THE ARTS AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Of all the social and economic forces that affect the nonprofit arts and audiences for the arts perhaps none is as perplexing as the swift development of telecommunications in the 90s. The high-tech hardware and software explosion—from multimedia to the so-called Information Superhighway—caught many nonprofits unprepared. We're invariably left grasping at virtual straws in our efforts to determine precisely what it is that has everyone talking. Will television sets become smarter, more interactive, or will computers become cheaper, more pervasive? Is it 500 channels of programming that's coming our way, or video-on-demand? What about the millions of pages on the World Wide Web? Are we headed toward a digital promised land, or simply, as some fear, a "vaster wasteland"?

Where, in any case, do the arts fit into these several versions of the future? Many in the arts community pin their hopes on a glorious new world of online multimedia—in which an endless variety of full-motion video, CD-quality sound, late-breaking news, and personalized information will one day stream into the nation's 100 million households via a broad-band network. For now, at least, that vision has turned out to be a zero-billion-dollar industry. Aside from a handful of advertising-supported Web sites, no one is making much money on the Internet. The money that is changing hands—an estimated $300-500 million in online advertising and sales transactions last year—may sound like a lot, but it's a small

fraction of the $160 *billion* in advertising expenditures overall, or the $45 billion in traditional catalog sales. In the world of Big Business, at least, the Information Superhighway is still pretty much a country road.

Which is not to say it's not important—or that it won't prove increasingly so in the next century—to the lives of growing numbers of Americans. The role of technology in our lives—from the pervasiveness of television to the expansiveness of the Internet—has already begun to generate a backlash. Sven Birkerts and others worry about technology over-mediating our lives[1], and it is true that one of the problems with television and the Internet is that they take up a lot of our time. More time online means less time experiencing the arts live, and the arts community must find many ways to use technology to augment the current cultural landscape. There are too many important issues involved to simply ignore the impact of technology on the arts.

Generally silent during the crucial debate that preceded the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the arts community was largely denied a seat at the table during the policy formation. None of the Department of Commerce's several Information Infrastructure Task Force working groups included the arts within their sweep, and there was not a single representative of the nonprofit arts among the 37 members of the U.S. Advisory Council on the National Information Infrastructure. The Telecommunications Infrastructure and Information Assistance Program, it is true, has made funds available for cultural projects over the past four years, but the results have been meager. Of the 11 program areas that were funded in the initial three rounds, the arts and culture finished dead last, garnering less than three percent of the funds awarded. And while there are isolated pockets of technological savvy among the various cultural agencies in Washington—including the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Art, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts—this sector has yet to collaborate in any meaningful sense.

For its part, the arts community has proved to be only slightly more resourceful in this area. With a handful of exceptions, including the Arts Wire network (a program of the New York Foundation of the Arts that dates from 1992),

[1] See Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Fawcett Books, 1995) and *Tolstoy's Dictaphone* (Graywolf Press, 1996).

and the collaborative National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage (NINCH), the field has generally failed to work cooperatively in this area. NINCH, however, shows great promise. The Initiative began in 1993 as a collaborative project of the American Council of Learned Societies, the Coalition for Networked Information, and the Getty Information Institute (then known as the Getty Art History Information Program). "A diverse coalition of cultural organizations," according to its mission statement, "dedicated to ensuring the greatest participation of all parts of the cultural community in the digital environment…" NINCH's mission

> *is to advocate for the inclusion of the cultural sector in all policy deliberations on the future of the information infrastructure and to educate policymakers, coalition members and the general public about the critical importance of translating the vision of a connected, distributed and accessible collection of cultural knowledge into a working reality.*[2]

In one area, at least, the arts community has been remarkably active of late, establishing a colorful presence on the World Wide Web. However belated and fragmented that effort has been, there are literally thousands of pages given over to culture on the Web, from the largest museums to the smallest artists' spaces to individual artists of all stripes. The Web offers a semblance, at least, of the very attributes—participation, interactivity, collaboration—that are so conspicuously absent from the more traditional media. The Web has a tremendous amount to offer to the nonprofit arts sector—as a means of advertising its wares, of sharing information, and even, albeit in a fairly rudimentary fashion right now, of presenting creative work to new audiences.

