

FROM MACBRIDE TO MURDOCH: THE MARKETISATION OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The report of the MacBride Commission is credited to have brought information- and communication-related issues onto the global agenda and therefore occupies a prominent place in the history of international communication. After revisiting the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates closely associated with the MacBride Report, this article contends that, despite many advances in democratization of the media, some of the key criticisms in the report are as valid in 2005 as they were in 1980, when it was published. Focusing on the global South, the article argues that the globalisation, privatisation and marketisation of the media, exemplified by what it terms as "Murdochisation," has undermined public discourse in a global media culture predicated on entertainment and infotainment.

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Introduction

Much has changed in the quarter of a century since the publication of the MacBride Commission Report in 1980. The Cold War, which for nearly half a century divided most of the world into hostile East-West blocs, has ended. The categorisation of First (capitalist, led by the United States); Second (communist, with its centre in Moscow) and Third (developing) Worlds – coined by French historian Alfred Sauvy in 1952 – does not make sense in the era of globalisation. In the twenty-first century, the world has a very different political and economic complexion. It is a capitalist world where old centres of global capitalism – Europe and North America – are increasingly competing with new and jealous converts to the idea of the unfettered market, such as China and India.

This has had a profound impact on the global South – the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which are also labelled as the “non-industrialised,” “underdeveloped” or “developing countries.” The term “the South” itself gained currency in the 1980s after the Brandt Commission report which defined it thus: “in general terms, and although neither is a uniform or permanent grouping, ‘North’ and ‘South’ are broadly synonymous with ‘rich’ and ‘poor,’ ‘developed’ and ‘developing’” (Brandt Commission Report 1981, 31). This division was later reinforced by the South Commission, adding, “while countries of the North are, by and large, in control of their destinies, those of the South are very vulnerable to external factors and lacking in functioning sovereignty” (South Commission 1990, 1).

In many ways McBride was the culmination of years of effort by the Non-Aligned Movement, which had been lobbying for greater economic justice in such UN forums as UNCTAD, and demanding a more equitable New International Economic Order (NIEO). While this largely remained an ideal, it provided a new framework within which to redefine international relations for the first time after World War II, not in terms of East-West categories but by the North-South divide.

At the same time, it was argued that the NIEO should be linked to a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). As Chilean scholar Juan Somavia (who was later a member of the MacBride Commission) observed in the mid-1970s:

It is becoming increasingly clear that the transnational communications system has developed with the support and at the service of the transnational power structure. It is an integral part of the system which affords the control of that key instrument of contemporary society: information. It is the vehicle for transmitting values and lifestyles to Third World countries which stimulate the type of consumption and the type of society necessary to the transnational system as a whole (Somavia 1976, 16-17).

A Look Back at NWICO Debates

The international information system, the NWICO protagonists argued, perpetuated and strengthened inequality in development, with serious implications for the countries of the South, heavily dependent on the North for both software and hardware in the information sector. It was argued that through their control of major international information channels, the Western media gave an exploitative and distorted view of developing countries to the rest of the world. Southern de-

mands were articulated by Tunisian Information Minister Mustapha Masmoudi (also later a member of the MacBride Commission). Masmoudi analysed the main failing of the current system as follows:

- that, owing to the socio-technological imbalance there was a one-way flow of information from the “centre” to the “periphery,” which created a wide gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”;
- that, the information rich were in a 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;
- that, this vertical flow (as opposed to a desirable horizontal flow of global information) was dominated by the Western-based transnational corporations;
- that, information was treated by the transnational media as a “commodity” and subjected to the rules of the market;
- that, the entire information and communication order was a part of and in turn propped up international inequality that created and sustained mechanisms of neo-colonialism (Masmoudi 1979, 172-173).

Masmoudi 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.” He contended that 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 de facto 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” (Masmoudi 1979, 173).

These structural problems were also identified by other scholars, who viewed the Western-dominated, international information system, with its origins in the international news media network, as geared to their own economic and political interests and projecting their version of reality to the rest of the world (Gerbner *et al* 1993, Thussu 2000; Mattelart 2003).

