Coda: Just Communicating

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PARIS—In March 1975, in what would turn out to be the final month of the war in Cambodia, I thought it might be a nice touch to place a call to my bride of six months and wish her a happy birthday. My interpreter/fixer/photographer, Dith Pranh, advised me to book the call a week or so in advance, which

I did at the PTT (Post Telegraph)—the only locale where an international call had even a prayer of going through. At the appointed time, I appeared there and, after a wait of only several hours, the operator announced that my party was on the line in New York, and I could pick up "the apparatus" in Cabin #1. I lifted the phone and there, 7,000 miles away, was a very faint voice of Susan making its way through a cloud of electronic noise, crackles, and pops. We shouted at each other for a minute or so, before we finally gave up on any meaningful communication.

That was life not only in a war zone, but across much of the Third World barely a half century ago. It was the advances in communications in the ensuing decades that changed life as we knew it in so many parts of the globe. And it was not only journalism—print and broadcast—but business, finance, and especially diplomacy that were transformed by the evolution of speed and access. For centuries, indeed much of known history, all of these fields and their practitioners were blessed (or all too often cursed) with an independence from headquarters that bordered at times on anarchy.

Diplomats may have been representatives of Her (or His) Majesty's Government in the days when the sun never set on the British Empire, but in fact they were largely independent masters of the lands over which they held sway or to which they represented British interests. Until the arrival of the telegraph and the Morse code that gave it speech (in 1844, when Samuel Morse transmitted the message "WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT?" from the Capitol in Washington, D.C. to the Mt. Clare Depot in Baltimore), it could be weeks before any diplomatic communication arrived in Whitehall in the heart of London from the far corners of the known, or especially unknown, world. But even when the telegraph and later the wireless did arrive (in December 1901, Guglielmo Marconi transmitted the first radio message across the Atlantic), communications were hardly instantaneous or even, for that matter, enforceable.

When I first arrived in Asia as a foreign correspondent in late 1974, communications were effectively one-way from large stretches of the world. It was all but impossible to receive instructions from New York about a story or the nature of coverage. Correspondents were to determine what was news, hopefully "scoop" the competition, but above all make sure they in turn were not "scooped," then dutifully send off their dispatches and pray they were not butchered by some anonymous but omnipotent copy editor on the foreign desk in London, New York, Paris, or Washington. So, for instance, *Le Monde* and its Paris-based Indochina editor Jacques Decornoy, a classmate of Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan in decades earlier at l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, was most sympathetic to their aims—at least until they turned their nation into a charnel house after western forces were driven from their nation. And I was rendered speechless when the foreign desk of *The New York Times* "spiked" (killed) a story of mine from Clark Air Base in the Philippines, after I suggested that the arriving flights designed to get Americans out of Saigon were in fact being used to ferry out sym-

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pathetic Vietnamese colonels and other officers, together with their girlfriends and suitcases filled with gold to ensure a comfortable exile. Seems the Pentagon then warned that if *The Times* ran such a story, they might have difficulty getting their own bureau personnel and their effects to safety before North Vietnamese Communist forces arrived in Saigon.

None of this ever really improved in all my time abroad as a foreign correspondent, at least not in the Third World. There was a concept called a "press emergency call," which the foreign desk in New York could invoke to break through and jump the telephone queue to a particular country in a real emergency, AND which it did on New Year's morning in 1976. We were awoken in Bangkok by a surprise call informing us that the wires were reporting a horrific plane crash at Don Muang Airport involving an Egypt Air flight that had killed all on board, not to mention scores more on the ground. The pilot, in what turned out to be a drunken stupor, a stewardess seated on his lap with champagne flute in her hand, mistook the long sheds of a textile plant for the runway on a stormy, post-midnight approach, and landed there abruptly, causing the carnage.

