

The MacBride Report: Its Mark on Catalonia

Miquel de Moragas

The vigour with which the debate and approval of the MacBride Report (1979-1980) was followed contrasts sharply with the speed with which it was filed away, or better said, with the success of the pressure applied to silence it around the world. The idea of a new world order of information and proposals to build communication policies in favour of development and democratisation were shunted aside under accusations of interventionism and the hindering of freedom of information. Unesco, affected by the withdrawal of the US and UK, incorporated this silence into its own communication policy.

On the other hand, the post-MacBride period, far from seeing communication policies buried, coincided with them being revitalised in the world's most developed countries. In Europe, the period coincided with the privatisation process of both television and telecommunications and the first steps towards a new information-society policy. The US, for its part, once it had largely neutralised the critical voices that questioned its hegemony in the sector of cultural industries and information, assured its leadership in the new-technologies sector, promoting new policies publicised by Vice President Al Gore under the slogan of "information highways".

The critics of the MacBride Report had managed to silence Unesco with respect to a new, more balanced information order which in fact coincided with a new phase of communication policies: the (American, European and Japanese) strategies for getting the best position in the new project of the information society.

Who were the big losers in the whole of this process? Without a doubt, the poorest countries, which had more difficulties in implementing communication policies that would favour their socioeconomic development and democracy.

Remembering the MacBride Report today is the same as taking another look at the needs of nations and regions that have not only not resolved their imbalance problems but rather seen them grow with the expansion of new information and communication technologies. In this sense, what is needed is a greater role and better-resolved position on the part of Unesco in the new phase represented by the World Summit on the Information Society, organised by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and which shall draw to a close in Tunis in 2005.

States and Nations in the Report¹

The passage of time has shown up the difficulties in applying the proposals of the MacBride Report, but has also allowed a glimpse of some of its main gaps. These include one which, from Catalonia, seems very obvious: the report's ignorance with respect to minority cultures and the world's stateless nations, although with one important exception: its defence of languages as an expression of cultural diversity. The new flow of information the MacBride Report called for referred exclusively to states, without considering the importance of other communication spaces, a question still pending today in relation to Europe's communication policy.

However, the MacBride Report had an important repercussion in Catalonia and on its communication policies.

The Report, and its proposals for communication policies, had emphasised that the free market was unable, or at

Miquel de Moragas

Director of Incom-UAB

least not enough, to make the democratic ideals of diversity and participation effective.

The most radical neoliberal positions in Catalonia were questioned from a special standpoint: the conviction that the Catalan identity and language were unviable from a single and strict framework of free commercial competition. The survival of the cultural identity thus implied the need for communication policies. Private initiative, arbitrariness, had been used as substitute tools with which Catalan civil society faced the Francoist dictatorship. But then, with the political transition to democracy and the recovery of Catalan institutions, it became more obvious that the public institutions had to promote new communication policies, procuring democratisation, cultural development and linguistic standardisation.

In this sense, we could evoke and assess the birth, shortly after the MacBride Report, in 1983, of Catalan television (TV3) and its option for a totally competitive public-television model. It was understood (a basic idea of communication policies) that to the delimitation of a political and cultural space there should be a communication space and that this space would not be guaranteed by market intervention alone.

The Catalan option for public television has not always been appreciated enough, and to do so we should remember the historical context: the approval of the MacBride Report in 1980 had determined, also in Catalonia and Spain, a hard campaign critical of the most radical positions, which was extensively reported by the press, spurred on by its own business interests at a time of multimedia transformation. The world context at the time was not the most favourable to public communication policies. Many people spoke against public-sector intervention in the media. The democratic legitimacy of these policies was called into question with phrases such as “the best communication policy is that which does not exist”. The memory of Francoism (a time of censorship and strict control over the media) was evoked as a (democratic) argument against communication policies.

Current Influence in Catalonia

The mark of the MacBride Report can be seen even today in different aspects of the Catalan communication model.

Its influence began in academic circles and went on to later be heard in professional and political sectors. In that regard, we have to assess the mediator role of the university. Particular concepts that are standard in parliamentary and journalistic circles today, such as communication spaces, media policies, democratic regulation, the convergence between communication and culture, etc., were born from the debate and academic reflection in the wake of the MacBride period. Moreover, the idea (and assessment) of communication policies as a key factor in democracy and cultural identity can be interpreted, at least partly, as a legacy of the debate.

Democratic media regulatory bodies, both public institutions like the Catalonia Broadcasting Council (CAC: www.audiovisualcat.net) and other professional self-regulating organisations like the Catalonia Information Council (CIC: www.periodistes.org/cic) could be interpreted as late fruit of these influences.

The MacBride Report revitalised the idea of cultural and communication spaces, conceded importance to the balance of flows, recognised the right to self-image and its dissemination, defended journalists' rights and referred to the need for consensus and independence among regulatory authorities. All of these are concepts which in Catalonia could be easily projected towards the construction of national communication policies.

Another of the contributions Catalonia received from the Report was the need to establish the debate about communication within an international context. Thus, the contrast between the claim for Catalan identity and the international perspective of the MacBride Report allowed Catalonia to advance in the understanding of key aspects of modern communication and culture. Catalonia's experience should not be interpreted as something isolated (and even less as something marginal or insignificant), but rather as a paradigmatic example of the modern dialectic between the global and the local.

Future

The whole of this experience could be beneficial in the face of the new phases that are opening up with the current convergences between various policies that have until now

been autonomous: telecommunications, culture, communication and, in general, the economy and social wellbeing.

Catalan communication institutions and universities should recover the MacBride spirit in the new European framework to favour new policies of cooperation, aimed not so much at competitiveness as at seeking a balance in a world that is becoming increasingly more dependent on communication.

Note

- 1 The author first referred to these questions in: MIQUEL DE MORAGAS. "Catalunya i el Nou Ordre Mundial de la Comunicació". In: *Revista de Catalunya*, no. 2, November 1986 (pp. 22-33).