Media Development

Revisiting
MacBride:
Communicative
Justice Today
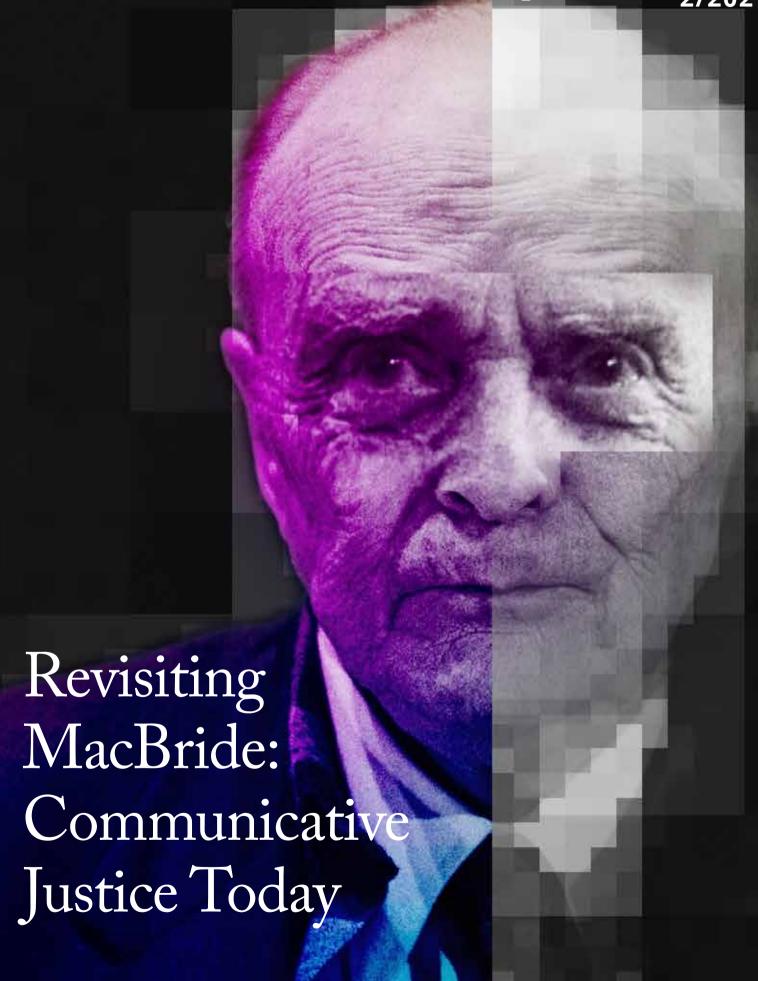
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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The 3/2021 issue of Media Development will explore shrinking public communication spaces, digital inclusion, and the need for concerted action by civil society to hold governments and big data to account.

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EDITORIAL

Those familiar with the history of the 1970s New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and the 1980s communication rights movement will remember the name of Seán MacBride as the chairperson of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, which produced the report "Many Voices, One World". Paradoxically, this much-feted event in communication circles played only a tiny part in the remarkable life and career of a man who was both respected and controversial for his views on political struggle.

The son of Irish military leader John MacBride and suffragist and actress Maud Gonne, Seán MacBride was born in 1904 in Paris, where he lived until 1916 when he moved to Ireland. MacBride retained his soft-spoken, slightly Germanic, French accent all his life. At the age of 12, the British executed his father for taking part in the Easter Rising. At 14, he witnessed his mother's arrest on charges of painting banners for seditious demonstrations and preparing anti-government literature. At 15, MacBride joined the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and at 17, he went to London with Irish revolutionary Michael Collins for the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations.