France was a bit better. By the early 1980s, we could generally get telephone calls through without a major problem, and there was always the telex—a typewriter hooked up to a phone line that allowed two-way written communications directly with the other machine, provided one had the number and the "answerback," or code identifying the machine at the other end. So, for instance, I happened to have the personal number of Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, and his answerback "greenbook" (the dictator's sayings patterned after the Little Red Book of China's Communist leader Mao Tse Tung, but with the theme of "green"—make the desert a fruitful oasis). This enabled me to land a couple of exclusive interviews with this madman at the height of his confrontation with President Ronald Reagan.

AUTHORITIES USED THE REQUIREMENT TO TRANSMIT FROM SOVIET TV (GOSTELERADIO) AS A MEANS OF CENSORSHIP.

But such miracles as the telex did not make life much easier for television, or those of us forced to cover the news for broadcast— not by a long shot. Toting along two dozen enormous metal cases of gear, the greedy eyes of airline shipping clerks lit up when we'd arrive with our credit cards, ready to fork over with barely a second thought thousands of dollars in overweight charges for any flight. And then, when we were ready to transmit our stories, we had to work out the logistics of transporting our tape to the nearest transmission point. In places like Chad, such points were often a country or two away, forcing the major American networks to charter a flight each day to get their stories to a place with a "satellite uplink." Today, such uplinks are often as far away as the nearest laptop and portable antenna. At the same time, print reporters can simply log onto a website and attach their words to an e-mail, rather than engaging in a mad dash across Bangkok in the midst of a military coup to the Reuters news bureau whose operators would transmit our copy whenever they might fit it in between their own.

That's when we were lucky. In Vientiane, Laos, as the Pathet Lao Communists were on the verge of seizing control in 1975, there was a single telex-radio line out. Regularly, in the midst of transmission, the signal would drift off the frequency, sending the Lao operator racing through a tiny door to begin frantically tuning until the beeps indicated it was back on line. Of course, if I got behind Bruce Palling, stringer for a long line of American and British publications from *The Washington Post* to the BBC and *The Guardian*, it could be hours before I'd see my copy go out to New York.

There was considerable discussion about whether it was worthwhile to have the PTT dig a trench the length of the rue Marbeuf just off the Champs-Élysées in downtown Paris to lay a special high-quality line (probably an early version of fiber-optics) so that we could actually transmit our stories from the bureau, rather than having to pay for a satellite connection and go racing over to French television to transmit. Ironically, the situation was not dissimilar to that in Moscow, though there the authorities used the requirement to transmit from Soviet TV (Gosteleradio) as a means of censorship. After a race through tunnels of ice and snow, to the top of the hill where the studios and control rooms were located, there was a state official standing next to us, and if our actual piece deviated in any substantive fashion from the version we had provided by telex, the plug could and would be pulled, the transmission cut. The Israelis, however, were even more blatant—they wouldn't let us transmit from Herzliya unless the military censor had actually viewed the piece before we went up on the satellite, and would refuse permission to transmit at the slightest provocation.

THE INTERNET

Then the Internet changed it all. In 1977, I sat in a tin-roof open shack with a single, black rotary phone, out behind the post office in Ambon on the South Moluccan Islands, screaming my story to a transcriber in *The Times*'s recording room in New York. He could barely hear me over the monsoon rain pounding on the corrugated tin roof. "Why don't you turn down the noise in the disco," the transcriber said, "you foreign correspondents, always living it up." Today I can simply log onto the Internet I access with my satellite telephone that can connect to New York digitally and immediately from nearly any point on the planet.

But as rapidly as technical agility has changed our ability to transmit our accounts of war and crises, diplomacy and finance, the expectations of news consumers has changed as well, and the industry itself has fragmented. On the one hand, it has made events closer, more immediate, more impactful. At the same time, it has reduced resources for any given medium, any given operation, transforming the very nature of media, business, finance, diplomacy, and politics.

