

Chapter 3

Cultural production and cultural pluralism

BERNARD MIÈGE

Professor of Communication Science,
Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3, Grenoble,
France

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are playing a decisive role in cultural production by transforming both the content and form of both works and products. As the century draws to a close, there are certain questions and even considerable anxieties about the rapid growth of electronic commerce, which has facilitated access to sound and audiovisual products that cross frontiers and zones of cultural influence and has even revolutionized the very patterns of cultural dissemination.

FROM TECHNOLOGY TO CONTENT

Although these technologies are advancing with unprecedented speed, particularly in the most economically developed countries, it would be a mistake to regard them as solely responsible for the current changes. This long-heralded momentum, which seemed slow at the beginning but is now well under way, seems likely to continue at a rapid pace and, if some authors are to be believed, will usher in a new information society or information age. It is, however, one thing to note the dynamic development of telecommunications, information technology and the audiovisual media, and quite another to credit them with changes in culture and in other areas of social life. As a rule, technical innovation is a by-product – only rarely a driving force – of transformations whose origin lies elsewhere. Technology provides such changes with new areas of opportunity, encouraging activities which would otherwise have been blocked by the dominant organizations in the sector and weakening the barriers set up to defend vested interests or to safeguard specific practices. It is important to look beyond the usual thought patterns, which see the issue as one of adaptation to technological changes, and turn our attention instead to changing trends in cultural production. ICTs may strengthen cultural production and help it to gain widespread recognition, or

conversely, they may cause it to be confined to a restricted area or even to decline.

Throughout the world, cultural production tends to be community based. Anthropologists, historians and cultural sociologists rightly emphasize this recurring feature which explains the persistence of locally-rooted and even non-commercial forms of culture, as well as the different ways in which viewers interpret television series, according to their own culture. In other words, despite more than two centuries of industrialized cultural production and despite the aggressive strategies of the increasingly-powerful communications groups, independent forms of entertainment still thrive all over the world. Folk productions are not declining – far from it: books and newspapers are published (at least when socio-political conditions are favourable), films and television series are produced (and are sometimes distributed beyond national borders) and music is recorded independently of the major companies. The pessimistic forecasts of the imminent globalization of cultural production heard over the last two decades have been proved wrong – or at least exaggerated. Culture remains an area of social activity in which industrialization meets with resistance and constraints, even though increasingly governed by markets (often small markets), and despite a growing trend towards the internationalization of production and the transnationalization of subjects, styles and standards.

The fact that predictions have not so far been fulfilled is, however, no guarantee for the future. The most likely hypothesis is that ICTs and the momentum they undoubtedly generate will eventually provide the means to move decisively ahead towards the industrialization and internationalization of cultural production. What in the past was only partly successful (driven by mechanical reproduction systems and the rationalization of design methods, with back-up from advertising funding increasingly geared to globalization) is now allegedly resulting directly from ICTs. In other words, what the mass audiovisual media

merely launched in the past has now become firmly established and universal through ICTs, which have proven to be more successful at sidestepping the cultural structures of countries and peoples, and certainly more favourable to the worldwide circulation of transnational flows. Individual tools of communication and/or access to data and ready-made programmes (recorded music, written texts, sound and images and multimedia products) are ushering in sweeping transformations in cultural production. Some recent and future developments in cultural production are described below.

THE SPREAD OF COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIALIZED CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The history of the cultural industries is by no means linear. Until recently, it has progressed unevenly, whenever production techniques were adopted and made widely available, so that works of literature became accessible as books, musical works as records (the hardware changed regularly), and films and audiovisual works as screenings in cinemas or as video cassettes. The industrialization of culture has, however, encountered difficulties and setbacks. For producers and publishers, the values attached to culture usually act as 'restrictions', or at any rate as contingencies, for which marketing techniques have yet to be found. It has been more convenient to market the equipment used to deliver cultural works (record players, television sets, cameras, etc.) than to introduce successfully on to the market works available either in a physical medium (reproducing a single creation or a basic model) or accessible through projection or broadcasting by the audiovisual media. So the picture of the relationship between culture and industry today presents sharp contrasts. There are striking divergences between:

- developed and developing countries (national, linguistic and cultural frontiers still play an important and, in some cases symbolic, role);

- countries which give more or less free rein to market forces, and those in which the public authorities provide impetus and co-ordination;
- countries where the market and industry are the major controlling factors in the cultural sphere, and those where small-scale productions, live entertainment with a popular appeal and non-commercial productions predominate;
- the various art forms: it is very difficult to create added value in dance, poetry and narrative performances, as opposed to filmed entertainment, which should be considered an activity straddling art and industry;
- individual access to works and live entertainment (whereas audiences for live entertainment are dwindling, new forms of entertainment regularly emerge which upset the plans of the major companies – public performances of ‘techno’ music are one example of this trend);
- cultural productions broadcast through the mass audiovisual media (financed by advertising and/or public funds) and those which, once published, are bought by consumers.

