

Yes, The Ideas of the MacBride Report Are Still Current

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There is no doubt that the mid-1970s mobilisation of intellectuals, politicians, academics and communication professionals from across the world was the biggest in the political and cultural history of humanity. Under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), led by Senegal's Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, thousands of documents, reports and contributions on the state of international and local communication infrastructures were produced, along with the content of messages produced by the transnational system and news agencies in particular about the negative effects of monopolies and media concentrations.

At the heart of this reflection was Unesco's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, chaired by human rights activist Sean MacBride, winner of the Nobel and Lenin Peace Prizes, a former foreign affairs minister in Ireland and the founder of Amnesty International. The MacBride Commission, made up of 16 members from the "different geographical and cultural areas, as well as different religions, ideologies and economic and political systems" of the day, was created in 1977 by M'Bow at the express request of the Third World countries. For more than two years, its members, supported by the Unesco Secretary's Office, reflected, studied, analysed and drew up conclusions about the state of information and communication in the world and prepared a 584-page report entitled *Many Voices, One World*¹, which some took as the Bible on communication and others considered a diabolical work to be fought and forgotten.

The Report underlined the inequalities that existed in

terms of communication in the world and called for each nation's right to information and the assessment of their cultural identities, thus boosting the demands of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the Third World in general to establish a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

In that regard, the ideas contained in the five key areas of the Report (communication policies, technology, cultural identity, human rights and international cooperation) constituted an important platform for legitimising the notion of the right to communication that had been put forward by French intellectual Jean Darcy. This right, inseparable from human rights, gave a legal and ethical meaning to the developing countries' demands for the democratisation of communication and represented a broader notion than the 'free flow of information' concept demanded by the US and some of the industrialised countries of Western Europe.

Criticism rightly focused on the one-way flow of information (between 80 and 90% of world information was produced by the four big Western news agencies: Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and AFP), sensationalist content and 'disaster' coverage in relation to the Third World, and on the nature of the South's news dependency on the North, which created a new type of colonialism with the imposition of its own value systems.

The 21st Unesco General Conference held in Belgrade in October/November 1980 unanimously approved the MacBride Report, which mainly proposed ending the one-way flow of information, eliminating internal and external obstacles to a free flow, and expanding and making a more balanced dissemination of information and ideas, eliminating the imbalances and inequalities in communication, abolishing the negative effects of monopolies and other types of ownership concentration (public and private), promoting plurality in news sources and channels, boosting

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aid for 'backwards' countries on the part of the developed countries to make the former self-sufficient with regards information, respect for the cultural identity of each country and the right of each nation to defend its social and cultural values, as well as its interests of any type in the media.

The Belgrade Conference represented the peak of the debates that saw the North square off against the South, the rich countries against the poor, the 'included' against the 'excluded', in the unanimous adoption of three basic resolutions for the future of international communication: the MacBride Report, which represented the philosophy of the new world communication; the resolution relating to the establishment of the NWICO, as the political will to eliminate imbalances; and the resolution on the creation of an instrument for action, the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

All of these agreements were possible thanks to international political conditions in which the Third World, largely supported by the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, was on the rise, following decolonisation and the emergence of new actors that would have an active participation in the United Nations system. Unesco assumed the particular area of discussing matters concerning the debate around the imbalance of information and communication flows.

After the start of the 1980s, the world political context changed substantially. The arrival to the White House of Ronald Reagan and his partnership with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, ended the protest phase and ushered in a brutal collapse of the idea of changes on the international stage. The triumph of these neoliberal ideas involved among other things the disappearance of the political context that had allowed the development of the MacBride Report and its corollary, the NWICO. The 'Western' press, led by Anglo-Saxon journalism, started a 'media war' against Unesco's Report and its director-general, saying that the whole debate was geared towards press censorship, the limiting of the freedom of information and that it tried to accuse the major powers of 'cultural imperialism'. Although admitting disparities, the industrialised countries, led by the US and the UK, considered it was an ideological debate begun by 'communist' countries, political leaders and international bureaucrats. In the mid-1980s, the US (in 1985) and the UK

(in 1986), together with Singapore, withdrew from Unesco, leaving it with a 30% hole in its budget. Thus was the debate settled. Communication policy initiatives considered to involve undue State interference were abandoned, and, in 1989, Unesco jettisoned the NWICO, claiming it was 'a big misunderstanding'.