MacBride went on to become chief of staff of the IRA. He was twice secretary to Éamon de Valera, President of the Irish Republic, and he later founded Clann na Poblachta (the political party that set itself up as an alternative to De Valera's Fianna Fail). He became Ireland's most distinguished lawyer, founder of Amnesty International, United Nations Commissioner for Namibia, and the only person awarded both the Nobel (1974) and Lenin (1977) peace prizes. Seán MacBride died on 15 January 1988.[1]

It is no surprise that the mantras of liberation, self-determination, and anti-colonialism that marked MacBride's early political life, and his later work to promote global justice and peace, should find expression in the MacBride Report, "Many Voices, One World". As other commentators have pointed out:

"It was Seán MacBride's involvement in movements for human rights and peace that led him to be concerned with questions of communication. Trying to influence public opinion on these issues, he could not help facing the strategic role of the mass media. Also, like many others, he realised that communication is an increasingly important human right of its own which needs protection."[2]

Identifying the democratization of communication, diversity of media, accessibility and affordability as key issues, the MacBride Report pointed out that democratization could not simply be reduced to its quantitative aspects, but that qualitatively a combination of processes were needed:

"[Democratization] means broader access to existing media by the general public; but access is only a part of the democratization process. It also means broader possibilities for nations, political forces, cultural communities, economic entities, and social groups to interchange information on a more equal footing, without dominance over the weaker partners and without discrimination against any one. In other words, it implies a change of outlook. There is surely a necessity for more abundant information from a plurality of sources, but if the opportunity to reciprocate is not available, the communication process is not adequately democratic."[3]

If the MacBride Commission were to sit today, what might its members have to say about inclusion, exclusion, and social progress in a world taken over by digital technologies of all kinds? That is the focus of this issue of *Media Development,* in which Cees J. Hamelink suggests that "The time for commissions of wise men and women to deal with burning global issues belongs to the past." It's an acute observation, given the many calls for civil

society to play a more vital role in policy-making. The same author concludes:

"The 'many voices, one world' theme of the MacBride Commission will in the 21st century have to be dealt with from the bottom up. No longer as a debate on a new global order or a global re-set, but in the form of inspirational local initiatives that… could reach a critical mass that constitutes the tipping point to realize the 'communicative justice' that was the global aspiration all along."

The mantra of communicative justice, closely allied to genuine social progress, has been explored in several previous issues of WACC's journal *Media Development*. Themes such as "Expanding Public Communication Spaces" (3/2020), "MacBride+40: What Next for Media Democracy" (3/2019), "Wanted: Sustainable Development Goal 18" (2/2019) and "Digital Futures" (1/2017) are persistent in their advocacy of communication rights as a vital component of sustainable development.

The MacBride Report, and the work of the MacBride Round Tables that followed it, led directly to the communication rights movement, energized by the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Twenty years later, its impetus slowed in the face of political roadblocks, transnational media conglomerates, deregulation, technological convergence, the emergence of Internet service providers, and unregulated digital platforms.

The kind of social progress implicitly advocated by the MacBride Report was stymied by globalization, neoliberalism, corporate greed, and finally a politics of fear in the context of the return of right-wing politics and populism. Nevertheless, in the considered opinion of Juan Somavia – a member of the original MacBride Commission – and Kaarle Nordenstreng:

"The MacBride Commission was a success story in its time. Its vision based on the democ-ratization of communication continues to be relevant in today's totally different context and indeed would serve well as a model for a new round of global reflection and multilateral policy action."

And for Stefania Milan, also writing in this issue:

"Without a doubt, our digital ecosystem urgently needs a new MacBride Commission able to produce a comprehensive critique of the state of play, and to identify corrective policy measures and directions for activists and practitioners to follow in the attempt to reclaim the central role of communications for human development."

The question is how civil society, "from the bottom up" and in tandem with stakeholders worldwide, can organize and mobilize to bring about digital justice – in terms of diversity, equality of access, affordability, and transparency – before those that seek to retain power and profit without accountability seize the day. ∎

Notes
1. Two biographies have been published: *Seán MacBride: A Biography*, by Anthony J. Jordan. Blackwater Press, 1993; *An Irish Statesman and Revolutionary: The Nationalist and Internationalist Politics of Seán MacBride*, by Elizabeth Keane. Tauris, 2006.
2. "Seán MacBride: A Short Biography" by Jörg Becker and Kaarle Nordenstreng in *Few Voices, Many Worlds: Towards a Media Reform Movement*, ed. by Michael Traber & Kaarle Nordenstreng. London: WACC, 1992, p. 20.
3. *Many Voices, One World. Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order.* Paris: UNESCO, 1980, p. 173.

