In April 1997, at an Internet site sponsored by the World Bank and the Canadian government, there appeared a 136-page document, published by Orbicon, entitled “Knowledge and Development in the Information Age: Preliminary Canadian Consultations.” It is co-edited by Claude-Yves Charron, Sheryl Hamilton and Anne-Tamara Lorre. It is mainly a collection of addresses given at the Montreal consultation by officials of the United Nations, the World Bank, the Canadian government, and academicians. These take up 20 chapters dealing with suggestions about the revolution in global knowledge and how to empower the poor with this knowledge, about capacity-building, effective governance and prospects of national and global partnerships. (This collection will be called document A in this commentary article.)

The background of this consultation is a complex set of problems arising from communication technology and its profound impact in the international system. This complexity is beyond the grasp of the consciousness of the dozens of experts in the many fields involved. It was therefore decided to open up the consultations to a larger public. Invitations were issued mainly through the Internet and these evoked enthusiastic response from more than a thousand computer connoisseurs or “surfers” from all over the world. By the end of June, more than 900 messages had been received at the GKD97 site from people in all walks of life, people who happened to be computer-literate. These are all compiled in a second document entitled “Mail Archives of
GKD97” (to be called document B).

The messages in document B include criticisms, both positive and negative, often coming in the form of deeply-felt questions, with or without answers. There appears no evidence of censorship. Exchanges are moderated by the general protocol of common courtesy and by their relevance to three core themes along six tracks initially specified by the moderators on the basis of the foci mentioned in document A. Participants dialogue or debate with one another online, individually or in groups.

The biggest single group show concern over the gender issue. This concern brings to light the bicameral nature of a collective “brain.” It laments the fact that a “left-brained” or masculine bias has been dominating world processes and strongly proposes that this now be corrected by “right-brained” or feminine intuitiveness. Against this proposal, no objection has gone on record.

This reviewer is particularly impressed by Kofi V. Anani’s observations about rural Africa. He speaks of ways of empowering the rural poor in Africa with knowledge and information. This process revolves around village leadership, individual occupations, kinship, healing practices, religious oracles and village theatricals. These are communicated more effectively through mechanisms of folk tales, town criers, itinerant herbalists, drums and flutes, rather than through a cybertechnology that is inaccessible to rural folk. Many see in this a growing technological gap between and within communities, not only in Africa but all over the globe.

It is understandable that indigenous communities in Africa and elsewhere have been historically marginalized by their colonizers. An article in Appendix II of document A is entitled “Indigenous Knowledge and Intellectual Property” by James Youngblood Henderson. A member of the Bear Clan of Oklahoma and now a law professor at Saskatchewan University, Henderson speaks up for aborigines in the American continents and elsewhere, and for their indigenous meanings and values. Although aborigines contribute their aesthetic, cultural and spiritual riches inherited from ancestral fonts, and although these riches are now being commercialized (or legalistically pirated) by non-indigenous peoples, the generous donors continue to live in poverty and isolation.
Henderson's insight is too precious to be relegated here to a mere appendix. One wonders if this is thought to be of less relevance to global knowledge than, say, the "achievement" (included in the main body of document A on page 35 of chapter 12), the "achievement" of a 600% increase in condom sales. One also wonders if this particular mindset is the prevailing mindset among the editors of the document and/or among the sponsors of the development of global knowledge. If so, it would cast serious doubts about the long-term sustainability of the development implied in the mindset. It would confirm the realistic extrapolation in the systems-analysis presented in document B by Jay Hanson and endorsed by a few others: long-term sustainability is extremely doubtful in a mindset as irrational as indicated above.

Many other instances of irrationality could now be haunting the consciousness of the shareholders and staff members of the World Bank as a result of contributions in document B. This irrationality is verbalized by Felix Stalder as a "disconnection" between those who make decisions and those in whose name decisions are made. In theory, a reconnection can be made if the corporate profits amassed, albeit irrationally, are now invested in educating all parties with an information and communication technology that is finely tuned to global needs of today and the foreseeable future.

How is this technology to be finely tuned to such needs? Answers have been pouring in from over a thousand contributors to GKD97 in document B. Jamil Brownson sees the problem of information flow as unidirectional, hierarchical and subject to interpretation filtering. Under present conditions, Information and Communication Technology asymmetrically empowers global speculators in world currencies. Brownson describes these speculations as a "male social game." The benefits derived from this addictive game include the perverse pleasure familiar to casino players, especially upon receiving a windfall, but the costs are being borne by low-income families during the resulting downfall of the Thai baht, the Philippine peso, the Indonesian rupiah, and the Malaysian ringgit. To sedate the pain inflicted by global speculators, and perhaps to teach lessons in defensive management of currencies, sectors with global concerns are offering special drawing rights. A question about national sovereignty: is it being killed
softly? Can this be the ultimate meaning of globalization?

If global knowledge best grows in freedom, still, conflicting and perverse "freedoms" can ruin global knowledge with a confusion of primary goals. Kerry McNamara is now faced with the very challenging task of systematizing these myriad answers. Prioritization of goals have to be clarified lest global knowledge turn into global schizophrenia. Is the primary goal a preferential option for the poor or the maximization of corporate powers? It must be either one OR the other, not both. Still, corporate managers are undecided between Keynesian caution and bold innovations.

For example, Lonergan's innovative proposal mentioned in document B is hardly understood. It can be understood only by those who have thoroughly understood previous studies by mainline economists like Keynes ("The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money") and especially Schumpeter ("A History of Economic Analysis").

Lonergan's proposal is partly innovative and partly traditional. It is innovative in its bold and systematic reconstruction of the technical foundations of the macroeconomy, namely, the foundational distinction between the basic stage and the surplus stage that cyclically supply the demand for a standard of living for the whole society. This foundational distinction has not yet been explicated in mainline macroeconomics.

But it is more traditional than Keynes' utilitarian ethic ("foul is useful and fair is not"). Lonergan calls for human adaptation to the technical constraints in modern macroeconomy with a political will to apply the transcendental precepts of attentiveness, intelligence, rationality and responsibility.*

*Editor's Note: For further reflections on Lonergan's insights into macroeconomics, see Fr. Marasigan's two review articles in this issue entitled "Financial Speculation" and "For Lonergan Students."