

THE MACBRIDE REPORT – 25 YEARS LATER

AN INTRODUCTION BOGDAN OSOLNIK

Abstract

The MacBride Report initiated a wide international debate not only within the professional circles but also amongst the broader public. This debate provoked a major political and ideological confrontation in which the opponents of the Report's orientation endeavoured to disqualify the entire Report and particularly so its recommendations. Consequently, the entire work of UNESCO in the field of information and communication was heavily criticised and obstructed. The Introduction presents an insight into the work of the Commission by one of its active members, and key recommendations proposed by the MacBride Commission for future activities in the field of information and communication.

Bogdan Osolnik was a member of the MacBride Commission, e-mail: bogdan.osolnik@siol.net.

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the kind invitation to write an introduction to the special issue of *Javnost-The Public* devoted to the 25th anniversary of the MacBride Report. As a former member of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems and one of the Report's co-authors, I particularly welcome the initiative to evaluate, after 25 years, the significance of *Many Voices – One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*. This Report initiated a wide international debate not only within the professional circles, but also amongst the broader public. As already known, this debate provoked a major political and ideological confrontation in which the opponents of the Report's orientation endeavoured to disqualify it and particularly so its recommendations. Consequently, the entire work of UNESCO in the field of information and communication was heavily criticised and obstructed.

Twenty-five years later, we have an opportunity for a tolerant, professional debate on how the MacBride Report responded to the problems of its time, which estimations and anticipations were confirmed, and what remains unresolved still today. In my brief introduction, I will limit myself to recalling how our Commission was created and how it understood its mandate; how its approach developed, which problems were put forth, and which key recommendations were proposed for future activities in this field.

The Commission and its Approach to Communication Problems

In 1977, Amadu Mohtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO at the time, established the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, which became known as the MacBride Commission by the name of the Irish statesman who was its president. The commission consisted of 16 members, all appointed in their personal capacity. We were not government representatives, but rather representatives of various communication activities. Since we came from different countries and different professional and cultural backgrounds, this reflected a broad spectrum of experiences, deriving from different cultural, economic and political conditions in which information and communication takes place in a modern world.

The commission was created at the time marked by a revolutionary progress in telecommunications with the use of satellites, the fast development of computerisation and the appearance of new electronic media. All of this created new, enormous possibilities to communicate. With the emergence of these achievements, the question regarding the impact of this development on people, nations and the entire world became increasingly important. The same can be said regarding the question, which values and rules should direct this activity and inspire those, who were engaged in this field. Finding common answers to these questions was an extremely difficult task. The political and ideological divisions that existed in the world at that time created an atmosphere in which international initiatives, especially concerning information and communication, easily became a subject of political and ideological confrontation.

This happened already with the famous UNESCO draft Declaration on Mass Media and their responsibilities concerning peace, international understanding, and prevention of war propaganda, racism and apartheid, which preceded the MacBride Commission. In order to prepare the wording of the draft declaration, a meeting of experts was held in December 1975 in Paris, at which a draft was adopted

on the basis of proposal by the non-aligned countries. The event provoked severe reaction of the representatives from western countries and almost all of them left the conference in a sign of protest. The operation of UNESCO in the field of information fell under severe critiques from the media and the official standpoint of Western countries. The director general therefore interceded at a general UNESCO conference in Nairobi in 1976, at which the text was changed so that finally the declaration on mass media was accepted by the common consent of all member states. The conference also accepted the decision that the director general would prepare a study on communication problems in the light of the newest technological development, bearing in mind also the deepening gap between the developed and developing world. This is how it came to the foundation of our commission.

I mentioned all those details to illustrate the tense atmosphere, full of distrust and contradictory expectation, in which our work began. A heavy task was set in front of the commission: to evaluate the stage of communication in the modern world and the problems in this field, but also to search for a consensus and avoid further threats for the functioning of UNESCO in the communication field. We, the members of the commission, were aware of the problem and how delicate was the task we were confronted with. Luckily the structure of the commission was such that although there were differences in our views, our personal relations, built during the two-year collaboration, enabled a tolerant debate, and the search for an agreement as well as free acknowledgement of differences and stating separate standpoints.