What tends to be overlooked, however, in the understandable excitement surrounding ever-more elaborate, multimedia-laden Web sites, is that the WWW is an *application*, not a final destination. It's the top card—for now—on a deck (the Internet) that is expanding and evolving in a manner that even the most technologically astute, or financially shrewd, have difficulty grasping. One thing, at least, is

[2] From NINCH web site at www.ninch.cni.org

PHOTO COURTESY WGBH

In the studios of Boston's WGBH, Margot Stage narrates a Descriptive Video Service script for *The American Experience*, to provide narrative links to television programs for the blind.

certain: that what began as an essentially "public" venture, serving scientific, academic, and military interests, will become increasingly "private" in its character and direction, driven by corporate investment, shaped by market forces. Ironically, in the process, the online world under corporate control will reach infinitely more people, with a greater variety of services, than ever before. Certainly the tiny cadre of technological elites who connected to the Internet in its early years pales in comparison to the millions who surf the Web today, or the many millions over whom, in the future, the online waters will wash.

Still, the crucial distinction between public interest and private development holds, for that vast new "public" that will be digitally interconnected in the next century will have one vital characteristic in common: they'll all be customers. The electronic menus from which they'll make their selections, moreover, will reflect much more complex pricing models than today's flat-rate schemes, including premium services that only the wealthy will be able to afford. Commercial content, similarly, will push more specialized fare (including civic discourse and nonprofit

culture) into the “slower lanes” and more obscure “neighborhoods” of the online world. Thus despite our tendency, in waxing eloquent on the promise of the digital future, to speak in terms of “digital town halls” and “electronic library cards”, the reality, for most Americans, is likely to be much more mundane. If the current commercialization of the Internet is any indication, at least, there’ll be far more virtual shopping malls and multiplex cinemas than town halls in our online future, the passport to which won’t be the library card, but the credit card.

The real promise of the digital frontier is not the animated Yellow Pages of the World Wide Web, nor the commercial juggernaut that threatens to homogenize the online world in much the same way that it has stifled alternative voices in the existing mass media. Even if only at the margins, there will be room for alternatives to the mainstream entertainment, for more radical variations—departures, even—on the standard, bifurcated themes of creation and presentation, artist and audience, spectator and participant. We’ve grown accustomed, in reckoning the online future, to think solely in terms of hardware and software, watching, with equal amounts of fascination and frustration, as CPU speeds and RAM capacities play leap frog with programming breakthroughs. In a technological parry and thrust that only manufacturers and retailers can truly enjoy, this year’s software pushes last year’s hardware to its limits, leading to next year’s purchase of new equipment, in a seemingly endless spiral. The remarkably good news is that costs continue to decline while processing power goes up. The less good news is that for all of that astonishing progress, none of it is likely to mean very much to the long-range prospects of the nonprofit culture. For insight into that future, we’ll have to look elsewhere than to the research and development labs of Intel and Microsoft. No one learned very much about the ultimate direction of the broadcast industry by staring at the back of a television set, after all, and it behooves us now to devote at least as much attention to the material that will be flowing through the online pipes of the next century as we lavish on those glorious pipes themselves.

The prospect of a broadband, interactive, multimedia network, integrating voice, video, and data, is indeed a tantalizing one. The potential implications for virtually every aspect of the arts—from marketing and audience development to the production, presentation, and storage of programming—are profound. Technological breakthroughs such as fiber optics and wireless transmission are bringing the information superhighway much closer to our homes. Future breakthroughs in video compression and digital signal processing are bringing a new delivery platform for the arts tantalizingly close. So, too, is High Definition

Television (HDTV) eventually coming our way, sometime around the turn of the century, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

Yet in the larger scheme of things, the changing technological landscape may appear to be the last thing arts organizations need to worry about. In comparison to the constant struggle to raise funds, or such thorny issues as cultural equity and freedom of expression, visions of a new information infrastructure in the next century may seem like eons away. The future is upon us, and the arts ignore technology at their peril.

