

# Media Development

2/2021

WACC



Revisiting  
MacBride:  
Communicative  
Justice Today

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**actalliance**

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>**

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-colonial-

ism, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> also at the European level,<sup>7</sup> with the latest contribution the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.<sup>8</sup> 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 Brother* 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](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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Dr Juan Somavia is a Chilean diplomat who served as Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO) 1999-2012. Earlier he was Ambassador to the UN 1990-99, Director of Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Transnacionales (ILET) 1973-90, adviser to the Foreign Minister of Chile, Ambassador to the Andean Group and Executive Secretary of the Latin American Free Trade Association 1966-73. He studied law at the Catholic University of Chile and economics at the Ecole de Droit et Sciences Economiques in Paris. Honorary Doctorate from Pantheon 3, la Sorbonne.

# Why digital culture needs a new MacBride Commission

Stefania Milan

*Forty years have elapsed since the publication of the ground-breaking MacBride Report. In terms of technological innovation, however, it might as well be ten times as many years. Since then, a great deal has changed in both media practice and public discourse. This article reflects on the legacy of the MacBride Commission in the realm of digital culture broadly defined.*

This transformation has affected the ways in which we consume media content, interact with each other, learn and work, engage in consumption and trade. The digital is now king. Societal concerns have shifted too: from satellites to the fifth generation of mobile networks (5G), from radio waves to podcasts, from Western news agencies setting the agenda of public debate to “global” social media platforms where everyone can have a say.

The transition to digital has been accompanied by flamboyant narratives of empowerment, fairness, and equality. Social networking services have been saluted as a “liberation technology” able to correct the inequality in access to the public sphere (Diamond, 2010). Mobile phones are for many people in infrastructure-poor countries a convenient – and often the only – way to trade goods and access news. Biometric identification and algorithmic decision-making increasingly permeate anti-poverty programmes in the Global South. Yet, the digital revolution also embeds a deal of inequality and discrimination.

Most of the communications problems identified by the MacBride Commission haunt us to this day.

## Living in the “datafied” society

The computational turn unveiled in the 1950s has spectacularly accelerated over the last two decades. Information in all its forms has become a central gear of modern capitalism. The advent of the so-called Big Data – datasets so large as to require software to process them – has altered our personal lives and our urban environments (Kitchin, 2021). Cities have become “smart”, allowing local administrators to take informed decisions in near real time about public services. Human beings are “quantified” by an array of dashboards monitoring anything from blood sugar levels to sport performance. Service work is mediated by platforms and mobile apps facilitating the encounter between workforce and demand. Contact tracing apps and thermal cameras are central weapons in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (see Milan et al., 2021). In short, we live in an increasingly “datafied” society, where data have taken central stage as a way of making sense of the world and intervening in it.

The datafied society harbours both novel possibilities and daunting challenges for its citizens. On the one hand, digital technology indeed facilitates social life – from cruising across town avoiding traffic to ordering take-away food to finding a sweetheart. The growing availability of data in the public domain – including the “open data” released by public administrations for everyone to peruse – bridge the gap between citizens and policymakers. Drones and sensors help citizens to gather original data about environmental depletion to support their advocacy efforts. At first sight, the massive presence of surveillance cameras in public space might even translate into an increased sense of safety.

However, the datafied society also tells stories of intrusive citizen monitoring and latent discrimination. For instance, individual and group

privacy is at risk with the adoption of security cameras implementing facial recognition technology, which are known to discriminate against non-White individuals and to jeopardize the right to protest against authoritarian governments. Algorithmic decision-making in poverty-reduction schemes profiles and keeps watch over vulnerable people, who are left with limited capacity for intervention and redress. States can resist their citizens' quest for transparency even in the datafied society, obscuring data, threatening datasets with deletion or making the process of obtaining information so cumbersome as to discourage citizens from taking action.

Faced with an increasingly complex technical ecosystem awash with socio-cultural consequences, two questions arise: are the complaints identified 40 years ago by the MacBride Commission still relevant today? How can we translate the core concerns of the MacBride Report to interpret the contemporary datafied society?

### **The MacBride Report today**

The MacBride Commission was tasked with analysing the communication problems of modern societies, with a view to identifying viable solutions to further human development. The report that concluded the work of the group of experts, aptly titled *Many Voices One World*, foregrounded three main concerns with respect to the communications systems of the time: excessive media concentration, the commercialization of media, and the unequal access to information and communication in particular for developing countries. A central theme was “the creation and diversification of infrastructures for the collection, transmission and dissemination of various messages” (MacBride, 1980, p. 68). Today, technology might have evolved, but not much else has changed.

### **Commercialization of poses a threat to voice**

Communications are increasingly mediated by proprietary platforms, including social networking platforms and chat applications. They sell a dream of empowerment and diversity but

monetize user data and time. It is the so-called “attention economy”, in which user attention has become the new commodity. Services are nominally offered free-of-charge, but users become the product. Their traffic data, social networks and preferences are sold to advertisers interested in customizing their messages. Microtargeting is an increasingly attractive proposition not only to sell products, but also in the marketplace of ideas – think of the role of political ads in electoral campaigns.

The commercialization of user data and interactions is made possible by the personalization algorithms that operate behind the scenes in platforms and apps. Personalization algorithms ensure that users are served messages and products that are in line with their taste, including political preferences. They are proprietary and inaccessible to independent scrutiny; operating in the realm of machine learning, their functioning evolves over time and in unpredictable directions. Their impact on messages and the way we visualize and consume online content raises at least two types of concerns.

The first has to do with the ability of different voices to be heard in the digital sphere, when algorithms tend to privilege popularity over diversity. The second speaks to the users' ability to gain access to varied points of view, in a digital environment that favours sameness. Social media have been accused of pushing users into “filter bubbles” that prevent them to be exposed to divergent opinions, with potential detrimental effects on democratic deliberation (Pariser, 2011).

### **Platform monopolies are today's bottlenecks**

Not only are interpersonal and social communications ever more caught in economic dynamics – they are also controlled by a limited number of mega-corporations that hog the market for user data and attention. Take for example Facebook Inc. Headquartered like most of its siblings in California, it is a technological conglomerate that embraces the social networking platform Facebook, the photo sharing service Instagram, and the chat app Whatsapp. With 2.2 billion

users at the time of writing and half a million new adepts added daily, Facebook Inc. is a huge player in online advertising, with a 77% share in social network ads revenue.<sup>1</sup>

Another tech giant, Alphabet Inc., exposes the extent to which the digital market is vertically integrated. Created in 2015 following the restructuring of Google, it comprises subsidiaries active in the realm of artificial intelligence (DeepMind), autonomous driving (Waymo), the smart city (Sidewalk Labs), drone-based product delivery (Wing), alongside the company's core initial business, internet services (Google).

Platform monopolies can be seen as the present-day equivalent of Western news agencies, widely criticized in the MacBride Report for their role in perpetuating cultural domination and technological dependence on the West. Platform monopolies jeopardize pluralism in ownership (and worldviews) as anticipated already by the MacBride Report. Not only is today's tech and media industry characterized by a troublesome concentration of power in a handful of quasi-monopolist players – it is also the expression of Silicon Valley “ideology”. The competitive advantage of platform monopolies echoes the worries of the MacBride Commission, which noted that “[a]s the amount of capital investment required in the communication industry rises, the control of financing and the provision of equipment tends to pass into the hands of large-scale enterprises since only they are able to raise the capital needed” (MacBride, 1980, p. 106).

### **Unequal access to infrastructure and content**

As the MacBride Commission observed, developing countries often find themselves on the losing end. Today Western industry capital increasingly intervenes to make up for the inability of developing countries to provide critical infrastructure like high-speed internet. For example, Loom, a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc. active until early 2021, was tasked with developing and marketing high-altitude balloons to bring the internet to the next billion users. But the distorted

effects of industry concentration extend to users themselves, affecting their online experience. The controversial case of zero-rating or free data products offered in developing economies are a working example of the problem. Offering consumers a stripped-down version of its services at no cost, the zero-rating service Facebook Zero was accused of confining the Indian poor to a “walled garden” of its choosing (Prasad, 2017).

Concerns over the digital divide – that is to say, the gulf between the “haves” and the “have nots” in the digital revolution – have lost traction since the 1990s, despite nowadays only 51% of the world population enjoying some form of access to the Internet according to the International Telecommunication Union.<sup>2</sup> The market has been tasked with bridging the gap, with platform companies offering corrective measures to correct the imbalance – as shown by zero-rating services. Unfortunately, the market imperative together with technological determinism permeate the discourse on development to this day and have replaced concerns regarding inequality in access. Technology, now like then, is “theorized as a sort of moral force that would operate by creating an ethics of innovation, yield, and result,” as denounced by anthropologist Arturo Escobar (Escobar, 1995, p. 36) – obscuring the need for adequate policy interventions at the global level.

### **The grassroots fights back**

In 1980, the MacBride Report called for democratizing communications and strengthening alternative voices. It identified communication as a basic individual right, advocating for a “right to communicate” as “a prerequisite to many other [rights]” (MacBride, 1980, p. 253). Despite today's gloomy state of affairs, organized civil society has not given up its role of advocate for equality and fairness in communication. We can distinguish three strands of mobilization and activism: the fight for digital rights, the creation of alternatives, and the promotion of awareness and digital literacy.

Digital rights – or the adaptation and extension to the digital realm of human rights like

the right to privacy and freedom of expression – have replaced the right to communicate in activist discourse. To be sure, something has been lost in the translation of the right to communication to present-day digital rights – namely the emphasis on autonomy from the market. Nonetheless, digital rights activists mobilize to defend users’ privacy against platform snooping, to ban facial recognition technology in public space,<sup>3</sup> to gain the support of the tech industry to advance human rights globally – and much more.

A second strand of activism follows more closely in the footsteps of the MacBride Report, creating alternative software tools and infrastructure for people to communicate on their own terms. Progressive developers give birth to alternatives to commercial platforms, for example privacy-preserving chat apps. Unfortunately, however, social movements nowadays appear to have given in to the critical mass that commercial social media alone can mobilize. As a result, many independent media projects of the 1990s-2000s have capitulated, and this type of activism is no longer so popular.

Other activists again seek to empower citizens to take informed decisions about their communicative actions online, educating them about risks and opportunities alike. They may teach people to generate data to support advocacy efforts. They may train human rights defenders in digital security, or engage in artistic projects aimed at nurturing technological “counter-imaginaries” in the population (Kazansky & Milan, 2021). Others develop software to help social media users to reflect on their “information diet” and become aware of the ways in which personalization algorithms shape our worldviews.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

While memories of the MacBride Commission might have faded among activists for fairer communications, its legacy for contemporary digital culture is visible to this day. Its criticism of distorted market forces in the media and communications sector is dramatically current. On the one hand, platform monopolies enjoy

an unrivalled power over users and states alike. On the other, technological innovations potentially introduce new reasons to worry – think of artificial intelligence technology.