One of the achievements that came out of Belgrade, the IPDC, sought to generate flows of technology transfer from the central countries to the peripheral ones, but as Colleen Roach has pointed out, the programme quickly proved to be unable to produce any significant change, even in the field of technology transfer. The special account created to receive donations only managed to gather \$20 million in the 1981-1990 period, an average of \$2 million per year². Thus the aid the industrialised countries pledged to communication projects (radio stations, press outfits, vocational training, etc.) was insignificant and, although the Pan-African Press Agency (PANA) was able to be created from bilateral contributions, it was not sufficiently independent of the African states that controlled it or able to generate resources or regional infrastructures to allow it to develop.

30 Years Later

At the start of the 21st century, 30 years after the debate began, the problems it dealt with are still around and in many regards the divides have become more pronounced. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the technology and communication boom gave rise to new paradigms. If the NWICO began at a time when the relationship between national development and information was recognised, today there are no national information or communication policies. It is not even fashionable to talk about national identity. We find ourselves facing a New World Information Order promoted and led by the market and characterised by a growing concentration of both the media and telecommunications companies that brings with it the homogenisation of contents and identities.

In this framework, it is important to point out that the media map has become a *multimedia* map, where the main players (Rupert Murdoch, Time Warner, Berlusconi, etc.)³ occupy the leading and exclusive market positions which, in fact,

prevents true pluralism. Despite the emergence of new actors in developing countries, information imbalances still exist and are growing with the so-called 'digital divide'.

The international debate on this issue, which used to take place within Unesco, today has a new discussion space in the shape of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a purely technical organisation which is transforming some aspects held dear by the MacBride Report, such as access, participation and the right to communication, into purely technical notions of 'digital access'. Consequently, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which took place in Geneva in December 2003, did not bring current trends, such as market domination, to the table for discussion. The power of the market has reinforced the globalisation process to the extent that it has become the only factor involved in the information society, while technologies and digital networks are treated as exclusively commercial matters, ignoring their impact on behaviours, values and identities. Also, and because of the very nature of the ITU, nation states are no longer alone, because discussions with the private corporate sector play a significant role in the preparation of policies, while 'civil society', although invited, is only an observer.

Furthermore, the creation of the Digital Solidarity Fund, similar to Unesco's International Programme for the Development of Communication, was postponed for 2005 and is likely to become a precarious financial entity as its predecessor was.

Today, globalisation, conglomerates and digital networks are again putting a country's right to communication and identity (i.e., diversity), as established with the MacBride Report⁴, up for discussion. Although in the 1970s it was the States who spoke in the name of the people, today's new technologies make it possible for organised communities (i.e., civil society) and sector workers to take part in communication processes. We are dealing with a new battle in the democratisation of information and communication in which vast social and alternative or general media are already acting. As the founder of the IPS news agency, Roberto Savio, said at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in February 2001, "information governed by the values of trade globalisations, such as profits, efficiency and competition, must not be put ahead of communication based on the values of the public: solidarity, justice,

equality, pluralism and participation".⁵ This is certainly a challenge.

Notes

- 1 *Un solo mundo, voces múltiples*. MacBride Comisión Report. Editorial Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1980.
- 2 Colleen Roach (1997) *The Western World and the NWICO: United They Stand?*, in Peter Golgin & Phil Harris (Eds.) *Beyond Cultural Imperialism*, London, Sage.
- 3 HERMAN, EDWARD & MC CHESNEY, ROBERT. *Los medios globales. Los nuevos misioneros del capitalismo corporativo*. Madrid: Ed. Cátedra, 1999
- 4 RICHARD, VINCENT; NORDENSTRENG, KAARLE & TRABER, MICHAEL. *Towards Equity in Global Communication, MacBride Update*. Hampton Press, Inc., 1999
- 5 SAVIO, ROBERTO. *La concentración de los medios conduce al pensamiento único*. Rome: Other News, IPS Agency, Rome, March 2004