This sharply contrasted picture provides convincing evidence that a unified system is not likely to emerge at the present time. Nevertheless, ICTs are capable of strongly reinforcing trends begun at least two decades ago, thereby giving a decisive boost to the expansion of cultural industries. The areas in which ICTs can make an impact need to be carefully evaluated, however. Contrary to what professionals often claim, it would be wrong to expect multimedia production to create innovative products – apart from games – and important markets in the short term. Innovative products of a truly multimedia type are still too rare and production costs remain too high for rapid progress to be expected. If there is not a rapid (and radical) change in product design and production methods during the next decade, ICTs will probably not be instrumental in extending the scope of commercial and even industrialized culture, since

with the products which are currently available they are increasingly marginalizing certain cultures, standardizing universally accessible products and excluding those who lack the purchasing power to be ICT consumers. The solution to this problem would appear relatively easy and involves speeding up product flow, which is the second major feature of the development of the cultural industries.

SPEEDING UP OF PRODUCT FLOW, PARTICULARLY AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Distance-shopping for products hitherto almost exclusively supplied by specialized end-product distributors or by mass distribution outlets, and downloading products accessible from a distance (e.g. books, magazines, recorded music, images, etc.) are two activities that have been made possible by the efficiency of communications networks and the growing sophistication of access terminals. The scope of this new electronic commerce is still difficult to gauge, but there is no doubt that in 1997–98 its growth was such that the major distribution groups all rushed headlong in that direction, preceded by small pioneering firms. This strategic choice was made despite the fact that monetary transactions on the Internet are still not totally safe and that arrangements for remunerating artists and publishers are still under negotiation (see chapter 8). Most specialists consider that cultural products are particularly well-suited to this new form of distribution. There are substantial advantages for consumers: real-time (i.e. immediate) access; the opportunity to browse through all available catalogues and products (a major advantage in the cultural field, where markets are very compartmentalized and few published works remain on the shelves for a long time); access (although not yet universal) to catalogues of foreign firms which used to be accessible only, if at all, with long delays involved (e.g. highly specialized book and record

publishing sectors such as the fields of scientific publishing and classical music). In other words, these new ways of accessing cultural products are of special interest both to the consumers least concerned by mass products, and to specialist publishers and producers. Paradoxically, the people who are apparently the most critical of this rapid change in the distribution of cultural products ('cultivated' members of society, let us say, who prefer the existing methods of accessing art forms, and also scientists) are those who, for the moment, find it most advantageous to purchase directly via the networks.

There is an additional paradoxical aspect to these immediate advantages for the most selective and demanding users. Producers and artists who offer the most distinctive products and who frequently encounter great difficulty in distributing the works they create and publish will obviously be tempted to bypass the large broadcasters and distributors (who demand a high percentage of the selling price) in order to contact consumers directly. This is all the more likely to happen because, throughout the history of the cultural industries, artists and their publishers have tried to eliminate intermediaries with little success. They themselves then joined that enviable group, thus only reinforcing the existing oligopolies.

The current trend consists mainly of users purchasing products after browsing through catalogues on publishers' sites and on the sites of artists acting as producers of their own works. Soon it will be possible to download actual works, meaning that publishers of books and recorded music will no longer need to reproduce and record the work in a physical medium. This is not a utopian prospect; it is already possible to access literary and musical works in this way, or even extracts from them (e.g. a chapter of a novel or a single track from a musical recording by a pop group). This phenomenon raises two essential questions about cultural products. Is a work on offer a finished product just because it has been stabilized in a medium (e.g. a novel on the printed

page)? Next, have the forms of monetary payment by consumers, here encouraged to buy works piecemeal, and 'paying-as-they-go', been fully considered? These are not merely technical innovations which, by encouraging a commercial shift, coincide with changes in systems of accessing works. Here technical innovations are changing the very substance of cultural products in various ways, especially by calling into question their finished appearance, an aspect considered fundamental up until now.