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. ■

## Notes

1. <https://financesonline.com/facebook-statistics/>
2. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>
3. <https://reclaimyourface.eu>
4. <https://tracking.exposed>

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# The MacBride Report today: In search of communicative justice

Cees J. Hamelink

*Forty years ago, I edited one of the first critical commentaries on the MacBride report. In the preface I stated that it is a challenge “to see the Report only as a step in a broader process and as an invitation to further reflection”. The authors of Communication in the Eighties: A reader on the McBride report made an attempt to stimulate further debate that should go beyond the MacBride analyses and recommendations. The downside of the haste in which we produced our reading of the report was that it became the McBride report. Was that a beautiful Freudian slip?*

When the authors finalized their comments in Caracas, August 1980, on the occasion of the IAMCR scientific conference, they certainly agreed that the commission had not been sufficiently critical of the reality of the corporate McDonaldized media scape. A crucial omission was the absence of a critical political economy analysis of corporate media power. “The Report supports – with qualifications – the Third World’s case for a new international information order. It misses, however, an essential point by not seriously analysing the role of the transnational corporations in the movement towards a new international order”.<sup>1</sup>

Our collective of critical readers thought

that the expansion of international information flows would primarily benefit the networks of large transnational industrial and financial corporations. As Herbert Schiller noted in his contribution, “Increased linkages, broadened flows of information and data, and above all, installation of new communication technology, are expected to serve nicely the world business system’s requirements. That they can be considered as constituting a new international information order is so much additional icing on the cake of the transnationals.”

We projected that the new international information order would follow the same route as the new international economic order. The basic framework was created by the transnational corporations. In fairness, the Report did point to the crucial role of transnational corporations in the field of international communications, but did not sufficiently recognise that the new international information order would indeed likely be the order of the transnational corporations. The “one world” the Report ambitiously referred to in its title could very well be the global marketplace for transnational corporations.

## The frightful five

Forty years later this critical analysis would still be needed and is possibly even more urgent because of the unprecedented control today’s “frightful five” exercise over the world’s information flows. The five, Amazon, Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Facebook, are today collectively more powerful than many governments. They affect national elections and guide national economies through the impact they have on job markets. Moreover, they exercise unprecedented measures of censorship over the materials their platforms publish.

In the context of selectively spreading information and providing misleading news, platforms such as YouTube have become key players in a global debate on “fake” news. This debate tends to focus on the damage that this news would inflict on democratic societies. It is not about the democratic deficit of those societies. The mainstream media will rarely engage with

the question of how democratic our societies really are. Usually, they report dutifully about the ins and outs of the system and leave fundamental questions about the system itself off the agenda.

The real problem, however, may not be fake news, but fake democracy! It therefore seems logical that governments are eager to intervene in the news services via social media because these media give citizens an open forum to express themselves.

### **Fake news**

Forty years later, a MacBride Commission would have a different global mediascape to confront and would deal with the issue of truth-finding in an information environment in which lying, deceiving and misleading have become shamelessly “normal”. In the midst of truth, post-truth, and fake news the Commission would have to address the question whether there could be a system to determine what is misleading news. It would be interesting to see how the Commission would engage with a public discussion in which the subject of all commotion about “fake news” is often the role of social media. Social media are considered to be the main cause of the spread of fake news. But in many countries the twitter noise is caused by small numbers – especially so-called angry citizens, often confused people chattering at the village pump. A social problem arises only when conventional media take this chatter seriously. Then it can have political effects.

Media tend to view communications from politicians on Facebook and Twitter as news (while in fact they are press communiques that are hardly worth mentioning). The tweets of US President Donald Trump received a lot of attention in the conventional media! Maybe the Commission would offer the comforting thought that news has always been largely fake news. Its main sources, such as governments or commercial companies, never had great interest in opening up. Moreover, the representation of events is always inevitably distorted, biased and incomplete. It is a reassuring thought that immediately puts the whole heated discussion about fake news into

perspective.

I think we should not have any illusions about the willingness of the producers and their sales channels to deal with the news service with greater responsibility. In all probability, all kinds of creative forms of regulation are so much part of the problem that they cannot solve it. The only party that can enforce change is the public and that was greatly overlooked in the 1980s. Attempts (in the 1990s) to mobilize a critical media consumer movement (including the People’s Communication Charter or the Cultural Environment Movement), however, were not very successful. In the 21st century prospects for critical media consumer movements actually seem to be even slimmer than before. This is due to a remarkable and disconcerting shift over the past 40 years in the ways publics are informed about global and local events. After the politically tumultuous 60s and 70s, public discourse shifted to what singer Sixto Rodriguez baptized as the Establishment Blues.

Largely inspired by the neo-liberal thinking of the Thatcher/Reagan duo, predatory capitalism came to be seen as the only working system and discussion about it was considered pointless. With the increasing privatization and oligopolization of the information media, this also became the ideology of more and more news suppliers. This de-politicized the public discourse. There was still room for all kinds of criticism, but the establishment system was not open to fundamental critical debate about ideological differences. The social order was no longer seen as a provisional construction but as a completed project.

### **Small is beautiful**

In conclusion, it would be easy to draw up an agenda for MacBride 2021. However well-intentioned, this would not be a very realistic or even meaningful project. The time for commissions of wise men and women to deal with burning global issues belongs to the past. The establishment of commissions such as the MacBride Commission, the Brandt Commission, the South Commission



and the Brundtland Commission reflected the old belief in wizards who have the power to wave their magic wand to solve perplexing problems. Laudable Commission recommendations, however, failed in the real-life confrontation with narrow political interests, commercial objectives, and the failures of the international governance system.

Addressing the world's most pressing issues through ad hoc groups of experts also suggested that social problems, in essence, are ahistorical and apolitical. The temporary nature of the problems' analysis and resolution ignores the processual quality of fundamental social problems. It cannot take into account the fact that social reality is constantly shifting and changing. Delivering recommendations while commissions are dissolved also seems to suggest that there is no responsibility beyond the proposals, and it denies the inevitable problem that many proposed solutions may create other, maybe even more serious, problems.

The efforts spent in these commissions to produce consensus recommendations also quite deceptively ignore the basic political character of important social issues. This makes all proposed resolutions contestable in the light of the divergences in value systems that exist in the real world. On top of these more principled considerations, there is the trivial logistical reality that these commissions consistently have too little time and too few resources to do a decent piece of work.

In the midst of an unprecedented oligopoly in the provision of information and communication services, a "Zeitgeist" which is overwhelmingly post-political, an enormous confusion about veracity in newscasting and an increasingly complex network of new public and private platforms, a Commission – however wise and experienced – could not provide the perspectives we may need. It is time to return to Schumacher's wisdom of "small is beautiful".<sup>2</sup> We need to give up the illusion of comprehensive and permanent social change because, although the scale of social justice movements has enormously

expanded around the world, this did not change our living together on the planet completely and permanently. Yet, we see everywhere that small victories are achieved from Black LivesMatter, Occupy Wall Street and Extinction Rebellion to youth marches, the network of journalists whose mission is to continue and publish the work of other journalists facing threats, prison, or murder, the kids skipping schools for a better planet, and women calling attention (singing and dancing) in the major cities of the world to violence against women.

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 should be supported by such global organizations as the WACC and the IAMCR. These initiatives could reach a critical mass that constitutes the tipping point to realize the "communicative justice" that was the global aspiration all along. ■

#### Notes

1. *Communication in the Eighties: A Reader on the McBride report*, ed. by Cees J. Hamelink. Rome: IDOC International (1980).
2. E. F. Schumacher. *Small Is Beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered*. Blond & Briggs (1973).

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# Towards equitable and sustainable technology futures

Preeti Raghunath

*In April 2020, an announcement was splashed across the media in India – that of Facebook’s investments in Jio Platforms, acquiring a 9.99% stake through an all-cash deal. Jio Platforms, owned by one of the biggest conglomerates in India, entered into this deal with Jaadhu Holdings LLC, an indirect, wholly owned subsidiary of Facebook, incorporated in Delaware, in the United States.*

This move came a few years after the technology corporation tried rather unsuccessfully to implement its Free Basics version for Internet access in India, something that it had been able to put in place in parts of the African continent. With technology corporations like Facebook and Google doubling up as media houses today, and with governments now figuring out policy directions with respect to issues like intermediary liability, encryption, regulation of OTT platforms, etc, it becomes important to see these developments as continuities, as also in their contexts.

This article reflects on newer developments in the arena of media and technology policies and practices in South Asia and to place them in the analytical trajectories of what were landmark constitutive moments (Collier and Collier, 1991) in the history of international media development and communication governance.

## Divided world, concentrated media: A bit of history

The post-war world was characterized by two developments – the emergence of newly independent states undergoing the process of decolonization, and an emergent world order that was bipolar and divided between the US and Soviet blocs. The first experience of decolonization is one that is arguably an ongoing process, which will be reflected upon later in the article.

The second development saw the concentration and usage of media entities, backed by the respective blocs, for the furthering of their political and national interests. For instance, Samarajiva and Shields (1990) have written about the role of myth of neutrality that often confronts the study of media policies, highlighting the role of communication and media studies scholars in working with the United States government, towards propaganda in the Middle East at the height of the Cold War. This story is true of the Soviet bloc as well. From the first experience, the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as an intervention in the bipolar world order, meant that the newly independent nations were asserting the need for a third way.

As a result, the 1970s saw the call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) intensifying, as a means to end the imbalances in news and information flows, between the developed and developing worlds. Tied to the New International Economic Order (NIEO) OF 1974, the NWICO conversations were heard at Algiers in 1973, Tunis in 1976, and later that year in New Delhi. The involvement of the UNESCO saw a deeply divided UN, with major powers withdrawing support and numerous international publishers against initiatives initiated under the rubric of the NWICO.

It was in 1977 that the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems was set up, by the director of UNESCO. This Commission, chaired by Seán MacBride and comprising representatives from 15 other countries, submitted the final report in 1980, titled “Many Voices, One World”. The report was

oftentimes disowned and went out of print, only to be resuscitated by Rowman and Littlefield, in 2004. Among many notable things that the report stated was the idea that while new technology is welcome, to view it as an all-purpose vehicle to supersede social action and eclipse structural transformation would not bode well for the future. “The future largely depends on an awareness of the choices open, upon the balance of social forces and upon the conscious effort to promote optimum conditions for communication systems within and between nations” (1980: 33), the report said.

