on the other hand, Sidney Lumet argued firstly, that film has its own unique aesthetic qualities (as does television), and these are often lost in the broadcasting of film; and secondly that an essential part of this aesthetic is the public viewing experience of film in a cinema.

Danny Schechter, currently Vice President and Executive Producer of Globalvision, and formerly a media activist who championed the coverage of African news in the US by producing the weekly programme, *Africa Now*, chaired a session which focused on the "Consumption and abuse of reality in the multi-media environment". He suggested that more media or more information doesn't necessarily mean more understanding and knowledge — it can also promote amnesia. He decried the absence of context in news reporting which enables people to make sense of the sound bites and 10-second images they are exposed to. He was also critical of forums such as this one in which "media moguls are feted, but never challenged and questioned".

There seemed to be consensus that advertising pressure has led increasingly to simplistic news coverage that is being framed more as "entertainment", than "news" — the now accepted genre of "infotainment". It was suggested that this change has given the Internet the edge in providing the context that television news does not, and also in being able to reach fragmented audiences that it is uneconomic for broadcast news to cater for. This raised questions about the relationship between, or convergence of television and the Internet, and whether this could be seen as a "technical or

content race". One assessment of this relationship is that there would be a convergence of content, but a divergence of platforms of delivery.

While the conference raised several important issues, and had many participants who were well-informed on the technical issues relating to the storage and archiving of audio-visual material, it was in many ways a lop-sided convention. While the global economy was recognised, little acknowledgement was given to what might be called the "disastrous" way in which it functions for poor countries in the South. Thus the "justice" in international communications called for by the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs is far from a reality. The privileging of commercial interests over social concerns was highlighted for me by a comment by the President of Pay TV/Cable/Network, Warner Brothers, Edward Bleier, who said without a hint of irony, "what others call memories, I call assets". While it is imperative to look at the economics of producing, preserving and archiving audio-visual material, it is dishonest to pretend that these activities happen in a free world, and that a free market will provide the answers to what are essentially social issues. The agitation by predominantly Third World countries for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was precisely because of the terms on which they were being inserted into the so-called free-market of international communications. Challenging the mainstream perceptions about the NWICO, media theorist Robert A White asserts that "it should be emphasised that the NWICO movement is not simply a Third World phenomenon but is world wide ... (it) is a movement that has deep roots in an historic socio-political and cultural process. Perhaps its most significant impact is the changed cultural perception of the nature of human communication and the role media are to play in society" (1993:25). This

wider socio-political context within which international communication should be seen was noticeably absent from the conference.

As so often happens at conferences of this kind, there is a broad unspoken ideological position which dominates, and which presents itself as a norm, or the only sensible way to think about the issues. With media there seems to be a notion of the inevitability of a particular form of globalisation, and digitalisation, and a general kind of technological and market determinism. Perhaps we should ask of this "all-powerful, but always invisible entity", as Steven Friedman did in a local newspaper article: "Will The Market please step forward" (Sunday Independent, Reconstruct, 25 July 1988:6). Ironically The Market did send its emissaries: the heads of various multi-national media outfits. But as Danny Schechter noted, they are rarely challenged and held to account. The unspoken discourse is of pragmatism. Thus while production experts, marketers, and hardware manufacturers are called upon to offer their experience to their peers of what it's like in the real world (where political and economic power hold sway), most times, media theorists, media sociologists, or media political economists who can both locate particular historical practices, and discuss them in a far wider social context, are not present. Such an engagement or dialogue would be particularly beneficial to policy makers and students of the media who are concerned with the potential role the media could play in building a more democratic world order.

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