The demands and proposals for a NWICO emerged from a series of meetings of the Non-aligned Movement, most notably Algiers in 1973 and Tunis in 1976. A landmark was reached with the Mass Media Declaration by UNESCO General Conference in 1978, which recognised the role the mass media played in development, and in December of that year, the 33rd session of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

The MacBride Commission

The international commission for the study of communication problems that was set up by UNESCO under the chairmanship of Sean MacBride occupies a

prominent place in the debates regarding the establishment of a NWICO.

The Commission was created in 1977 as a direct response to Resolution 100 of the 19th General session of UNESCO held in Nairobi in 1976. It was established to study four main aspects of global communication: the current state of world communication; the problems surrounding a free and balanced flow of information; and how the needs of the developing countries link with the flow; how, in light of the NIEO, a NWICO could be created, and how the media could become the vehicle for enlightening public opinion about world problems. The Commission took two years going through one hundred working papers especially commissioned for it, to bring out one interim and a final report in 1980, thus giving the issue of reducing global communication inequality a solid intellectual basis and justification. For this reason the NWICO protagonists consider the MacBride Report to be a seminal document (Gerbner *et al* 1993; Vincent *et al* 1999).

Among the 82 recommendations covering the entire gamut of global communication issues, the most innovative were those dealing with the democratisation of communication. The Commission agreed that democratisation of communication was impeded by undemocratic political systems, excessive bureaucracy, inappropriate technologies and illiteracy. To break through these barriers, the Commission recommended many steps, including "participation in media management by representatives of the public and various citizens groups, horizontal communication, counter information and three forms of alternative communication: radical opposition, community or local media movements and trade unions or other social groups with their particular communication networks" (MacBride Report 1980, 191-233).

Following the UNESCO definition of "a free flow and a wider and more balanced dissemination of information," the MacBride report linked freedom of the press and of expression, to the rights to communicate and receive information, rights of reply and correction, and the socio-economic and cultural rights set forth in the UN's 1966 covenants. The report called for the abolition of "censorship or arbitrary control of information" asking for "self-censorship by communicators themselves." It was critical of the constraints imposed by commercialisation, pressures from advertisers and concentration of media ownership and linked the growth of transnational corporations to "one way flow," "market dominance" and "vertical flow" in media products and messages (*ibid*).

Despite generating a good deal of controversy, the MacBride Commission Report was submitted to the 21st General Conference Session of UNESCO held in Belgrade in 1980, and a resolution for the attainment of a NWICO was passed, thereby formally approving the demand (UNESCO 1980).

Opposition to MacBride

Given its tone, the MacBride report was hailed by the protagonists of NWICO as the first international document to explicitly deal with the world's communication problems, but criticised by Western-based media groups such as the World Press Freedom Committee, consisting of journalistic organisations, including the International Federation of Journalists, AP, UPI and the American Newspaper Publishers Association. One key criticism concerned with the report's alleged bias against private ownership of media and communication facilities and the "problems created in a society by advertising."

The West, led by the US, saw in the proposed NWICO a “Soviet-inspired” Third World attempt to control the mass media through state regulation, and, a concept fundamentally in conflict with liberal Western values and the principle of the “free flow of information.” Opposing NWICO, Western leaders argued that the demand was a pretext for Third World dictators to stifle media freedom, to impose censorship and keep away foreign journalists. Such slogans as “cultural self-determination,” “media imperialism” and “national sovereignty over a country’s communications,” they argued, were designed to control channels of communication. The Western news organisations stoutly fought any change in the old information order. They maintained that they were only reporting the reality of life in the Third World – political instability, economic backwardness, human and natural disasters – and that this objective journalism was disapproved of by undemocratic governments in the South. There was a lot of truth in such criticism, given that most of the governments in the developing countries had demonstrated a very antagonistic attitude towards media plurality and autonomy. From Latin America to Africa and from Asia to the Arab world most governments in the global South controlled all media outlets and had systematically suppressed free expression and any form of dissent. Even democratic India had during this period tried to muzzle its usually independent press, while lecturing Western leaders about media ethics.