It is now imperative to draw out the continued importance and relevance of the Report, in a world dealing with AI, but also radio – in a time of multiple temporalities and a multiplicity of lived experiences.

### **South Asia and its multiple offerings**

South Asia serves as a theatre that registers continuities and changes in the media development landscape, in line with the vision envisaged in the MacBride Commission Report. The region is home to some of the oldest linguistic traditions, oral cultures and histories, even as it is now the site that has seen the growth of technology corporations and home-grown businesses, in response to policies that opened up economies, allowing for the influx of global capital. Home to strong state media institutions, the region has registered numerous shifts since the days of modernization programmes, even as late as the late 1970s when community-based radio was introduced in the region by Danish broadcaster, Knud Ebbesen.

While Ebbesen’s vision was about making radio along the lines of the Danish Tape workshop, during my conversations with him he described his inability to work along those lines in Sri Lanka, the country where he developed his idea. The overarching control of the state meant that the initiatives that brought in UNESCO and DANIDA had to reconcile with community (-based) radio working under the aegis of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). This is in contrast to the Nepalese experience with

independent radio, which was brought in by interpreting legal documents to allow community broadcasting in the mountainous country.

Meanwhile, the media sector in India saw numerous foreign media companies investing in the region, bringing with them what was to become quotidian exposure to and experience of watching international music and sitcoms, news channels and technologies. The 1990s and 2000s also saw a burgeoning and unregulated cable television industry in India, with cable operators almost ruling access and subscription to television. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the popularity of participatory communication methods meant that media and communication researchers were now working with media technologies at the grassroots.

Again, this could be seen in the realm of community radio in India, which led to the promulgation of the first policy guidelines in the region for this form of participatory media. While 2008 saw the global financial meltdown hit countries in a big way, India managed to deal with its growth rate rather safely. However, the country saw a marked shift in power in electoral politics, with a Hindu nationalist government coming to power with a huge majority in 2014, and again in 2019. This becomes an important turn for experiences with media technology and its development in the region.

The current political regime in India is one that is working at a confluence of policy trajectories – while, on the one hand, the government’s preference for privatization of public entities and institutions is now widely understood, on the other, one also witnesses a call for *atmanirbharta* or self-reliance. This has typically meant that home-grown conglomerates have been given a free hand, riding on these only seemingly divergent strands of policy prescriptions, unifying them to create big entities, with wide-ranging business interests, including in the digital media space. The recent case of a member of Facebook’s Public Policy team in India colluding with the present government’s interests and Twitter’s blocking of accounts opposing government poli-

cies and stances, has only opened up a can of worms on the functioning of technology corporations in a muscular regulatory state enabled by a majoritarian right-wing government in power.

### **Post-globalisation? Pandemic, surveillance technologies, “openwashing”**

Connecting to this strand of thought is the current debate that has scholars and thinkers talking about a post-globalised world. Do we now live in a world that is seeing the resurgence of the nation-state? Strong governments elected along nationalist sentiments have come up in various parts of the world, even as we see a shift in power in the United States. This has only been exacerbated by what has been a near-global phenomenon: the pandemic.

With the onus on governments to control the spread of the pandemic, we have seen the deployment of surveillance technologies through contract-tracing apps, national healthy registries, health stack technologies, and widespread datafication (Couldry and Mejjias, 2019). With advances in technologies like Artificial Intelligence, we see their unabated usage in the making of smart cities, for instance, in the region. In India, Mozilla wrote a scathing response to a government policy on the National Open Digital Ecosystem, calling it “openwashing”, since the definition of access and openness was left vague and undefined, thereby allowing a lot of room for interpretation and implementation at the individual technologists’ level.

Similarly, in the realm of datafication, we see policy moves in the form of the Personal Data Protection Bill and the Non-Personal Data policy report, both of which prefer nationalization of data, to a large extent. All these developments raise questions in the interest of *democratization* as a process and an ideal.

One of the biggest contributions of the MacBride Commission’s Report has been its focus on decolonisation and democratisation – as an integral and internal process – one that is rooted in ideas of liberation and justice. While the Report examined these ideals in the context

of news production and flows from the developed to the developing world, and placed on the shelf the need for the latter to make its own media, it also emphasized the flow of news within the developing world. Recent works on the ideas around designing for the pluriverse (Escobar, 2018) and the plurality of the Souths (Milan and Trere, 2019) as sites even within the developed world, continued to emphasise the need for internal democratization, which is a progressive, ongoing process.

This can be translated into praxis, in the designing and development of technologies and their policies, in an inclusive fashion, bringing to light not only their implementation but also their making. Who has access to the spaces where technologies get codified? Who are the people who operationalise technologies and at which sites? Who are the people who get left out of these processes and are made to be passive recipients or, worse still, completely excluded?

Asking these questions would allow us to reflect on democratising newer technologies. When this is brought into conversation with the ideal of deliberation as an act of not only diagonal and two-way dialogue but also as a robust multi-vector process (Raghunath, 2020) of facilitating conversations, one is left with a vision for the future of media and technology developments for a pluriversal world, as one that draws on ideas of sustainability and equity for the future, and one that would bring to life “Many Voices, One World”. ■

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# Comunicación y democracia en el siglo XXI

Rafael Roncagliolo

*Resulta muy atractiva y desafiante la invitación de la WACC a revisar, cuarenta años después, el informe de la Comisión MacBride desde la perspectiva de los cambios recientes. ¿Qué diría hoy la Comisión MacBride? ¿Cómo se debe fomentar y proteger la participación genuina, la igualdad y la diversidad?*

Al respecto, cabe una observación preliminar que define la perspectiva de las líneas que siguen. Al final del Informe MacBride, se registran los comentarios personales de algunos de los miembros de la Comisión. Como eventual asistente de Gabriel García Márquez en la Comisión, no puedo olvidar aquello que los dos miembros latinoamericanos de la misma, García Márquez y Juan Somavía, registraron en sus comentarios: lo más trascendente del Informe es su llamado a la democratización de las comunicaciones.<sup>1</sup> O sea, ¿cómo asegurar que las comunicaciones sean más democráticas y sirvan a la democracia?

Aquello no era claro para todos, en la época de la Comisión MacBride. En esos mismos comentarios al Informe, el miembro soviético de la Comisión, Sergei Losev, declara que, en su opinión, “el derecho a la comunicación no ha ganado ningún reconocimiento internacional.”<sup>2</sup> Hoy, sin embargo, es sólo a partir del reconocimiento de ese derecho que podemos interrogarnos sobre el vínculo entre comunicación y democracia.

## La democracia representativa: Una historia trifásica

Para colocar a las comunicaciones en el marco de

la democracia, hay que partir de las condiciones de esta última. El ideal y el significado mismo de democracia desbordan ampliamente los propósitos y alcances de estas líneas. De manera, que nos limitaremos a los espacios y mecanismos democráticos de representación, que, por cierto, son sólo un aspecto, aunque no menor, de la vida democrática.

Bernard Manin, en un texto que ya es un clásico,<sup>3</sup> considera que la democracia representativa contemporánea ha pasado por tres etapas consecutivas, no excluyentes sino sumatorias: (1) la etapa del parlamentarismo; (2) la etapa de la “democracia de partidos”, y (3) la que él llama democracia “de audiencia”, que quizás sería mejor llamar “democracia mediática”.

En este esquema trifásico, puede considerarse que, en la primera etapa, el escenario principal, aunque no exclusivo, de la representación, el lugar en el que se fija la agenda, es el parlamento: “El gobierno representativo moderno se establece sin partidos políticos organizados. Es más, los fundadores del gobierno representativo consideran la división en partidos o ‘facciones’ como una amenaza contra el sistema que estaban fundando.”<sup>4</sup>

En la segunda fase, los partidos se convierten en intermediarios entre representantes y representados. En los partidos se deciden los candidatos y desde los partidos se manejan los congresos. Del voto por personas notables se pasa al voto por partidos, que enarbolan programas e intereses articulados. “La democracia de partido es el gobierno del activista y del burócrata del partido.”<sup>5</sup> Al mismo tiempo, se democratiza el derecho al voto.

En estas dos primeras fases la prensa escrita es un vehículo principal de expresión política, al lado de la calle. En la segunda, aparecen el local partidario, la célula política, y la radio, aunque esta última, en su origen juega un rol político menor. Sólo hacia 1933, cuando F.D. Roosevelt inicia sus “fireside chats”, la radio se convierte en un medio importante de comunicación política.

En la tercera fase, que hemos denominado “mediática”, los medios masivos, y, sobre todo, los

sets de televisión, pasan a cumplir un rol crucial. Por supuesto que siguen vigentes las calles, los partidos, los grupos de interés y de presión, los periódicos y la radio, pero de alguna manera la TV juega un rol primordial. Esto es lo que Giovanni Sartori denominó la “videopolítica”, en un libro deslumbrante que apareció bastantes años después del Informe MacBride.<sup>6</sup> La televisión, hay que recordarlo, se expande sólo después de la segunda guerra mundial; en los países de América Latina, recién en la segunda mitad de los años sesentas del siglo pasado; y, en otros países, aún más tarde.

En esta tercera fase, la vida política pasó a desplegarse principalmente en la arena de los medios. Ello ya se anuncia en la extendida combinación de “videopolítica” y “encuestocracia” que dominó y domina los eventos electorales. Y en el hecho de que, de vuelta al pasado, otra vez “los votantes tienden más a votar a la persona en vez de al partido o al programa.”<sup>7</sup> Tenía que ser así, pues se volvió a la percepción directa de los políticos, y puesto que, por su propia naturaleza, la TV privilegia a los rostros sobre los conceptos.

No desaparecieron, por cierto, las otras formas de hacer política. Las calles estuvieron siempre presentes y los medios no podían ser impermeables a lo que en ellas ocurría. Los sindicatos (aunque ya en franca declinación), las marchas contra la guerra en Vietnam, las tomas de tierra en diversos países, el movimiento por la igualdad racial y el movimiento feminista animaron los años de la videopolítica.

Pero los locales partidarios y las células de militantes políticos empezaron a desvanecerse. Las carreras políticas formales pasaron a desarrollarse principalmente a través de los medios; y la clásica función de “agenda-setting”, se concentró en los medios, y, sobre todo, en la televisión

En este marco histórico, lo que se requería era democratizar el ejercicio de los derechos a informar y ser informados, para lograr una genuina democracia. Pero en la época del Informe MacBride, el acento estaba puesto sobre la prensa escrita y las agencias internacionales de noticias.