Revisiting 45 years of history in communication policies

Kaarle Nordenstreng and Juan Somavia

This article is an extension to the video presentation at the online conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in its final plenary. It reminds us of the origins of the MacBride Commission and provides an insider's view of the Commission's work. It also reflects on the changing landscape of international relations and communication from a present–day perspective.

Knowing and understanding history is indispensable – and too often overlooked – also in matters of international communication. A short history lesson on the MacBride Commission leads us to two root causes.

First, the immediate launching ground was UNESCO's General Conference in Nairobi in November 1976 and one item on its agenda: Draft Declaration on Fundamental Principles Governing the Use of the Mass Media in Strengthening Peace and International Understanding and in Combating War Propaganda, Racism and Apartheid (Nordenstreng, 1984: 101-113). This document originated from a Soviet-inspired UNESCO initiative of the early 1970s attempting to formulate normative guidelines for media in matters of global concern. It had been prepared by experts and diplomats and was merely a reminder of the existing international norms and instruments. But there was one Article on "state responsibility" and a reference to the recent UN resolution defining Zionism as a form of racism, and these became a *casus belli* for Western governments and media. A campaign was mounted against the Draft Declaration, suggesting that the Declaration would be a "curb" to control media in the interest of the socialist East and most of the developing South.

The political controversy in Nairobi escalated into a crisis which was tactfully handled by Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. He suggested that the Draft Declaration, although prepared by an intergovernmental conference the previous year, be postponed and further negotiated aiming at consensus, and that meanwhile a "reflection group" be formed to undertake "a comprehensive study on the problems of communication in the modern world" – the mandate of the MacBride Commission. To balance these conceptual and normative activities unpalatable to the West was an initiative to begin mobilizing material resources for the media systems of the developing countries – something which was unwelcome among hard-liners in the East and South as the "Marshall Plan of Telecommunication". In the end a delicate balance of different interests was approved by consensus. M'Bow deserves a medal in commemoration of this historical achievement when he turns 100 on 21 March 2021.

Second, the deeper roots of the MacBride Commission lead us to the global context – a movement towards a new international information order (Nordenstreng, 1984: 3-77). Four different, although partly overlapping, stages can be discerned in the development of the global relation of forces since the early 1970s – in the field of media policies as well as in the grand designs of world political strategies – until the late 1980s, when the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War heralded a new era in history with globalization as its main feature until the new millennium.[1]

The first stage, from the early 1970s until 1976, was dominated by a *decolonization offensive* by the developing countries against the industrialized West. Its first landmark was the 4th

summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Algiers (1973) declaring that "the activities of imperialism are not confined solely to the political and economic fields, but also cover the cultural and social fields" and demanding "concerted actions in the fields of mass communication". This led to the NAM Symposium on Information in Tunis (April 1976), to the founding of the NAM Pool of Press Agencies in New Delhi (July 1976) and finally to the political declaration of the 5th NAM summit in Colombo (August 1976) proclaiming: "A new international information order in the fields of information and mass communication is as important as a new international economic order."

The second stage can be characterized as a *Western counterattack* of a self-defensive nature, which peaked in 1976-77, mainly against UNESCO's programme promoting communication policies. The third strategic stage in 1978-80 emerged soon after the second and was marked by the adoption of the Mass Media Declaration and the MacBride Commission. It can be characterized as tactical maneuvering in a spirit of compromise, or *truce*. The fourth stage followed after 1980, when the Western countries once more adopted a confrontational course, with a *corporate offensive*.

Accordingly, the MacBride Commission was no isolated chapter in history; it was an integral part of a highly politicized information war, academically known as the great global media debate (Gerbner, Mowlana and Nordenstreng, 1993). Originating 45 years ago in the eventful year 1976, the Commission should be seen as a manifestation of a long and tortuous process.
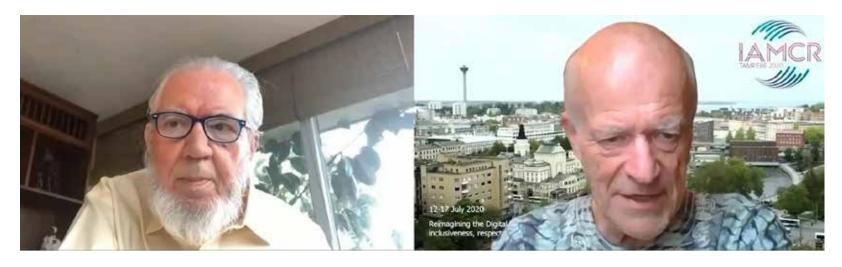
Commission member Somavia recalls its mission[2]