UNESCO itself also came in for criticism by Western observers as the site of those heated debates, claiming that the organisation was neglecting its true objectives by sponsoring this Third World encroachment on international information and communication. Even the MacBride Commission, which had members from both developed and developing countries, was criticised for providing an intellectual justification for the reform of international communication (Stevenson 1988). The NWICO demands for “national communication policies,” “national sovereignty over information” and “democratisation of communications” were seen as “entailing too interventionist a role for the state” (Wells 1987, 27). A scrutiny of the arguments against NWICO shows that the entire debate was seen only in terms of the threat to the “freedom of the Press” posed by Third World governments under the new order. As Colleen Roach comments, the emphasis on the “government control” argument reflected, “the need to ensure that the NWICO would not reinforce government-run of public sector communications media at the expense of the private sector” (Roach 1987, 38).

The primacy of the private sector was evident also in the policy pronouncements emanating from the White House during this period. The Reagan administration announced significant restrictions on development aid, as “trade not aid” became the catchphrase and the assistance that was provided was to be primarily bilateral and aimed at promoting projects designed to build up the private sector in developing countries. The Reagan administration’s tough line was responsible for cuts in the US allocation for various communication development programmes for the Third World undertaken by the UNESCO-supported International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The attacks on multilateral communication organisations, notably UNESCO, became more strident, culminating in the US withdrawal from the UN body in 1984, followed a year later by Britain. The US decision was influenced by business interests, as the memorandum of the State Department made clear: “the divorce from UNESCO may well

foster a greater willingness on the part of the US business and industry interests to support communications development projects” (quoted in Harley 1984, 96).

The fate of IPDC projects reflected a wider ideological shift, from a public service view of media and communication to a privatised and deregulated industry. The “free flow of information” doctrine, which had defined US policy during the Cold War years received a new fillip with the neo-liberal ideology of the “free market.” The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the break-up of the Soviet Union two years later, transformed the landscape of international politics, profoundly influencing international information and communication. The end of the Cold War, variously celebrated as the dawn of a “new world order,” and as “end of history,” fundamentally changed the contours of international communication. The superpower rivalry had ended and the bipolar world, which had informed debates on international communication for half a century, suddenly had become unipolar, dominated by the remaining superpower. The superpower, now referred to as the hyper-power, had always been a champion for market solutions to the world’s communication problems. It deployed all its power and influence to reshape the international communication ecology. The technological and political infrastructure that made it possible is worth outlining.

As ideas about free-market solutions started circulating, the debates on international information flows within UNESCO were also changing. The organisation itself was gradually losing its primacy as the premier forum for discussing international communication issues. The focus of debate too had shifted from news and information flows to such areas as global telecommunication, with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) acquiring greater importance. Another key contributing factor was the availability of new information technologies and the growing convergence between information and informatics – the combination of computer and telecommunication systems, traditionally dealt with as separate entities. Amongst all this, the NWICO debate faded into insignificance as “information” was being privileged over “communication,” a trend which received new impetus with the process associated with the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

The Marketisation of Global Communication

As the model of public ownership of state assets, represented in its extreme form in the Soviet system, was dismantled, privatisation became the new mantra, with the opening up of new markets in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union adding urgency to the privatisation project. The deregulation and liberalisation of the broadcasting and telecommunications sector and its rapid privatisation in the 1990s, partly as a result of free-market trade regimes set up under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), contributed to the creation of a global marketplace for media products. The reduction in the costs of computing and international telephony during the 1990s laid the foundations for a revolution in communications, creating the Internet – the network of networks. Satellites provided the infrastructure for a global “interconnectedness” to enable a networked global society, and the “knowledge economy” (Mansel 2002, 9). A market-led media system which became dominant in the post-Soviet world, celebrated this connectivity and helped legitimise the economic arguments about freedom to trade at

a transnational level promulgated by multinational capital (Thussu 2000, 116-118).

