

From the MacBride Report to the World Summit on the Information Society. Legacies and transformations in global debates around communication imbalances¹

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The year 2005 will be marked, alongside the anniversary of the approval of the MacBride Report by the UNESCO General Conference in Belgrade, also by the end of a four year international process³ which has had information and communication issues at its core: the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

The second phase of the UN World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Tunis in November 2005 under the leadership of the International Telecommunication Union, following the Geneva phase of December 2003, will conclude a high level political process the aim of which was “to define a common vision of the information society” and to find ways to overcome the digital divide within the UN Millennium Goals.

Bringing information and communication issues back to the centre of international debates, after the dismantling of the proposal for a New World Information and Communication Order which the MacBride Report had contributed to articulate, WSIS has generated expectations about the need and feasibility to find solutions to world communication problems, while at the same time tackling the very nature of communication governance in the 21st century. It has therefore been surprising to notice that the WSIS developed in the absence of any historical perspective. The present global communication context, with its globalizing dynamics, trends towards an “informational paradigm” and emerging trans-national actors, is profoundly different from that of the

‘70s; yet most of the developments we have witnessed in recent years find their roots in technological, societal and political changes that can be traced back to the time when proposals for a NWICO were debated.

Communication scholars involved in the WSIS process and aware of its “precedents” considered this “historical gap” as a major constrain. The lack of historical depth in facing contemporary communication challenges reflects a problematic tendency to understand such challenges as “novelties” on the world scene, mainly related to technological and infrastructural aspects, and to respond with a short sighted political approach overlooking the political nature and cultural implication of issues and phenomena.

In this context I have attempted to develop a critical investigation of legacies and changes over time, through the analysis of three documents which could render the “climate” of political discourses that have developed in different periods and contexts.

The documents were: the final section of the MacBride Report⁴, where proposals are arranged in “Recommendations and Conclusions”, and the two major documents that emerged from the first phase of WSIS (Geneva 2003): the Official Declaration of Principles – *Building the Information Society: a global challenges in the new millennium* – and the Alternative Declaration elaborated by the Civil Society Sector which has been active throughout the WSIS process – *Shaping Information Society for Human Needs* (Padovani & Tuzzi 2004, Padovani & Tuzzi 2005).

Dealing with two moments in history and three speaking voices (one of the novelties of the WSIS process was the choice to have both governmental and non-governmental

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actors formally involved), a few research questions have been addressed:

- What can we say about legacies and transformations, analysing the language in communication debates?
- What are the issues at the core of each document and speaker? What are the “common” elements?
- Is it possible to identify conceptual links and elements of continuity? are these to be found mainly in the relationship between the MacBride Report and the official Declaration or in connections between MacBride and the alternative Civil Society document?

In order to offer a synthetic summary of the main results I would start by a synthetic description of common elements found in the documents, and then will move on to describing the “confronting visions” of communication in society that actually characterize those texts.

What emerged from the investigation is that **very few elements are common to all documents**. Only aspects related to development and technology seem to be equally relevant to all speakers, which demonstrates the central need to overcome inequalities (divides), which have actually become more evident over the past 25 years. The focus on technology, with a quite similar wording, also indicates that in spite of technological innovations that have intervened in the past decades, the language to express the centrality of information technology has remained quite similar.

There are more elements in common between the MacBride Recommendations and the WSIS Civil Society Declaration than between MacBride and the Official WSIS output. Issues of common interest between the “old alternative discourse” and the “new alternative discourse” are human rights, freedoms and a strong reference to the “public dimension” (public spaces, public services, public policies). Reference is also made to the institutional responsibility to develop legal frameworks through a decision-making process that should foster democratization processes. Yet while democratization is expressed in a generic manner in the MacBride Report, consistently with the goal of a “democratization of the international system”; democratic, open and inclusive processes are crucial to the Civil Society document, which shows a more concrete approach to democratic processes, between as well as within societies.

A few more elements are shared by the two speakers, among which: the use of the term “power”, a reference to “world peace” and two interesting evolutionary visions of human rights, respectively more important for MacBride and Civil Society. The idea of a “right_to_communicate” appears in both documents, but is used three times in the MacBride Recommendations and once in the Civil Society Declaration; while the formula “right_to_participate” is used three times in the WSIS Civil Society document and once in MacBride. This possibly reflects the different context in which visions were developed together with the contemporary recognition that it is only through inclusive decision-making that policies can be adopted which allow the democratic potential of communication to develop, thus fostering the right to communicate.

Few elements are shared by the official WSIS Declaration and the Civil Society document, in particular the “access dimension” (access to information, universal, affordable, equitable access) and the “development dimension” (promotion and levels of development, ict for development). While two specific formulae, the so-called “digital_divide” and “sustainable_development”, reflect the evolution of concepts over the years.

Very few aspects connect the MacBride Recommendations with the WSIS official Declaration, mainly the use of verbs, indicating commitments to be made (to create, to enable, to enhance), and reference to international organizations, cooperation and community, maintaining a focus on the national dimension (national priorities, efforts, capacity) which appears stronger in the MacBride document.

Overall each document expresses quite different visions.

