



RUPERT

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NEXT ISSUE

- We've given up predicting!



Evidence was collected by Social Development Branch Officers to support taking the application to the Supreme Court.

A welfare officer in Alice Springs wrote: "That Peter's mother was keen to have Peter looked after and that she had not visited him in the Alice Springs Cottage Home." This takes no account of the fact that Aboriginal people do not like visiting childrens' homes unless they can be made to feel at ease there. It makes no mention of the fact that the Social Development Branch made no efforts to keep Peter in touch with his mother, while he was in the Alice Springs cottage home, nor does it mention that one of the reasons Peter was transferred to Tennant Creek was that he frequently ran away from the home to be with his mother or other relatives. In any case Peter was only in the Alice Springs home for one month before he was transferred to Tennant Creek.

The minute also claimed that "psychologist recommended his removal from Alice Springs to a more favourable environment." The record clearly shows that the recommendation had been made in June 1973 and that the psychologist "was unable to form any conclusions in one visit, due to lack of communication. *However, he agreed there is nothing favourable in the Alice Springs environment for Peter and supported moves to place him elsewhere.*" Quite obviously the psychologist had failed to find out anything from Peter but had gone along with what the social worker had suggested.

Peter's mother is berated for not demanding Peter back earlier. The welfare officer failed to realise that Peter was a State Child and no evidence is provided to show that Peter's mother understood she could get him back. The history of the Social Development Branch and its fore-runner, the old Welfare Branch, quite clearly shows that Aboriginal mothers of total Aboriginal descent had no hope of getting children of partial descent back.

The welfare officer admitted that when Peter's mother was asked whether she would agree to adopting Peter she clearly indicated she would not.

Despite contrary legal opinions expressed by Dr Elizabeth Eggleston and the barrister briefed by Aboriginal Legal Aid, Judge Foster considered that the:

- (a) child is an intelligent 12-year-old who wishes to be adopted.
- (b) child is a half blood without therefore tribal ties in strict sense.
- (c) director would not let child go back to his mother in any event until aged 17 years.
- (d) child was in trouble when with natural mother and has now settled down and is doing well as school.
- (e) prior to placement with P. family he was disturbed and unhappy and has now settled down.
- (f) child was taken from natural mother because she could not care for him and there is no evidence that circumstances have changed.
- (g) mother had made little or no effort to see Peter or enquire about him since original placement in home in Alice Springs; and
- (h) future welfare of child seems to me to require that he be adopted.

A field officer of the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service said "that Peter's mother did not appeal against the adoption order because she was so ashamed to hear Peter say he wanted to go to the English couple."

This is what happens when children are taken out of a materially deprived background and placed with people who have an interest in them. Children respond to the most recent displays of affection they often don't understand why their natural parents have "deserted" them.

In all the recent Aboriginal adoption cases in the Northern Territory the people with the custody of the child have won. The Frank Gananggu and Elsie Danburna cases, the 1966 custody battle, and now Peter, are good examples of this process.

The only time the natural parents have a chance is when the due process of white law is *not* evoked as in the Nola Bambiaga case. But precedents are useless unless the Aboriginal community is prepared to insist on a say in matters relating to the welfare of its members. The white bureaucracy has shown the speed with which it can move when decisions acceptable to it are offered — their policy statements are worthless unless the Aboriginal community is prepared to make them stick to their word.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The promotion of freedom of information is normally taken to be concerned with ending government and industrial secrecy, guaranteeing access to the media by all community groups and citizens, and providing equal resources for diverse groups seeking to gain and disperse information. Yet even if all these aims were achieved, there would still be an advantage to some groups in society in communicating their viewpoint, due to the inherent structure and bias of technology. Any given configuration and distribution of technology is necessarily organised so that it is easier to use for communicating certain types of messages, in special ways, by and to particular groups.

This means more than McLuhan's "the medium is the message". This is a useful idea as far as it goes: radio and television are at present communicating the message that information flow is from the few to the many (though McLuhan does not emphasize this aspect of his perspective). But it is also useful to look at how the available technology determines what content can be communicated over a medium, and more importantly, what portions of the community find it easiest to promote their message and monopolise or manipulate the means of communication for their own ends.