It would be an equally grave mistake to assume that technology alone will solve the problems of the nonprofit arts, or even that the new communications technologies won't initially raise as many questions as they answer. For we are approaching a change in the cultural landscape of this country as pervasive as the advent of the broadcast media earlier this century, and with as many implications for the arts as the development of the public-private support structure for 501(c)(3) organizations. The parallels are instructive. Neither the reservation of spectrum for public broadcasting nor regulations permitting tax-deductible gifts came easily, and not, at least, without considerable public debate, policy formulation, legislation, and continued monitoring. Such effort, already well underway, will be required to ensure that the new information infrastructure will be hospitable to the nonprofit sector, including the arts.

> "We recommend a public-private partnership to digitize cultural materials to make them available on the new technologies. To fulfill its potential to educate and enlighten, the information superhighway must be enriched by cultural content."

JOHN BRADEMAS, *CHAIRMAN*, PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON THE ARTS AND THE HUMANITIES

Perhaps more than any other aspect of contemporary life, the various ways in which we transmit and receive a wide range of information and entertainment is undergoing a fundamental change. Both in the conversion from analog to digital, and in the gradual convergence of the telephone, publishing, entertainment, and computer industries, the communications infrastructure of the next century will differ significantly from the existing patchwork quilt of mutually exclusive technologies. If the implications of these changes for the nonprofit sector are not immediately clear, it certainly cannot be assumed that the benefits will invariably be extended to that sector.

In the absence of regulations for full, two-way connectivity, for nondiscriminatory access to video platforms, and for support for training, production, and distribution, the new technology will represent little more than another lost opportunity for the arts, and another source of formidable competition for the leisure time and disposable income of Americans. Already the World Wide Web, for all of its remarkable breadth and variety (a mixed blessing, actually, for anyone searching for a particular nugget of information amidst the mountain of data) is starting to betray the same traffic patterns as the mainstream media. Undeniably, there is a lot of work of considerable merit sprinkled throughout the Web, but much of it is a fairly well-kept secret.

In the meantime, though, a number of issues remain to be addressed, and it behooves the arts community to make its voice heard concerning the implications for nonprofit culture of a range of telecommunications issues:

ACCESS: Cultural organizations of all types and all sizes must have access to the emerging communications infrastructure. We might expect that large institutions will have the wherewithal and foresight to establish branch operations in the online world. We must make certain that smaller, community-based groups, cultural centers of color, artist-run organizations, and individual artists not affiliated with institutions are also guaranteed affordable access to advanced telecommunications services, and not simply so they can dial in to a system designed and implemented by others, but so they can play a role in shaping the new digital landscape.

Much has been written about the danger of our becoming a nation of information haves and have-nots, the current "digital divide" (26 percent of white

households own computers, for example, compared to only 10 percent of Hispanic households, and 9 percent of African American households). We must see to it that the cultural community does not fall, either through political oversight or its own failure to act, into the latter category. The responsibility here is two-fold: on policy makers, to enact provisions for the encouragement and support of noncommercial programming, and on arts organizations themselves, to prepare for the time when such programming will be in demand. The Clinton administration's commitment to ensuring that "every library and classroom, every clinic and hospital" is connected to the NII by the year 2000 is a laudable one, but museums, cultural centers, and other nonprofit arts organizations should be added to the list of essential destinations on the Information Superhighway.

DIVERSITY: If the marketplace of ideas is central to American democracy, the marketplace of creativity is no less central to American culture. Yet just as the diversity of viewpoints is threatened by media agglomeration and constricted systems of communications, so is the vitality of American culture undermined by the homogenizing tendencies of the mass media and commercial entertainment. Unfortunately, the new telecommunications legislation relaxes rather than tightens restraints on the concentration of media ownership. A quick scan of the radio dial, a glance at the Nielsen ratings or the best-seller lists all suggest the creeping uniformity of conglomerate culture. It is not that diversity does not exist, for it does, in folk traditions and modern experimental forms alike, from Mexican *conjunto* to computer music, from cowboy poetry to hypertext novels. In purely economic terms—in the reality of getting those goods to market—such forms of expression are the cultural equivalent of endangered species.