With its growing commodification, information acquired the status of a “key strategic resource” in the international economy and its distribution, regulation, marketing and management became increasingly important. As real-time trading was made possible through digital networking, information could be transmitted at unprecedented speed and volume across the globe. Inevitably, the growing “informatisation” of the economy facilitated the integration of national and regional economies and the creation of a “global” economy, dominated by a few mega corporations, increasingly global in the production, distribution and consumption of their goods and services. The growth of Internet-based trading, the so-called electronic commerce gave a boost to “digital” capitalism (Schiller 1999, Mattelart 2003).

Manuel Castells has extensively analysed the emerging trends of the global “network society” and social and political processes within the context of such a society, as well as the integration and information-based polarisation in the international “informational economy” in which communication becomes both global and customised. According to Castells, “informational capitalism” is increasingly operating in a “networked” globe, through exchanges between electronic circuits linking up transnational information systems, bypassing the power of the state (Castells 2000, 77-78).

The shift from state-regulation to market-driven policies in the 1990s, within multilateral institutions such as the WTO and the ITU, established a global market in information and communication. These multilateral institutions also emphasised the need for a strong communications infrastructure as a foundation for trade and economic development. With a clear agenda for privatisation and liberalisation, the WTO argued that dismantling barriers to the free flow of information was essential for economic growth. It was even implied that without free merchandising in information, significant trade in goods and services was almost impossible (World Bank 1998, 8-12).

The Annex on Telecommunications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the first multilateral, legally enforceable agreement covering trade and investment in the services sector, set the rules for informational capitalism. Deregulation of telecommunications was crucial as telecoms play a dual role, both as a communications service and as the delivery mechanism for many other services. The Annex ensured that private corporations could invest in telecommunication networks in developing countries and, in turn, Southern governments were forced to open up their markets to private telecommunications operators. The agreement also extended the “free-flow of information doctrine” to cover both the content of communication and the infrastructure through which such messages flow. It required free movement of information and encouraged the establishment of international standards for global compatibility and interoperability.

Three major agreements championing liberalisation signed in 1997 under the aegis of the WTO were crucial in creating an infrastructure within which digital capitalism would flourish. The deregulation of three key sectors – telecommunications services; information technology products and financial services – profoundly affected global trade, especially in information and communication related areas. The resultant liberal regime in telecommunications created the conditions to enable transnational corporations to penetrate uncharted territories especially the

“emerging markets” of Asia, where the potential of the services sector was seen to be enormous.

Such deregulated and privatised new international trading regimes have encouraged the free flow of capital across a borderless world. Concerns about trans-border data flows and their impact on national sovereignty have been replaced by the race to embrace the global electronic marketplace. The biggest beneficiaries of the processes of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation and the resultant WTO agreements, have been the transnational corporations (TNCs) which dominate global trade. They are rapidly boosting their foreign activities through a variety of non-equity firms (e.g. management contracts, franchising), as well as building technology networks with local enterprises. So influential have they become that the annual sales of the top corporations exceed the GDP of many countries. In order to extend electronic commerce to the developing countries, the US government launched, in 1999, its *Internet for Economic Development* initiative. Ostensibly to bring the South into the global digital economy a key goal was also the creation of “a pro-competitive policy and regulatory environment where the Internet and e-commerce can flourish” (US Government 1999, 6).

However, many parts of the global South did not benefit from these neo-liberal policies. Marketisation of media, criticised by the MacBride report, thrived under liberalized global trading regimes, adding to the power of the mainly US-based global media conglomerates – Disney, AOL-Time-Warner, News Corporation – as they owned multiple broadcast and cable networks and production facilities and dominated media content and delivery mechanisms. The relaxation of cross-media ownership restrictions, coupled with mergers and acquisitions, ensured that the media companies broadened and deepened their existing interests, aided by new methods of delivering content, namely digital satellite, cable, the Internet and mobile phones. The convergence of media and technologies, and the process of vertical integration in the media industries, has led to the concentration of media power in a few large corporations, which have used an array of strategies, including the regionalization and localization of managerial staff and programme content to acquire new and retain traditional audiences in a heterogeneous global market.

