

Presentation

25 Years of the MacBride Report:

A Bold and Controversial Diagnosis about Communication

This issue of *Quaderns del CAC* is commemorative in nature. A quarter of a century, or the spirit of a generation, has gone by since the leap from the 1970s into the 1980s. This is a good chance for the people who closely followed the whole of the journey to remember and assess it. It is also a chance to discover the roots and undercurrents of many perspectives that have recently emerged among the younger generations. We are thus celebrating the MacBride Report as an important milestone that deserves to be invoked and to a large extent reassessed, not so much in order to close a handful of fundamental debates as to keep them open, in their present configuration and through their current challenges and the questions they raise, thinking about communication problems as they were perceived 25 years ago, but also pointing towards the new panorama of communication problems today.

We are thus remembering and, in some way, making calls with regard and paying homage to an ambitious, stimulating and enriching work that sparked transcendental debates and conflicting statements - a work that immediately became a reference point and which later, often and by many, was successively criticised, silenced and avoided.

Today we know that the complex communication space is decisive in the conformation of all societies, but awareness of its centrality has come about quite recently. It is in our time of the omnipresent opulence of the media and communication industries when theories and interpretations have been woven that use the field of communication as a source of metaphors and denominations that aspire to make us aware of the profound nature of the new models of society. We talk about what the media is and is not; about the reduction of policy to public communication; about the information society; about information and communication as keys in the productivity of a particular economy and the displacement of religion by the audiovisual industries as a source of values. Behind these labels, indicatives and new common places, we find traditions that date back to before the reflections of mass communication research or the Frankfurt School, which tried to organise the communication panorama with their postulates, jargons and methods, atlases and maps.

The MacBride Report was the most ambitious attempt of its time to summarise and tackle the major challenges presented at the worldwide scale by the process of business concentration in the media and the publishing and audiovisual industries, the adoption of new communication technologies and infrastructures, and the control of the generation of information flows and cultural content. The Report emphasised the need to correct the inequality and imbalances of communication, information and culture between a rich and influential world and a poor and progressively irrelevant world. It proclaimed that freedom of information (transmission and reception) could not be reduced to the freedom of the news market and said that pluralism and diversity were necessary and should be demanded. The Report affirmed the right of all communities and cultures to project their own voice in a 'new order' (*Many Voices, One World*).

Backed by Unesco, the Report was conceived as an "effort of collective reflection" to confront the "forces of inertia". With this specific goal, formulated by the then director-General, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow:

"with the establishment of a new world order of communication, each country should be able to learn from the others, while at the same time inform them of how they conceive their own condition and the vision they have of world affairs. When this is achieved, humanity will have taken a decisive step towards freedom, democracy and solidarity."

Some focuses and approaches of the MacBride Report are still in force at the beginning of the 21st century. The communication ecosystem has changed, along with its area and capacities, but the bases of discrimination in terms of information, culture and symbolism have not altered substantially. And this comes precisely when, now more than ever, economic and political domination seem to be settling on another form of domination, built on the basis of unequal access to the sources of knowledge.

The Catalonia Broadcasting Council, in developing its work as a regulatory authority, has adopted the radical defence of pluralism and diversity as standards to inspire its activity. For that reason, and particularly following the Dialogue organised in Barcelona in June 2004 on Regulation and Cultural Diversity, it is now working to shore up an International Network of Broadcasting Regulation and Cultural Diversity (BRCD). The network aims to promote cultural diversity in the audiovisual sector from the platform of regulatory organisations, as they are a key element in the promotion of public communication policies.

The globalisation process does not automatically generate a new global culture, but carries with it serious risks of homogenisation and the displacement of less powerful cultural and communicational heritages. The shared references that come from the hegemonic basis of the culture and communication industries no longer supply just the cosmopolitan elite that participate in the new global metropolitan culture, but also local groups that risk losing a link with their local social and cultural environments.

