

1956 a Seminal Year in Telecom

Dr Jeremiah Hayes

Perhaps, it is because it was the year I received my Bachelor of Electrical Engineering that I believe that 1956 is a seminal year in telecommunications. I cite two events, both of which had far reaching effects. On September 25, 1956, TAT-1, the first transatlantic telephone system went into service. TAT-1 was an engineering marvel that ushered in the modern era of worldwide communications. Before TAT-1, voice was carried on unreliable and expensive radio channels. Text was carried on submarine telegraph cables (the technology of the previous 90 years), which was reliable, but slow and expensive.

The year brought another auspicious event, which had particular relevance to Canada. The US Department of Justice and the American Telephone and Telegraph Company issued a consent decree, which settled an antitrust suit initiated in 1949. The agreement prohibited AT&T from entering any markets except regulated telecommunications. Under the pressure of burgeoning technology, this proved to be the first step in a process that eventually led to the breakup of the AT&T's monopoly and the present competitive environment in telecommunications. The consent decree had a significant impact on Canada, since it stated that AT&T had to divest itself of international interests, including those in Canada. This led to the birth of Nortel, and, in time, its heart wrenching death.

I will discuss both TAT-1 and Nortel. I worked on the former and I am one of the many mourners of the latter.