Moving Forward, Looking Back: The MacBride Report Revisited[1]

Andrew Calabrese

The year 2005 marks the 25th anniversary of the report of UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems by re-entering the book into circulation and public discussion with a new edition. *Many Voices, One World,* more commonly known as the MacBride Report, after the name of the commission's president, Sean MacBride, is about a subject of increasing importance to *everyone:* the right to communicate. By our humanity and as citizens of the world, it is our birthright and our duty to speak, to write, to read, to listen and watch, to assemble, and to associate as means to better understand one another and our shared and separate histories, needs, and interests. It was in the strong belief of such a right that the MacBride Report was commissioned, its charge being to elaborate on what that right can and should mean in a world that had begun to see dramatic changes in the means of communication.

The MacBride Report was written in a much different global context than we witness today. When published in 1980, the Cold War had a pronounced influence on geopolitical alliances, and even the choice to be "non-aligned" was in reference to this great polarity. But few observers or leaders at the time foresaw the moment or shape of the Cold War's imminent end. Not surprisingly, the struggles to democratize countries of Central and Eastern Europe—what some at the time called the rebirth of civil society—placed great emphasis on the freedoms of speech and of the press, especially the rights to criticize those in power, to closely examine the actions of political leaders, and to report those actions to the world. The aim was to remove political power from the confines of secrecy and concealment, and to make it a subject of public accountability. Some of the most visible struggles were for control over newspapers and broadcasting channels, the lifeblood of democratic expression the world over. In the years 1989 and 1990, citizens of the world watched, listened, and read while their brothers and sisters defied their governments and claimed the right to communicate as a basic means of democratic self-governance. When the MacBride Report was first published, South Africa was also a very different place, wracked by bloodshed and widespread suffering because of a form of institutionalized racism that denied basic freedoms—to vote, to criticize, to assemble—to most of the country's people. Since 1990, when apartheid was officially ended, much has improved for many more of South Africa's citizens, although it does not mean that the struggle for democracy has ended there or in other parts of the world where human rights are routinely violated. But such historic moments have been inspiring because they signify for all of humanity an irrepressible spirit that demands transparency and accountability from political leaders, a spirit that also insists on democratic controls over the means of communication.

Much has changed since the MacBride Report was published, not only in terms of global politics, but also in global communication. Today, modern media technologies, particularly the Internet and satellite communication, have become the infrastructure that has made possible a new global market system and a new context for the spread of political, economic, and cultural ideas. Emerging with these new powers have come opportunities for the elimination of global poverty and the greater capacity for citizens of the world to bear witness to and fight against violations of human rights, wherever they may happen. But alongside the many positive changes are the perils that must be avoided, not least of which are the uses of these new means of communication by some to violate the dignity and humanity of others through public deception, economic exploitation, political surveillance and repression, and other abuses of power. The term globalization should not be one that signifies divisions among citizens of the world. Rather, it should be a term used to celebrate our common humanity.

Although the context in which the MacBride report was published no longer exists, that document represents a legacy that we should value, because it was the first comprehensive, modern attempt to

1. This essay is published here in modified form from the Foreword to the re-publication of the MacBride Report, in anticipation of the 25th anniversary of its original 1980 release. The full reference is: MacBride Commission, Many Voices, One World: Towards a New, More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order *(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). It is printed here with permission from the publisher.*

define an international code of communication rights in terms of human rights. Ironically, the report was out of print for many years, and it was difficult for scholars and communication rights advocates to obtain access to it. Even libraries around the world found it difficult to locate copies. The MacBride Report is by no means a stopping point in the progress of thinking and global discussion and debate about the right to communicate. Justly or unjustly, the report has been criticized for being too statist, for being illiberal by advocating censorship and threatening the free flow of information, and for giving inadequate recognition to the wide range of interests, values, institutions, and movements that fall under the collective heading of civil society. If one is looking for specific reasons to condemn the report, they can be found somewhere in the details of this rambling document that was the product of disagreement and compromise among an impressive group of honorable and dedicated commissioners. But if we can overlook its flaws and the controversies that surrounded its public reception in 1980, culminating in the eventual decision by the U.S. government to withdraw its membership in UNESCO (which commissioned the report), we can read from it a spirit that continues to motivate fruitful global dialogue about communication problems, and which appeals to widespread and fundamental ideas about how the means of communication are fundamental tools of democratic self-governance. In the MacBride Report, we find a spirit of hopefulness about how a better world is possible, about the continued importance of public institutions as means to ensure global justice at local, national, and transnational levels, and about the value of global communication as a means to knowledge, understanding, and mutual respect.

It is especially important that recent efforts initiated by the United Nations to define a global commitment to a right to communicate be informed by the wisdom contained in the MacBride Report. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which met in Geneva in 2003 and will culminate in Tunis in November 2005, should be a process that welcomes and responds to broad participation in building a global consensus about the necessary conditions for a just world Information Society. Upon its initiation, the WSIS process represented for many people throughout the world, particularly in the global South, new hope for making important progress in articulating global norms in the area of communication rights. Of course, the year 2005 will not mark a stopping point in a global dialogue about the right to communicate, but it is an auspicious occasion for us to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the MacBride legacy. I encourage you to read this hopeful book, to honor its legacy, and to embrace the spirit that inspired it. ■

Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 51–52