The Stammering Discovery
of the Processes of Internationalisation

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The 1970s marked a turnaround in communicational thought about the processes of internationalisation and its relationship with democracy, although more questions were raised than answered. The MacBride Report went some way towards crystallising this turnaround. Beyond the biases, shortfalls and its 'schizoid ambiguity', as Herbert Schiller said, its greatest merit is the fact that it existed. It was the first time a document legitimised by a UN institution conferred viability on structural imbalances in the field of communications while also proposing a number of clues for solving them. By making communication problems visible, the Report offered a possible common key in which to read the multitude of parallel initiatives that Unesco was undertaking in the 1970s. One example is the series of regional conferences on cultural policies decided upon at the conference on this issue held in Venice in 1970, i.e., before the central debate about the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) began. It is also the case of the conferences on communication policies. This articulated reading uses a coherent body of the basic principles of the democratic regulation of communication devices through public policies and the rights of communication as the specification of the charter of human rights, even though the notions remain relatively vague. In its defence, it could be argued that the Commission's work reflected the state of the alternative legal reflection that was still in its infancy at the time and which constituted one difficulty that persists today in defining the support for this field.

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Back in the '70s, voices that had until then been ignored in international chambers made known their opinions about the way the world was organised, both in terms of economics and communication. It is not possible to isolate the Report from the geopolitical undercurrents that legitimised the appearance of a view of the world other than that which Unesco had been used to since the 1950s. Generally speaking, it could be said that the entry into the postcolonial era signified the rise in the international space of the Third World. What began to crack was the evolutionist paradigm of the developed/underdeveloped coupling and its informational and linear concept of history, removed from the idea of diversity and the creativity of cultures. The crisis of this return to the old ideology of progress signalled a crisis in the ways of thinking about communication and modernisation from the point of view of the dissemination of innovations starting from a civilizing centre, which had dominated the references of engineers and social planners at Unesco for more than two decades. With regard to the excessive weight that the question of new flows by major agencies acquired in the starting up of discussions about unequal exchange, this was due to historical events that had begun to raise people's awareness. One example is the events that took place in Salvador Allende's Chile in the early 1970s, where Associated Press and United Press International had a starring role in the campaigns against the Unidad Popular's reforms. It is no coincidence that Chile's Juan Somavía, the founder of the Latin American Institute of Transnational Studies (ILET), a group based in Mexico City in the years following General Pinochet's coup d'état, was invited to join the MacBride Commission. The ILET proved a minefield of ideas about the New World Information and Communication Order.

The reactions to the Report were according to the 'revelation' of 'communication problems' and included

intolerance from the US, which defended its old free-flow doctrine, and opportunism by the Soviet Union, which used the legitimate demands of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries in favour of a New Order to shore up its policy of closing its own borders. The confrontation between the two superpowers reduced the debate to yet another front of the Cold War. No less important were the interests that motivated the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries in their claims: some of their members used the call for a New World Order as a way to conceal breaches of freedom of expression in their countries. Finally, while the corporate organisations quickly became aware of the need for organisation to oppose the idea of regulation and public policy, there was a noticeable lack of structured action on the part of organised civil society. This was mainly due to the fact that the reigning view on communication in the forces of change was essentially instrumental.

A dark tale has been woven around the Report and the NWICO issue and, even today, within Unesco itself, few people dare recall this history. The taboo has paralysed the possibility of a critical return to the past and its contradictions, and continues to stop people from fully appreciating this pioneering and unique moment in the construction of the long history of the struggle for the democratisation of communication. The hibernation period of the idea of public policies and the parallel rise in 'self-regulation' by virtue of the market and technology, in times of fierce deregulation and privatisation, has helped establish an epistemological tabula rasa. The least that can be said is that the US delegation's return to Unesco in 2003, after a 17-year absence, does not favour the disappearance of the mortgage.

We had to wait until the start of the new century, with the failure of the premises of the ultraliberal model and the signals given by new forces of resistance, for the concepts of the right to communication and public policies to resurface in international debates. The voices of their defenders have multiplied in line with the strategies from civil society and professional coalitions. Also, the number of institutional sites from where the meaning of these concepts can be argued has expanded and resulted in negotiations about cultural exception and cultural diversity, the information society and the management of common public goods. Discussions about articles of conventions, declarations and plans of action that seek to remove information, culture and knowledge from the rule of trade and finances are becoming increasingly legal and technical, prefiguring the cultural struggles of the new century. But that does not mean that the Manichean arguments in circles that oppose the idea of democratic regulation have disappeared. More than ever, across the world there are forces working to assimilate the concept of 'public' with censorship and mind control.

If the actors that represent civil society make their 'multiple voices' from 'many worlds' heard once more in international debates, they will also be trying, on the ground, to counteract the asymmetrical relationship between the people and the new and old devices of cultural and informational hegemony. They have thus begun, gropingly, to imagine hitherto unheard-of and permanent forms of a democratic anti-establishment movement at the national and local levels, constructing an ethical and moral force against the improper appropriation of the public sphere by the logics of political and financial concentration.