

The forgotten history of global communication negotiations at the League of Nations

By Kaarle Nordenstreng, University of Tampere (Finland)

Published in

*The World Summit on the Information Society:
Moving from the Past into the Future*

edited by Daniel Stauffacher & Wolfgang Kleinwächter
(UNICT Task Force, New York 2005, pp. 119-124)

WSIS represents the highest and broadest platform of global negotiations on communication ever to take place. Surely the ITU, the oldest specialized UN agency, has handled the international regulation of telecommunication and radio spectrum for over a century; UNESCO has contributed to the development of mass media and other information systems since its founding sixty years ago; and as early as in 1948 the UN itself held a historical Conference on Information, which among other things drafted the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, none of these other platforms has achieved the profile and prestige of WSIS.

On the other hand, WSIS has not yet produced more than good intentions: a declaration and a plan of action. True, the declaration also exists as a version by the non-governmental organizations – a manifestation of the new multi-stakeholder culture – and in this respect WSIS paves the way towards a more democratic global governance. But still it is too early to say whether the high profile and prestige of WSIS will live in history as a platform to transform visions into reality or merely as a show place – a late repeat of the dot-com bubble at the level of international diplomacy.

In any case it is important to realize that WSIS is not a unique event without historical roots. On the contrary, it should be seen as a crystallization of long-term developments in political, economic and cultural spheres. And in this respect it symbolizes a long history of multilateral negotiations concerning communications.

Quite an impressive history of global negotiations on communication is found in the celebrated 60 year-old UN and UNESCO, including the rise and fall of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). But there is a prehistory to this post-World War II period: a forgotten story of the League of Nations. Actually the roots of WSIS go back to Geneva in 1925 as much as to San Francisco or London in 1945.

After World War I it was believed that a new era was to begin in international relations. The horrors of war were fresh in people's minds; there was a need to prevent future wars and to establish conditions for lasting peace. Power politics and clandestine diplomacy were regarded as major reasons for the outbreak of war. Now the time had come to replace them with international cooperation, collective security and open diplomacy. The League of Nations was established in 1920 to nurture these aspirations; it was the first great exercise of the world organizing itself for peace.

One of the leading ideas of the League was to work in public and to give wide publicity to its activities, marking the dawn of open diplomacy. The League also relied upon the influence and impact of public opinion in international relations; President Woodrow Wilson even called the League “the court of public opinion”. Accordingly, the press was incorporated into the system of

international relations in an unprecedented manner – comparable only to the step taken earlier when the press assumed its pivotal role in bourgeois democracy by operating as the “fourth estate” next to the legislative, executive and judiciary powers.

It was in this spirit that the delegate for Chile stated in the League Assembly on 16 September 1925: “We must stimulate among the people that new spirit which the war produced and which the League of Nations is trying to spread throughout the world... A universal bond of feeling unites all men and all peoples on the question of peace and the welfare of the working classes. The Press is the vanguard of these ideas, and that is why I submit the following draft resolution to the Assembly.” The proposed resolution was thoroughly discussed by the Assembly and adopted unanimously on the same day in the following form:

The Assembly,

Considering that the Press constitutes the most effective means of guiding public opinion towards that moral disarmament which is a concomitant condition of material disarmament:

Invites the Council to consider the desirability of convening a committee of experts representing the Press of the different continents with a view to determining methods of contributing towards the organisation of peace, especially:

(a) By ensuring the more rapid and less costly transmission of Press news with a view to reducing risks of international misunderstanding;

(b) And by discussing all technical problems the settlement of which would be conducive to the tranquillisation of public opinion.

The resolution became the first overall position regarding the mass media that has ever been taken by the international community through its multilateral organization. It is a remarkable resolution not only because of its historical nature but also because of its political and professional substance. It sets the agenda for a deliberation of technical problems, not only in loose relation to a political context (as is the case of WSIS), but explicitly subordinated to the overall objective of peace and international understanding. Moreover, it combines press and disarmament – two topics, which over the decades, have become more and more sensitive on their own, not to speak of them in combination.

The resolution was followed up by a round of consultations with various countries and international associations (replies from more than 25 countries by March 1926), a meeting of 16 news agencies in August 1926, a meeting of press bureaux of 17 countries in October 1926, as well as an ad hoc committee drawn from the members of the International Association of Journalists accredited to the League of Nations in January 1927. On the basis of these preparations the League Council decided in March 1927 to convene a Conference of Press Experts in Geneva on 24-29 August 1927.

Accordingly, the PrepCom of those days led to a major meeting in less than a year, and the conference itself was extremely productive. It was attended by over a hundred delegates from 38 countries and adopted a number of resolutions amounting to a programme “in order that journalists may have every facility in residing, travelling, securing news and improving their professional equipment, and that news itself may be free at the source, expedited in every possible way in its transmission, protected before and after publication against unfair appropriation, and given the widest possible dissemination, to the end that the work of the Press may be made more effective in its responsible mission accurately and conscientiously to inform world public opinion and hence to contribute directly to the preservation of peace and the advancement of civilisation”.