*El 22 de febrero de 1980, Amadou M'Bow (a la derecha) recibió el informe sobre problemas de comunicación de manos de Seán MacBride (a la izquierda), a quien más tarde confirió la Medalla de Plata de la UNESCO. Foto: UNESCO.*

Fue bastantes años después del Informe Macbride que Giovanni Sartori publicó su célebre y polémico libro, que señala a la televisión como vehículo del postpensamiento. Es decir, que afirma la muy controvertida afirmación de que la videopolítica es la negación de la democracia.

#### **La cuarta fase**

Ahora bien, lo que está ocurriendo en la actualidad permite pensar que estamos transitando a una cuarta fase en la evolución planteada por Manin: la fase de la democracia digital y de redes.

Esta cuarta fase, que tampoco reemplaza a las anteriores sino que se suma a ellas, se caracteriza por la interacción inmediata (no mediada) entre los ciudadanos. Desde fines del siglo XX las campañas políticas requieren, además de los tradicionales “equipos responsables de prensa”, “equipos responsables de redes”, para alimentar los intensos flujos de comunicación interpersonal

y retroalimentar a los candidatos.

Vivimos, según Manuel Castels, la era de la información y de la sociedad – red,<sup>8</sup> que “es un periodo histórico caracterizado por una revolución tecnológica centrada en las tecnologías digitales de información y comunicación, concomitante, pero no causante, con la emergencia de una estructura social en red, en todos los ámbitos de la actividad humana, y con la interdependencia global de dicha actividad (...) Como todo proceso de transformación histórica, la era de la información no determina un curso único de la historia humana. Sus consecuencias, sus características dependen del poder de quienes se benefician en cada una de las múltiples opciones que se presentan a la voluntad humana.”<sup>9</sup>

Naturalmente, el término era invoca estadios de larga duración, en términos braudelianos,<sup>10</sup> o las edades (antigua, media, moderna y contemporánea) de la escuela. Así, puede hablarse de la era de la escritura, la era de la imprenta o la

era de la digitalización. Esta última era, en todo caso, se expresa en cambios que trascienden ampliamente el terreno de la tecnología.

Uno de los cambios más importantes y notorios es el reemplazo, en parte, de los partidos políticos por los movimientos sociales, como se ha constatado recientemente en numerosas realidades. En los Estados Unidos, la fuerza y la energía del movimiento Black Lives Matter, fundado en 2013, radica en una combinación de prácticas callejeras con el uso de las redes virtuales, lo que lo ha llevado a desbordar los márgenes de acción de todas las organizaciones de defensa de la igualdad racial pre-existentes.

Del mismo modo, el movimiento #Me Too, surgido como hashtag en octubre de 2017 y extendido por el mundo entero, combina la protesta callejera masiva a favor de erradicar la violencia sexual contra las mujeres, con la comunicación y organización a través de las redes sociales. Ambos movimientos, aunque buscan que sus agendas sean incluidas en los partidos, y el Partido Demócrata tiene que tenerlas en cuenta, desbordan los límites partidarios.

Lo dicho, se expresa con la misma evidencia en otros países con regímenes de partidos más sólidos, como es el caso de Chile, donde las demandas de cambio constitucional se han desarrollado masivamente en las calles, con prescindencia de los partidos políticos. También se ha expresado recientemente en el Perú, donde la gente en las plazas y calles de todo el país, sin conducción de ningún partido, obligó a renunciar al régimen efímero y antipopular de Manuel Merino en el año 2020. O en Francia, con el Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes.

En todos estos casos, los protagonistas han sido los movimientos sociales y no los partidos, y la comunicación y la movilización masiva se han realizado, sobre todo, a través de redes virtuales en interacción con los grandes medios. Es cierto que estas movilizaciones apartidarias (o antipartidarias) existían mucho antes, como se demostró, por ejemplo, en mayo de 1968 en París así como en múltiples otras ocasiones. Pero sólo con la comunicación digital se han vuelto un fenómeno



común y global.

Por ello puede afirmarse que la democracia representativa, y la vida política en general, ha entrado a una cuarta fase que es la fase digital.

### ¿Quién controla la democracia digital?

El desafío principal que plantea la democracia digital, tiene que ver con el mismo problema fundamental que motivó a la UNESCO a crear la Comisión MacBride, y a sus miembros a producir el informe. Este problema es ¿quién controla el poder de las comunicaciones?

En principio, ninguna innovación técnica tiene un signo positivo o negativo. El signo sólo proviene de la forma en que es utilizada. Así, entre otras eventuales virtudes de esta nueva forma de comunicar, figura la posibilidad de establecer formas de genuina democracia directa y participativa. Se multiplican las posibilidades de deliberación pública sobre los problemas colectivos y las posibles alternativas de política pública para enfrentarlos: el sueño del ágora ateniense en la



“Global Village” de McLuhan.<sup>11</sup>

Sin embargo, en lo inmediato, se plantea el mismo problema de fondo que estuvo en el corazón de las preocupaciones del informe MacBride, que es el problema de los flujos, nacionales e internacionales, ¿Quién controla los flujos? ¿Cómo establecer un control democrático de los mismos?

Lo que ha ocurrido recientemente, cuando los dueños de las redes más importantes decidieron silenciar a Trump, por sus escandalosas falsedades, es la mejor ilustración de la índole de los desafíos que estamos enfrentando. De hecho, ya existen numerosas expresiones de la urgencia de hacer algo.

Así, en Alemania, se aplica desde el año 2018 una ley, la NetzDG, que impone multas a las empresas de redes sociales que no eliminen en un plazo de 24 horas cualquier discurso de odio o con contenido que pueda incitar a la violencia. Iniciativas similares se ensayan en España y en Francia frente a la avalancha de las fakenews.

Los empresarios de redes, tienen que adaptarse a estas nuevas disposiciones. Así, Tristan Harris, ejecutivo de Google, declaró al periodista Andrés Oppenheimer que “la única forma en que vamos a resolver este problema [de las fakenews] definitivamente es mediante algún tipo de regulación gubernamental. Cuando digo eso – agregó Harris – no me refiero a que el gobierno regule lo que podemos o no podemos decir en Internet. Creo que necesitamos que el gobierno regule el modelo de negocios de estas empresas.”<sup>12</sup> Es decir, tenemos que cambiar un modelo que propicia la difusión de noticias falsas, porque son las preferidas por los consumidores (como los reality shows y el sensacionalismo noticioso).

Al mismo tiempo, este tipo de normas genera **desconfianza política y social** por la posibilidad de imparcialidad en su aplicación y por la dependencia de aquellos quienes la aplican, con lo cual, volvemos al clásico debate sobre qué es la **libertad de expresión** y si existen límites. Y, más allá de ello, al modelo mercantil y neoliberal que llevó ayer a la concentración de los grandes medios y que lleva hoy a la concentración de las

redes sociales, encapsuladas en la lógica del negocio, tanto en el nivel de cada país, como a escala internacional.

Un puñado de corporaciones vinculadas a las tecnologías de punta (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon y Microsoft) controla la mayor parte del mundo digital en el cual vivimos, incluidos millones de datos personales. Esta situación afirma y expande la vigilancia sobre las vidas privadas, debida al control corporativo, la “heightened surveillance”, cuya exacerbación es característica de la sociedad de la información, según Anthony Giddens.<sup>13</sup>

Sin duda, éste debería ser el gran tema de una Comisión MacBride del siglo XXI. ■

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**Nota del editor:** Lamentablemente, el profesor Rafael Roncagliolo falleció en abril de 2021, justo antes de que este artículo saliera a la imprenta. Puede representar sus últimos pensamientos sobre el tema de la democratización de las comunicaciones.

# “Posverdad”, libertad de prensa y democracia

Juan Carlos Salazar del Barrio

*Las desgracias, como reza el dicho popular, nunca llegan solas. La pandemia del coronavirus, que ha paralizado al mundo, ha dado paso a otro mal, cuyo virus se esparce con la misma velocidad, si no mayor, que la misma pandemia, un mal que la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) ha bautizado como “infodemia”, y ha definido como “la obstaculización de la información, propagando pánico y confusión de forma innecesaria y generando división” sobre el coronavirus.*

Meses después, la OMS precisó el término y habló de “desinfomedia” para diferenciar las noticias falsas o malintencionadas de la simple sobrecarga de información sobre la pandemia, es decir la “infomedia”. En otras palabras, la “desinfomedia” es el contagio viral de las “fake news” (noticias falsas) relacionadas con la crisis sanitaria.

La pandemia y la “desinfodemia” se han unido en una tormenta perfecta en el marco de la excepcionalidad que ha impuesto el coronavirus a raíz de los estragos que está causando en la salud y la economía de la humanidad. Ya existe una vacuna para el covid-19, pero no para las “fake news”.

Según un estudio reciente, uno de cada cinco casos de manipulación rastreados en Europa, guarda relación con el covid-19. El Instituto Reuters de Oxford observó a su vez que el 88% de

las afirmaciones falsas o engañosas sobre el coronavirus fueron propagadas por las plataformas de redes sociales y sólo el 9% por la televisión y otros medios de comunicación convencionales.

Se sabe que las informaciones falsas van más lejos y se difunden más rápido y más ampliamente que las verdaderas. Y se sabe también que este fenómeno crece significativamente en momentos de crisis. Hemos visto, por ejemplo, como proliferan e influyen en los procesos electorales, al punto de cambiar la balanza a favor de una u otra opción.

Como ha reconocido el creador de Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, al referirse a las “fake news”, “nos enfrentamos a adversarios inteligentes, creativos y bien financiados que cambian sus tácticas cuando detectamos el abuso”.

Este fenómeno encuentra un campo abonado en el miedo y la ignorancia de las sociedades. Cuanto más desconocido es el problema que enfrentamos, cuanto menos sabemos de él, es mayor el temor que nos infunde. Es el caso del problema que nos ocupa. Las “fake news” se expanden como un virus, impulsadas por el pánico y porque la ciencia no tiene todas las respuestas que busca la gente para conjurarlo.

## El factor político

Es común ver en la actualidad imágenes y videos falsos en las plataformas de las redes sociales, particularmente en Facebook y WhatsApp. Una buena parte de estas piezas de desinformación son videos y/o fotografías de sucesos pasados que son sacados de contexto con el fin de crear una opinión pública funcional a los intereses de sus promotores.

Desde la aparición del brote en Wuhan, en China, hemos sido testigos de oleadas de “fake news”: desde las falsas teorías sobre el origen del virus hasta la infinidad de falsas recetas para la cura y el tratamiento del mal, sin olvidar las clásicas teorías de la conspiración que suelen acompañar a todo acontecimiento y terminan imponiéndose en la creencia popular.

