

# A Latin American Memento of the MacBride Report: The Catechism of Utopias Still Stands

**Luis Ramiro Beltrán Salmón**

Never before in the history of international relations had communication managed to be the cause of a confrontation between the developed and underdeveloped countries like that which took place in the 1970s. In 1970, the Unesco General Conference recognised for the first time that it was necessary to formulate and apply 'national communication policies' to lay down the rules for development in this field of activity. It authorised director-general René Maheu to support member states in this regard. At the same multi-governmental assembly, the Indian Minister for Information questioned, also for the first time, the validity of the principle of the 'free flow of information' that Unesco had been responsible for applying since its creation. Although there was no warning of their importance at the time, these two events would constitute the root of the confrontation.

The fuse was lit in 1973 when the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, meeting in Algiers, began a programme to forge a New International Economic Order and put forward the belief that it would be eventually be necessary do something similar in terms of information, which until then had been governed unquestioningly by the classic 'free flow' principle.

The fire began to be stoked in 1974 when Unesco held the Meeting of Experts on Communication Planning and Policies in Latin America, in Bogota. Based on the definition that a Unesco-appointed Latin American consultancy commission had prepared, the meeting successfully delivered on its primordial task when it drew up a detailed agenda and preparatory works for the First Intergo-

vernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, which Unesco anticipated in principle for 1975. The report from the Bogota meeting was violently and loudly repudiated by the InterAmerican Broadcasting Association (AIR), made up of commercial radio and TV station owners from across the continent, who complained that it contravened 'freedom of information', a principle that later on in the decade would be called into question and replaced by the much broader and more impartial concept of 'right to communication'. In any case, the media magnates in the InterAmerican Press Society (SIP) then endorsed this pugnacious pronouncement.

From the beginning of the 1970s, a few years before the Non-Aligned Countries sprang into political life with their demands, another vigorous intellectual insurgency had begun in Latin America that was not only critical of external domination but also opposed internal rule. This was traditionally exercised in each country by conservative and authoritarian minorities to perpetuate their economic, political, sociocultural and communicational privileges to the detriment of the impoverished, subjugated and overshadowed majorities. The eminent precursor of this movement was a distinguished group of communication academics committed to change. The region already had around 80 university schools of communication, as well as regional communication teaching and research centres, such as the CIESPAL in Ecuador, the ILET in Mexico and, a bit later, the IPAL in Peru. After the mid-70s, it also had researchers' groups, such as the ALAIC, and journalists' groups like FELAP (made up of the Catholic radio/television, film and press), and, a little later, FELAFACS, in the teaching field. That is why Latin America exercised, as Catalan analyst Josep Gifreu pointed out in 1986, an "exemplary leading role" in the struggle, particularly with regard to the establishment of national communication

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**Luis Ramiro Beltrán Salmón**

*Readers' Ombudsman in the Prensa Líder Group, Bolivia*

policies. It also had a precursory position in the practice and theory of “horizontal, negotiated and participatory communication” and in the criticism of communication research subject to foreign premises, objects and methods.

1976 marked the high-water mark of the bad relations, mainly due to four activities that constituted milestones in the process and exacerbated the conflict. The first was the Symposium on Information among Non-Aligned Countries, which, meeting in Tunis in March, constituted the formalisation of the proposal to establish a new world communication order. This would end up being validated, with the support of the G7, by the UN General Assembly. The second, the Intergovernmental Conference on National Communication Policies for Latin America and the Caribbean, called by Unesco and held in Costa Rica in July, managed to meet its mission, despite the tenacious and aggressive campaign unleashed by many media groups in the SIP in association with the AIR. By way of a declaration and 30 resolutions, the conference officially adopted the idea of promoting policies and offering specific bases for their formulation and application by social consensus in favour of the democratisation of communication both nationally and across the world. The third activity was the 5<sup>th</sup> Summit of Non-Aligned Countries, held in Colombo in August, which resoundingly approved the program to establish the New World Information Order. The fourth of these critical activities in 1976 was the Unesco General Conference in Nairobi in November, which became the battleground of the full-scale confrontation between contenders that took place, as the developed countries, led by the US, launched a counterattack against Third World insurgency. So passionate was the controversy at the start, there were fears Unesco would collapse. However, things calmed down and negotiations to forge conciliation began. An initial indication of this was the approval of two resolutions that sought the flow of not just free but also balanced information, as the Third World had proposed. A no less significant demonstration of the will to agree was the mandate given by the Nairobi Conference to the director-general to create a commission that would study the situation of communication in the world.

The Unesco director-general, Senegal's Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, met that mandate by establishing, later on in 1977, the International Commission for the Study of Commu-

nication Problems, the presidency of which was awarded to Irish journalist Sean MacBride, winner of the Nobel and Lenin Peace Prizes. It was made up of a further 15 excellent personalities from diverse professional fields, representatives of different trends and people from all the major regions of the world, including Latin America, which contributed the Colombian journalist Gabriel García Márquez and the Chilean economist Juan Somavía. The Commission worked in eight sessions over more than two years on numerous documents, including the contributions that came from experts in different countries, and was shored up by round tables on particular specific issues. Some wags dubbed MacBride's task “Mission Impossible”, but he managed to forge consensus among the members of the commission that would eventually take his name.

