

## Helsinki: The New Equation

by Kaarle Nordenstreng and Herbert I. Schiller

*The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe reveals a shift in East-West balance on information flow, at least in conventional areas of communication exchange.*

For three sunny days, from 30 July until 1 August, 1975, the capital of Finland was a scene of deliberations unthinkable even a few years ago. Heads of state from 33 European nations and the United States and Canada gathered to review and sign a document, produced jointly and reflecting the consensus of all parties, calling for peaceful relations between countries and increased international cooperation in practically all fields—from commerce and industry to culture and communication.

In general political terms, Helsinki means *both* progress from cold-war confrontations to peaceful cooperation *and* changes in the strategy of ideological struggle. The new equation brings into better (if still largely implicit) balance the traditional and still continuing opposition between Eastern and Western conceptions of the role of information in international relations.

The Western approach asserts that human contacts, the "free flow of information and ideas," and other concrete forms of cooperation are *primary functional prerequisites* for peaceful relations and therefore for international security. The Eastern approach insists that forms of cooperation—and particularly informational flows—have the nature of *secondary consequences* of an overall political situation. While Western states say that increased flow automatically advances détente, Eastern states believe that improved security will lead to

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more relaxation and that one should be selective in choosing the means for cultural and information cooperation.

An essential component of this philosophical difference is the issue of the *content* of the information flows. The Western approach has a tendency to avoid all considerations regarding the substance of what is being communicated. It is characterized by what Gerbner's 1961 study called the "procedural" (vs. the "substantive") emphasis (3). It is a principal feature of the Western tradition of freedom of information to speak about *all kinds* of information and thus to bypass any "quality control" as censorship or at least a step towards it. The Eastern approach takes the opposite view: a specification of the kinds of information (and cultural exchanges in general) is understood as an indispensable part of informational exchanges.

*The "basket diplomacy" on the CSCE brought communications into the agenda of super politics.*

The Final Act lists under "Information" a number of measures for (a) "Improvement of the Circulation of, Access to, and Exchange of Information," (b) "Co-operation in the Field of Information," and (c) "Improvement of Working Conditions for Journalists." The complete text of this section of the Helsinki agreement follows this article. A careful study of the specific measures will reveal that most of the painstakingly negotiated formulations clearly reflect the Western viewpoint—that of the free flow.

But the "operative" passages should not be studied in isolation. They are an integral part of the whole document in which particular political weight may be placed on the preambles. Thus, the Western outlook is not as pronounced in the preamble to the chapter on information which notes "the need for an ever wider knowledge and understanding of the various aspects of life in other participating States," and acknowledges "the contribution of this process to the growth of confidence between peoples."

Besides reading the practical measures alongside the principles and objectives, one has to understand the broader context of the document and the negotiations which produced it.<sup>1</sup> The protracted proceedings of the conference were centered around four problem areas, called "baskets" in the conference jargon, and the Final Act follows the same division. The first (and politically most important) basket deals with "Questions Relating to Security in Europe" including "Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States" and "Confidence-Building Measures," such as the prior notification of major military maneuvers.

The second basket pulls together "Co-operation in the Fields of Economics, of Science and Technology and of the Environment." The third basket is entitled "Co-operation in Humanitarian and Other Fields" and it covers "Human Contacts," "Information," "Co-operation and Exchanges in the Field of

<sup>1</sup> The agenda of the conference (and the disposition of the Final Act) was provided in the *Final Recommendations* of the Helsinki Consultations, approved by the first stage of the conference held at the level of foreign ministers; see (2).

Culture" and "Co-operation and Exchanges in the Field of Education." The fourth basket deals with the "Follow-up to the Conference," i.e., how the process of detente and cooperation in Europe would be continued.

