

Rehabilitation of the MacBride Commission: 25 Years Later

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Heeding the desire expressed by the majority of member states to examine the totality of communication problems in modern society, the director-general of Unesco decided in 1977 to create an ad hoc international commission made up of 16 experts from different fields, with the presidency granted to the Irish journalist Sean MacBride.

The Report that was presented after three years of laborious work hurt the sensibilities of some leaders and was refuted for a while, but numerous observers today believe it should be rehabilitated, given its premonitory nature and singular reflection in the work of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Comparing the Report's conclusions (prepared 25 years ago) with those of the WSIS in 2003 makes it possible to confirm this reality in shape and substance. Indeed, the classification of major issues resulted in the choice of almost identical headings, while the analysis of concerns led to the same trends when the exchange mission was entrusted to the partners themselves, particularly the NGOs.

I – Identical Headings:

The MacBride Commission published its Report in 1980 under the title *Many Voices, One World*. After analysing all the aspects of international communication, the authors of

the Report came to 82 recommendations that they regrouped under the following headings (see pages 315 to 338 of the French version):

- Communication policy for independence and self-reliance.
- Reinforcing licences for appropriate technologies.
- New social tasks for the media.
- Integrating communication into development.
- The recourse to ethics and standards for professional integrity.
- Democratisation of communication: an essential component of human rights.
- Reinforcing cultural identity for human dignity.
- Access to technical information: essential resources for development.
- Promotion of international cooperation for the right mechanisms.
- Partners for development: all the actors involved.

These ten headings, strangely enough, recall the fundamental principles of the information society defined in the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action of December 2003.

The similarity of shape is confirmed in substance with regard to the analysis and conclusions.

II – Similarity in the analysis of the concerns and conclusions:

The MacBride Report emphasised the points that today make up the pillars of the information society. In this context, we should remember three headings:

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1. Integration of the media and informatics for development:

The revolution in information must be considered seriously. Informatics has become an essential part of communications and is fundamentally important for development. Development can be gradually reached through all fields: financial and administrative activity, business management and market surveys, banking life, insurance, agriculture, education, medicine, hydrology, etc.

A new sphere of this importance runs the risk of increasing its control and favouring oligopolistic tendencies. Development strategies should incorporate communication policies in line with the diagnosis of needs and in keeping with their own priorities.

All nations are forced to make difficult decisions with respect to investment priorities. It is vitally important that the differences that exist in this area are reduced and progressively met; hence the need to support the development of countries less advanced in communication. These statements have been taken from the MacBride Report, as has the paragraph below.

2. Democratisation of communication: an essential component of human rights

The MacBride Commission confirmed a shortfall in the democratisation of information and emphasised the importance of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the human need to the right to access reliable sources. Indeed, the exchange of information among individuals through a common system of symbols has always been a goal for communication theorists. It is imperative that the development of the new media is channelled towards the democratisation of information. This development should be followed by the development of the right to knowledge and the specificity of each human being and each group, from the harmony with globalisation that ongoing progress in communications involves.

It thus involves acting internationally to create harmony between internal legislations and international law and favour the democratisation of information, both within each country and in relationships between states. Human rights, the defence of which is one of the primordial labours of the organs of information, would be unable to exist outside of

freedom of expression, freedom of the press and information and freedom to assemble.

3. Other important questions

The Commission made an in-depth analysis of the different questions relating to *binary communications* and considered it necessary to adopt codes of ethics, with the condition they were prepared by journalists (as stipulated in the Unesco Declaration on the media's role in strengthening peace and human rights). It also proposed establishing *media councils* and implementing them far and wide, believing that their widespread creation would simultaneously favour democratic participation and the progressive suppression of information distortion.

The Commission also believed that authors' rights were a part of the internationalisation of exchanges, both as an instrument in the telecommunications and electronics sectors and as a product of the written and broadcast media. It felt, however, that a protectionist trend should not be exercised to the detriment of the Southern countries and the dissemination of scientific information. Illegal forms of media concentration should be corrected and more attention paid to the needs of rural areas and less-developed countries.

The Commission believed studies should be carried out to decide the means of *financing needed* and tackle the lack of available resources. To this end, it proposed creating an international study and planning centre.

The question of *cultural identity* was also a focus of the discussions, and led the Commission to recommend the promotion of conditions to preserve the cultural identity of each society. Each culture would be able to evaluate its own identity, experimenting with other cultures.

These recommendations are only mentioned by way of example, and all the other recommendations are also similar to the different resolutions the WSIS adopted in its first phase in Geneva, 2003.

III- For the same partners and mechanisms:

The function attributed to civil society in the process of developing information is not new. This reflection was brought to the table at the Commission, which called on a

hundred experts from different countries to take part in a joint reflection and to prepare specific studies. One of the principle recommendations was the organisation, at Unesco headquarters in 1979, of a colloquium of NGOs on the right to communication. More than 90 civil-society organisations took part in the event, to discuss different aspects of information policies. They formulated numerous recommendations of different types. Civil society was asked to make a particular effort to promote the idea of communication in favour of endogenous development and to act so the new media (the least costly and least dependent on international transmission networks) were not sidelined or monopolised by stronger ones.

Only after having stressed the importance of these questions did the participants in the colloquium recommend that NGOs intervene to mobilise public opinion with the aim of guaranteeing the right to communication as a human right. They said the right to communication was based on article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but that new elements should also be added to the right to information that already existed.

They said it was important to establish a very clear distinction between *information* and *communication*, because *communication* involved the idea of the division of respon-

sibilities. The Report's authors ended up preferring the notion of the *right to communicate* rather than the *right to communication* to better stress the particular aspect of the right that covers the interests of individuals, groups, countries and states.

The participants also emphasised the need to study the possibility of creating an international fund to develop communication. It was the representatives of civil society who, one year later, actively took part in the inter-governmental conference for the development of communication and content networks (DEVCOM), organised upon the proposal of the MacBride Commission.

Conclusion:

It is very significant that 25 years later, civil society has taken on the proposals originally suggested by the representatives of the associative world. In the light of these first trends, it is tempting to conclude that the MacBride Report, rejected in the past by people nostalgic for monopolies, is set to be rehabilitated and become a true reference point today for the people responsible for building the information and knowledge society.