

The MacBride Report 25 Years Later. The Proposal the First World Refused to Accept

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The MacBride Report presented a spot-on diagnosis on world communication and future trends. Fruit of the consensus and rigorous work of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, which took the name of its president, unfortunately its effort was not crowned with success. The most developed countries, particularly the US, could not or did not want to understand the need for new international relationships that required a profound structural change both in the fields of communication, information and culture as well as in the field of the old economic order built in the wake of WWII (Nordestreng 1986; Preston 1989).

The two premises on which the Report was built have turned out, in 2005, to be truly prophetic. Firstly, it said the right to inform and be informed was one of the key points of modern societies, to the extent that the growing concentration of the power to inform could lead to new types of control in which there would be no separation of power from society. Secondly, it said that information was a key resource, the treatment of which had to include interactions between communication, technology and culture. From there, it proposed five main areas of action:

- 1) Promote the inclusion of communication as a fundamental right of individuals and groups.
- 2) Reduce the imbalances, inequalities and distortions that affect news structures and flows.
- 3) Shore up all efforts to promote a global strategy for democratic communication in an interdependent world, but respecting cultural identities and individual rights.

- 4) Promote the formulation of national communication policies that would be coherent and lasting in the broadest framework of the processes of development.
- 5) Explore the bases on which a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) as a component of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) should be established.

It is clear that the path for proposals and particular actions to bear some fruit was multilateral cooperation through the organisations in the UN system, particularly Unesco. The motto was very simple: solidarity. However, just when the Report was approved, in 1980, the technological superiority of the First World over the rest of the planet became definitive and favoured the US very noticeably. So, as it no longer had a majority in the Unesco General Conference, the First World felt particularly irritated by a proposal which, in short, wanted information technology to be the patrimony of all and which claimed that the right to transmit also belonged to everybody, in a framework of absolute respect for the cultural identity of each country.

Furthermore, the arrival to power of the US conservatives with the first Reagan administration, whose programme had been prepared by the right-wing think tank the Heritage Foundation, led to the abandonment of a line of internal opposition to the NWICO in favour of a markedly anti-UN and anti-Unesco programme (Dupont 1986; Gifreu 1986; Pines 1984). Thus, there was a change from the reservations presented by the Western Group at the 21st General Conference (Belgrade, 1980) with regard to everything related to the elimination of imbalances, control of monopolies, elimination of barriers and plurality of the sources and channels of information, to the announcement of the withdrawal from Unesco by the US. After that date (28 December 1983), the NWICO became a set of 'Soviet-led

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projects incompatible with the basic freedoms of a democratic society (Harris 1984; U.S. Department of State, 1984). These opinions on the NWICO were also taken up and spread by the major media corporations throughout the whole of the period from the announcement of America's withdrawal in 1983 to its definitive exit in 1985 (Herman 1989).

Sean MacBride and Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow meant consensus and constructive spirit. M'Bow (director-general) not only knew how to put a brake on the rapture that was on the point of occurring at the 19th General Conference (Nairobi, 1976), but also promoted the adoption of resolutions by consensus and not mechanical majorities, and proposed MacBride as the president of an international commission to study communication problems in modern society. MacBride was a Nobel and Lenin Peace Prize winner, the co-founder of Amnesty International, a man with experience in government and with a profound knowledge about the world of communication. His work, like that of all of the commission (including the US's Elie Abel), was exemplary. The conservative right, however, turned them into an obsession and a target for attacks, when it denounced the NWICO as a danger to freedom of expression and information (Dupont 1986; Gifreu 1986; Pines, 1984). MacBride was silenced and M'Bow removed from his post (1986). There still remained the question of liquidating the Report and the spirit of consensus that had made it possible. This was done via what was known during the period when Federico Mayor Zaragoza headed up the organisation, as Unesco's 'new strategy' on communication.

At the 24th General Conference (Paris, 1989) all of the principles related to the NWICO began to be diluted and discussion returned to news flows and the role of the media in the development of the Third World in line with the arguments that had been used when Unesco was established and which favoured the imposition at the world scale of the postulates of the US from 1946 through to 1970. Concepts such as 'balance', 'national communication policies' and the 'right to communicate' no longer held any meaning in the most important agency of the United Nations. That is why the 3rd Medium-Term Plan introduced a series of 'precisions' and 'qualifications' that laid the groundwork for returning to the idea of the 'free flow of information' as Western governments and the big

professional organisations and media owners understood it. It was felt that the NWICO made the mistake of understanding freedom of information as an implicit prerequisite and efforts were made to once again make it explicit with the formula: 'broader and better balanced free flow of information at the national and international levels', without any obstacle for the freedom of information. Thus doubts about the elimination of imbalances, suppression of the negative effects of certain monopolies, the cutting of internal and external barriers to the free flow of information and the plurality of the sources and channels of information were resolved. In other words: the 'Western reservations' shown at the 21st General Conference (Belgrade, 1980) were thus overcome. It was not long until the requisites of the 'broader and better balanced flow of information' were also eliminated (that had been implicitly understood in the previous formula) (Unesco 1989).

Meanwhile, three meetings on media development and democracy held in Windhoek (1991), Almaty (1992) and Santiago de Chile (1994), were used to return to the paternalistic concept of development. After the 26th General Conference (Paris, 1991) the reference text would be the Declaration of Windhoek (1991). Under the motto 'development, participation and communication are part of a continuum', the IPDC reformed its statutes and began to accept private-sector projects, giving them priority when they competed with the public sector in the same country. In other words, the path was opened to US demands to give a greater role to private corporations in international affairs.

The way was also lost with regard to training programmes. Under the 'new strategy', Unesco was defined as the appropriate forum for facilitating dialogue between governments, journalists and civil society. In this regard, Unesco's policy was to encourage self-regulation amongst journalists rather than establish laws and regulations that note and control, i.e., censor, media content. If Unesco entered this area it could run the risk of undermining one of the main goals of its charter, which was to promote the free flow of ideas, words and images. Now nothing remained of the old NWICO project.

On the 25th anniversary of the approval of the MacBride Report, it could be said that its diagnosis was correct and spot-on. World communication today has all the negative features listed in 1980, improved and increased by the

doctrine of the free flow of information. This is a doctrine, which, under the slogan of 'liberal', hides the subordination of all other freedoms to the freedom to pure and simple trade. In other words, the freedom that the powerful took on to appropriate resources, markets, technologies, culture, etc., in the name of a freedom which does not generate benefits for anyone other than themselves. That is why I believe Unesco's current policy (WSIS, the draft convention on cultural diversity, etc.) will have problems moving from mere formulation into effective policies, because it lacks the bond provided by the NWICO, particularly because it was inseparable from a New International Economic Order.

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