Each of the baskets includes a variety of elements—political and philosophical principles as well as practical operational measures. They have been carefully designed in relation to each other and intended to form an organic whole. In this respect, the wording in the preamble of the third basket ("Co-operation in Humanitarian and Other Fields," covering four topics including information) is critical. In that preamble the participating states declare:

*Convinced that this co-operation should take place in full respect for the principles guiding relations among participating States as set forth in the relevant document. . . .*

The "relevant document" is the first basket where, among others, the following sentence is to be found under the first principle, guiding relations between participating states, entitled "Sovereign Equality, Respect for the Rights Inherent in Sovereignty":

*They will also respect each other's right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems as well as its right to determine its laws and regulations.*

These are the key elements of a "package deal" made by diplomats in Geneva in the course of the second stage of the conference in summer 1974. It was agreed that the first principles listed in the first basket will state that each sovereign state has the right to determine its own laws and regulations, while the tenth principle will declare that the rights guaranteed by sovereignty will be exercised in harmony with international law and obligations such as those approved by the conference. The problem of national sovereignty is thus solved by a two-pronged formula which, to a great extent, leaves it to each situation to determine—and each state to interpret—which approach is more relevant: a sovereign state's right of independence or the obligation of an international norm.

*This was the diplomatic way of overcoming a fundamental dilemma which accompanied the conference from its first days.*

The socialist countries were willing to approve an increase in contacts between people and in dissemination of information, etc., only on condition that this takes place in accordance with the laws and customs of each country and on the basis of non-interference in internal affairs—a stand which is a logical consequence of their philosophical approach. The Western countries regarded such restrictive conditions as watering down the substance of the third basket and did not approve the Eastern proposals for making such provisions explicit in the preamble to the third basket.

If the operative measures to promote "freer and wider dissemination of

information of all kinds," etc., are formulations that may be seen as a diplomatic victory for the West, the package deal can be regarded as a balancing construct in the interest of the East. Viewed as a whole—as it should be—the Helsinki document may be interpreted as a definite limitation on the free flow doctrine in international politics.

Obviously, this is not unrelated to what is happening to the free flow ideology elsewhere in political and diplomatic circles. (5). The rise and the fall of the orthodox Western doctrine of the free flow of information has been discussed by Schiller in this journal (6). It has been registered, as well, in several resolutions within the United Nations framework. The 18th General Conference of UNESCO in the fall of 1974, approved a Medium Term Plan for 1977-1982 suggesting that the traditional concept of the free flow of information "needs to be complemented by that of a more balanced and objective flow, both between countries and within and between regions" (1).

After thirty years of almost unqualified acceptance in international politics, the free flow of information doctrine is now increasingly on the defensive. Helsinki has not reversed this trend.

*But paradoxically, these moves may be almost  
quixotic, given the quickened technological  
tempo in the communication sector.*

The free flow of information was a doctrine originally conceived in terms of visible, tangible information flows—books, magazines, papers, films, TV programs, and news dispatches. Today, though not by any means obsolete or discarded, these older forms must take places beside new message transmission mechanisms, such as direct satellite broadcasting.

The thinking expressed at a U.S. State Department sponsored conference in 1974 reflected the awareness that the sentiment for protecting national cultural sovereignty was spreading rapidly in the international community and that "any international agreement on satellite broadcasting is bound to have some restrictive effect on the international flow of information and ideas." The conference addressed the question: what should the United States do? The answer: move ahead as fast as possible to introduce the technology (in this instance, direct satellite broadcasting) which may have the potential to create its own *fait accompli*:

*If the United States modifies its position and accepts an international regime under which the consent of the recipient country is required for foreign direct satellite broadcasts, the consequences will be positive. The regime can and should be a mild one. . . . Under a regime of consent, the United States would no longer seem (as it does now for some nations) a superpower seeking to impose American television programming on the rest of the world. In addition, the United States would probably gain the support of other nations that place a high value on the principle of free flow in any further debate with those nations that have and work to preserve closed societies. And finally, and most importantly, a regime of consent would*

permit the development of international direct satellite broadcasting to move to the stage of practical operations. It is practical operations that must be stressed (4).

Inherent in this quite sophisticated view is an understanding that technology embraces far more than equipment. There is a growing awareness—not least among U.S. policymakers—that technology as it is designed, installed, and utilized may be an embodiment of the social system which first creates and uses it. Helsinki moved toward a new equation in *conventional areas*. But the more advanced technological forms of information transmission and control are still to be dealt with.

#### REFERENCES

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Following is a facsimile reproduction of the section on "Information" of the printed text of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, adopted in Helsinki on August 1, 1975, and of the signatures of the heads of state approving the Final Act.