

The MacBride Report – Always Topical

Gaëtan Tremblay

The claim for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that the Non-Aligned Countries had been calling for since the mid-1970s, culminated in 1980 in Unesco issuing the report entitled *Many Voices, One World*, more commonly known as the MacBride Report. The Report was published in an unfavourable international context characterised by a dying but exacerbated Cold War and the advance of neoliberal ideology. The good reception with which it was met in some regions of the world did nothing to oppose the negative environment that ultimately saw it condemned to isolation. 25 years later, what remains of the proposals of the MacBride Report? Has the world information and communications order changed? Does the renewal project it was the bearer of make sense today?

Calls for a fairer order and more balanced exchanges of information; exposing the communication-infrastructure requirements of countries in the South; and the affirmation of the right to communication first led Unesco member states to adopt the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). But bipolar positions, led by the imperatives of the Cold War, saw some Western countries, with the US at the fore, perceive the NWICO as a strategy of the Eastern Block countries. The crisis produced within the organisation reached a peak when the US walked out in 1984, officially alleging poor management as the reason.

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A year after the publication of the MacBride Report, Margaret Thatcher took over as the head of the UK Government and Ronald Reagan entered the White House. The 'leftist' Report, the inheritor of two decades of protests and demands, arrived at the time when the powerful rise of the conservative right, based on the theories of Friedrich Hayek and taken up by the followers of the Chicago School, began. In the West, the influence of the MacBride Report was from the very start swept away on a wave of hardline conservatism that called for the free flow of ideas and material goods across the world and the deregulation and, what's more, the *re*-regulation of communications such as air transport to better serve the corporate interests of big multinational groups.

The MacBride Report proposed an immense collective effort to allow disadvantaged countries to make up for their lag in terms of information and communication equipment. It aimed to establish a fairer and more balanced system of exchanges that appealed to human solidarity. The hegemonic ideology of the time offered up the market and free exchange as universal solutions to the world's evils.

The Report was never a best seller. Its repercussion on the international stage was only comparable to the Nora-Minc Report in France. However, it was appreciated in intellectual and academic circles, particularly in disadvantaged regions and some small countries without much influence on the management of world affairs. In Quebec, for example, the political and ideological situation meant it was given a more favourable reception.

The conservative right had never caused as much havoc as in other Western countries. Opposition to the Vietnam War had sowed the seeds of persistent distrust of imperialistic American goals. Quebec was fertile ground for media experimentations with popular educational and social-motivation purposes, which converged with the new

ideas expressed in the MacBride Report. The ideology of participation, widely accepted in academic circles, unions and associations, was in the phase of the aspirations to social justice and participative democracy that constituted its foundations.

A report by the Minister for Communications in June 1971 also evoked the unalienable right of all the citizens of Quebec to communication, according to their cultural, social, economic and political needs, and the duty of the State to have a modern communications system that would allow it to fully assume its responsibilities towards the people of Quebec. The step forward was of course very progressive. Without anyone knowing exactly why, after 1972-73 the Ministry's annual report abandoned this formulation in terms of goals and scrubbed any mention of the people's right to communication. Since then, it has been happy to simply list the Ministry's functions in a completely neutral language.

Was the MacBride Report misleading, with its interpretation of the state of the world and the trends manifested in it? Did the NWICO fail? Have its recommendations become obsolete or are they still topical?

The world of information and communications has changed greatly in a quarter of a century. Technological innovations occurred quickly after the early 1980s: micro-computers, cable distribution, Internet, etc. Today it is easy to reproach the authors of the MacBride Report for not having taken this into account, but who would have foreseen it? What are promotional or prophetic forecasts about the wired city, the virtual college, the development of micro-

computers and other such whims worth today? The innovations have expanded, but they have not brought about inherent social, cultural, economic or political transformations.

In fact, the MacBride Report did not get it wrong; it was shelved. The NWICO did not fail; it was never implemented.

Some progress has certainly been made over the past few decades. The Al-Jazeera network and its emulators now provide another voice to Southern countries, specifically the Arab world. Internet access, wherever it has expanded, opens up new possibilities for dissemination and exchange. But overall, the diagnosis made in the MacBride Report is unfortunately just as topical today. The difference between the rich and poor countries, rather than being eliminated, has got worse with the dissemination of the new technologies. The fact that people now talk about the digital divide, the 'numerical ditch', does little to change the issue.

The World Summit on the Information Society organised by the UN has made it possible to appreciate how deeply this imbalance has gone. If good intentions were clearly manifest at Geneva, very few specific commitments were announced. The Tunis round should make it possible for the international community, and in particular the developed countries, to see its gravity in their aspirations for a fairer and more balanced world in terms of information and communication. Can we catch a glimpse of a New World Information and Communication Order? Let us hope it has a brighter future than that of the NWICO of 1980. MacBride and his colleagues would be the first to be pleased.