A Milestone in the Great Media Debate

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For me, the MacBride Report stands as a milestone of history. In my view it was not primarily a scientific exercise of discovering the state of communication in the world but first and foremost a political exercise in taking stock of the socio-economic forces in the world at that time.

I see the Report in the context of what is known as the "great media debate" over the past three and a half decades (Nordenstreng 1999; see also Gerbner & al. 1993). In hindsight, this debate has had five major stages with a number of milestones such as the following:

1) **1970-75. Decolonisation offensive**
   - the idea of information imperialism
   - the concept of a New International Information Order

2) **1976-77. Western counterattack**
   - establishment of the World Press Freedom Committee
   - delaying Unesco's Mass Media Declaration in Nairobi
   - proposal of a Marshall Plan of Telecommunications

3) **1978-80, Truce**
   - adoption of the Mass Media Declaration of Unesco
   - work and Report of the MacBride Commission
   - consensus on the concept of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)
   - establishment of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC)

4) **1981-90. Western offensive**
   - conference of Voices of Freedom in Talloires

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- withdrawal of USA and UK from Unesco
- removal of Unesco's Director General M'Bow
- killing the concept of NWICO

5) **1991. Globalisation**
   - global markets vs. cultural exception
   - multinational corporations vs. global civil society

The MacBride Report is 'located' in the middle of this narrative, next to the Mass Media Declaration of Unesco. Actually the idea of an international commission to study the global problems of communication grew out of the political deadlock where Unesco found itself in the middle of the 1970s when trying to draft a declaration on "fundamental principles governing the use of the mass media in strengthening peace and international understanding and in combating war propaganda, racism and apartheid". As documented in my book on the declaration (Nordenstreng 1984, 20 and 112), Unesco's then Director General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow suggested a "reflexion group of wise men" as a way to avoid a political crisis which accumulated at the 19th General Conference in Nairobi in 1976, largely due to mounting disagreements about Unesco's competence to determine normative standards for the media.

A parallel instrument helping to avoid an impasse in Nairobi was the idea of an international fund to support media infrastructure in the developing countries. This was a joint initiative by moderate developing countries, notably Tunisia, and leading Western countries offering material assistance to the former as a kind of "Marshall Plan of Telecommunications". The Western offer was led by the US President Jimmy Carter's administration, which adopted a tactical shift from stick to carrot with the intention of buying the developing countries out of espousing a militant line,

thus "trading ideology against cooperation". This diplomatic trading subsequently led to the establishment of the International Programme for the Development of Communication, IPDC at Unesco. (See Nordenstreng 1984, 16-22; 1999, 244-245.)

Accordingly, the bottom line in creating the MacBride Commission was a manoeuvre to play down an anti-imperialist momentum in the Non-Aligned Movement and to neutralize the attempts to let the UN system set standards to the mass media. For the political West this momentum presented a serious threat as the political South was empathically supported by the Soviet-led political East. Surely there were also those idealists, including Séan MacBride himself, for whom the Commission represented genuine quest for discovering global problems of communication, but still the main motives and the crucial forces were behind those realists, including M'Bow, who made a compromise between the capitalist West, socialist East and the non-aligned South. And there was room for compromise – a truce in an information war – in the late 1970s, largely due to the East-West détente and the oil crisis, which supported those Western strategists who preferred carrot to stick.

However, the balance of global forces changed drastically soon after the MacBride Report was issued. Ronald Reagan's advent as President in early 1981 turned the USA from multilateralism to a unilateral employment of power politics, with a relative weakening of the USSR and the Non-Aligned Movement. The truce of the 1970s was followed by a new Western offensive in the 1980s. At this stage all the elements of compromise which were earlier regarded as valuable and honourable suddenly went out of fashion and even turned into liability risks. Thus M'Bow lost his job and NWICO became tabu at Unesco.