Highly **relevant to MacBride** is reference to mass media, broadcasting, the profession of journalists, news and information flows. Strong focus is also on the concentration and monopolization of communication structures, with explicit reference to trans-national corporations, which does not find equivalent in either of the two other documents. This focus on the world media system and the role of media in development, which has actually been one of the major concerns in former debates, has been quite marginalized in the WSIS official discourse⁵; raising criticism among civil society organizations as well as scholars (Raboy 2004, Hamelink 2004, Carlsson 2003). In contemporary official

narratives problems raised by global media concentration are hardly mentioned; in spite of this being one of the most problematic development on the world media scene. Nor any conceptual articulation emerges from the WSIS Declaration of the interrelation between traditional and new media, nor between public, commercial and community media.

In the MacBride Report “communication” is widely referred to: means of communication, flows of communication, development communication. In spite of the focus on world information flows which characterized the NWICO debate, information and communication seem to have been conceived as two different aspects, within a broader international reality. This very international arena was relevant to MacBride but a strong focus was also placed on countries and national spaces, thus reflecting the still preminent role of state entities on the world scene (though the word “state” is never mentioned...). Reference to self-reliance and independence reflects the historical context in which the debate took place; while civil_ ociety is never mentioned and sparse reference is made to organized social groups.

The **basic idea in the official WSIS Declaration** is that of building the information society through technology and its applications, through connectivity, technology transfer and infrastructure development; the other strong focus being on economic growth, productivity, job creation, competitiveness and investment. This reflects policy narratives around ICTs and communication that have developed since the early '90s: the launch of the Global Information Infrastructure and the European commitment to the “information society” in 1994 (Padovani & Nesti 2003). Language is therefore consistent with contemporary global trends, “spurred by deregulation and privatization, concentration and commercialization” (Carlsson 2003, p. 61): a prevailing technologically-oriented view of societal transformation goes along with a neo-liberal approach, according to which institutional actors are essentially required to “foster enabling environments”.

The other peculiar element in the document is the recurrent reference to security issues (cybersecurity, confidence, global_culture_of_cyber_security,). As suggested elsewhere, we find in WSIS “two ways of conceiving security, ...: on one side international security and stability

and on the other side the need to enhance the confidence of consumers in the information society. What seems to remain uncovered, ..., is the individual dimension of a human right to personal security in an information environment that can be more and more un-safe for citizens, though safe enough for consumers” (Padovani & Tuzzi 2003).

Several elements characterize the Civil Society Declaration and its diversified language. The use of plurals is strong - societies, peoples, actors - and the emerging vision is very much “globally aware” (global civil society, global governance). Strong is also reference to the community (community media, community informatics), while information is always accompanied by communication and/or knowledge, thus stressing a broader conception of communicative flows, interplaying with culture and human knowledge. As communication was strongly referred to in MacBride, a focus on “knowledge”, its control and trends towards privatization and ownership of this common good, seems to express the deepest concern of civil society organization. While democracy, in their view, goes along with accountability, transparency and responsiveness of institutional powers and other actors; who are called to commit themselves to shaping information societies capable of responding to human needs: a recurrent verb is “must”, the focus being on the right to be guaranteed and not just on the action to be promoted.

Some of the legacies, particularly the ongoing discourse about communication rights and the continuing effort, carried on by civil society actors, to denounce the governmental short sighted approach to global imbalances in terms of connectivity and infrastructures, overlooking social and cultural elements of the complex communication landscape, deserve more in depth investigation. At the same time, building on the analysis of language and issues, I think it is important to stress the process dimension of both experiences and its potential impact in a longer time perspective.

As some have argued, the relevance of the MacBride Report can be appreciated, in a political-historical perspective, in terms of having consolidated knowledge and spread the awareness of communication issues at the international level, more than in terms of its actual impact on

communication policies. In the same line, we should continue to reflect on contemporary debates, focusing on emerging features the result of which is not yet foreseeable: as in the case of trans-national mobilization and local-global connection through an inclusive use of ICTs; as in the

case of the plural agenda which have emerged from WSIS (Padovani 2004); or in the case of new “key words” – such as the “multistakeholder approach” – which may have consequences in the future conduct of communication policies.

Notes

- 1 This short article builds on a lexical-content analysis investigation synthesised in an articulated version “Debating Communication Imbalances: from the MacBride Report to the World Summit on the Information Society. An application of lexical-content analysis for a critical investigation of historical legacies”, forthcoming in a monograph issue of *Global Media and Communication* (December 2005)
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- 2 El 21 de desembre de 2001 l'Assemblea General de les Nacions Unides va adoptar una resolució per a organitzar una Cimera Mundial sobre la Societat de la Informació.
- 3 We recall the Macbride Report was the result of investigations conducted by communication experts, scholars and policy-makers and not the outcome of a diplomatic negotiation, as is the case of the WSIS declaration. But it was officially adopted by the UNESCO General Conference, thus receiving legitimization by the international community.
- 4 The only reference in the official WSIS Declaration is paragraph 55.
- 5 A la declaració oficial de la CMSI només s'hi fa referència al paràgraf 55.

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