

Wiring Megalopolis: Two Scenarios

by Mark Hinshaw



It is becoming increasingly evident that we are in the midst of a tremendous societal transformation. Students of social change have begun in recent years to examine its form and substance and to make predictions as to its consequences for human existence. In an effort to give it an appropriate historical identity, scholars have christened this systemic transformation out of the industrial era variously as the arrival of post-industrialism, the coming of a super-industrial age (Toffler, 1970), the Age of Discontinuity (Drucker, 1968), the dawning of a Universal Civilization (Ribiera, 1968), the evolution of Consciousness III (Reich, 1971), and emergence of the Technetronic Age (Brzezinski, 1970). At least two authors have identified this social phenomenon as revolving primarily around the invention, use, and proliferation of new communications technologies and processes. Robert Theobald (1970) maintains that we are entering into nothing less than a full-blown Communications Era, while L. Clark Stevens (1970) applies the title of Electronic Social Transformation.

In the area of urban affairs and planning few attempts beyond those of Richard Meier and Melvin Webber have been made to analyze the impact of communications on urban change. Among the myriad of conferences, symposia, books, and journals examining current and future urban development, planners have given virtually no recognition to the consequences of communications for alternative urban life styles. As Jerome Aumente (1971) has noted: "Professional planners who should know better persist today in conventional predictions of future land use and population movement without sufficiently examining the new set of communication variables that turn their predictions topsy-turvy." Indeed many planners may well feel that communications technology will have little or no effect upon urban development. Virtually any recognition at all of the relationships between urbanism and communications has come from academicians and professionals outside the fields most directly involved in urban analysis and policy development. Most of the literature coming from such sources, however, treats communication and information-generating hardware seemingly as the means of solving most of the urban problems with which we are presently confronted.

It is imperative that communications resources, goals, and potentials be included in the urban planning process, taking into account local, regional, and national needs. The development of communications technologies and communicative structures is intimately related to housing, transportation, social services, and the political economy. Communications systems must be considered a major component of the urban infrastructure, both as a public resource and as an integral part of urban movement systems involving people, goods, energy, and information. There is a clear need for substantive analysis and synthesis of urban change in terms of concomitant communications developments . . .

Cable communications has particular import for urban change in that it has the potential for radically altering the very concept of the urban community. Entirely new perceptions of community life may develop. In addition, it may well be a key to determining the ability of urban inhabitants to understand their individual and collective problems and deal with them effectively. However, it should be pointed out that predictions of the emergence of "the wired-city" are clearly shortsighted in that they fail to realize that with such extensive a communicative system, the very term, "city", will no longer be a useful term for symbolizing urban way of life. Indeed, as Melvin Webber (1968) has already pointed out, we are even now in a "post-city age"