The new communications infrastructure holds the potential to revitalize our culture by bringing the margins much closer to the center—avoiding the compromises inherent in commercialization—by connecting niche markets to specialized programming, building audiences in the process, and developing a culture that is artist- and audience-driven rather than strictly market-defined. Rural folk traditions might be transported to the inner city, for example, or experimental forms made available to inquisitive minds in rural settings. The new telecommunications infrastructure has the potential, in other words, to deliver the full panoply of nonprofit cultural expression to those with the curiosity and the interest to seek that material out.

But only if we plan. And only if we work collectively to circumvent corporate designs for a new electronic world of home shopping and Hollywood-on-

demand that will almost certainly prove stultifying to the continued growth of a diverse American culture. A promising development in this regard is "Open Studio: The Arts Online," a $1 million initiative co-sponsored by the NEA and the Benton Foundation that will provide community access to the arts on the Internet at sites in all 50 states. "This project is about ensuring a public culture," observed Larry Kirkman, executive director of the Benton Foundation. "We must work to protect noncommercial public space in the digital age. Artists and arts institutions, schools, libraries, as well as other independent voices must be able to make their noncommercial imprint on American cultural life and values." The two components of Open Studio (www.openstudio.org) include (1) free community access to the Internet, with more than 100 public access points in arts organizations and culturally oriented community centers; and (2) training centers for Web development projects at ten sites across the country, each of which is responsible for serving as mentors to ten local cultural organizations and ten local artists, who are then deputized, so that each one must teach one more.

EQUITY: Just as new communications technologies, properly regulated and deployed, can be used to enhance the quality of work and to promote equity in the workplace, so can these technologies be used to enhance the quality of artistic production and to promote cultural equity on a variety of fronts. Smaller organizations and individual artists, in particular, stand to benefit from a system that will permit them to reach remote audiences in a manner that only major institutions and commercial entities currently enjoy. At the same time, a poorly designed system, one whose cost and control structures are not conducive to independent programming, will severely retard the growth of what could be a much more vibrant, diverse American culture.

The barriers that must be cleared are two-fold. First, nondiscriminatory access for noncommercial programming must be secured, with provisions—if such access is to mean anything—for access as well to equipment, training, and support for production and distribution costs. Second, once such access is gained, it is incumbent upon the cultural community to see that participation is extended beyond the major institutions to include smaller, community-based, culturally specific, and artist-run organizations, as well as individual artists who choose to work outside of institutional structures. Admittedly, such issues of inclusion have been the subject of much discussion in the arts community already, and their extension into areas of electronic commerce and networking will add yet another layer of complexity to an already-difficult set of issues.

CIVIC DISCOURSE: What was once an arcane topic of discussion—the extent to which the government should be involved with the arts—has become in recent years a virtual cause célèbre, generating heated discussions at all levels of the public sector. The new online world, with the full participation of the arts community, can elevate the level of the art-and-politics debate, to the mutual benefit of all concerned—art, politics, and the online world itself. For just as the new communications infrastructure will depend on a vital civic sector for its success, so will it need an equally vital civic culture, a basic appreciation of the varied contributions that the nonprofit arts make to American society, as well as an understanding of the special needs of the arts community that must be met if it is to continue to make those contributions.

The new communications technologies can serve the arts in both respects, helping arts organizations reach wider audiences, and permitting these organizations to establish a context in which the larger significance of their work, beyond the transitory pleasure they provide, can be explored. Gone are the days—if, indeed, they ever really existed—when art can be left to speak for itself, its right to public patronage unchallenged, its value to society universally acclaimed. In addition to offering their basic programs, arts organizations will increasingly need to place their work in a social context, making clear their stake in the community. Artists and arts organizations can use the new information infrastructure to clarify their mission, to engage audiences, and to expand their programming. It is not too early to prepare for the cultural changes of the 21st century. To the extent that we're headed toward a computer-mediated future (in which "computer" refers to any number of devices designed to collect, customize, and deliver data to users in a variety of settings), cultural organizations will need to "translate" their work into a variety of formats, some of which will exist solely in the online world. Artists, too, will have to deal with the mediation of their work and the effect of the computer upon personal vision and ambition.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: The arts have often been a First Amendment battleground in recent years, offering both metaphorical and all-too-real opportunities for vocal minorities to attempt to regulate and constrain the thoughts and actions of others. Nor is there any reason to believe that the information superhighway will be any less susceptible to battles such as these. The Communications Decency Act debate made it all the way to the Supreme Court where First Amendement rights were affirmed. Some furture iteration will probably