Of course, it is true that common references can represent a new chance to prevent isolation and achieve interconnection. They can be a chance to access the new and different and include them in the processes of interpretation and appropriation, the construction of meaning and the recreation of a particular tradition. This is because plurality and specificity in communication and culture are just as closely related to what is seen and said as to the way it is seen and said, and because what is important and substantial in culture and communication is not just the moment of creation and production, but also the moment of consumption, i.e., the moment of reception and often mass participation. However, local ability to produce contents and thus the chance to have local industries and policies seems today, as was the case 25 years ago, to be the fundamental part of any real policy to defend diversity. The Report indicated in its opening paragraphs that, “without fundamental structural changes, the majority of humanity will not be able to make use of the progresses in technology and communication”. Today we know that small and medium-sized cultures can usually only be renewed from their own singularity, and can only viably project themselves onwards and outwards if there are communication and culture industries capable of allowing the differentiated incorporation into technological change and globalisation, and the right policies to intervene in the modulation of this incorporation.

This is the framework in which it is important to establish the new agenda of communication and information problems. The topicality value of the MacBride Report and its analyses and suggestions rests on its ability to provide us with an appropriate historical perspective that allows us to tackle the present. Does remembering it contribute towards having a dynamic context of interpretation in which we can record our current problems and immediate agenda? *Quaderns del CAC* believes it does. And to propose our own assessment, we have turned to the intellect and capability of the Institute of Communication at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (InCom), led by Miquel de Moragas. The Catalonia Broadcasting Council would like to thank the hard work and ability with which InCom-

UAB has taken on the task of coordinating and preparing this issue, with the support of the very qualified set of contributions contained on these pages.

The agenda of the big issues the current debate about communication goes into is established in the middle of a contrasting situation: part of the world is on its way to joining the knowledge society, while the other part is immersed in a basic struggle against misery. From this perspective, the basis of the MacBride Report maintains its interest, and some of the risks detected in it have in fact only got worse and bigger, bringing its warnings into even sharper relief.

The reflections on the field of communications and the construction of strategies for decision-making in this area today covers an extensive range of questions. Some are of a theoretical and methodological nature, such as the very validity of the main paradigms inherited from the analysis of mass communication. Others concern communication policies, such as the deployment of major telecommunication infrastructures and the effective democratisation of access conditions. Others still refer to the question of the acceleration and expansion of the processes of concentration and centralisation of the big agencies, big media and main networks for the generation, selection and distribution of information and knowledge. Other reflections concern the perhaps paradoxical possibilities that some of these new information technologies offer for the development of other networks of an open and horizontal configuration.

The agenda should also inevitably include the difficulties some countries or communities have in planning or executing specific local policies which allow the deployment of similarly local communication and culture industries so that plural and diverse local issues can be present on global stages without having to necessarily be diluted into them. It should also include the accumulative chain of forms of dependency with regard to technology and software, languages and standards, genders, formats, authors' rights and control. And of course, it should include the subordination of the networks of marketing and distribution, market control and the forms of reception and consumption. All of this in contexts that translate the difficulties most cultures have in maintaining the ability to produce, reproduce and recreate something of their own, in the face of the growing demand from their communities to consume and receive more of nearly everything, especially heavily promoted metropolitan and hegemonic products linked to the predominant platforms.

The agenda also includes a criticism of current discourses about the 'free flow of information' and the consideration of communication and cultural products as simple goods, subject to the basic criteria of the doctrine of liberalisation. It is also important to mention the different proposals regarding the viability of intervention strategies using 'specificity' and the 'cultural exception'. To take one last example, we should also emphasise paying attention to an element as fundamental as the nature and delimitation of the public-service mission in the field of communication and knowledge and its role (function and objectives) with regard to the market, in the different models of society.

Today's agenda, like that of yesterday, is constantly being rebuilt in response to old problems that remain and new problems that have their roots in the past. It is possible that remembering and critically reviewing the great effort put into making the MacBride Report a generation ago could be inspiring and help us attune the ambition and energies we should incorporate into our actions and responses if we want to tackle the challenges we face.

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