A TREND TOWARDS THE OVERLAPING OF LEISURE ACTIVITY, INFORMATION AND CULTURE

In modern societies, the values and images associated with the concepts of leisure, information and culture are still sharply differentiated. Although these concepts are evolving and now sometimes overlap (in the economically dominant societies, leisure is often equivalent to cultural activity), it would nonetheless hardly be possible to confuse them taken in a strict sense. They have relatively stable definitions: information is more ephemeral than culture, and this idea orients the functioning of those who produce news and information; leisure time is primarily for entertainment, but leisure pursuits encouraging the development of cultural activities are judged as positive.

Although the trend began earlier, ICTs are causing these distinctions to grow more and more blurred, and in some cases it is becoming difficult to distinguish between information products and cultural products. Methods of creation (by journalists or artists, with an increasing use of streamlined methods), production structures (more and more often controlled by the same multimedia groups), distribution procedures (via networks or in the form of products accessible on- or off-line), consumption time and conditions of consumer use (use is often individual and involves interactivity with the hardware acting

as intermediary in programme communication) are now closely related, not to say identical. These similarities cannot be considered as either secondary or insignificant. Behind all the confusions and convergences, the question that arises is more than ever that of mass culture, although in forms different from those observed in the 1960s when the phenomenon became evident. As the transmission of standardized and increasingly transnational mass culture boosted by ICTs develops, cultural distinctiveness tends to be maintained within an elitist, or at any rate a niche, context. Although distinctive cultural production is not declining, and examples of it which successfully express popular and national identities continue to receive considerable attention, they enter into competition with mass products that are easily distributed on communication networks. The struggle is to some extent unequal, not because of inadequacy of supply (on the contrary, supply is increasing and diversifying) but because the major communications groups are strengthening their hold on the circulation of products. Insofar as future developments can be inferred from the situation today, culture seems to be going the same way as leisure and information.

WEAKENING OF PUBLIC SERVICES, UNCERTAIN PUBLIC POLICIES

For most people, ICTs have not yet become part of a familiar landscape. They have already led, however, to some fairly radical changes in the functioning and regulation of public services, resulting in considerable hesitation on the part of those responsible for cultural policy (cf. Chapter 5 on deregulation). The discussion here is limited to a few frequently overlooked aspects.

An increase in the supply of commercial products almost inevitably leads to the reduction, if not the disappearance, of non-commercial products (heavily subsidized by public funds) and of semi-commercial products (e.g. small-scale productions and

those enjoying tax and customs protection). A movement of this type has recently become apparent in television production. In response to competition from powerful new commercial channels and in order to increase their output of programmes to compete with the commercial channels, with approximately the same resources, the managers of public channels have been obliged to subcontract production, placing it in the hands of new private producers for whom the origin of the orders they handle is of no importance. As a result, production variety in public television programmes has declined sharply, and some types of programme are less available or have actually disappeared since they are not commercially viable in a situation where audience ratings are all-important. Poetry and other literary programmes have disappeared or been banished from prime-time slots. Even once-popular variety shows have been downsized or incorporated into shows with a wider appeal, since the popularity of a group or singer is no longer sufficient in itself to attract a mass audience.

Over the past ten or fifteen years, some national cultural industries have continued to function and have even grown as a result of certain trends in public policy. In the European Union, community-wide or domestic measures have undoubtedly been beneficial to certain industries in Member States, such as book publishing (the French system of retail price maintenance for books has allowed a network of specialized bookshops to survive), recorded music publishing (radio stations are obliged to play a quota of nationally-produced songs and music), cinema and audiovisual production (a system incorporating various forms of aid to production) and television production (channels required to broadcast a quota of works produced nationally or elsewhere in Europe). There is, however, no guarantee that these hitherto undeniably advantageous effects will continue in the future. Not only do quota systems run into operational difficulties (is a cinematic co-production funded by capital from different sources considered 'national?'),

attracting regular criticism because of their singularity in world commercial transactions (see below the section on the primacy of American English), but the fact that programmes can now circulate on the networks and largely escape control from public authorities will tend to reduce the effectiveness of support measures for small- and medium-sized industries operating mainly within a specific cultural or linguistic framework. This does not mean that such measures are unnecessary, but that their effectiveness may become more uncertain, simply because consumers will tend to diversify demand, including demand for products from the sphere of high culture (art films, rarely-heard music, scientific works, etc.).

IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL FORMS OF ACCESS TO CULTURE

A number of authors representing different schools of thought have long been predicting a trend towards the individualization of social behaviour, and the emergence of this trend does seem to be reinforced by ICTs, particularly in the developed countries. ICTs, unlike the media that developed earlier, usually require user-consumers to take active steps not only to access a specific programme but also to interact with it in order to obtain responses tailored to their personal requirements. To this extent, ICTs, more than any other earlier technology, promote a one-to-one correspondence between the content on offer and the user's demands, which are apparently unlike those of anyone else.

Too much should not, however, be made of this. Where ICTs are involved, cultural consumption is not simply a question of narcissistic contact with works. Likewise, collective forms of consumption are not doomed to disappear, because individualization does not necessarily spell a decline in public performances and other forms of collective entertainment. Despite predictions to the contrary, the proliferation of individual delivery systems for recorded music has not led to a decline in concerts of all types of music.

Complex interactions and processes of mutual influence are observably taking place between different types of music, but it is not to be expected that this will have any practical outcome, although new linkages can be foreseen. ICTs encourage a fragmented, episodic pace of consumption which has little in common with the heyday of collective cultural consumption and this tendency may lead to a number of fundamental cultural changes. One consequence may be for increased cultural consumption to go hand in hand with a decline in discussion and debate focused on cultural productions. It is also possible that performances may become almost exclusively opportunities for the 'promotion' of cultural merchandise, something that would be inevitable if public aid earmarked for live performances were reduced or even abolished, with those responsible taking as their pretext the variety and quantity of commercial products available. This would mark the culmination of the process by which culture becomes a commercial product and, as noted above, is absorbed into the leisure and information sectors.

THE PRIMACY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

Thanks to ICTs, American English has suddenly been promoted to the status of an international language. According to a 1998 Euromarketing study, more than one of every two Internet surfers (58%) uses English. Other languages – Spanish (8.7%), German (8.6%), Japanese (7.9%) and French (3.7%) – are much less commonly used (see Figure 3.1). These data, which are obviously difficult to establish, have nevertheless been confirmed by other studies (see other related data in the Statistical Annex). However, they are difficult to assess because change is so rapid in both hardware and habits. Furthermore, it is not possible, on the basis of data on the preferred language of communication (used for electronic mail and forums), to draw similar conclusions regarding trade in cultural products. For example, after an initial phase when English

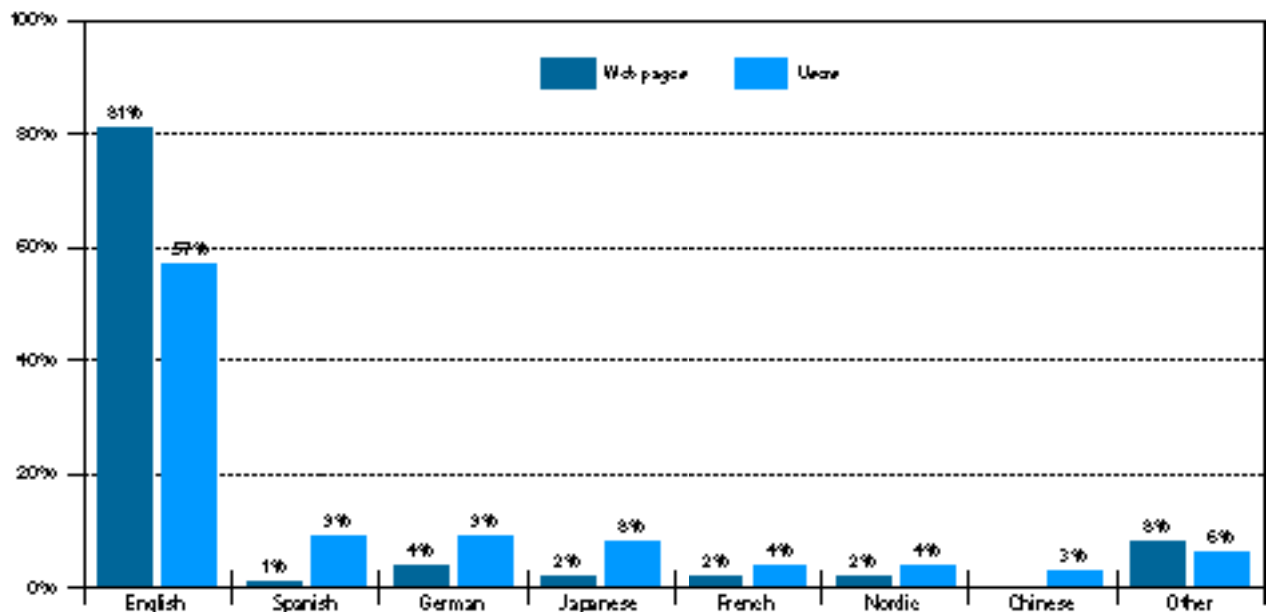
predominated, the satellite channels are now beginning to diversify into other languages.