These computer-generated images are part of Martina Lopez's "Revolutions in Time" series that appeared in exhibition on the Internet through The Light Factory (http://www.lightfactory.org).

IMAGES COURTESY THE LIGHT FACTORY

loop back through the judicial system more than once before it is ultimately decided. New technology also holds the promise for a mediation of our differences, affording us the freedom to choose from among a wide range of viewpoints, styles, and content.

Such freedom, needless to say, will not come automatically. We must design and build a system, free of proprietary bottlenecks and authoritative constraints, that will encourage the free flow of ideas, giving artists and arts organizations alike a platform for the full presentation, explication, and discussion of their works. Controversy will not disappear, either, nor should it. But an open system, one that is hospitable to a full range of cultural expression, is much less likely than the current closed system to yield the kind of ad hominem, out-of-context attacks that have proved so destructive. This is hardly a battle that arts organizations can be expected to wage successfully on their own. Again, a properly designed and regulated telecommunications system will in itself foster alliances among nonprofits, and arts organizations should be a part of that team.

PRIVACY: Both personal privacy and intellectual property rights loom large on the new telecommunications landscape, and arts organizations, as much as any other group, have a stake in both. Although publicity might come to mind before privacy in regard to the arts, the freedom of an individual to partake of any kind of programming that networked systems might offer, without fear of either censure or salesmanship, is an important one. Particularly in the light of the attacks that some groups have waged on certain kinds of artistic expression in recent years, using such terms as "blasphemy" and "obscenity" with abandon, we'll need to make certain that digital witch hunts are no more successful than their analog predecessors.

COPYRIGHT: Intellectual property rights are equally important, if less easy to codify in the new era of digital replication, as First Amendment rights. Such matters, as with so much of the regulatory structure of the NII, have yet to be settled. The arts, clearly, have special needs, too, reflecting not only their mission to provide cultural services, to mirror and interpret the world around them, to preserve and transmit certain aspects of our civilization while adapting and modifying others, but also reflecting the arts community's great potential as a major contributor to the stream of images and ideas, sounds and stories that will flow through the new telecommunications system. This is not to diminish the importance of other kinds of content, which will also add much to the richness of the new system—the

contributions of educators and librarians, health-care and social-service providers, public-interest and community-development experts. While the importance of data from such sources as these is incalculable, it remains largely the province of the arts community to determine the ultimate quality of the information infrastructure.

If that new system is to rise above the lowest-common-denominator tendencies of the existing mass media, in which purely commercial interests of the marketplace far outweigh standards of critical excellence and cultural diversity, it will do so by seeing that the vast resources of the nonprofit cultural sector—the riches of our dance companies and museums, theatrical and musical ensembles, and the creativity of our individual artists—are brought to bear on the emerging telecommunications infrastructure.

As the potential producers of much of the substantive content in this new system, the cultural community has a significant stake in seeing (1) that adequate standards are established to accommodate the entire range of audio and visual material that the arts require for their full impact to be felt; (2) that the tools that will be used both to produce and distribute this material will be accessible; and (3) that training, technical assistance, and support will be available to enable those with programming potential to deliver that material to interested audiences. Anything less will result in a system that will fail to reach its full potential, a system that will shortchange both the artists and the audiences of the future. This is a lesson that the arts community must learn: the future begins now. The active participation of the arts community in staking a claim for culture on the information superhighway, in effect—both imagining the future and working for the regulations and standards that will make that vision a reality—is not simply an option anymore. It's a necessity.