The MacBride Report in the Rear-view Mirror

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■ *We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable develop-ment and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Declaration of Principles "Building the Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millennium")*

These words preface the political plan of action adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003. This is not the first time the international community has set out to draft policy for information and communication issues in a global arena. In their first decades, the normative roles of the UN and UNESCO were closely aligned with work relating to the protection of human rights, but in the 1960s technological advances in the field of telecommunication introduced a need for international regulation of an entirely new sort.

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Questions concerning information assumed a new political valence or charge, and the discussion of them revolved increasingly around the doctrine of free flow of information. The Cold War defined the front lines in this period, but a new "front" was also emerging — that between North and South. Demands for a new international information order were voiced. In 1976, at the height of the debate, the UNESCO General Conference appointed the MacBride Commission to analyze problems in the field of communication and to propose some solutions. The diplomatic community and international policy-makers acknowledged the international character of the media, their structures, world-views and markets.

Today, 25 years later, technological advances are once again provoking a discussion of the need for new international communication policy. Now in the framework of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and in different terms than those current in the 1970s. The UN, UNESCO and ITU are all involved in the new arena, where information and communication issues are primarily discussed in terms relating to "global governance". Now, as then, issues of democracy and development are central, and considerable attention is devoted to the question of how to bridge the digital divide in a North-South perspective.

The MacBride Report: A Milestone in the Tumultuous NWICO Debate

The non-aligned countries introduced the demand for a new international information order in the mid-1970s as an extension of already voiced demands for a new world economic order. Although the non-aligned countries could hardly be considered a unit in terms of ideology or political-economic systems, and as a group had leanings toward

both of the major blocs, they maintained a remarkably united front on the issue of a new international information order. That the demand for reform of the international communications system arose out of the non-aligned camp was hardly sheer chance. A prime factor was the tumultuous change that was taking place in the world oil market. The 'OPEC Crisis' or 'Fuel Crisis' of 1973 broke a position of near-total dominance that the USA had enjoyed for over a century and won the non-aligned countries an unprecedented bargaining position.

After 1973, it was no longer a question of national liberation in a strictly political, juridical sense, but ambitions extended into the economic and cultural spheres, as well. This, of course, sharply challenged prevailing power relationships. The new international information order rested on four cornerstones, the so-called "four D's": Democratization of the flows of information between countries; Decolonialization, i.e., self-determination, national independence, cultural identity; Demonopolization, i.e., imposing limits on the activities of transnational communications companies; and Development, i.e., national communication policy, strengthening of infrastructure, journalism education, and regional cooperation. (cf. Nordenstreng 1984). The media, particularly news flows, were central. A new way of looking at development was evident. Its ingredients were tenets like: development presumes self-determination and cultural identity, and recipient countries should control the aid received. Add to this an international perspective, and a commitment to regional cooperation.

The third world's complaints and the demands for a new international information order that were raised in UNESCO developed into a bitter struggle that came to a head in the work on a 'Declaration on the media' in the mid-1970's. Just as the strife surrounding this Declaration was culminating in 1976, the MacBride commission was convened and asked to suggest principles that might guide work toward a new world information and communication order (NWICO). The commission, chaired by Irish politician, diplomat and Nobel Laureate Sean MacBride, submitted its final report, *Many Voices, One World. Communication and Society, Today and Tomorrow* just before the 1980 UNESCO General Conference.

The sharp differences that had characterized the discussions throughout the 1970s were also present in the MacBride Commission. Considering that it consisted of 16 members representing different ideologies, different political, economic and cultural systems, different geographical areas, it was no small achievement for the Commission to manage to reach agreement on as many points as they did. Sean MacBride remarks in his foreword to *Many Voices, One World* that the members "reached what I consider a surprising measure of agreement on major issues, upon which opinions heretofore had seemed irreconcilable" (p. xviii). Due to differences in the group, the report does not offer any specific proposals regarding communication policy principles. On the other hand, the report does offer a good number of recommendations and suggestions aiming to bring about a "more just and more efficient world information and communication order". Such a document had never before seen the light of day. Nor has anything comparable in the area of media and communication been achieved since. A majority of those who commented on the report, including many who were essentially critical, agreed that *Many Voices, One World* was the most thoroughgoing document of its kind on communication ever to have been produced (cf. Hamelink 1980).