From the perspective of the developing countries of the time, confronting "information dependency" and placing it at the heart of the report was both daring and indispensable for an autonomous development outlook. It began with the dynamics of decolonization and was part of a wider struggle to deal with neo-colonialism, but was rapidly transformed into a powerful Third World movement, both governmental and non-governmental: countries wanting to assert themselves with their own cultural and political identity. They felt that their reality was communicated to the rest of the world, including their own countries, with the cultural, and often political bias of the four Western news agencies (AP, UPI, Reuters, AFP) which dominated the international media arena of the time. All this in the context of the Cold War with a polarized East-West information sphere.

These elements led to the realization that we needed a new world information and communication order (NWICO). What the report does is to legitimize that discussion and show a way forward based on the conviction that this outlandish idea was indeed possible. Four key values or cornerstones emerge from the report.

The first is respect for diversity and cultural identity – the basic notion of respect for the other. And it is not only in terms of acknowledging that the developing world is not well reflected, but also has to do with the essence of communication at the national level: you have to respect the other – national, society, culture, individual, gender. It should reinforce social cohesion and convey a sense of belonging. As the comment by Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Somavia in the MacBride report puts it: "Communication… is a determining factor of all social processes and a fundamental component of the way societies are organized." (*Many Voices…*, 1980: 281)

The second value is the need to democratize communications, which means acknowledging the rights to inform and be informed as human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the related Covenants. That means you need to have a multiplicity of sources, from vertical to horizontal. Moreover, it proclaims a need to go beyond elites and to give the voice of the people a more direct hearing. Sources need to reflect the society that we are describing. So, it began as an international problem, but it also dealt with communication at home. And, linked to that, is the unequal concentration of

Dr Juan Somavia (left) and Professor Kaarle Nordenstreng (right) conversing during the 2020 online conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

power and the need for a balanced and transparent relationship between the controllers and media output as a cornerstone of democracy.

The third value is the conviction that information is not a commodity. It is a right and consequently has a social function. As a foundation of society and development, it is an integral part of the manner in which societies move forward. It is fundamental to social cohesion, but it costs something and there is a price to be paid. The report states that we have to distinguish between communication as a business and the meaning of communication in society. Consequently, communication cannot be considered simply as a commodity.

The fourth key value is to acknowledge a link between international information and global peace and security issues – that information should not be used as a tool in the East-West confrontation of the time. The fact is given – and this is where the Cold War comes in so strongly – that the extent of disinformation, misrepresentation and distortion on both sides and their link to international peace and security was extremely strong.

Forty years later the world is quite different, but the key values prevail

The East-West confrontation of the Cold War era is long gone, neoliberal globalization has emerged and is in crisis, different forms of global power shifts are underway, the Internet has proliferated, changing the entire media ecology, and

it is no longer the four news agencies but five large international platform oligopolies that dominate the communication scene. How does the Commission's message look from the perspective of today?

We should ask if communication today is more democratic; are information flows more democratic? In terms of individual access, we must answer yes, the capacity to communicate has expanded enormously. Anybody can tweet something, and if it strikes a chord, it can become a trending topic. It is also a major instrument of social organization and activism and many other expressions of individual and social activities. At the same time this expansion has brought about the dispersion of responsibility for what goes into the air; there are enormous problems in digital access. We are at the very threshold of addressing this matter as an issue of a democratic society. Also, access comes with a basic commercial conditionality by the five global companies and their use of our personal data for business purposes. This is a blatant invasion of people's privacy. Again, we are just beginning to grapple with this issue.

Another question is content: is it more culturally and politically diverse? It is in terms of availability, but it has not changed the basic norm described in the report: one way or another, the owners and the controllers of the communication system continue to call the shots. Misinformation is rampant, professional information is being replaced by opinion and accountability for fake news is non-existent. So, in a certain sense,

the traditional, professional role of journalism and of making information available is being much more constrained by the manner in which the power of large enterprises determines the nature of content.