Will automatic translation systems contain applications that will help to reduce misunderstandings between languages and promote genuine multilingualism? In the past, research has proved disappointing, and researchers are at present cautious, pinning their hopes on the development of computer-assisted translation systems. This indicates recognition of the fact that, in this field, approximations and simplifications are not sufficient, because they undermine languages as vehicles of specific cultural features. Only strong support for translation from producers and from authorities responsible for public policy can help to bring about a more balanced flow of cultural works. If this is not forthcoming, English and probably a few more of the most widely spoken languages will eventually dominate the cultural

marketplace (see also box 3.1, Non-roman alphabets and the computer).

Support for translation and for the development of translation aid systems (including multilingual systems which should receive backing from international organizations) will not, however, be enough in the absence of systematic efforts to support productions suitable for distribution outside their country or region of origin, and support in distributing them. Recent experience has shown that the successful exportation of films, works for television and sound broadcasting or even literary works, depends as much on international standards being met (format, requirements concerning drama production and staging, etc.) as on the availability of an appropriate distribution system. It is also important for production costs on national broadcasting networks to have been absorbed in advance, which explains the recent

Figure 3.1 → Web pages (July 1997) and Internet users (October 1998) by language, by percentage



Source: Web pages, Alis Technologies/Internet Society (<http://www.isoc.org.8080/palmares.en.html>)
 Users, EMA (<http://www.euromktg.com/globstats>).

Box 3.1 → Non-roman alphabets and the computer

In a period of rapid and accelerating developments in information and communication technologies, the letters and texts, the images and graphics that are the very *raison d'être* of these same technologies do not always receive sufficient attention.

This is a serious matter. The non-computerization of scripts which are not based on the Latin alphabet could lead to whole societies regressing to an almost pre-Gutenberg age, when only an élite of privileged scholars were commissioned to write, copy and read precious books, of which there was often only a unique original.

This problem is of great concern to over two hundred ethnic societies and language groups, mainly in Asia, but also to the autochthonous peoples of the circumpolar region and the indigenous peoples of Latin America. For a large number of languages, it is a matter of using graphic tools to represent the letters, words and phrases of these languages as symbols within computerized lines, in the same way that those who speak the languages would have written them. Because the computerized writing tool should follow as closely as possible the grammar and style of writing, it is not simply a question of correctly transposing one alphabet based on imitating sounds to another, also based on sound imitation.

In most cases, for example, the consonant is written first and the appropriate vowel becomes an accent or diacritic, near the consonant symbol. There could, however, be an essential difference if a vowel comes first or if it comes last as a stand-alone vowel, and the writing tool should be able to take this factor into account.

An entirely different writing tool needs to be developed in order to transpose ideo-based alphabets with characters that do not represent sounds, but rather objects or ideas, such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The challenge is even greater to develop writing tools for scripts based solely on ideogrammes, such as the Indian languages of North America or the Inuit scripts, which recount whole sagas and histories with what the uninitiated would call a scarcity of symbols.

Creating the appropriate fonts is only the first step. A computerized writing tool that enables the style of writing to be articulated and expressed has to be developed. In any given language, there are different ways of using bold characters, italics, underlining, and other typographical elements. There are different types of punctuation and different ways of separating words, sentences and paragraphs. In Thai, for

example, all words are run together. There are no commas to mark independent thoughts, no full stops to end a sentence and no indentations to show a paragraph. Most traditional scripts are written in upper case; lower case has no meaning. Moreover, the size of the symbol is very important and is usually determined by the traditional use to which the script will be put.