The immediacy and accessibility of the Internet has also transformed the very nature of interaction between governments and individuals, and indeed between individuals and the media that has long served as the principal conduit and chronicler of the actions of both groups. At the annual gala of the White House Correspondents Association, celebrating the organization's 100th anniversary, its president Steven Thomma pointed out, "A changing media gives us more tools, but also allows the government to send its own images, its own video, its own messages direct to people in ways that

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we find challenging. It's certainly a thing predecessors to the president would have envied and probably used themselves."

And indeed, each day, the White House communications office does put out at least one or two emails addressed to the four million names, larger than the combined print circulation of *The New York Times* and *USA Today,* the White House maintains. Each of these messages, of course, bypasses the traditional news outlets and goes directly to millions of individuals who may never see the event or the issue on which the White House is "reporting." None of these issues is set in context and perspective, with appropriate comment from others who may disagree in whole or in part with the conclusions the White House communicators reach. There is not a substantive difference between this practice and that of Soviet Russia, when all media was controlled by the

state and the content of newspapers, radio, and television was assumed to reflect directly and unabashedly the views of the ruling Kremlin leadership and that of the Communist Party. So when the White House expands its use of White House photographers as the sole chroniclers of an increasing number of meetings of the president with foreign leaders, it restricts the access of accredited news photographers who might conceivably capture an expression that is less congenial to the nation's leaders (on either side), but perhaps more reflective of the underlying views of the participants and the nature of their private sessions.

There are similar issues that reflect other direct-to-consumer communications as well. Many international human rights organizations, for instance, have actually hired former correspondents—many laid off in the frenetic downsizing of foreign staffs by western news outlets—to report on issues in regions where they are most active. Their reports are presented, frequently, to news outlets as reportage rather than advocacy. At a recent panel at the German Mission to the United Nations, the representative of Human Rights Watch defended this practice by saying that every government targeted by such a document is asked for "comment" so the reports are even-handed. However, there is a substantial difference between a report that is setting out to make a particular point on behalf of an organization with a clear agenda and reportage by a journalist whose mission is fundamentally to examine the issue dispassionately, place it in full context, and allow readers to draw their own conclusion. Any deviation from such a practice presents a clear and present danger to the natural order.

BRING ON THE BLOGGERS

And then there are the bloggers. A growing amount of news and comment communicated in today's world comes in the form of unmediated content. This means writing that flows directly from the mind and the fingertips of barely-known individuals of unknown training, background, access, or accomplishments, to the mind of any individual who may stumble upon their musings in a Google search or chance linkage. This is perhaps the single most dangerous form of news being disseminated today, and it has become all but ubiquitous.

There has been considerable effort invested in the process of defining bloggers as journalists—particularly by organizations such as the thoroughly estimable Committee to Protect Journalists—as to what constitutes a journalist in the day of the omnipresent blogger. In other words, who might be entitled to protection in the event they are attacked, especially in nations that do not particularly cotton to criticism from any quarter? At one time, it was suggested that a prudent critic did not pick a quarrel with someone who buys ink by the barrel. But these days, what about an unnamed individual with a half million followers on Twitter or 200,000 Facebook friends or a million YouTube views? Are they to be trusted with respect to the accuracy, probity, or honesty of their next tweet or Facebook post or YouTube video? For that we need to know a whole lot more—their pedigree, training, and access, their agenda if they have one, their biases and prejudices. Above all, it would be good to know whether another sentient mind somehow occupied the space between their fingertips and the eyeballs of their readers or viewers. Any unmediated publication is immediately

fraught. Any journalist or commentator, no matter what their standing, can do well with another set of eyes and another mind on any writing before it goes out to the world at large. The best often became that way because of the very act of editing and questioning, the critical pushback and debate that is central to the interaction of writer and editor.

All this applies, equally, to the concept of citizen journalist. If one is a citizen of a particular location, does that automatically convey the ability, training, and sensibility of a real journalist? For that matter, does one need to be a citizen of or even deeply immersed in a particular nation or people to have the ability, if not the right, to convey its reality to the world. Real journalists are quite likely born to recognize a story or a situation as somehow significant—with a larger point to be drawn. Experience can only hone this sensibility; editing can refine its expression. Self-selection as a journalist is fraught with potential danger.