Pero no es únicamente el miedo, una característica muy humana, ni la ausencia de respuestas

de la ciencia, lo que alimenta este fenómeno. Hay también, como se ha detectado, un factor político. La utilización del miedo y el desconocimiento como arma de confrontación política.

¿Cuántos grupos de extrema derecha ven en la pandemia la oportunidad para imponer sus agendas racistas y xenófobas? Estos mismos grupos, sobre todo en Europa, pretenden culpar a determinadas minorías de la propagación del virus o socavar la confianza en los sistemas democráticos.

De las recetas milagrosas hemos pasado a las broncas políticas. Como alguien ha dicho: es más fácil que se aplane la curva de la pandemia que la de las “fake news”. Con razón, muchos analistas, sostienen que la “desinfodemia” está atacando a las democracias con una virulencia alarmante. Y no es un problema reciente ni se refiere exclusivamente a la pandemia.

En vísperas del estreno de la película “Los archivos del Pentágono”, basada en la investigación de “The New York Times” y “The Washington Post” sobre las mentiras del Gobierno de Estados Unidos acerca de la guerra de Vietnam en los años 70, su director y realizador, Steven Spielberg, afirmó que “la verdad nunca pasará de moda”.

El filme relata cómo Washington engañó sistemáticamente a la opinión pública estadounidense, no sólo alterando la información sobre el conflicto, sino ocultándola para que nadie supiera que esa guerra estaba perdida desde su inicio. Todo en aras de la seguridad nacional.

Lo que hizo el Gobierno de entonces era apelar a unas “fake news” o “verdades alternativas” -dicho entre comillas-, para hacer frente a la verdad desnuda de la guerra que los periodistas no tardaron en descubrir.

Hace veinte años, reflexionaba Spielberg en la ocasión, sostener que había que decir y publicar la verdad era una “obiedad”, pero en la actualidad es una afirmación “revolucionaria”. Y lo decía no porque antes fuera más fácil descubrir la verdad, sino porque ahora hay gente a la que no le importa prescindir de ella o que trabaja abiertamente para ocultarla o negarla.

## La mentira vendida como verdad

La victoria de Donald Trump y del Brexit, en 2016, puso de moda la palabra “posverdad”. “¡Bienvenidos a la era de la posverdad!”, escribió “The Economist” tras las elecciones de Estados Unidos y el referéndum británico.

A fines de ese mismo año, el prestigioso diccionario de Oxford distinguió al término con el título honorífico de la “Palabra del año”. Dos años después, la propia Real Academia de la Lengua la incorporó a su acervo y la definió como una “distorsión deliberada de una realidad, que manipula creencias y emociones con el fin de influir en la opinión pública y en actitudes sociales”.

En términos menos académicos, la “posverdad” es la mentira vendida como verdad. El periodista español Antonio Caño, exdirector del diario madrileño “El País”, la define simplemente como “la mentira premeditada y organizada”.

Entre los periodistas de mi generación se solía ironizar con la frase: “no dejes que la realidad estropee un buen titular”, pero lo que era una broma, ahora es una práctica habitual en las redes sociales. La ficción ha superado a la realidad.

El primero que habló sobre la “posverdad” fue el dramaturgo serbio-estadounidense Steve Tesich en un artículo publicado en la revista “The Nation”, en 1992, a propósito del escándalo Irán-Contras, el llamado “Irangate”, cuando el gobierno de Ronald Reagan vendió ilegalmente armas a Irán, en plena guerra con Irak, para financiar a los “contras” nicaragüenses que pretendían derrocar al gobierno sandinista.

Tesich escribió en esa ocasión: “Lamento que nosotros, como pueblo libre, hayamos decidido libremente vivir en un mundo en donde reina la posverdad”.

Y en eso estamos 25 años después, en la era de la “posverdad”.

El periodismo se desarrolla principalmente en cuatro ámbitos: el democrático, el autoritario, el dictatorial y el ámbito de los conflictos armados. A mi tocó trabajar en todos ellos y

en alguno que otro no clasificado, como el de la “dictadura perfecta”, como definió Mario Vargas Llosa al régimen de partido único del México del siglo pasado, y la “democracia imperfecta”, un modelo bastante conocido en América Latina.

Y también me ha tocado trabajar bajo un autoritarismo de nuevo cuño, el populismo, definido por el politólogo neerlandés Cas Mudde como una ideología que divide a la sociedad en dos grupos homogéneos y antagónicos: el de los «puros», por una parte, y el de las «élites corruptas», por otra.

En la actualidad es imposible leer un artículo sobre política sin toparse con la palabra “populismo”, porque, como bien dice Mudde, de un tiempo a esta parte, en casi todas las elecciones y referendos están presentes “un populismo envalentonado y una clase dirigente en horas bajas”.

Fue el triunfo del Brexit en el Reino Unido y de Donald Trump en Estados Unidos lo que también puso este tema en el tapete del debate global.

Los populistas, sobre todo los de derecha -dice Mudde- quieren hacernos creer, desde una pretendida superioridad moral, que la sociedad está dividida entre los “puros”, que son ellos, y la “élite corrupta”, que son los demás; entre los “puros”, que, obviamente, expresan la “voluntad del pueblo”; y los “corruptos”, que están en contra de los intereses populares.

La “posverdad” está directamente relacionada con el populismo. Se han aliado incondicionalmente, como el hambre con las ganas de comer. Y este fenómeno tiene mucho que ver con la esencia del periodismo, que es la búsqueda de la verdad y el escrutinio del poder.

La experiencia muestra como los líderes populistas se han puesto a demoler las instituciones y el sistema democrático. Lo hacen invocando esa misma democracia que les ha permitido ganar el poder, mientras sus seguidores propagan sus seudoverdades sin pudor ni cuestionamiento alguno. ¿Y cómo lo hacen? Pretendiendo establecer una comunicación directa con los ciudadanos, sin filtros, a golpe de tuits, y sin la fiscalización ni el cotejo de la información que

difunden ni de las políticas que prometen.

Esta es la otra cara de las redes sociales. Pero lo que importa en este caso no es el soporte, sino el mensaje, la verdad, y lo que importa es defenderla, porque, como dice Spielberg, “la verdad nunca pasará de moda”.

### **Una campaña de desinformación sin precedentes**

El asalto al Capitolio por los simpatizantes de Donald Trump del 6 de enero pasado estuvo precedido por una campaña de desinformación sin precedentes en el mundo entero. Según el “Washington Post”, el expresidente estadounidense dijo más de catorce mentiras diarias durante los tres primeros años de su mandato, lo que significa unas 15.500 mentiras en total, sin contar las de 2020.

Si eso es verdad, Trump no hubiese merecido ni un solo voto en las pasadas elecciones, pero obtuvo casi el 50 por ciento de la votación, con cinco millones más de votos que hace cuatro años. La terrible conclusión es que mentir no tiene castigo en política.

Bastaría recordar ese dramático episodio para llegar a la conclusión de que la desinformación, resultante de la manipulación de la información, convertida en “verdad alternativa” o en “posverdad”, pone en peligro no solo la libertad de expresión y de prensa, sino de todas las libertades y derechos que sustentan la democracia.

Ante los ataques de Trump y la expansión de las “fake news”, el “Washington Post” llegó a decir: “La democracia muere en la oscuridad”. Periodismo y democracia son elementos de una misma mancuerna, que se condicionan mutuamente. Sin prensa libre no hay democracia y sin democracia no hay prensa libre. Por eso es tan importante buscar la verdad y contribuir a hacer la luz en la oscuridad.

La periodista brasileña Cristina Tardáguila, Directora Adjunta de la Red Internacional de Verificación de Datos, dice: “Estamos ante una globalización de la mentira”, porque “las fake news no tienen bandera. Ni idioma. Ni siquiera ideología definida”.

Las redes, es cierto, no tienen fronteras, sirven como simples vehículos de difusión de las ideas, buenas o malas. Entonces, no tiene sentido echarle la culpa a estas herramientas tecnológicas.

Marshall McLuhan dijo hace más de medio siglo que “la humanidad habita en una aldea global”, en la que se pueden conocer de manera instantánea los hechos que ocurren en cualquier parte del mundo como si ocurrieran en una pequeña aldea. ¿Qué diría ahora? La paradoja de nuestro tiempo es que estamos viviendo en un mundo hiperconectado y con un acceso sin precedentes a la información de todo tipo, pero, por eso mismo, estamos más expuestos que nunca a la manipulación y al engaño.

El problema, pues, no son las redes sociales, que son los instrumentos que tiene la gente para interactuar en el seno de una sociedad, sino nosotros mismos como agentes y sujetos de esa interacción. Hoy más que nunca es importante formar ciudadanos con espíritu crítico, informados y conscientes de lo que reciben y leen a través de las redes, capaces de hacer por sí mismos lo que hoy hacen los verificadores: chequear y verificar la información antes de compartirla.

Somos los únicos anticuerpos de este mal del siglo XXI. Los ciudadanos, los medios y los periodistas.

La fidelidad a los hechos se ha convertido en un asunto de la mayor importancia. Como dice el historiador estadounidense, Timothy Snyder, autor del ensayo “*Sobre la tiranía*”, el lema de los periodistas en los tiempos actuales debería ser: “Los hechos son nuestro trabajo, los hechos importan, los hechos son reales, conocer los hechos beneficia al público y por eso estamos comprometidos con los hechos”. ■

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## The leaps and bounds of e-Estonia

Eneken Tikk

*Disassembling bronze monuments and concrete tokens of a half-decade of occupation and expelling Soviet troops from Tartu's strategic bomber airfield and the Paldiski nuclear reactor base in the early 1990s was a play against time. It was, then and there, also a race against two major powers – inherently opposed, yet perpetually intertwined in the strategic superpower culture.*

The agility and wit of a few angry young men in the re-independent Estonian government played a major role in cutting this small nation loose from the Soviet Union without major concessions. All means were justified – in love, war, and now – in taking back the country from the occupying power. But as the last trainloads of Soviet troops were clanging across the border, the nation was left with desolate fields and riven villages. Poverty, crime and corruption were just over the horizon. After the applause, the population was becoming impatient.

Hardly anyone in Estonia believed in change across the eastern border. This made our strategic orientation and partnerships very clear. Memberships of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were to pave the way to economic stability and secure this insignificant nation's independence.

Estonia's ambition did not end there. Racing towards successful reintegration with Europe against a flock of countries with similar backgrounds, Estonia had no intention of being just

“another” Eastern European country or “a mundane Baltic state”. Estonia was going to become more. To do that, it was necessary to uproot the legacy lifestyle and governing mentality forced westwards across its eastern border.