The grossly unequal trade in media products from the media-rich North, and within it the Anglo-American core, to the media-poor South was at the heart of the NWICO debates. Arguably this traffic has become more pronounced in the era of multi-channel television, mobile telephony and the Internet, while at the same time there is also evidence of a small but significant contra-flow in media products from South to the North (Thussu 2000). The largely Western-owned audio-visual industry is one of the fastest growing global industries, as digital technologies have enabled both the development and delivery of a whole new range of products and services (pay-per-view, interactive TV, video-on-demand, mobile TV and web TV). This has given new relevance to some of the NWICO arguments: the growing flow of consumerist messages through Western-owned or inspired media outlets has been seen by some as evidence of a new form of cultural domination, especially in the global South (Pasquali 2005, 295-296).

The Murdoch Effect

A quarter of a century after MacBride, the mediascape of the global South has profoundly changed, making major media markets such as in China and India prime targets for transnational media and communications corporations. One particular company, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (one of the world's biggest media and communications conglomerates) seems to have been more successful than others in negotiating its way around the complex Asian media scene. Murdoch's media can justifiably claim to have pioneered satellite television in Asia when in 1991 it launched five television channels, reaching a pan-Asian audience. By 2005, Star (Satellite Television Asian Region) was broadcasting, according to its website, "over 50 television services in seven languages to more than 300 million viewers across 53 Asian countries." In 2005, it had a daily viewership of some 100 million and control over 20,000 hours of Indian and Chinese programming and also owning the world's largest contemporary Chinese film library, with more than 600 titles (Star TV website).

Murdoch's extensive control of both information software (programme content) and hardware (delivery systems) makes him a hugely powerful global multimedia player. His empire spans the globe, with wide-ranging media interests – from newspapers; film; broadcast, satellite and cable TV; interactive digital TV; television production, satellites; to the Internet. Apart from owning substantial interests in satellite and cable television, Murdoch also controls the largest number of English-language daily newspapers around the world, as well as such powerful international publishers as HarperCollins. This makes News Corporation one of the world's largest media empires, almost completely global in its reach and influence. What distinguishes it from its rivals such as AOL-Time-Warner and Disney Corporation, however, is the fact that it is the only media conglomerate created, built and dominated by one man – Rupert Murdoch, the septuagenarian chairman and Chief Executive Officer of News Corporation (Page, 2003). As Robert McChesney has noted: "More than any other figure, Murdoch has been the visionary of a global corporate media empire" (McChesney 1999, 96).

A deeply conservative political agenda has characterised the creation of this media empire. In Britain, for example, Murdoch has consistently used his newspapers – *The Times* and *The Sun* – to champion the privatisation of broadcasting, undermining the public service ethos of radio and television. In Europe, British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB), with majority ownership by News Corporation, is now one of the most profitable broadcasters. In the US, Murdoch's media has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Republican cause, including the deregulation of broadcasting (McChesney 1999; Page 2003). These political attitudes are also reflected in the way Murdoch's networks cover international conflicts. If *Operation Desert Storm* of 1991 created the 24/7 global television news culture and launched CNN to a global public, the "war against terrorism" has catapulted Murdoch's television news networks into the international spotlight.

With Fox News in the United States, Sky News in Europe and Star News in Asia, Murdoch's media are relayed to television screens around the world, giving him extraordinary powers to influence the coverage of the open-ended and global "war on terror." The more populist, not to say jingoistic, Fox News, has redefined broadcast journalism in the US, with more than two million viewers regularly

watching it, taking Fox News ahead of CNN as the key cable news channel in the US. In the market-driven broadcasting environment, it might justifiably be feared that Fox's success could lead to the so-called "Foxification" of television news in other parts of the world. Already other Murdoch networks, particularly in Asia, regularly use news reports and footage from Fox News from New York and Washington and Sky News from London.

There is also evidence of very skilful use of localisation techniques to reach wider audience. In India, for instance, Murdoch's Star News (a 24-hour operation, entirely in Hindi and on Indian themes) tends to follow a flashier news agenda that emphasises metropolitan news. For example, its daily *City 60* programme focuses exclusively on news events in India's major cities. The news channel seems to be obsessed with glamour, crime and celebrity culture. This tabloidisation is particularly evident in such crime investigation programmes as *Red Alert* and *Sansani* (Hindi for sensation), shown almost daily.

