Current Aspects of the MacBride Report: A Latin American Viewpoint

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■ *In short, the communication industry is dominated by a relatively small number of companies that cover all the aspects of production and distribution, are located in the main developed countries and whose activities are transnational. Concentration and transnationalisation are, perhaps inevitably, consequences of interdependence between the different technologies and the diverse media, the high cost of research and development work and the aptitude of the most powerful firms when it comes to entering any given market (MacBride et al. 1980, 197).*

It is assumed that today, when time and space have been 'condensed', everything changes at a giddy rate. But there is still much that remains the same, such as the inequality and poverty of the many versus the affluence of a few. To a large degree, this is the main diagnosis that came from Unesco's MacBride Commission[2] in the late 1970s, whose Report was published in 1980. It showed an international information and communication reality characterised by three main aspects, from which a complex problem that was hard to solve emerged. In my view, these three aspects were: 1) the enormous concentration across the world, and within countries as well, of the abilities to produce, circulate and consume communication products; 2) based on 1) above, a series of world, regional and national inequalities that translated into a dominant trend towards what was at the time coined the 'one-way flow'[3]; and 3) what was then called the accelerated 'transnationalisation' of the sector (and, in fact, of the most dynamic sectors in the world economy), which today we would generally call a central feature of 'globalisation'. Finally, the big problem facing such an unequal structure was the need to democratise information in different fields and at various levels.

In the face of worldwide inequalities in information, communication and culture, Unesco and organisations such as the Non-Aligned Countries called for a New World Information and Communication Order. These international, regional and national imbalances suggested to communication theorists in many parts of the world, but particularly in Latin America, that it was necessary to oppose the irrational replay of market forces (at the time known as the 'free flow of information') with 'national communication policies'. Since then, public policies have been suggested as a way to oppose the inadmissibility of the blind forces of supply and demand. But despite the diagnoses being well documented, it was impossible to meet the proposals that circulated in forums like Unesco, which meant that the voices of those who controlled financial, trade and communication flows eventually dominated the world after the 1980s, i.e., the position of the free flow of information. The only thing that seemed to offer an alternative to market domination in all areas of social life collapsed symbolically with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Also, unfortunately, the apparent alternative, 'real socialism', was seen to be too closely linked to authoritarianism and even the totalitarian control of social life (including information and communication). During the 1980s and 1990s, the neoliberal ideology reigned supreme and any role or participation of the State was minimised or delegitimised.

The current context is that of a highly interconnected and interdependent world. It is globalisation, the 'triumphant' stage of capitalism, after the fall of 'real socialism'. One

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possible indicator of the increased interconnection and interdependence between nations today is found in foreign trade flows. Over the past 50 years, the general world trend has been towards the opening up of markets. In 1997, international trade was 14 times what it had been in 1950. This trend has accelerated in recent years with the rise of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements and trading blocks like the European Union, NAFTA, Mercosur, ASEAN, etc. Cultural product markets have also expanded: between 1980 and 1998, the trade of cultural goods and services grew five times (Unesco 2000a).

However, international trade flows are unequal. In 2000, the Western European countries, North America (excluding Mexico) and Japan accounted for 64.5% of world exports and 69% of imports. The G7 countries accounted for 51 and 50% respectively. Latin America and the Caribbean only took part in 5.8% of world exports and 5.9% of imports. (Source: WTO 2004).

In Latin America, recent figures show that poverty continues to represent a challenge on an enormous scale. In 2002, 44% of the population lived in poverty and 19.4% were destitute. Also, between 1999 and 2002, the rate of poverty grew 0.2% while the level of destitution rose 0.9%, i.e., in absolute terms there was a rise of 10 and 8 million people respectively (CEPAL 2004, 4).

World inequality in wealth and people's access to the benefits of progress are reflected in the inequality in the development of culture industries and the different levels of access to these sources of entertainment, information and education.

For example, the 2001 Unesco World Culture Report said that in 1998 industrialised countries published 218 daily newspapers per 1,000 people, while developing countries published 40 (the world average was 78 papers per 1,000 people).

The Media in Latin America Inventory carried out by CIESPAL[4] in the 1990s showed a high concentration of media access in line with the countries' level of development. Thus, Brazil and Mexico accounted for more than half the newspapers and TV and radio stations on the subcontinent.