To outsmart the grim post-Soviet reality, this small hope-filled nation came up with a plan. A bold strategy. Both grand and novel. Recently re-independent Estonia’s first modern highway was not going to link regions and towns. It was going to connect everyone throughout the nation. To each other. And across international borders. Estonia’s first new avenue was going to be the information highway.

### **Democracy, freedom, connectivity and progress**

Estonia’s ideals could not have been more closely aligned with the Clinton-Gore promise of a global superhighway that delivers democracy, freedom, connectivity and progress to all corners of the world. There was no need for steel or concrete. Estonia was going to be a wired and wireless society all at the same time.

The late 1990s saw Estonia experiencing a meteoric rise as the nation’s Tiger’s Leap project delivered the internet to every village, every school and all government institutions. Estonia’s mother-tongue was the foundation of the people’s survival through nearly 1,000 years of oppression. Less than one-and-a-half million Estonians were too small a market to warrant the (mostly American) software giants providing Estonian language versions of their products. So, Estonia built its own national information systems.

The Estonian Parliament adopted a raft of policies concerning information society development, country-wide connectivity, digital innovation and online services. European regulations of various aspects of information and communication technology use were an easy target for Estonia. Way before most other European countries, Estonia pioneered the availability of public sector information, digital signatures, and nation-wide e-services.

Estonia accustomed itself to being the first. Among the first to implement a rollout of Internet access to every Estonian school, installing computer labs in most schools, and replacing the legacy infrastructure. Among the first to have public institutions publish a wide range of government records on their websites. Among the first to implement a nation-wide e-health information system. Among the first to create a data exchange layer solution that allowed government to securely exchange information over the Internet. Among the first to conduct elections online. Among the first to collect taxes online. Among the first to make it possible to create companies online. Among the first to adopt, in a public-private partnership, a nation-wide identity in the electronic environment. Among the first to take government sessions online. Among the first ready to declare access to the internet a human right.

As the new Millennium dawned, the whole world was admiring Estonia’s e-lifestyle. Estonia’s economy was on an upcurve. Estonia was first among the Baltics, first in Eastern Europe, first in the world. And now, it was set to be first in NATO.

### **Cyberwar defence**

NATO’s transformation in the early 2000s offered Estonia an opportunity to contribute to the alliance’s superpowers. Around 2003-2004, the Estonian Ministry of Defence approached NATO with a proposal to set up a centre for cyber warfare expertise. Setting up a NATO-accredited centre of excellence in the Estonian capital was seen as a guarantee and contribution to the partnership, even when Tallinn was still struggling to meet the required defence investment threshold. After some political finessing, the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCD COE) project was, around 2006, set in motion.

Having invested in cyber defence, Estonia was to appraise the politico-military risk of its information society stocks. And again, Estonia became one of the first to do so. By means of a

thorough series of consultations, a group of researchers and young officers established the first bridges between the ICT-infused private sector, information society-oriented government entities and the rather cyber-distant Estonian defence organization.

The word pair “cyber defence” was not an easy sell to an information society invested in societal and economic growth. Indeed, Estonia’s cybercrime indicators were of no major concern and information society indices were all rising. Even a hint of securitization was met with resistance and distrust on the part of the public bodies responsible for the information society and its infrastructure development.

It was a hard sell to the allies, too. For a NATO Centre of Excellence to be established, Estonia needed at least two other allies to invest in the initiative. Yet nobody believed in the danger of a cyberwar. Moreover, in the UN Disarmament Committee, Washington was busy convincing the world that Moscow’s predictions of the threat of hostile uses of ICTs were just a myth.

Struggling to find sympathizers, Estonia was to find support to its newly found cyber aspirations from the most unlikely direction.

### **Hackers and service denial**

Ironically, or: conveniently, a remaining piece of bronze and concrete became the token of Estonia’s rise to cyber power. In late April 2007, high political tension unfolded between Tallinn and Moscow around the Estonian government’s decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier – a World War II memorial – from downtown Tallinn to a military cemetery out of the immediate city traffic. Russia-aligned patriotic hackers cloaked in Estonian websites and apparently Kremlin-backed coordinated denial-of-service attacks against Estonian public and private web services over a period of more than three weeks demonstrated how devastating cyber-attacks can be against societies deeply dependent on their ICT infrastructure and online services.

With just this glimpse of what could happen, the world’s perception and narrative of the

Internet and ICTs was turned upside-down. The NATO CCD COE was started not by three but seven sponsoring states. Coming out as a winner from the Web War One, Estonia, digitized to the teeth, had just thwarted a major power. NATO was now set to adopt its first-ever cyber defence policy. Developments in Estonia and, one year later, events in Georgia, were also factors in changing US cyber policy. As cyberwar was out in the open, there was no longer any point in denying the obvious.

As Estonia was among the first to adopt a national cybersecurity strategy and the Pentagon was making preparations for initiating the US Cyber Command, the international community was destined to face national trials between information society and security apparatus.

Once again, Estonia was the best student in the classroom. Estonia suddenly found itself in the company of the major allied powers. From the UN First Committee discussions to EU digital and cyber policy reforms and NATO cyber policies to world-wide capacity building and Security Council Membership, Estonia faced a surge in fame and visibility.

As Estonia’s success grew, so did its ambitions. To keep up with all the opportunities, Estonia has taken a pragmatic, almost project-managerial approach to international affairs: setting up a cyber range for NATO, hosting the EU’s Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems, setting up its own military cyber command, and taking up operational responsibilities in NATO and in cooperation with the United States.

While the Estonian success story is next to impossible to disregard, it may be less evident how Estonia has been transformed through its own success. Once a poster child of progressive and agile all-inclusive information society with no concessions on human rights and online freedoms, Estonia has learned first-hand that online presence comes at a cost.

### **Cracks at the seams**

In 2017, Estonia had to revoke almost half its

national ID-cards due to a vulnerability that allegedly had not been duly attended to by the government. In the light of this incident, especially the slow pace of reclaiming these cards, the arguably near-100% participation of the Estonian population in national online presence came into question. In 2018, the state audits office raised questions about the profitability and sustainability of the e-Residency program projected to bring the Estonian e-population up to 10 million in just a few years.

Another state audit revealed that cybersecurity competency in local government that lay outside of the epicentre of government IT-innovation, was very low. Estonian success stories faced domestic criticism for government decisions to curb anonymity online. The 2019-2022 cybersecurity strategy stressed the need to repair serious systemic failures: a weak strategic integral management, limited investments in R&D, low cybersecurity awareness and a deficient sense of ownership in risk management, lack of specialists and insufficient supply of new talent.

To the world, the early visible signs of the crumbling façade are the now stopping or declining indices of online freedoms, and an alarming contrast between the digital savvy and less cyber-privy generations and community groups.

It is also easy to observe the impact of securitization on Estonia's current stage of digital development. Decision-making about the various instalments, investments and uses of ICTs are increasingly made at the executive, rather than parliamentary level. Estonia's views on international law gained new emphasis in the law of cyber operations, the right of self-defence and countermeasures, even collective countermeasures, something that had never been the main emphasis in a small state's take on the rule of law in the international community.

### **How to sustain success**

There is little doubt that Estonia is (or was) one of the most successful information societies. The choices made in the early 1990s paved the way towards an inclusive, open and free society. How-

ever, sustaining these choices in the current strategic climate has proved a daunting task. Recent years have highlighted Estonia's unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to compromise leading to a daring appeal for securitization and even militarization.

Having ticked all the boxes of an exemplary information society and a cyber power, Estonia is hardly a whole. Both on- and offline, the country seems still on its way to finding a balance between socio-economic and politico-military expectations and ambitions surrounding the development and use of ICTs. Will there be a meaningful compromise between free and open on the one hand and secure on the other? Can a country be larger, richer and more powerful in cyberspace than offline?

The outcome of the Estonian experiment has implications way beyond the Baltics, the Nordics or Eastern Europe. Full throttle into the information society has not proven to be a magic formula for many countries. Estonia might add whole new chapters in international relations and economics books – about states as start-ups, societies as projects and lessons about their management. Or it might face dire realities that cannot be substituted by or compensated for using ICTs. Or it might transform on the information highway into something rather different than was originally aspired to. ■

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# Africa's information flows still suffer from global competition

Levi Obonyo

*The debate to end all debates ended with the promulgation of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), but like the African traditional hearth the embers linger on half a century later. The world should have been flat today with information flow from all directions. But it is not. Africa, the globe's least industrialized continent is still a net recipient of information from the industrialized North – the injury that NWICO was to cure.*

The needle has hardly moved: the African continent still stands at the point where the debate started even as the world transitioned through various stages of information evolution. How Africa is viewed in the world is still framed through the information-rich nations' lenses (Africa no Filter, 2021). We explore below, 50 years after the commissioning of the MacBride report, if the 1976 UNESCO conference in Nairobi were to be held again, whether the discourse would be any different.

Nordenstreng observes that although the debate was heated in the mid-1970s, the global information flow discussion and its implications on world relations had been going on for decades. “The roots of the debate ... can be traced

as far back as the pre-war League of Nations ... Tens of ... pieces of international law existed by the late 1970s, including 44 standard-setting instruments with more or less direct reference to the performance of the mass media” (Nordenstreng, 2010: 2). But these instruments had no effect on the imbalance in information flow. As the debate raged at the United Nation's Assembly, African leaders had been equally seized of the matter. Much of the debate in Africa took place within the Organization of African Union (OAU) summits and across African capitals.

There were few pan-Africanists more passionate about the continent than the founding president of Ghana, Kwameh Nkrumah. He envisaged an Africa “free in the fullest sense, of a continent holding itself politically sovereign, ordering its economic destiny, and achieving its own cultural and spiritual personality” (Eko, 2001: 365). But there were stumbling blocks on the way. Africa might be what she is: rich in natural resources, in flora and fauna and in cultures. However, the framework for assigning value to these resources has never been in Africa's control. A newly independent continent, (Ghana, the first country to gain independence did so in 1957, with the others following in short order), Africa's voice at the global level was muted.

Half a century ago, the concern of the South was that the information market was dominated by merchants from the North; among them Reuters, Associated Press, AFP, and UPI. They streamed their content to the South and dominated coverage of the South and disseminating it to the rest of the world. The world saw Africa and Africa saw the world through the prism of these players. The direction of information flow was one concern, the other was the content transmitted; it was a concern about both the quality and quantity of information.

Much of the content framed the South in stereotypical images that either conflated Africans with African flora and fauna or presented such flora and fauna as symbolization of the continent. The allegiance of African leaders was divided, and they seldom spoke with one voice.