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BUT NOT JUST JOURNOS

Back in the 1970s, I ran across a young banker with Bankers Trust, a venerable New York banking institution until it was purchased by Deutsche Bank in 1998. The bank and my friend the banker were most interested in business in then-communist Eastern Europe, especially in Poland where vast reserves of coal were just being developed, and in Yugoslavia which was marginally capitalist than Poland. This young man was busily flitting from project to project, scattering largesse almost at will—loans in hard currency desperately needed by countries that were otherwise cut off from Western credit markets by the Iron Curtain and very much ruble-centric Comecon, the Russian-controlled common market. Coal and other materials were in substantially shorter supply than the hard currency that these regimes squandered, long before the discovery that the reserves that collateralized them might never be developed. The reason this nearly catastrophic system—effectively an ill-conceived Ponzi scheme of dollars and resource—could go on was the reality that there was little real control from the home office, and little readily available knowledgeof what was being financed. But that was life in the Third World (or even the Second World) back in pre-Internet days.

Today, there is not only more instantaneous access to real-world data, but greater expectations as well. In December, I had open-heart surgery. My aortic valve was failing, and I had it replaced by a "third-generation" bovine valve. Manufactured by Edwards Lifesciences at its facility in Singapore, the company's CEO contacted me and suggested that he could place me in touch, via Skype, with the worker in this plant who had hand-sewn my valve. Seems each valve has a serial number and since I knew mine, he could match it instantaneously with the worker who'd made it. All of this, of course,

is expensive. Yet the inefficient quite simply do not survive.

EXPECTATIONS RISING

At the time I was traveling the world for CBS News, there were three U.S. television networks that maintained real foreign bureau operations, staffed by correspondents, producers, camera crews, tape (or film) editors, and assorted expeditors. At the same time, there were the resources—and the expectation—that in the event of a major world crisis, planes would be chartered, entourages assembled, that would allow same-day coverage of these events with scarcely a deep breath or a moment of hesitation. Today, there are at least 700 television channels in most major cities, not all of them covering international news to be sure, but certainly several dozen that lay claim to that ability. Yet full-time, fully-staffed bureaus have largely disappeared from Paris, Rome, Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and a host of other cities that lost their American network bureaus as long ago as the mid-1980s.

One of the principal reasons for the disappearance of professionals with the electronic and intellectual equipment to understand regional activity, develop sources, and do the kind of objective reporting that much of the developed world has come to expect is that the resources are simply not there any more. The advertising pie that nourishes big-boy television and other media has grown by perhaps a half. But the servings into which it must be sliced have multiplied a hundredfold or more.

When Larry Tisch bought CBS in 1987 and first visited the Paris bureau, he asked a telling question of the staff he assembled in the cameramen's ready room. "Why do you need to charter a plane to get there the first day of a hijacking or some other event? Would the world end if you took a commercial flight and got there the next day?" A horrified veteran CBS cameraman, Joe Masraff, shot back, "What if that first day the hostage takers shot a couple of Americans and threw them out of the plane's door onto the tarmac? Wouldn't our viewers be entitled to see that?" Tisch shrugged. It does take a certain sensibility to appreciate the value of immediacy and telling the whole story.

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Since then, the impact and expectations have changed as well. Today, with the possibility of a live uplink from the most remote corner of the globe at any hour, nothing is outside the scope of "live." At the same time, newsmakers of all stripes play to this capacity. It's worth reflecting on whether today's terrorists would have been able to thrive without their access to global media capable of broadcasting the gruesome consequences of their activities barely moments after the suicide vest is detonated. The old philosophical conundrum, first raised by George

Berkeley in 1710 in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, "if a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" is especially applicable in today's media universe when little occurs unseen or unreported. The problem is distinguishing the real from the phantom.

