

The Power of Sacred Texts

Daniel Biltereyst and Veva Leye

If one would organise a celebrity poll of the most important texts in the field of international communication and media studies at large, there might be a big chance that the *MacBride Report* ranks among the most frequently cited. The fact that the *Many Voices One World* report itself had become a scarce manuscript and had not been republished completely ever since 1980, only seemed to increase its canonical value. Ever since the *International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*, which began its workings in 1977, presented its findings three years later to the UNESCO General Conference, the *MacBride Report* succeeded in whipping up a debate, not only within the commission itself, the international political arena or the field of media and communications.

Also within the academic world, scholars quarrelled about the true meanings and implications of this text, inspiring critical academics to pursue the work around what was considered the legacy of the Report. Although the *MacBride Report* itself was a highly debatable and multifaceted text with a legendary spirit of compromise, it grew into a mythical text with perceived principles worth to (continue to) fight for. These included ideas such as the right to communicate, a new world order in the sphere of media and communication, the furtherance of international cooperation, the develop-

ment of true independence and self-reliance, better international news gathering and better conditions for journalists, the democratization of communication, and so on. The legacy underscored the idea that information and communication is a vital, liberating resource for economic, social and cultural emancipation. Engaging external experts and scholars for its workings, the *MacBride Report* had a major influence on scholarship in the field of international communication, inspiring till today efforts of global media/communication monitoring.

The Report however continued to be criticized and critics found fault with its tone of compromise, its hollow principles, its a-theoretical and a-historical nature. Political economists such as Herbert Schiller argued that the report did not investigate thoroughly patterns of control, while other critiques included the assumptions about large and positive effects of communication¹, the lack of a gender perspective², the inadequate address of the relationship between culture and communication policy³. Hamelink argued that “there were inadequacies in the structure of the recommendations that made their ineffectiveness almost inevitable”⁴. For some it was considered to be too conservative, for others too critical. The latter mainly shimmered through the reproach that it threatened the free flow of information doctrine by the attempt to impose rules, codes, new structures and other ‘statist’ interventions. From a more recent perspective the *Report* could be seen as neglecting or even ignoring the dynamics of what has become known as civil society and its belief in the power of public interest values, organizations and movements.

The history of what happened after the presentation of the *MacBride Report* is well-known. Its reception within UNESCO, the international political and media arena might be described at least as tumultuous, drifting a deeper wedge

Daniel Biltereyst

Professor in Cultural Media Studies and International Communication at the Gent University (Belgium)

Veva Leye

Doctoral Researcher at the Fund for Scientific Research (Belgium)

between the different parties in the debate on the *New World Information and Communication Order* (NWICO). However, the Report and its controversial historical reception must be seen as an expression of the time, characterised by changing power relations and the emergence of more offensive capitalist (geo)politics. In the 1980s, commercialisation, deregulation, liberalization and free-trade policies dominated the new political discourse, also in the field of media and communication, where new ICTs underscored the globalization euphoria.

It is true that the Commission could not have foreseen the profound political, economic, socio-cultural and technological changes which would occur in the next decade. However, although in the 1980s and 1990s the debate about the *MacBride Report* and NWICO left the UNESCO agenda, it stayed alive on the agenda of an emerging global civil society⁵. This debate ranged from the *MacBride Round Table*, a communications rights advocacy group, which met annually from 1989 to 1999 to, more recently, the *Communication Rights in the Information Society Campaign* (CRIS)⁶.

The driving force behind the survival of the *Mac Bride Report* legacy is that while the world might have changed tremendously, many issues dealing with media and communication imbalances and inequalities persist. The contrasts in terms of a media, information and communication inequality are nowadays most elegantly expressed as in terms of a digital divide. The world wide flows of media and communication changed, of course, but the main trends continue to underline imbalance, while major transnational

corporations still operate mainly from one of the three political-economic centres. There still is a need for systematic international communication monitoring, while the right to communicate is still a principle to be pursued. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, argued a couple of years ago that the “increasing backlash against globalization has come about, first, because its benefits and opportunities have been so highly concentrated among a relatively small number of countries and are spread unevenly within them”⁷.

Meanwhile the *MacBride Report* has become a mythical landmark in the field of international communications and one wonders who actually has read this canonical work. Building on Cees Hamelink’s comments on the “ad-hocracy” of the commission⁸, a question about the nature of such commissions arises. Usually their recommendations are not legally binding, what has been illustrated again by the *UN-UNESCO World Commission on Cultural Development* (1995), whose report *Our Creative Diversity* suggested some fairly radical proposals relating to media. But, as O Siochru, Girard and Mahan indicated, these proposals “never made it to the subsequent UNESCO conference in 1998 and have since sunk without a trace”⁹. From a post-modern perspective, then, the truth claim(s) such commissions make might be strongly questioned. This reminds us of the belief in “the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth”, endorsed in the Preamble of UNESCO’s *Constitution* by the Organization’s member states. History has shown us, though, that there are also Many Truths, yet only One World.

Notes

- 1 Basil, M. (1999). Unresearched Assumptions in the MacBride Report, pp 223-232, in R. C. Vincent, K. Nordenstreng, M. Traber, (eds.), *Towards Equity in Global Communication. MacBride Update*. Cresskill (N. J.): Hampton Press.
- 2 O Siochru, S. (2004). Will the Real WSIS Please Stand-Up? The Historic Encounter of the 'Information Society' and the 'Communication Society'. *Gazette: The International Journal of Communication*, 66(3-4), 203-224.
- 3 Ady, J. C. (1999). Transcending the Dialectic of Culture, p. 213 in: R. C. Vincent, K. Nordenstreng, M. Traber, (eds.), *Towards Equity in Global Communication. MacBride Update*. Cresskill (N. J.): Hampton Press.
- 4 Hamelink, C. J. (1997). MacBride with Hindsight, p. 86 in Golding, P., Harris, P. (ed.). *Beyond cultural imperialism. Globalization, communication and the new international order*. London: Sage.
- 5 Calabrese, A. (2004). The Promise of Civil Society: a Global Movement for Communication Rights. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 18(3), 324-325. Padovani, C. (2004, september). *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*. www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/publications/knowledge_report/memos/Padovanimemo4.pdf. Nordenstreng, K. (1999). The Context: The Great Media Debate, p. 262 in R. C. Vincent, K. Nordenstreng, M. Traber, (eds.), *Towards Equity in Global Communication. MacBride Update*. Cresskill (N. J.): Hampton Press.
- 6 See Padovani (2004) and O Siochru (2004).
- 7 Lecture for the Global Ethical Forum, 21 January 2002: http://www.weltethos.org/dat_eng/st_9e_xx/9e_144.htm.
- 8 "The establishment of such commissions would seem to reflect a longing for the old belief in wizards who have the mysterious power to wave their magic wand to solve perplexing problems." (Hamelink, 1997: 89-90).
- 9 O Siochru, S., Girard, B. and Mahan, A. (2002). *Global media governance. A beginner's guide*. Lanham (Md.): Rowman and Littlefield, p.124