I will not enumerate the names of the commission members; they are stated in the book. I would only like to mention that initially one of the pioneers of communication and media studies, the Canadian professor Marshall McLuhan, was appointed, however, due to his state of health, he could not accept the strenuous journeys to conferences in Paris. He was replaced by Betty Zimmerman, the director of the Canadian Radio International. Among the members of the commission the following stood out, due to their experiences in journalism and publicity: the French representative Hubert Beuve-Mery, the founder of *Le Monde*, the Colombian writer and publicist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, later the winner of the Nobel prize for literature, the Japanese journalist and sociologist Michio Nagai, the chief editor of *Assahi Shimbun* with the daily edition of 15 million copies, Moctar Lubis, a journalist and writer from Indonesia, the president of the Asian Press Foundation and Mustapha Masmoudi, the Tunisian representative with UNESCO, the president of the Co-ordination council for information in the movement of non-aligned countries. Member of the commission was also Jan Pieter Pronk from Holland, professor of economy, who was some years the Dutch Minister for Co-operation with the Developing Countries. Although the members of the commission were appointed on the basis of their personal activity in communication and we were not official representatives of our countries, it is not unimportant how our nationality was reflected in the commission structure. The standpoints of the Western world were represented by Elie Abel, the dean of the journalist school at the Columbia University, USA. On the other side the central holder of the so-called concepts of state socialism was Leonid Mitrofanich Zamiatin, the representative from the Soviet Union, the director of the Tass news agency, whose follower at the end of the commission's operation was Sergej Losev.

There were seven members in the commission coming from non-aligned countries, i.e. India, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, Zaire, Tunisia and the former Yugoslavia. These countries strove for a salvation of the problems, burdening developing nations, for a new international information and communication order. In 1978, when our commission submitted its Interim report to the UNESCO general conference for approval, Mustafa Masmoudi and I each added our own special elaborate as a separate opinion about the approach to communication problems. My contribution was entitled: Aims and approaches to a new international communication order, while Masmoudi presented a detailed concept of this order that was formed within the non-aligned movement. At the general conference they supported our opinion, which significantly influenced the further orientation of the commission.

The commission work was lead with unbelievable personal impetus and capability of engaging deeply into the problems, by the late experienced journalist and statesman Sean MacBride, an eager activist, fighter for peace and protection of human rights, the holder of the Nobel and Lenin prize for peace and the founder of Amnesty International. The commission executive secretariat, consisting of several UNESCO civil servants was lead by Ašer Deleon, a journalist and publicist from Yugoslavia. The secretariat carried out a great deal of work collecting, organising and publishing the material sent, upon the commission's request by UNESCO national commissions, professional organisations, scientific institutions and numerous individuals. A number of studies were elaborated on specific issues, resulting in a series of over 100 elaborates and analyses, which represent a precious source of knowledge concerning communication problems. The commission itself initiated deliberations and round tables at which numerous prominent experts, representatives of the profession and public life collaborated. In addition to a large seminar on the functioning of press agencies held in Stockholm, the commission also held meetings in Yugoslavia, India and Mexico at which the host experts explained the specificity and experiences of these countries. Never before had so much data concerning information been collected, systemised and evaluated in one place. The Commission's final report is thus the result of a great effort to illuminate information problems in all their complexity and scope.

Some of the Report's Key Issues

What follows is a brief look at some key issues that constitute the core of the Report and its recommendations. As its subtitle suggests, the Commission endeavoured to illuminate *the social part of communication, its part in the life of individuals and their communities, in the narrower and broader sense*. It thus considers information as a very important instrument, both as the protection of human rights and as a tool in politics, economy, culture, and technological development of every country. The freedom of press (and freedom of information) principle was enriched with the right to communicate, the right to accept and spread information and to be informed. This is an important addition to the traditional understanding of press freedom and freedom of information, which is in practice often reduced to the freedom of the entrepreneur to reap profit with the help of the media without being interested in its content and quality. The Report thus highlights new dimensions of the issue of freedom of information, which are often neglected by the advocates of "absolute freedom". Freedom of the press and freedom of information

are treated in the Report above all from the standpoint of the interests and needs of free citizens and of a democratic society. The Report therefore *rejects media control by government or holders of commercial and consumer interests, and resolutely condemns any sort of obstacles to, and violations of the freedom of press.*

In its debate on freedom of communication, the Commission faced the eternal question regarding *freedom and responsibility*. The Report states:

For the journalist, freedom and responsibility are indivisible. *Freedom without responsibility invites distortion and other abuses. But in the absence of freedom there can be no exercise of responsibility. The concept of freedom with responsibility necessarily includes a concern for professional ethics, demanding an equitable approach to events, situations or processes with due attention to their diverse aspects.*

The principle of freedom demands also a strict legal definition, supervision and execution of the eventual restrictions required by the protection of human rights and other reasons defined in the conventions and treaties adopted by the United Nations. Regarding this issue, the Report noted as separate standpoints the views of two members of the Commission, namely, the American and Soviet. Aside from the journalists' responsibility to seek the truth in their reports, which should be the main requirement of any investigative journalism, the Report emphasises the importance of freedom in performing their profession, and especially free access to sources of information, which should apply also to reporters from foreign countries. This is not only in the interest of journalists, but also in the interest of the entire public and the people's right to be informed.

The Report dealt particularly with the issue of *democratisation* of communication and information. It assessed the negative sides of the one-way information-communication flow, going mostly from the richer countries to the poorer, from those who have power and technical means to those who do not have them. At the national level, this means a flow from the centre of power vertically downwards. The Report also draws attention to the fact that the abundance of information and the diversity of sources do not ensure perfection and reliability of information. It therefore advocates that pluralism and the free flow be balanced in terms of content. The question as to what does this mean in practice, and how to harmonise it with freedom of information, remained open due to diverse opinions.