Such programming has impacted on other television networks too as they compete for advertising revenue as well as fragmenting audiences which have more choice today than could ever be possible under state-controlled broadcasting. The commodification of news is reflected also among some of India's most revered newspapers such as *The Times of India*, which now regularly publishes Bollywood gossip and stories concerning sex and scandals, especially involving celebrities. That such an emphasis may not be appropriate for audiences in a poor country, afflicted with serious socio-economic problems does not appear to concern a commodified journalism. As Palagummi Sainath, one of India's best known media commentators, noted:

The best figure I could come up with for 'national' media journalists covering the rural crisis through one full week was six. Those covering the Lakme India Fashion Week for a full seven days? Over 400 (accredited plus daily pass holders). Between them, they produced in one count, some 400,000 words in print. Also, over 1,000 minutes in TV coverage. Some 800 hours of TV/video footage were shot. ... Consider that this was the main media event in a country where less than 0.2 per cent of the population sports designer clothes. Where per capita consumption of textiles in 2002 at 19 metres was way below the world average. And this was a fashion show which drew more journalists than buyers (Sainath 2004).

This is ironical in a country which was at the forefront of NWICO debates and where there is a long and deep tradition of socially responsible journalism. Mahatma Gandhi, the "Father of the nation," was himself a fearless and spirited journalist and regularly wrote for most of his political life for his weekly newspaper to propagate anti-colonial ideology as well as messages on political and social unity.

However, in the India of 2005, there is an unmistakable trend towards a popular news agenda, driven by the logic of maximizing profit and Murdoch's media has been a major influence in this transition. As television increasingly defines how public opinion is shaped – in its national, regional and international spheres – such trends are fraught with concerns about civic disengagement and depoliticisation. I have characterised this "Murdochisation" of media as "the process which involves the shift of media power from the public to privately owned, transnational, multimedia corporations controlling both delivery systems and the

content of global information networks." "Murdochisation" exhibits a combination of the following factors: a convergence of global media technologies; a tendency towards a market-driven journalism thriving on circulation and ratings wars; transnationalisation of US-inspired media formats, products and discourse; and lastly, an emphasis on infotainment, undermining the role of the media for public information (Thussu 1998a, 7). Seven years on, Murdoch's political influence as a multi-media mogul has widened even further.

Murdoch's Media and the Public Sphere

One key result of "Murdochisation" is the ideological shift in media culture from public service to profit-oriented programming. The growing commodification of information and the trend towards corporatised news can adversely affect the public-service role of media, whose egalitarian potential remains hugely under-explored in the global South (Thussu, 1998b). The increasing marketisation of television seems to have left out of the picture the majority of the world's citizens, the poor, especially those living in the countryside. Countries such as India that pioneered the use of space technology for education, with the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) of 1975-76, which brought educational TV to poorest villages in the most inaccessible areas, and where 40 per cent of the population is still illiterate – according to the United Nations, 30 per cent of all Indian children do not attend school – has ignored the educational potential of television.

Arguably, market-led media have created a more open and wider public sphere, some contend that popularising news and current affairs may in fact have a liberatory potential and a more democratic character (Hartley, 1996; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001). However, popular journalism in a market-driven media environment runs the danger of compromising the quality of public debate and although it may give a sense of broadening the public sphere, in ideological terms it could be narrowing and shrinking the parameters of debate (Rajan 2005).

What compounds the problem is the almost total absence of alternative media outlets emanating from the global South to put poverty back on the international news agenda. The concept of development news emerged as a response to the NWICO, which voiced Southern grievances about the perceived dominance of and "one way flow of information" from North to the South, which had contributed to the misrepresentation of the South in the global media. In addition, many analysts in the South believed that the media could be harnessed to promote social and political development in evolving a civil society and in nation building within a democratic framework.