The Unesco General Conference in Belgrade approved the MacBride Report in October 1980 and, after the anticipated controversial debate, it ended up putting a conciliatory epilogue to an arduous 10 years' work. Despite the inevitable imperfections, it constituted a unique political manifest of a humanist temper and with a universal projection which, based on an extensive historical summary of the situation of world communications, made a generally proposal-based summary of measures for change to favour fairness, independency and democracy.

The MacBride Commission essentially included nearly all the main theses of the arguments raised by the Third World. Indeed, the Report, fruit of equanimity accompanied by prudence, validated, in a conciliatory fashion, the Third Worlds' demands and set out how they should be met. It clearly endorsed the proposal to implement, by negotiation among the parties, a New World Information and Communication Order, for which it listed 11 principles, enshrining the notion of a free and balanced flow of information under conditions of equality, justice and mutual benefit, suggesting the elimination of media monopolies and calling for respect for each nation's cultural identity and freedom of information to do away with domination and dependence. It also promoted countries formulating and applying national communication policies to lay down the rules for the behaviour of communication systems and processes. It supported the democratisation of communication characterised by equal opportunities of access, dialogue and participation for all. It emphasised social

function, pluralism and ethics as responsibilities of the media. It recommended technological improvement. It even included the concern for advancing in the configuration of the right to communication.

Could anybody ask for more? Obviously not. But the recommendations of the MacBride Report –a temporary advisory body– were not binding. Its acceptance and application were thus freed from anything other than the ‘goodwill’ of the countries, as, after the US and the UK walked out of Unesco and director-general M'Bow was replaced, the organisation was unable to continue to meet its mission of supporting the project. Who could be surprised that, 25 years later, there is clearly a big difference between words and action. Because of many factors, including the collapse of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the overwhelming insurgency of globalising neoliberalism, practically nothing was done to make the spoken-of dream a tangible and happy reality.

But the great distance between aspirations and achievements should not deceive anybody about the validity of the ideas summarised and proclaimed in the MacBride Report. The vast majority are still applicable today. That is because, in principle, they were fair, well founded and obviously necessary. It is also because the situation they wanted to correct not only has not improved but has got significantly, very rapidly and seriously worse. The breach of political, economic, cultural and informational power between the developed and underdeveloped world, already enormous in the late 1970s, is now so big as to be astronomic. As Antonio Pasquali says, “A single triumphant economic model, a monolithic way of conceiving policy, a ‘single thought’, now reigns in the world’. Now more than ever, the old ideals are topical. They deserve to be rescued and repeated, naturally with adjustments to the new realities of the globalisation era, which is now announcing the dawn of the information society.

At a meeting in Talloires in 1981, media magnates and big trans-national communication leaders declared war on the NWICO and the proposals contained in the MacBride Report. From then on, the Latin American combatants for those ideals began to realise that, although the Third World had won the battle of words for the ideals of change, they would find it hard to win the war on the ground of the new realities. However, few threw in the towel then and there,

and leaders of the movement, such as Peru's Rafael Roncagliolo, were set on offering “platforms and flags”.

In 1982, communication experts and religious representatives were called to a meeting organised by the Latin American Catholic media organisations in Embú, Brazil, where they repeated their commitment to the proposal to develop the NWICO and suggested getting together with grassroots organisations to continue to promote the formulation of communication policies. A similar group, meeting in Quito in 1985, also insisted on policies and agreed to promote among the main Catholic organisations in the region “a serious and profound reflection of the new communication technologies”. In 1990, a consultation made to experts backed by the IPAL and the WACC produced the Declaration of Lima which, on the basis of a critical analysis of the regional situation 10 years after the appearance of the MacBride Report, listed among its ideals for the new communications situation after the year 2000, the effective democratisation of the broadcasting and reception of messages in conditions of true freedom and extensive pluralism and the urgent need to train Latin American societies as international message producers and broadcasters. Similar statements came from other regional groups in La Paz in 1992, Quito in 1993 and Santa Cruz in 1994, without counting other, more recent, ones.

Brazilian communications expert José Marques de Melo said: “10 years after its publication, the goals of the MacBride Report continue to be topical. But the experience of Latin America should lead to a profound revision of its search”. And, at the time of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transcendental document, Mexican communication expert Javier Esteinou Madrid has begun to examine the five elements of the Report that he considers it is “vitaly important” to rescue today: “The one-way flow of communication, vertical and horizontal concentration, transnationalisation, informational isolation and democratisation.”

There thus remains in some parts of Latin America a commitment to the struggle for change, even under the extremely difficult present circumstances. This should lead all the regional associations involved in the research, teaching and production of communications to establish an inter-institutional coordinatory body as soon as possible. Its mandate would be (1) to carry out a regional study of the

situation, (2) use this as the basis for an operational strategy, and (3) organise a multi-institutional congress, which, analysing the study and strategy, would make decisions for an agreed-upon and sustained action for the conjugation of resources and efforts in terms of the international and domestic spheres.

Despite everything, is utopia worth fighting for again? Yes, because as the old saying goes, “it is better to light a little flame than to curse in the dark.”