It takes, perhaps, a certain genetic makeup, something deep in the soul of a real journalist, a loyalty to a certain standard of objectivity and honor that becomes a passion to convey reality. None of this is easily taught. It is simply felt and then, if we are lucky, exercised every day in some fashion. But today there are multiple layers of requirements that make such an exercise ever more challenging.

One *New York Times* correspondent, heading overseas for his first extended foreign posting as a bureau chief, observed before his departure that when faced with a developing story, he might have to file three or more times per day. Once in the morning for the website, then again in the afternoon through Paris for the *International New York Times* (once known as the IHT or *International Herald Tribune*), and again in the evening for the mother ship in New York. A decade ago, there was one fundamental responsibility—the mother ship. All other parts of *The Times* empire would be sitting somewhat below the salt. Today, it's the outlying bits that are the real profit centers—where the various slivers of the advertising and paid circulation pie can all come together to make a self-perpetuating, or at least self-sustaining whole. And it is only such an attitude that can really allow the institution to perpetuate through the next generation, without being picked to bits by any number of private or vulture equity firms.

We are all tied so deeply and instantaneously together as to remove some of the independence, even spontaneity of earlier times. We are at the mercy, all too often, of unseen forces we will never meet, certainly never control. The chairman of Target is sacked because of a "data breech" that affected 110 million of its shoppers. Its origin is still unknown, though similar attacks have originated as far afield as Russia or China, which has been most interested in penetrating the computers of *The New York Times* itself.

FROM ALL SIDES

This begs the question—how do we cope with all this data, all this news coming at us every day, every second, from all sides? In 1965, I first came to New York as a summer intern for WINS. It was the summer that its owners at Westinghouse Broadcasting had decided to change from its top-40 rock and roll format (one of the three leaders in the city) to 24-hour news—the first in the nation. Skeptics, and there were many, scoffed. "Who'd ever want to listen to news 24/7" went the mantra. But Westinghouse's riposte won out—"give us 22 minutes, we'll give you the world." Now, there are all-news stations, of course, on radio and television—locally, nationally, and globally. And they hardly want for listeners or viewers. They are just part of the global cacophony.

How do we make order out of all this? Slow it to a pace that works for you. My wife and I rarely watch television "live" in real-time. We record those shows we enjoy, then watch them at our leisure (and oh yes, we spin through most commercials, though those that capture our attention, we slow down and view.) But we do that as well for all the information we absorb. We subscribe to apps from news-

papers that hit us with bulletins on our iPads and iPhones, identify must-reads for us, though we do get three delivered daily to our door in dead-tree editions so that we can see what editors have chosen for page one and other displays. We store the really useful material for the future in the Cloud and return to it at our leisure.

In short, we slow the pace of the hyper-informatory world to a pace that works for us—allowing us to stay in touch, while at the same time, kick back and reflect. For if there is one action that is lost in the media fog, it's reflection.

Of course, this is written from the perspective of the baby-boomer generation, now entering their 50s and exiting at the other end in their 70s. But how does one persuade the younger generation—the Gen-Xers, though they are now aging into their their 30s and 40s, the Millennials now in their 20s, to engage in this process of reflection or stock-age? The answer, it would seem, is simply to let them grow older, wiser perhaps.

With wisdom and age, hopefully, comes valuation of the written word, the deeper thought. My son, for instance, very much a GenXer, came only lately to the value of the printed word—books, even magazines of a decidedly literary bent. And don't minimize their capacity or attention span. After all, VICE has already discovered a real, substantial, and marketable audience for long-form digital journalism—visual and printed, if only on an iPad. For it is the not the delivery vehicle, but the material to be delivered, and reflected upon, that is central to this process of absorption. There is hope, then, that if we continue to chronicle stories that move as well as inform each successive and increasingly hyperactive citizen of the world, we will be able to develop their emotional as well as intellectual intelligence. ●