In a broader context of Western politics, Unesco was regarded as a burden, whereby the Reagan administration decided that the USA would leave the Organisation, followed by Thacher's UK. Here it is important to realize that the American and British departures from Unesco were not caused primarily by NWICO, MacBride or M'Bow but that the true reason was a strategic shift away from multi-lateralism – a warning to the international community that leading Western powers would not be outvoted by the majority of the world's nations. As expressed by a former Assistant Secretary of the State of the Carter administration, "Unesco was the Grenada of the United Nations" – a relatively small target to demonstrate what can be done on a larger scale if the interests of the big power are not respected.

In this light, Unesco's record after M'Bow – both in communication and in other sectors – is far from honourable. The Organization not only stopped following the strategic line of the South and the East but it did its utmost to appeal to the West – not least the non-member state USA – for example by attempting to censor a book exposing Unesco's U-turn in media policy (Preston & al. 1989). Part of this culture of the 1980s was the fact that MacBride Report, like NWICO, was regarded as politically incorrect.

Consequently, before attempting to assess the impact of the MacBride Report it is crucial to understand its nature – the historical conditions which gave rise to the Commission in the first place and the context within which the Report was prepared. Now that this is done we may ask: How well did the Report succeed in discovering and analyzing the world of communication?

My assessment of the Report right when it came out in 1980 was quite negative. I joined a group of communication scholars who instantly produced a booklet of critical essays on the Report (Hamelink 1980). In my critical reading (Nordenstreng 1980) the Report treated the history of communication in isolation from fundamental social and global developments; its notion of the "one world" did not contain any coherent picture of the world (neither of yesterday, today nor tomorrow) but rather an abstract image surrounded by a number of more or less disconnected phenomena and debates; its presentation of the "crucial problems facing mankind today" was convenient in terms of eliminating theoretical and political controversies but was counterproductive by preventing us from seeing the deep interrelationships and the totality of social and global phenomena; and its concept of communication represented the mainstream of bourgeois liberalism with a functional-positivistic and ahumanistic approach. The concluding paragraph sums up my view:

The Report is an excellent illustration of the dilemma of eclecticism: you try to be comprehensive but you lose

the totality which you are supposed to discover. In this respect the Report could well be called "Mission impossible".

I still subscribe to this assessment. The other critical essays of that collection have also endured the test of time. Editor Cees Hamelink's own chapter on how inadequately the Commission treated transnational corporations has even proved prophetic:

The Report, although rightly pointing to the crucial role of transnational corporations in the field of international communications, did not sufficiently recognize that the new international information order is indeed likely to be the order of the transnational corporations. The "one world" the Report ambitiously refers to in its title may very well be the global marketplace for transnational corporations.

Today, 25 years after, we have all reason to repeat these critical reflections from a scientific point of view. The MacBride Report was indeed relatively lightweight when measured against scholarly criteria. On the other hand, we have to admit – today more that in 1980 – that it carried quite a lot of political weight and came to signify the global movement towards democracy and equity in communication spurred on by the decolonisation offensive of the early 1970s. Therefore one has to distinguish between scholarly and political perspectives; it is important to be intellectually uncompromising in a scientific analysis of the Report, but it is also vital to assess the Report on its political merits. From the latter point of view the Report outlived the Mass Media Declaration but it was gradually offset by the Western offensive of the 1980s, along with NWICO. Many if not most of its 82 recommendations remain unimplemented (see Hancock & Hamelink 1999).

However, at the turn of the millennium, the conflicting elements of globalisation have revived many of the elements of the Great Media Debate of the 1970s. Some even talk about a comeback of the NWICO concept. This is not going to happen, because times have changed and communications have changed even more – with Internet as a new element. True, the principal and structural issues remain largely the same as faced by the MacBride Report and NWICO, but still we need new approaches. In looking for them we should make full use of the lessons learned and documented in academic and professional platforms such as the MacBride Round Tables since 1989 (see their reports in Vincent & al. 1999).

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