The continent depended on aid and had no influence over any transnational media. “Primarily the nations of the South, which included all countries of African continent, wanted a radical overhaul of the ... international communication system. They wanted the world communication system to reflect the diversity and equality of all human races” (Ojo, 2002: 3). The framing of Africa in the international media was not flattering to many African observers.

### **Exploitative and distorted view**

Thussu (2005: 48) notes that through their control of major international information channels, the western media gave an exploitative and distorted view of developing countries. He has analyzed the failings as:

- \* Owing to the socio-technological imbalance there was a one-way flow information from the “centre” to the “periphery”, which created a wide gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”;
- \* The information-rich were in the position to dictate terms to the information poor, thus creating a structure of dependency with widespread economic, political and social ramifications for the poor societies;
- \* This vertical flow (as opposed to a desirable horizontal flow of global information) was dominated by the Western based transnational corporations;
- \* Information was treated by transnational media as a “commodity” and subjected to the rules of the market;
- \* The entire information and communication order was a part of and in turn propped up international inequality that created and sustained mechanism of neo-colonialism.

Then Tunisian Information Minister, Mustapha Masmoudi, was a leading voice of the discontented South. Masmoudi, Thussu notes, argued that there was:

“A flagrant quantitative imbalance between North and South created by the volume of

news and information emanating from the developed world and intended for the developing countries and the volume of the flow in the opposite direction... gross inequalities also existed between developed and developing countries in the distribution of the radio-frequency spectrum, as well as in the traffic of television programmes. He saw ‘a defacto hegemony and a will to dominate’ – evident in the marked indifference of the media in the developed countries, particularly in the West, to the problems, concerns and aspirations of the developing countries. Current events in the developing countries were reported to the world via the transnational media; at the same time, these countries were kept ‘informed’ of what was happening abroad through the same channels. According to Masmoudi, ‘by transmitting to developing countries only news processed by them, that is, news which they have filtered, cut, and distorted, the transnational media imposed their own way of seeing the world upon the developing countries’” (Thussu, 2005: 49).

The MacBride Commission “was established to study four main aspects of global communication: ... state of world communication; the problems surrounding a free and balanced flow of information; and how the needs of developing countries link with the flow; how, in light of the NIEO [New International Economic Order], a NWICO could be created and how the media could become the vehicle for enlightening public opinion about world problems” (Thussu, 2005: 50).

The obstacles placed in the path of the NWICO report have been documented. They include opposition by the western media, by western governments, the structure of the debate itself, the form of the report, and even the lack of capacity in the South to step up to the plate. There were efforts in Africa, even if feeble, to right the wrongs. Such efforts predate the NWICO. The challenges of Africa were many. Western nations were economically powerful and owned the media of communication. “80 per cent of the

international news that flow through the newsroom across the globe came from the four major news agencies – Reuters, Agence France-Presse, United Press International and the Associated Press – and international cable news networks – CNN and BBC. Of this, about 20 per cent [of the content] is devoted to developing countries, which count for almost three-quarters of the world population” (Ojo, 2002: 1). The report had “called for the democratization of the media and equal access to information” (Scher, 2010: 198). Ojo (2002: 6) concluded that “the NWICO debate was a failure,” as this could hardly be done.

Still there were efforts at correcting this situation, which included the setting of media exchange centres to encourage intracontinental and intercontinental communication. Among these were plans for the exchange of films, radio and television programs, and finally establishing a pan-continental news agency. Unfortunately, these efforts – some spearheaded by the OAU, later African Union (AU) – either collapsed along the way or have not scored the kind of success expected, maybe with the exception of the film sector. The film sector efforts, however, had preceded the NWICO.

The Carthage Film Festival was the first exhibition, started in 1965 and launched a year later; it intended to counter the negative and stereotypical images of Africans in movies. It was initially held in Tunisia every two years to alternate with another African film festival, FESPACO, but has since gone annual bringing together film makers from Africa and the Arab world. The other initiative was the inter-African cultural revival and exchange program, Festival Pan-Africain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou, (FESPACO) formed in 1972 (Eko, 2001: 368).

FESPACO, like the Carthage Festival, remains one of the success stories of celebrating African films. FESPACO was later recognized and institutionalized by the government of Burkina Faso and remains a premier event of international stature. These cases of partnership in the area of film, however successful they may be, are the exceptions. Their prestige on the global stage

is relatively limited against the stated goal of presenting an authentic face of Africa when compared with the other major global film festivals.

Besides films the other areas of collaboration were in radio and television program exchanges and news distribution. Eko posits that

“Television and Radio program exchange in Africa is one of the most concrete forms of Pan-African cultural cooperation. This exchange takes several forms. They include informal station to station deals, formal bilateral cooperation agreements between African countries and their television stations, and exchanges among countries in a specific region or linguistic grouping of the continent” (Eko, 2001: 370).

The African ministers of information agreed to set up these exchange programs to help stem the imbalance. The Union of National Radio and Television Organizations, URTNA, was founded for the purpose of promoting the exchange of programs among African radio and television stations. The radio programs’ exchange function was headquartered in Dakar, Senegal; while the television program exchange was located in Nairobi, Kenya. For a range of reasons, some similar to what bedeviled the Pan African News Agency (PANA), the dream of URTNA fizzled out mid-stream. The majority of their programs were rejected due to technical quality reasons, whereas a significant number did not pass the political and religious test (Eko, 2001: 375)

### **The Pan African News Agency (PANA)**

PANA was set up on 20 July 1979 with lofty dreams by the African ministers for information to essentially compete with the established global media merchants, and to provide an alternative framing of news. Cavanagh (1989: 355) observes that, “Pana’s mandate was to correct ‘the distorted picture of Africa, its countries and peoples resulting from partial and negative information published by foreign press agencies’, and to assist ‘in the liberation struggles of peoples against col-

onialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, racism, Zionism, and all other forms of exploitation and oppression”.

PANA was headquartered in Dakar, Senegal, to collect information from across the continent and transmit to the rest of the world – Africa’s answer to the then big four. But its problems were created even before its offices were set up. The agency, as per its founding statute, was to disseminate the stories without so much as editing them. Many African countries applied a political rather than news prism to frame and submit stories, then sent copies to PANA long after the events had occurred, copies that were of little news value.

Furthermore, the stories were written to reflect the state of origin’s position. In a word, the stories were no more than public relations materials for African governments. Even African countries were hardly using copies from PANA. Cavanagh (1989: 353) reports that in a 1985 survey by Frank Ugboajah, PANA-originated stories accounted for a meagre nine per cent of all agency supplied copy carried in Nigerian media. Nearly a decade after NWICO, western agencies still supplied between 60 and 70 per cent of news carried in Nigerian media.

Communication among African countries was never easy. Messages across African borders would have to be transmitted through their former colonial capitals making the process both expensive and time consuming. While African governments set up PANA with fanfare, they were less enthusiastic about supporting it. Few paid their subscriptions. At one time, out of the then 49 members of OAU, only eight were up to date with their subscriptions. There were other problems such as corruption and misappropriation of resources that further reduced PANA’s viability.

NWICO had little impact on Africa. The direction of information traffic did not change both in terms of quantity or quality. Africa No Filter (2021), reports that “the sources for news gathering on African countries are problematic, the resulting content continues to feed old

stereotypes, and often the quality of local journalism doesn’t allow for nuanced and contextualized storytelling that is critical for telling stories about the 54 countries in Africa. In summary:

“Many countries did not feature at all in the media of other African countries ... conflicts and disputes under topics such as elections, politics, crime, ... and protests not only predominate, but are also considered more newsworthy by editors... They cited scarce resources as the biggest challenge to cover Africa more extensively.... recognized the need for more nuanced coverage, but the available funding dictated that they use stories by western agencies, which often are in line with the expectations of western audiences, to cover stories from Africa. ... agencies account for almost half (43%) of the stories about African countries in the media review. Only 19% of the agency stories in the sample size were from agencies based in Africa. This means that it is often non-Africans who set the agenda or offer perspectives on African affairs and events” (Africa no Filter, 2021: 3).

The picture in Africa is still grim. Half a century after NWICO, the MacBride Commission’s report has not made a mark in the continent. Few among African journalists would know what NWICO was about. The number of major global agencies providing stories in Africa may have gone down, but there is a surge in global competition for the African audience pie. Today, nearly every major global television network such as BBC, CNN, CGTN, CNBC, Bloomberg, Al Jazeera, France 24 has programs dedicated to covering Africa and largely from their point of view. Most have multiple programs on Africa (Ndlovu, 2020). Unlike fifty years ago when there was a heated debate regarding the information flow, today that debate is muted, if it is there at all. ■

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# News flow research during and after the MacBride era

Richard C. Vincent

*There is little doubt that well-written, thorough and objective, journalism is a vital component of modern life and a necessity for a democratic society. Whether the traditional newspaper-reporting we have known for centuries, a hundred years of broadcast journalism, or the more recent flow of news and information on the internet and social media, this communication media is necessary for everyday life. Regardless of its delivery format, news flow is essential as we strive to stay informed and make responsible decisions.*

This article offers a brief overview of international journalism research prominent at the time of the MacBride inquiry and up to the present. News flow involves international news analysis dealing with “the volume and direction of news flow,” whereas news coverage analysis “focuses on the amount, nature, and type of foreign news disseminated” (Kim & Barnett, 1996: 325).

## New World Information and Communication and Order

The communication and journalism fields have seen numerous attempts by researchers to understand the nature of news flow and its evolution (Vincent, 2017). The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) move-

ment at UNESCO served as a nucleus for attention to international news flow (Galtung & Vincent, 1992). Central to the NWICO discussions was the unequal flow of news generated by the five major news agencies. UNESCO's central forum for debate was the Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, under Seán MacBride.

### **International news flow**

The Commission's Report (International Commission, 1980) addressed the perceived imbalances in world media operations and news flow and the accuracy and geographic inequalities of international news reporting, including North-South flow.

The news landscape has changed markedly since those early years. CNN, BBC, and regionally based Al Jazeera are now dominant players. News dissemination is nearly instantaneous. Many currently participate in newsgathering and news production vis-à-vis online bulletin boards and blogs, vlogs, wikis, and SMS. The podcast is reminiscent of the old audio cassette, a vehicle popular for mass message dissemination across the Middle East and elsewhere in bygone decades. Digital journalism includes hypertextuality, public-connectivity Web sites like Slashdot, and cloud journalism.

The internet and World Wide Web have changed our world. Lines between traditional media and other forms of communication have become blurred. High tech allows large swaths of the public to join the information revolution. Wireless communication delivers digital products, including games, videos, news, websites, office tasks, education programs, and political mobilization platforms. About 60% of the world has access to the internet. More than half of the world uses social media. Facebook has three billion users. Yet, in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), not all enjoy these advances. Only 9.5% have access to the internet. The internet also remains primarily an English language vehicle, so individuals in the Global South continue to have less access than individuals in the North

and West. Ironically, inequalities seen during the MacBride era, or comparable communication imbalances, exist today (Vincent, 1998; Vincent & Nordenstreng, 2016).