The Commission report stresses that it is not only about developing countries, but about the whole of humanity, because unless the necessary changes are made in all parts of the world, it will not be possible to attain freedom, reciprocity or independence in the exchange of information worldwide. The Commission confirmed the persistence of imbalances in news and information flows between countries and of marked inequalities in the distribution of communication resources. They perceived, albeit somewhat equivocally, the dominance of transnational corporations as a threat to cultural integrity and national independence. The Commission were agreed as to the necessity of change and that the current situation was "unacceptable to all " (*Many Voices, One World*, 1980:xviii).

Above all, the Commission sought solutions whereby third world countries would develop and strengthen their independence, self-determination and cultural identity. They also explored ways to improve international news reporting and the conditions under which journalists operate. Several central proposals focused on the democratization of communication, i.e., issues relating to access and participation; "the right to communicate" at all levels,

international, national, local and individual, was strongly emphasized" (*Many Voices, One World*, 1980:265, 173).

The report of the MacBride Commission,was one of the main points on the agenda of the 21st General Conference of UNESCO 1980. But, on the advice of the Director-General, who was under considerable pressure, recommendations of the Commission were deferred and filed among the preliminary documentation for UNESCO's Medium-Term Plan 1984-1989. The threat that the USA would pull out of UNESCO over the issue of NWICO cast a pall over the Conference. The recommendations of the MacBride Commission surfaced frequently, however, in the debate and indirectly influenced the formulation of the UNESCO Resolution on the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (4/19). The most concrete sections of the resolution had to do with development and aid. These emphases were further strengthened by the institution of an International Programme for Communication Development (IPDC), an indirect fruit of the MacBride Commission. The position of the West was reinforced; efforts to implement a political idea in some of the recommendations ran aground, and practical aid initiatives predominated.

Clearly, the MacBride Commission made a significant contribution by structuring the problem area, which made it possible to raise the intellectual level of the debate. The issues were given concretion through the solutions the Commission proposed, but the issues faded from the international agenda as a new political climate and new power relationships emerged in the 1980s. With the benefit of hindsight we see that 1970s mark a major shift in emphasis, a tip in the balance from politics and ideology toward the play of market forces. The 1960s were years of optimism: the wealthy nations of the world were experiencing a boom, former colonies were gaining their independence. Faith in government and technology were strong. The 1970s were turbulent - ideologies conflicted, systems were criticized and alternatives propounded; collective solutions were favoured. The 1980s, in contrast, may be seen as an era of deregulation, commercialisation, consumerism and individual solutions. The developments were strongly coupled with an accelerating, technology-driven process of globalization.

The Mac Bride Commission and the Communications Research: A Contribution?

That the MacBride recommendations did not have the political impact their authors had hoped for was naturally a disappointment. The MacBride report was not primarily an academic product, but the Commission's impact on research in the field of international communication was discussed. The fact is that the Commission engaged a number of external scholars from different disciplines to produce specialized reports on aspects of the Commission's work. Nothing like this on this scale had ever happened before. The studies ranged from conceptual analyses to statistical reports, surveys of national media legislation, and bibliographies. They were reported in roughly 100 publications. In retrospect, one of the prime legacies of the Commission is the articulation of a third paradigm of development.

Self-reliance and cultural identity were key principles in the Commission's recommendations. Concepts like access and participation were made explicit. The Commission also introduced the local level and horizontal communication into thinking about development. There was also a hint of the idea that the causes of underdevelopment might be found in the developed and the developing countries alike. The MacBride Commission's recommendations were hardly unequivocal, however. The ambiguities were particularly apparent in the Commission's treatment of communication technology and technological development. Here the Commission's thinking alternated between the modernization and dependency paradigms. But, the contours of a third, alternative concept of development were taking form.