As a special problem of communication and democratisation the Report also dealt with the harmful consequences of *the concentration of ownership in media* and particularly the consequences of an increasingly global reach of transnational corporations and their monopoly in cultural and entertainment programs, especially in television and film. The commission proceeded to limit the process of concentration and monopolisation with legislative and other measures, but the standpoints on enforcing possible limitations remained divided, which is evident from the separate opinions expressed in the Report. Nevertheless, the issue was seen as one of the key questions of a new information-communication order.

A New International Information and Communication Order

The issue of a new international (later renamed "world") information-communication order, suggested by the Non-aligned Countries, provoked a clash of views, resulting from major differences in basic philosophic and social concepts. The deepest misunderstandings came from, on one hand the extreme liberal understanding of absolute freedom, and the social subordination to state ownership and monopoly,

on the other hand. The views that endeavoured to introduce a possible *third way* often faced opposition from both sides. This happened particularly in our discussions about a new international communication order. Luckily, during the Commission's work, we experienced an evolution which allowed us to adopt by consensus the idea of a new information-communication order, as a basic guidance for further development in the field of communication. The new concept was not seen as any sort of an existing model, but rather as a process of indispensable change of relations in the field of communication between nations as well as between specific social groups within individual countries. It was understood that a new international order should be the aim of further communication development, but not by abolishing the autonomy and differences in individual national systems. The inter-linking into a unified, functional international order was meant to take place exclusively by respecting pluralism, equality and non-interference, as well as social, political, cultural and economic characteristics of a country. Such a definition of a new international information-communication order was confirmed by the UNESCO General Conference a few months later (in the autumn of 1980, at its session in Belgrade) with a special resolution that was unanimously adopted. However, after the vote, representatives of some Western countries expressed their reservations concerning important standpoints and recommendations. The most critical was the British representative who claimed that the resolution gives too much opportunity for state intervention, which could limit the freedom of communication and free press.

The Commission devoted a great deal of attention to *professional ethics in journalism*. A lot of material was gathered on how the journalist associations themselves deal with this problem. Their experiences were expressed particularly at a meeting of the representatives of individual national and international journalist associations. On the basis of common elements in their professional codes of conduct, we tried to identify whether a universal, international professional code of conduct was at all possible. We even prepared a draft for such a document, but no agreement was reached, either on its content or on the necessity of such a code. Therefore, in its recommendations the Commission speaks merely about possible rules of journalist ethics on a national or regional level, and it recommends that these be prepared and adopted by the profession itself, without any interference of government.

It was furthermore impossible to reach any agreement on the issue of a special status and *protection* of journalists. The prevailing opinion was that such an introduction of personal protection measures could expose journalists to the risk of having non-professional bodies decide important matters regarding their status and norms of behaviour. This question was therefore left as an issue that needs further attention.

The concluding recommendations of the Commission deal with the role of *communication in international relations*. It underlines the media's contribution to strengthening peace and international understanding, the promotion of human rights, and to countering racism, apartheid and incitement to war. All of these recommendations had great importance at the time, as humanity was in immediate danger due to the Cold War inspired arms race and even a possible use of nuclear weapons. The Report invites that special attention be given, and responsibility exercised, in reporting international events. This was particularly stressed in re-

gard to reporting about critical circumstances when the media happen to be the only witness and, possibly, a mediator between disputing parties.

The Commission stated also a number of *proposals that need to be further examined*. Amongst these: the language barriers in international communication; the imbalance in the use of world languages; the necessity to improve international legislation, especially international normative instruments, such as those of the UN, in accordance with new phenomena and problems of global communication; the impact of advertising on cultures and moral values, and possibly how to protect these with some sort of code regarding economic propaganda.

Finally, the Report includes comments made by individual members. Personally, I renounced this possibility, but I have published my views on a new international informational and communication order separately in a book, published also in English, French and Spanish, just before the beginning of the General UNESCO conference in Belgrade.

Before concluding, let me quote a comment by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Juan Somavia expressed in Report:

Working in the commission was hard but it was a worthwhile effort in order to reach a certain level of consensus amongst the participants with divergent viewpoints... As such, its Report is more of a negotiated document than an academic presentation. This fact enhances its practical and political value to the extent that it reflects certain areas of common understanding upon which it may be possible to develop concrete policies and actions in different national and international settings.

Associating myself fully with this view, let me end this introduction by another pertinent concluding thought from the Report itself, which reads as follows: "It is important to realise that the new order we seek is not merely the goal but also a stage in the journey. It is a *continuing quest for ever more free, more equal, more just relations within all societies and among all nations and peoples.*"

Today I would add to this only the following words: "The MacBride Report was an important landmark in this journey."