In the age of "Murdochisation" of media, so-called "development journalism," has all but disappeared from news agendas. The central notion of alternative journalism – investigating the process behind a story rather than merely reporting the news event itself – has no place in a ratings-driven news environment, which discriminates against news that cannot be "sold," resulting in a distorted presentation of events to make them marketable. UNESCO-led initiatives to promote regional exchange mechanisms, established in the late-1970s, largely failed to make much difference to the global, or even regional news agendas, which are shaped by geopolitical or economic factors (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992, 141).

Southern international news-exchange mechanisms, such as the Non-aligned News Agencies Pool, designed to promote news among Non-aligned countries, has failed dismally, primarily because it was accurately perceived as little more than a government-to-government exchange programme and thus lacking journalistic credibility, even within developing countries (Ibid.). Other alternative voices, mostly NGOs, have not been able to make themselves commercially viable and are therefore dependent on funds from Western aid agencies and the UN organisations, acting more like a pressure group, putting Southern concerns on the UN agenda rather than professional news organisations.

Will new information and communication technologies lead to greater democratisation of international communication, a major theme of MacBride report? Such is the allure of the Internet that almost every country in the world, irrespective of its economic situation, is keen to embrace digital capitalism. The famed Silicon Valley has been cloned in other parts of the world – for example, Bangalore in India has become a centre for excellence in electronic trading (Singhal and Everett 2001, 171-172). However, despite pockets of hi-tech, vast swathes of the developing world are not on-line, as lack of telecommunication infrastructure continues to limit access to the Internet. Though growing at an exceptional rate, the Internet is still used by less than ten cent of the world's population: users are generally English-fluent middle class males. The number of the Internet domain hosts has increased at an exponential rate, yet a majority of hosts are commercial websites and most websites are based in developed nations. For millions of people in the developing world, having access to the Internet is a luxury. Where on-line access is available, the telecommunication infrastructure is often not strong enough to allow wide-scale data transmission over telephone lines.

Increasingly seen as a potential IT superpower, the contradictions that India represents are indicative of the digital divide seen in many developing countries. Though India is the world's second biggest producer of computer software and a major "offshore software development centre," it has just over 10 million Internet users in a population of more than a billion. It is true that sections of the Indian population have benefited from liberalisation – especially the 5 per cent which speak and work in English language, the rural populations – some 700 million people living in 700,000 villages – have yet to witness any tangible improvement in their economic fortunes. This trend is replicated in other developing countries too where the elites have been naturalised to the idea of digital capitalism while the vast majority is excluded from the knowledge economy: the 2003 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme notes that in the 1990s average per capita income in 54 countries, in fact, declined (UNDP 2003, 1-2).

Yet, idealists have argued that improved communication between and among nations will enable a more just and equitable global society (Cairncross 1997). However, how is this to be achieved, given the stark disparities in access to information and communication technologies? Meaningful suggestions – such as one proposed by UNESCO's World Commission on Culture and Development, that commercial satellite interests should pay "property rights" when using airwaves and space as they are deemed to be part of "the global commons," a collective asset that belongs to all humankind (UNESCO 1995, 278) – have been hastily buried by the free-market ideologues.

As the media are increasingly driven by the ratings or circulation wars and advertisers' demand for consumers, unfettered commercialism is likely to grow under the onslaught of neo-liberal ideology. Given that mass media are a powerful instrument for propagating dominant ideology, they can play a crucial role in the creation of a marketplace in which their corporate clients can consolidate and expand into un-chartered territories such as China – potentially the world's largest media market. As a striking indicator of the shift in media cultures worldwide, when the Chinese edition of international fashion magazine *Vogue* was launched in 2005, all 300,000 copies of the 400-page first issue, full of advertisements, were sold out within days, forcing the publishers to order an extra print run (Mowbray 2005, 20). Thus the “problems created in a society by advertising” that MacBride Commission was so concerned about, appear not to be seen as problems but an indication of the globalisation and modernisation of “traditional” societies. As Murdoch triumphs in this marketisation of media systems internationally, MacBride must be turning in his grave.

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