

Memory of That Which Was Not

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Strange fate, that of the MacBride Report: at the same time it saw the light, when approved by the Unesco General Assembly in 1980, it began to belong to the past. Strictly speaking, the New World Information and Communication Order that the Report was meant to support never existed. The extensive document released by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, *Many Voices, One World*, sounds reminiscent of a call for planetary harmony and was barely one of those well-meaning documents of the type that supranational organisations love to produce. We should not hide the fact that we have been incapable of doing anything else – the increase in the number of documents and declarations have failed to reorientate the path that has led to an increasingly unjust and increasingly more violent world. 25 years after the approval of the MacBride Report might be a good time to vigorously reflect on our present and the complex history that brought it about. As with any paradox, the proposal could be disturbing, in that it involves remembering that which was not.

We may have to accept that the NWICO was a necessary mythical construction; the way of establishing, at that time, an illusory story that took into account clearly verifiable facts, although the reasons ultimately used to show them were not so explicit. The NWICO shook up some academic sectors, small political groups and irregular state/para-state/non-state organisations; justified numerous international meetings and authorised bureaucratic structures of different types. It was the flag unfurled in apparent battles,

while the war (as they say) was waged on other stages. It is possible that the NWICO always existed as the past, because its rhetoric only ran to good proposals for the future - the mirror into which it looked only reflected what ought to be. It was composed of generalities that never managed to define it with precise features. The broadest range of suggestions was gathered under its name while almost nothing represented it exactly. Numerous communication papers speak about what the NWICO could have been, while the disagreements among them are insurmountable. For the immense majority of researchers, the issue is irrelevant. Commemorative acts such as this one are more in keeping with a type of concern shown by collectors or archaeologists rather than demands of the time. Those of us who do not choose to join in the remembrance can probably be persuaded that in nostalgia, in the pain for the lost, there is a nobleness that makes remembering worthwhile. The opposite is giving in to the irreverence of forgetting.

For more than a decade, between 1970 and 1980, the papers with which international discussions about communication concluded would list and condemn demonstrable injustices; at the time of NWICO, the key word was *imbalance* and its counterpart *the free flow of information*. Almost always the conclusions to these papers projected a promising future, which, with some effort, would be attainable; the belief that history always marched to the wellbeing of humankind forced optimism. Some wanted to see in the MacBride Report the culmination of a struggle in which, finally, the subjugated managed to impose their voices over the powerful. "With the establishment of a new world communication order," said Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, director-general of Unesco, "each country should be able to learn from the others, while at the same time inform them of how they conceive their own condition and the vision they

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have of world affairs. When this is achieved, humanity will have taken a decisive step towards freedom, democracy and solidarity". Sean MacBride, the president of the Commission and a man with vast experience in legal affairs whose name was synonymous with the desire for autonomy and existence (he had fought for Irish independence, started Amnesty International and won the Nobel and Lenin Peace Prizes), was more cautious in the prologue to the Report: after mentioning the limited optimism the task had begun with and the confidence that grew because of the quality of the work done and the agreements reached, he conditioned his assurance: "If future dialogues are governed by this same spirit of goodwill, it will be possible to build a new order in benefit of humanity". There were no such dialogues and, in fact, times of rupture were to follow. The unrelenting hostility of some countries, the US in particular, against the discussions started by the Commission, is well known. The big international news agencies were persistent in 'uncovering' a Third World conspiracy, which, with the approval of the socialist camp, sought to reduce the free flow of information. Nor did the Report's approval cause much of a hullabaloo in the disordered Third World either, where, in the name of the people, some of the elite supported principles whose complex formulations were far removed from the masses. The view that neglected countries were simply products of external enemies prevailed and a type of reaffirmed innocence continued to cover up the harsh contradictions and depraved conditions that ruled in many of these countries, united in their role of victims. For their part, the socialist countries of the Soviet block, heading towards its disappearance, could never abandon the anachronistic and suicidal language of projected tolerance that handed out blessings and condemnations in line with their action strategies for the Cold War.

In Latin America, the echoes of the debate about the NWICO were much more persistent than in other regions. Communication theories and practices had penetrated the continent's political and social history for some time. Experiences of such close articulation between communication and collective action as the ones proclaimed and many times exercised in numerous Latin American countries are not so frequent in other parts of the world. This background makes it possible to track some of the reasons

that enabled the Regional Conference on National Communication, called by Unesco and held in Sant José, Costa Rica, in 1976, to go ahead. The event is important because nothing similar would happen again anywhere in the world and because it resulted in an agitated defamatory campaign on the part of the InterAmerican Press Society. On the other hand, its consequences were null and the conceptual arguments that supported it would today be unsustainable. In any case, and as in other parts of Latin America, specific discussions about the NWICO did not extend beyond a number of specialised institutions and academic or professional sectors that together were backed by state sectors or international organisations. Some attempts to build autochthonous forms of information exchange between nations sunk without trace: the Latin American Agency of Special Information Services (Alasei), the Latin American and Caribbean Broadcasting Union (Ulcra) and the Action of National Information Systems (Asin) were scarcely remembered by some people and only by a generous semantic expansion could the NWICO resonate in the different popular communication activities (sometimes called 'alternative activities'), which, although weakened, flourish here and there across Latin America.

The balance, 25 years after the MacBride Report, offers data that could disappoint and perhaps even alarm with regard to particular ideas we believed in (the plural inevitably includes myself) as instruments for building a less disconsolate humanity. The past in which the NWICO developed was a time of occasional strength among the so-called Third World countries, with the stimulus of the recent power acquired by the OPEC oil producers and the failure of the Cold War that would a few years later end with the hegemony of capitalism reigning triumphant. If something justifies raking over this past, it is the fact that its genealogy speaks to us of our most immediate problems, i.e., how to think in values that make it possible to transcend the blindly pragmatic trade that rules today along with the flagrant misery of a terrifying number of human beings; how we can avoid tranquillising short cuts that, among other things, locate evil exclusively with others and stop us from recognising it in ourselves and how we can take a risk in the irreplaceable research effort that we should not dismiss to the momentary vacuums of securities that the old beliefs and old institutions used to offer us.