Inequality in the development of cultural industries is thus reflected in international flows and exchanges. The trade in culture products has grown exponentially. Figures from Unesco show the annual value of the trade in culture goods shot up between 1980 and 1998 from $95,340 million to $387,927 million. However, most of these exchanges were between very few countries. In 1990, Japan, the US, Germany and the UK accounted for 55.4% of world exports. France, the US, Germany and the UK imported 47% of the world's total. In 1998, China joined the above groups and the 'new big five' accounted for 53% of exports and 57% of imports.

A study by the agency Media Research & Consultancy-Spain about the Latin American audiovisual industry found that five companies concentrated nearly 90% of film, video, and television exports: Televisa, Rede Globo, Venevisión, Radio Caracas TV and RTVE. Televisa's exports represented nearly 50% of the total. However, programme sales abroad still made up a small percentage of these companies' income.

Despite the optimistic image created in Latin America, both in terms of self-sufficiency in the audiovisual field and as an exporting region (particularly in terms of TV soap operas), recent empirical research shows that its presence, for example in Europe, is practically non-existent (Biltereyst and Meers 2000). In fact, Latin American television continues to be a net importer. The abovementioned study by Media Research & Consultancy-Spain found that even Mexico, which concentrated 50% of the audiovisual industry's exports from Latin America, imported more than it exported: in 1996, it was estimated to have a deficit of $158 million and in 1997, $106 million ($2,247 million for the whole of the region) (Source: MR&C, 1997; 1998). Working on the basis of these figures from the government, I calculated that for the same year (1997), Mexico had a deficit of $22.7 million on the television trade balance alone. 87% of Latin American audiovisual imports came from the US; 6% from European countries and 5% from the region itself. Looking only at television, 95% of signals imported via satellite ($925 million) and 77% of programmes (more than $900 million) came from the US. A high proportion of these imported signals were broadcast on pay TV, not particularly well established in Latin America.

The diagnosis made by CIESPAL found that exchanges between Latin American countries were less powerful than people usually think. Of total imported programming time among the 16 countries included, 62% originated in the US;

30% came from Latin American countries, while Europe and Asia were respectively 6% and 1.7%. However, it is obvious that a few Latin American countries are acquiring increased production and exporting capacity, such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Venezuela, Peru and Colombia. Actually, I would like to make a small correction: in a very few Latin American countries, one or two companies have developed the centralised capacity to produce and occasionally export television programmes in a limited number of genres, mainly soap operas.

Even though the general trend in free-to-air TV is towards reducing the programming imported from the US, in pay TV, which is expanding rapidly among the high and medium segments of the Latin American socioeconomic spectrum, imports continue to be very strong.

The expansion and diversification of new audiovisual options (digital television, all the different types of pay TV, DVDs, etc.) are bringing with them new demands for audiovisual culture products. The Latin American countries ought to generate the capacity to cover an important part of this demand within each country, in order to not have to cover it principally from foreign markets. A competitive domestic environment must be created in order to generate foreign competitiveness. But the convergence that has been taking place between information technologies, telecommunications and the broadcast media is in turn leading to another type of convergence, in the shape of large mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances between corporations. The high concentration of a few production companies and companies that get products onto screens, together with the disparity in international flows and exchanges of culture products, limit the diversity and plurality of the cultural manifestations in circulation. For example, in Latin America, a study of the main free-to-air television stations by level of income shows that the ten biggest players concentrate 70% of total sector income. As we already saw, five companies accounted for 90% of exports at the end of the last century.

What can the MacBride Report tell us today? I would like to finish this article with the paragraph I transcribed at the beginning, and say that almost nobody would notice that a quarter of a century had gone by since it was written. The topicality of the quote I began this paper with shows that it seems that practically nothing in the basic structure of world communication has changed in the past 25 years.

Notes

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2 International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems.

3 It is important to clarify that in fact the expression avoided the fact that since then, empirical research that supported it found that regional flows also occurred, owing to certain linguistic and cultural similarities.

4 Unesco's International Centre for Postgraduate Journalism Studies for Latin America and the Caribbean

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