The results of the Conference were welcomed by the League Council at its next session in September 1927. The most technical issues were referred to the Organisation for Communications and Transit, while other resolutions, including those on the protection of news and on the professional facilities of journalists, were followed up by the Council in consultation with different governments. However, no spectacular achievements seem to have taken place in this area in the course of the following few years. This shows that despite good intentions and even euphoria, real steps to implement were slow and few.

Still the League went on in this field, and the next milestones were in the early 1930's in the context of the 1932-33 World Disarmament Conference under the shadow of a deteriorating international situation. The Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press was convened in Copenhagen in January 1932. The scope of this Conference was less technical than that of the 1927 Geneva Conference with its main concern on "inaccurate news", the rest covering follow-up of the earlier Geneva Conference and cooperation of official press bureaux.

The Copenhagen Conference was followed up by the Second Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press, convened in Madrid in November 1933. It reviewed the action taking under the earlier Copenhagen resolutions and considered various related problems such as the right to correct false information in the international field, the intellectual role of the press, broadcasting and international relations, and the status of press correspondents in foreign countries. However, its resolutions full of good intentions were never put to practice. The mounting contradictions in the international political atmosphere paralyzed these activities.

Apart from these expert conferences, mass media emerged as a central issue in the World Disarmament Conference preparation which started already in 1925, soon after the first resolution on media. In the early 1930s the Polish, Swedish and Spanish delegations made proposals regarding "moral disarmament" and the flagrant contradictions between demands for reduction of armaments or demands for total disarmament and an increasingly violent hate campaign intended to promote disorder and even war – false information about other countries which appear in the press. When the Conference was finally convened in 1932, it appointed among others a special Committee on Moral Disarmament. However, despite a draft text with four Articles on this topic to be included in the General Convention for the Limitation of Armaments, moral disarmament remains but a footnote in history – most interesting and intriguing, but still a footnote.

Towards the end of the Disarmament Conference in 1933 the international situation was steadily deteriorating, and what happened outside the League had a profound effect on the fate of the Conference. Philip Noel-Baker, the British statesman and Nobel Prize winner, who at the time was personal assistant to the President of the Disarmament Conference and later wrote a book about the Conference and on the reasons why it failed, has stated that the chances of success for the Conference would have been much greater if the timing had been earlier, in 1931 or even 1930. The same assessment was confirmed at a symposium "The League of Nations in retrospect" in Geneva in 1980 where it was stated that "the Disarmament Conference came far too late" and that "the collapse of the Disarmament Conference cannot be imputed to the League of Nations".

As pointed out by Noel-Baker, in many countries there were people who thought that the League and disarmament were utopian nonsense since "whatever you do, war will come". Such an attitude was to be found in certain circles both within and outside governments. It was not only a spontaneous attitude but also something that was deliberately mobilized by anti-disarmament lobbies. For example, in Britain some private arms manufacturers were eager to support and re-arm Hitler, and this support of the military-industrial complex had all the effects of creating the illusion

of public support for the militarist Ministers in the Government. The same happened in France where most important newspapers were brought under the control of the Comité des Forges – the Private Arms Manufacturers of France, with a ruthless campaign against the League and its Disarmament Conference. Likewise in Germany, the Hugenburg Konzern bought more than half of all the daily newspapers and other key media using them against the Treaty of Versailles, against the League and against disarmament. And it worked. As Noel-Baker noted, in this struggle the internationalists have won all the arguments, but the militarists have won all the material victories that count.

Still, there was some progress in the League of Nations in the 1930s, particularly regarding the “modern methods utilized in the cause of peace”, along with the general development of film and radio. The first manifestation of these mass media emerging outside the conventional press was the attention devoted to the educational use of “cinematography”. Thus film was not primarily considered as a political factor related to peace but rather as an educational method within the overall framework of “intellectual co-operation”.

Radio – or as it came to be called by the 1930s, “broadcasting” – was the real “modern means” that captured the attention of international politics at the League. Here also a point of departure was the educational use of the medium: in September 1931 the League Assembly passed a resolution relating to the intellectual co-operation, in particular to an enquiry being carried out by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation on the educational aspects broadcasting, and this resolution recommended that the enquiry “should cover all the international questions raised by the use of broadcasting in regard to good international relations”. The resolution, backed by the consideration of moral disarmament, launched a five-year process which culminated in September 1936 in the adoption and signing by the Plenipotentiaries of 28 States the International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace – an instrument still nominally in force but by now practically a dead letter.

So what is the lesson of this exercise in history for the WSIS?

The main lesson is that good intentions do not necessarily materialise into concrete reality. Global negotiations and diplomatic agreements are a necessary but not sufficient condition for change in the world. In addition to goodwill there must also be genuine political will as well as economic and administrative support.

In addition it should be noted that the focus of global communication concern has shifted in 80 years from public opinion to ICT. It should also be kept in mind that the composition of the international community has grown from just about 50 predominantly Western countries, including imperial powers, into nearly 200 independent states, most of them from the so-called Third World.

Yet, the public opinion factor has not lost its relevance in the contemporary world of globalisation. Actually, another lesson of the League of Nations story is to remember the vital role of media in public opinion and international relations. Thus, in the midst of concern about ICT we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Consequently, there is good reason to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the first resolution in September 2005 at the beginning of the PrepCom 3.