

Sean MacBride: 25th Anniversary of the Approval of the *Many Voices, One World* Report

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The choice of Sean MacBride in 1977 to chair the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems was one of the best moves made by the then director-general of Unesco, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow (the other, no-less important one I would like to pay homage to was putting Acher Deleon in charge of the Secretariat responsible for drawing up and publishing the Report). Without mentioning other details of his impressive curriculum, MacBride had the double and well-deserved fame of having won the Nobel Peace Prize (1974) and the Lenin Peace Prize (1977) and arrived after concluding a successful mission as the UN Commissioner for Namibia. The comforting fascination of someone who remained connected like few others to realisms and large and cruel problems, while refusing to renounce for an instant the real utopia of a pacified humanity or despair of mediation always being possible, emanated from his penetrating half-outwards/half-inwards gaze, his crystal-clear English and his Parisian French (his voice can be heard at www.nobelprize.org/peac/laureates). He knew and understood extremely well that 'communication' was one of the most crucial problems of our time and managed to assemble the masterly report *Many Voices, One World* in the middle of the Cold War, and printed onto it the powerful weight of his humanist nature. That the report was spontaneously baptised The MacBride Report testifies to that.

The fact we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of its appearance and paying it homage answers any question

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about its possible impact. Hundreds, possibly thousands of weighty international reports have, over the course of the last quarter of a century, been filed away, many in dead files. The MacBride Report continues to be an essential reference point for people concerned with communication, and although it may sometimes appear to be more often quoted than read (as also happens with Clausewitz and the gospels of Machiavelli and Marx), it is true that ignoring its existence would, for communication academics today, give a pernicious signal of ignorance and gap in their knowledge.

There are many reasons to explain the survival and vigour of this delicate collective work. In my opinion, one of the most functional was that the team who drew it up knew how to avoid technological razzle-dazzle to go to the heart of the moral, social and political substance of the problem. It is not that it lacks technological statistics and references, or even explorations that are largely correct, but essentially the Report avoids the futurological temptation of telling us what the world will be like if certain trends are confirmed (which means that today it would be unreadable), to attack the age-old issue of human relations in contemporary technological and political spheres: its great overture is titled *Communication and Society* and its conclusions expand into areas such as gender issues, social consequences, the democratisation of communication and international cooperation. I thus invoke the same reason that makes Aristotle's *Physics* a terribly démodé scientific work, and his *Nicomachean Ethics* a dramatically topical moral work. The MacBride Report was saved from going out of date because it anchored contemporary communication, with its technological sparkles, evil states, corrupting multinationals and Cold Wars, not on technological development but rather on the undying questions surrounding human relations, the presence of the other, intersubjectivity and the rights of man.

I would go so far as to say, too, that the best thinkers working in communications today are still, consciously or unconsciously, thinking less with vocabularies forged by the different schools and disciplines and more with a 'Unesco-esque' vocabulary that emerged from documents for the initiated to be swallowed *urbi et orbi* by the Report. You just have to look over the summary to see for yourself.

During the past quarter of a century, many of the powers

that at the time did not want the MacBride Report to appear have become more powerful, giving life to a type of resignation before the most strident communicational imbalances and interferences. But ideas are also obstinate, and more so the closer they come to a particular ideal of justice. That is why we are today remembering and commemorating a work that does not need to have new laurels heaped upon it because its true fame has yet to arrive.