Thanks to new communication technology, other developments include personalized hand device telephones and the internet/World Wide Web. They have changed the construction and distribution of data, information, and news across multiple platforms. Today's communication technologies provide transmission speeds that the MacBride Commission could only imagine.

Since the MacBride Report was released, the media industry's economics has changed markedly. Scores of traditional newspapers have struggled and closed, and advertising revenue of newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media has shifted mainly to the internet (Vincent, 2016).

**News Determinants.** Two of the earliest studies of international news determinants were the IPI study (1953) and Schramm's *One Day in the World's Press*, looking at world newspapers' images. Schramm concluded that not all countries were covered proportionally or by geographic size (1959). Two decades later, Gerbner and Marvanyi reported similar findings (1977).

**Modernization Theory.** Common in media and journalism scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s, *Modernization* moulded the news media literature decades before the MacBride era. Looking at the development of Third World nations, some, such as Schramm (1964) and Pool (1964), embrace a modernist view (Lerner & Schramm, 1967). These studies encourage the adoption of Western values and practices in developing nations. In addition, media are considered agents of technical and social innovation.

**Normative Theory.** *Normative Theories* describe values or ideals on how a media system operates within society. The best-known normative theories in communication are in the 1956 book by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *The Four Theories of the Press – authoritarian, libertarian, social-responsibility, and communist-socialist* – define the various world

media systems. “Four theories” was developed during the Cold War era. As a result, it reflects the bipolar perceptions of a capitalist versus socialist world view.

Normative Theory has witnessed a resurgence in more recent years as various scholars have revisited the concept (Christians, Glasser, et al., 2010; Duff, 2012).

**Dependency Theory.** Dependency Theory is rooted in Marxism and began in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. A revised version of Dependency is World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 2004). Dependency examines how Western wealth is acquired at the expense of poorer countries (Galtung & Ruge, 1965, Galtung, 1971). Occidental communication serves a bit as a Trojan Horse with Western ideas creeping into Southern societies, all in the Western World’s interest.

Another extension of dependency theory, structural imperialism, clarifies both players and variables. Galtung explores the centre-periphery flow. News flow remains primarily in the centre where information is formulated. Ultimately, news flows down to periphery countries. Even when news stories originate in the periphery, stories are sent up to the centre, are approved and edited, and only then are sent back to the periphery country for consumption with the centre’s tacit approval.

As was the focus in the Frankfurt School, Dependency Theory focuses on the role of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the global marketplace. The purpose is to identify inequities. The overriding assumption is that developed or industrialized nations continue to control peripheral nations through underdevelopment. The consequences, they argue, is a state-dependent situation or state of neocolonialism.

Dependency models also influence Political-Economy theory. Political-Economy applies to elite commercial control of media and its impact on the broader social order, including social policy construction. See Dorfman and Mattelart (1971) and Mosco (1996).

**Cultural/Media Imperialism.** Cultural

Imperialism has a long history in international communication studies, also dating to the 1960s. After a loss in popularity, Cultural Imperialism saw a resurgence in recent decades thanks, in part, to emerging research on the internet. In all, Cultural Imperialism has become one of the most important paradigms in the news field. (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000).

Cultural Imperialism researchers utilize equity, news flow, and communication balance by embracing free flow principles. Cultural Imperialists conclude that media control and cultural creations are uneven. Added to this are the concepts of democratization, self-expression, and the right to communicate. The latter is an idea that emerged from the NWICO dialogue and its aftermath (Hamelink, 2003; Mueller et al., 2007).

A more current notion of cultural imperialism looks at international communication as a vast control and manipulation scheme. It holds that communication functions as an extensive network of multinational corporations that introduce predatory practices and entities, mostly without resistance.

The Americanization of world culture has been simplified in ways inconceivable in some early days when researchers looked only at news flow (Ritzer, 1992). Taking their *raison d’être* from the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, the cultural rights movement embodies some aspects of cultural imperialism (Assembly, 1948).

**Comparative Studies/Design.** Comparative research in journalism dates basically to the 1950s and 1960s. These studies covered mostly U.S. journalism with comparisons to other countries. Comparative analysis fits a broader political emphasis, such as calling for a new communication and information order as in NWICO. The research provides a nucleus for a more extensive geopolitical debate. This body of research is mostly about North-South information flow. McLeod and Rush (1969) is one of the first studies in this area.

**Globalization.** Anthony Giddens defines Globalization as “an intensification of worldwide social relations” (1990). With the growth

of information and communication technologies (ICTs), they are frequently mentioned as catalysts for economic growth and development.

As an alternative to Cultural Imperialism, Globalization shifts the nation-state emphasis to the multinational media corporation operating beyond national boundaries. This perspective contends that international communication researchers have neglected to consider the multiple factors involved in the global flows of commodities and services, including media (Waisbord, Morris, et al., 2001).

**Framing.** Media are recognized as a fundamental source of information. However, bias is inherent in most news. Within this milieu, Framing is a theory that enables us to study media messages and examine aspects of perceived realities within news texts. Researchers subsequently discuss, manage and comprehend the frames produced (Goffman, 1974).

The growth of cable television, satellite television, the internet, and social media has transformed the news landscape. Yet, the rise in public preference for entertainment, even in the news, has changed the degree to which individuals seek information (Prior, 2007). Entertainment and a softening of news and information mean an increasing supply of sensationalism, misinformation, and soft news stories. News objectivity has suffered dramatically.

**Media and Terrorism.** One relatively new topic in news research is coverage of transnational terrorism. Interest increased when global terrorism came to U.S. shores on 9/11 with the New York Trade Center's attacks. A shrinking news hole for foreign news left readers and viewers with less exposure to global events. When international terrorists struck, the shock, arguably, became even more stunning.

Research shows that news frequently frames terrorism as a Muslim problem (Korteweg, 2008; Papacharissi et al., 2008). News reports often frame Muslims as militants, barbaric, sexist, insensitive and religious zealots. Islam is defined from a "white man's world" (Osuri & Banerjee, 2004; Bhatia, 2008). One study by Nickerson

(2019) examines terrorism and Muslims in the press, finding that presentations are not always neutral and promote prejudice against Muslims.

Scholars conducting studies on global terrorism and media must expand their research designs and sample news organs beyond the elite newspapers typically chosen. Stereotyping of Muslims is a grave concern, with profound implications.

**Disinformation.** One of the more concerning elements of today's news and information flow is the rise of misinformation and the presence of so-called "fake news". The term "fake news" was given recent notoriety when U.S. President Donald Trump chose to belittle CNN and its coverage of the former MI6 officer Christopher Steele dossier.

In recent years, social media has proven quite effective in spreading the radical far-right messages of Islamophobia; neo-Nazism; anti-semitism; conspiracy theories; hate; misogynistic imagery and characterizations; calls for violence; and glorification of selected killings. The internet has created a home for this extreme thought and dialogue.

Recent examples are found, for example, in the far-right conspiracy group *QAnon*. The group promotes conspiracies such as the contention that the Covid-19 pandemic was faked by the so-called "deep state" to undermine civil liberties or that top U.S. political leaders operate a Satan-worshiping group of paedophiles. The group was one of the major players behind U.S. President Donald Trump's bid to claim falsely that the 2020 American election was "stolen" from him.

## Summary and conclusions

It has been more than forty years since the MacBride Report was released, forty-five since the start of the Great Media Debate (Nordenstreng, 2016). The work of the Commission became quickly outdated. Technology rapidly changed the nature of the communication industry. New technology and an emerging ICT industry threatened traditional print media's stability, par-



ticularly newspapers. A worldwide contraction of newspapers was about to begin as readership fell, and advertising revenues shifted to the internet and social media. With an industry scrambling to survive, there was little appetite to get into equity questions or the Global South's plight.

The rise of news-film and video networks and agencies, distributed by satellite and fibre optic cable, ushered in a new generation of media operations. New to the scene was CNN, BBC World Television, APTV, Reuters World Television, and others. Globalization provided a new landscape. While the transnational and multinational corporations were still emerging as global players in 1980, it is interesting that the TNAs of the MacBride era were among the first globalization agents in the worldwide marketplace. In retrospect, they were harbingers of the future communication and corporate world.

New players and online electronic environments have restructured the industry and led to a new agenda of issues. While the WSIS (World Summit on the Information Society) meetings embraced the notion of *Communication Rights*, there was little interest in moving forward by elevating the campaign as a U.N.-guaranteed fundamental right. Consider that the least developed world has had only 1% of the world's wealth over the past 40 years. On the other hand, while the West has around 25% of the world's population, it enjoys a vast 70% of global wealth.

As we consider the many different international news research traditions reviewed above, we are still missing global news analysis that better represents work from developing world scholars. Furthermore, we too often see research based on Northern and Western research designs. To improve these shortcomings, we must strike stronger international research alliances, encourage developing world research team building, and facilitate developing world researchers taking the lead on new research projects.

International news research is a growing and increasingly relevant academic discipline. However, the next generation of work will require a significant shift in focus if we want bold, fresh,

and revealing new research. Forty years after the MacBride Report is as good as any time to begin this next chapter of scholarly exploration, inquiry, and writing. ■

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## Saarbruecken (Germany) 2021

At the 42nd Film Festival Max Ophuels Prize Saarbruecken held 17-24 January 2021, the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, endowed with € 2500 by the Catholic and the Protestant Adult Education in the Saarland, was awarded to *Borga* directed by York-Fabian Raabe (Germany, 2021).

Motivation: *Borga* shows the global effects of Western consumption at the expense of the African continent in haunting, sometimes oppressive images. The related migration issue is presented soberly and realistically. But the film tells more than a story about the fate of a migrant and his family. It problematises our capitalist actions, in which toxic waste is shown as a new form of exploitation of Africa and it questions the dream of illegal immigrants who are willing to become criminals for their supposed happiness. The protagonist cannot fulfil the ambivalent expectations of both worlds and finally experiences the family as the ultimate support.

The German-Ghanaian film team has succeeded in creating an authentic, topical and gripping drama with great actors and actresses. It offers the viewer a more respectful and sensitive look at stories of flight and questions clichés. *Borga* gives refugees faces and promotes solidarity within the human family.

Members of the 2021 Jury: Guido Convents, Belgium; Tom Damm, Germany; Birgit Persch-Klein, Germany; Bellinda Sigillò, Switzerland.

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