Beyond these considerations, and making good use of new information technology, it will then be necessary to consider the following: the creation of electronic dictionaries, electronic thesauri, electronic spellcheckers integrated into the writing software, multiscript writing environments, voice activation and translation and format standardization to allow electronic transmission and conversion. Even for Afralpha, the script system developed on Apple computers to integrate several dozen African languages into an extended roman alphabet, there is a need to advance further to the stage of dictionaries, thesauri and other such reference tools.

Finally, given the fairly large number of initiatives to develop computerized writing tools for non-roman scripts, it will eventually be necessary to codify scripts to ensure uniformity within the script language and compatibility with related scripts, as for example between Dzongkha, the language of Bhutan, and Tibetan, the origin of most of the religious writings used in Bhutan.

The importance of computerizing scripts as one integrated and holistic programme cannot be overestimated. Peoples and societies who are unable to write their own language script on computer for global transmission and exchange will also be unable to participate fully in the emerging information society or to benefit wholly from the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies. Another consequence may be that their creative spirit and their cultural identities could be adversely affected.

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Communication Division, UNESCO

success of Brazilian and Mexican series outside the areas where they were produced. The same factors are likely to be important in the future. Although in theory the new communications networks guarantee wider distribution, and even distribution that crosses borders and cuts out intermediaries (direct from artist to consumer), which may be helpful for niche products that may even be boycotted in their place of origin, it would be illusory to think that world markets will develop on this basis. Direct transactions will leave room for a few new actors, but free flow will probably lead to a rapid jump in production costs (met either through co-productions or by raising new capital) and a concentration of distributors. The major communication groups are preparing for this eventuality. Their uncertainties about the future focus on the plans of their direct competitors rather than on the emergence of newcomers or the development of direct commerce that would be beyond their control.

ICTs undeniably complicate a number of issues facing the production of culture in all its diversity. However, the more or less rapid spread of hardware and networks is not the only factor involved in sustaining artistic pluralism within countries and regions and keeping a variety of production methods in place (whether market-oriented or non-commercial, small independent producers or production on an industrial scale). Blithe and often exaggerated statements to the effect that we are now living in an information society which will impose its ground rules on culture should be viewed sceptically. It should also be remembered that, for complex reasons that research into technical innovation has already begun to elucidate, technical developments seldom fulfil expert predictions. In other words, ICTs do not contain a blueprint for the future. They will not be the sole factors shaping the future. If, however, those responsible for cultural production worldwide adopt a wait-and-see attitude and fail to grasp the importance of what is at stake, then culture will be increasingly subservient to the norms of mediatized

communication and information flows. In conclusion, it must be emphasized that public cultural policies are important and should be reinstated in areas where the field has been left free for the commercial audiovisual media and transborder flows of information. Public action will have little effect, however, if it is confined to protective and defensive measures which are in any case liable to be inefficient, if not impossible, to implement.

This issue is likely to give rise to considerable debate and to social movements and even 'resistance' instigated by artists, producers, users and political leaders. During the 1993 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, France strongly supported the idea of 'making an exception of culture' and provisionally won its case, arguing that with the opening of world markets, cultural products (in particular cinema films) should not be treated like other commercial commodities. Since then, the question has been asked worldwide, some counting on a de facto abolition of the 'cultural exception' by technological development, while others are waiting for international organizations and regional bodies to come out in support of cultural pluralism. Another crucial issue being debated is the future of copyright and authors' continuing control over their works in an environment complicated by the emergence of multimedia products (see chapter 8). Many developing countries have not yet stated that they are directly concerned by these discussions, which nevertheless do affect them. In order to maintain cultural pluralism, it is pointless to avoid or side-step negotiations on these basic issues. An attempt was made to do this in the case of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) by seeking to negotiate behind closed doors within the OECD. What are needed are balanced agreements that acknowledge the distinctive nature of cultural products and do not treat them simply as industrial goods. The expansion of world trade in cultural products, associated with the rapid development of communication hardware and networks,

makes it clear that, if cultural pluralism is to be maintained and if the distinctive cultures of peoples and communities are to be respected, the search for new solutions should not be postponed.

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