Summing up, we are led to the question of credibility of information fuelled in part by a disconnect between the people and the elites and in part by the enormous multiplicity of sources, leading to a lack of trust in what comes out from the system. So, whom do you believe? You ultimately choose those who share your own views, including your family, friends and the people you trust. And in terms of public information, you find yourself connected to likeminded people; in a sort of sociological mutation, you become a complacent fellow traveller rather than a citizen exercising the right to be informed.

In the end, the above four values continue to question our communication systems and information flows in a different technological and political setting. From the perspective of human rights and power structures, democratization continues to fall short. Again, the comment by Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Somavia remains topical:

"More democratic communication structures are a national and international need of peoples everywhere promoting access, participation, decentralization, open management, and the diffusion of power, concentrated in the hands of commercial or bureaucratic interests, is a worldwide necessity." (*Many Voices…*, 1980: 281)

Changing platforms of communication policy: Time for a comprehensive look

The great global media debate since the mid-1970s was largely facilitated by UNESCO with the MacBride Commission as its flagship. However, UNESCO lost its leadership of the intellectual movement by the mid-1980s after the Reagan administration and the corporate offensive pushed it to make a U-turn in media policies (Preston, Herman and Schiller, 1989). At this stage, UNESCO ceased to promote the ideas of the Commission.[3] Also the Mass Media Declaration was deliberately forgotten and NWICO had no place in the Organization. Normative and standard-setting issues were set aside and UNESCO adopted the traditional free flow of information doctrine, while the Constitution sets as its overriding mission the advancement of the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples for the higher cause of peace and security (Nordenstreng, 2013).

To fill the intellectual and political vacuum around NWICO, a number of non-governmental professional and academic organizations created a platform to follow up the work of the Commission as a grassroots initiative (Traber and Nordenstreng, 1994). The MacBride Round Table on Communication met first in Harare (Zimbabwe) in 1989 and thereafter annually in different parts of the world (Vincent and Nordenstreng, 2016). However, after 2000 it was no longer convened.[4]

The new millennium introduced new momentum to international communication policies with the UN and ITU organizing the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005.[5] The intergovernmental platform with an extensive NGO following replaced UNESCO and the MacBride Round Table as a forum for bringing various parties together to discuss and take action on common concerns, especially in the era of digital communication. It gave birth to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as a body for all stakeholders from governments, private sector as well as civil society.

The Internet-related global debate is well established,[6] also at the European level,[7] with the latest contribution the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.[8] All this is welcome but does not address the ever growing global problems of communication. Especially topical is a trend against democratization under the pressure from both authoritarian governments and private giants. Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's Big Bother are lurking around some governments, while commercial giants threaten the individual and collect-

ive rights of citizens, surrounded by a strategic competition between China and the USA, with many communication components.

This dangerous landscape calls for a fresh look with a comprehensive approach. The MacBride Commission was a success story in its time. Its vision based on the democratization of communication continues to be relevant in today's totally different context and indeed would serve well as a model for a new round of global reflection and multilateral policy action. ∎

Notes
1. For details, see reviews on the Commission's 25th and 30th anniversaries (Nordenstreng, 2005 and 2010). Nordenstreng attended the Non-Aligned Symposium on Information (April 1976) as a representative of the invited guest, Finland, and participated in all General Conferences of UNESCO dealing with the Mass Media Declaration and the MacBride Commission (1976-85) as President of the International Organization of Journalists (IOJ).
2. At the time Somavia was director of the Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Transnacionales (ILET) while in exile from the Pinochet dictatorship in Mexico. ILET had a major program on international communication headed by Fernando Reyes Matta, who became a senior advisor to the Commission. This, together with the vision of Commission member Gabriel García Márquez, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, provided a think tank contribution to the Commission's work.
3. By the end of the 1990 the Commission's report in English ran out of print and UNESCO no longer took new printings. Instead, media scholars arranged a reprint by the American Publisher Roman & Littlefield in 2004.
4. https://indstate.edu/cas/macbrideroundtable
5. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/
6. For example, see http://www.circleid.com/posts/20210108-internet-governance-outlook-2021-digital-cacaphony/
7. For example, see https://www.eurodig.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EuroDIG_Media-and-Content_A-Decade-of-Change.pdf
8. https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/

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