

denied access to competitive Canadian material. And government action in this case does not stop the flow of information from other countries but is intended to stimulate the production of competitive and attractive Canadian material, giving Canadians, and perhaps Americans, a choice. And so, while quotas remain to assure some Canadian content, the thrust is away from protection and towards positive measures.

Government role

Because of Canada's great size and thinly dispersed ribbon of population along our southern border, and because of the vigour of the world's largest homogeneous market immediately to our south, the problem of maintaining a viable national economy has been with us from the start. Canadians have called on their government to play a leading role in economic development since pre-Confederation times. Whether it be the building of a railroad (the prerequisite of Confederation), the establishment of a national coast-to-coast radio and television network (the prerequisite of a distinctive culture), or the creation of a domestic satellite system (a prerequisite to the opening of the North), government action has been considered essential. And it was undertaken not to develop a government monopoly, but to open the country to the private sector: alongside the national railroad now run a dozen private railroads; alongside Air Canada fly the jets of a dozen private airlines; alongside the antennas of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation are those of a number of private networks, and a host of private stations.

There is nothing in this that is peculiar to Canada. Patterns such as these exist in England, in Japan, in Italy, in France and increasingly elsewhere around the globe particularly with regard to information industries. Far from being perverse and undemocratic interference in the business of free speech and free enterprise, they are considered by these countries to be viable, effective, and democratic means to assure these principles, and at the same time to guarantee that national information flows will be maintained in the new global information environment.

It is important that those who make or influence policy return to basic principles, when confronted by changing realities. For not since the industrial revolution have we seen such dramatic changes in the structure of our economies. In the industrial era, many laboured, and information was the tool of the elite, the universities, the churches, the instrument of management or of governance. Information was a scarce commodity and information was power for relatively small groups of people. Today we have seen information percolate down through the echelons of society to an ever-increasing extent, torn from the files of government under freedom of information legislation, squeezed from industry, boardrooms under the banner of disclosure, and spread by the media. And as it reaches ever further down into society, information is being transformed from power to wealth. We have entered a new age, a new economy, whose rules are as yet undefined, whose realities are as yet undetermined.

Unity of information

One of the first new realities of the information age, which helps distinguish it from the old industrial age, is the transformability of information. When wood was manufactured into a table, that was the end of it. No one confused it for a coal scuttle or a cannon or a bottle of ink. But the further we progress into the information age, the less it partakes of the old realities, and the more it seems all of a piece. Data and media