Rather than present further general statements, I will try to illustrate this perspective through the example of telephone technology. This is a challenging example because it is one of the most democratic of the communications media — one of Illich's 'left' institutions. Nevertheless, if one looks closely, there is a great difference between telephone technology as it is, and telephone technology as it might be (but isn't).

The basic features of present telephone technology are two-way communication between parties that can afford or gain access to a phone, a service which is provided at a price by a centralised authority. In Australia, capital charges are high and each individual call must be paid for as well. In the US there is no charge for local calls on a private phone. Also, trunk lines may be hired at a monthly rate (this is usually done by companies) — there is no further charge for any trunk calls made to or from the number. Internationally, only companies, governments, and a few rich individuals can afford the high charges. Also significant is the large surplus capacity in the system, at least at certain times (in the night) which however is charged at the normal rates rather than at marginal cost to the network.

Many of these features of telephone technology can be traced to a few basic organisational principles: design and operation of the technology is for the benefit and convenience of the people who have 'succeeded' in society (there *are* people who cannot afford telephones, and many more who must skimp on trunk calls); centralised control; and (in capitalist countries) design and availability on the basis of maximum return on capital (rather than maximum utility to the public).

How does technology affect this state of affairs? A good way to approach this question is to imagine what telephone technology *might* be like in an alternative society. It is possible for me to imagine: an easy way to adjust a phone so it won't ring; an easy and cheap way to arrange for conference calls — more than two parties on a line; a device for signalling that another party is dialing the number on which one is engaged; easily available materials of basic design, and simple instructions, for people to build their own telephone sets to plug into a network; an appropriate network into which handmade or standardised phones may be inserted; materials and advice for laying local telephone cables and the like (perhaps as part of an urban structure with removable pavement tiles, more easily dismantlable construction of buildings, etc.); priority systems for trunk calls based on equity of people rather than money. All of these possibilities are immediately feasible with present scientific and technological knowledge and experience.

Just stating these possibilities is to show how technology reflects social and political structures. To allow people to make their own telephones and use the system without paying individually is to require a different social and political ethic — one based on promoting equity rather than rewarding money and position.

The same sort of imaginative analysis could be made with the technology of other media: radio, TV, newspapers and magazines, books, the post, etc. In each case the ideal of freedom of information is limited by the available technology. And since the available technology reflects the interests of those with political and economic power, a farsighted view of freedom of information must look beyond present social, political, and economic structures.

Suggested reading

David Dickson, *Alternative technology and the politics of technical change* (Fontana, 1974).

Godfrey Boyle, Peter Harper and the editors of *Undercurrents, Radical technology* (Penguin, 1976).

Brian Martin

TOWARDS GOVERNMENT INFORMATION SERVICES — A CONTINUING SAGA IN SEVERAL EPISODES

PART THE ONE

Once more the Federal Government is entering the quicksand area of establishing some form of national information policy. The present tentative steps are being taken via the Interdepartmental Committee which is charged with making recommendations to the Government as a result of their consideration of the two major library reports; "Development of Resource Sharing Networks: Interim Report and Surveys" from the National Library and "Public Libraries in Australia" from the Horton Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries (reviewed RUPERT 3 June, 1976).

This IDC has taken Recommendation 3 of the Horton Report namely:

"A statutory body to be known as the Public Libraries and Information Council be established to formulate advice to government on national policies for the development of library and information services for the public."

and tied it in with the Recommendation (R308) of the Coombs Report on Australian Government Administration which suggests:

"... that consideration be given to establishing a Commonwealth Information Advisory Council under an independent chairman, and including representatives from community users of the information held by the Commonwealth Government. (Further representation is then suggested.) The primary purpose of the Council would be to advise the Commonwealth Government on the development of a comprehensive information policy, to review significant technological developments, and to provide a forum for consultation between specialist information agencies . . . It would advise on:

- (a) the development of policies for the generation and the efficient use of information within government administration, and for making the information available outside the administration;
- (b) desirable changes in the form and content of information made available by each of the three main sources;
- (c) desirable improvements in users' access to particular classes of information;
- (d) the priorities to be attached to proposed developments."

The IDC's product is a National Advisory Council for Library and Information Services (NACLIS, librarians
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