In the early 1980s, some scholars and development experts began speaking of 'another development'. This third approach may be characterized as a reaction to both the modernization and dependency paradigms. Over the last decade or so, much of the work with 'another development' has focused on the concept of multiplicity. The central tenet here is that there is no single path toward development, but that development must be seen as an integral, multidimensional and dialectical process that will differ from country to country. Thus, 'development' is a relative concept, and no society or part of the world can claim to represent the ideal model of 'development' in all its aspects.

The focus on multiplicity has also entailed a focus on participatory communication for social change. (See for example work of J Servaes, J D Bordenave, J E Fair, U Kivikuru, T L Jacobson, K J Kumar, R Lie, S A White).

The links between this third paradigm of development and the NWICO debate and the ideas implicit in the MacBride resolution are obvious. Concepts like self-reliance and cultural identity took their place on the international agenda and thus won political acceptance on the conceptual level. The MacBride Commission involved social scientists - sociologists, political scientists, educationalists, media scholars, and so forth - which ensured the inclusion of many of the concepts that were to recur in both theory and practice in ensuing decades. It is difficult, however, to distinguish cause from effect. In all probability the present position is the fruit of the mutual exchanges between regions, academic disciplines, experts, politicians, etc., that the MacBride Commission broke ground for.

The body of research that was reported in connection with the MacBride Commission could be likened to a comprehensive multidisciplinary research project. By comparison, the absence of such a scientific fundament in the WSIS process is remarkable. Indeed, it is lamentable that the WSIS has not engaged researchers of many disciplines and geographical venues to afford a better and deeper understanding of the media and communication situation as it related to the ongoing processes of globalization. Such an effort would surely better equip the WSIS to create an enabling environment for media and communication on an international plane.

From the MacBride Commission to the WSIS

Many Voices, One World stands the test of time - reading it today arouses reflections of many kinds. Some of the developments of this past decade could be discerned on the horizon even at the time of the MacBride Commission. Indeed, increasing concentration of media ownership, monopolization of markets, and a decline in diversity were among the complaints the Commission raised. But, it was quite impossible to envisage the breadth and depth of what was to come – no one could imagine the offspring information technology would produce. The globalization of

the media has accelerated and the digital divide has widened in recent years.

The relationships between the wealthy countries and the poor countries of the world that the MacBride Commission described at the end of the 1970s seem to prevail for many countries albeit the terminology is partly new. Several countries in the South still lack adequate infrastructure for modern mass media. This hinders the countries' development, while it also blocks their access to the international news and media system. Those who can change the situation are not always motivated to do so; those who want to change the situation are not always in a position to.

Now, when international information and media issues are once again in focus, many have expressed concern that the WSIS has come to apply an increasingly technical perspective on issues relating to telecommunication and the Internet. Many voices, not least within the civil society, have called for more attention to media and media pluralism, human rights and communication rights in the final document.

When the final WSIS document is adopted in 2005, 25 years will have passed since the MacBride Commission submitted their report to UNESCO. Even if the points of departure and terms of reference used today are quite different from those of the 1970s, 'development' is still bound up with the modernist project. Today, however, solutions to the problems and issues are not sought in top-down steering. Contemporary society is far too complex for that. Now we see the era of multilevel governance of the media and communication system – the interplay between many different actors, public and private, on multiple levels, from the local to the global. Ultimately, however, the goals of the WSIS and the MacBride Commission are essentially the same, and Sean MacBride's words on the significance of a new information order remain eminently valid:

...the 'New World Information and Communication Order' may be more accurately defined as a process than any given set of conditions and practices. The particulars of the process will continually alter, yet its goals will be constant – more justice, more equity, more reciprocity in information exchange, less dependence in communication flows, less downwards diffusion of messages, more self-reliance and cultural identity, more benefits for all mankind. (*Many Voices, One World*, 1980:xviii).

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