

# The MacBride Report: Its Value to a New Generation

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The year 2005 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the report of UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, *Many Voices, One World*, more commonly known as "The MacBride Report." The MacBride Report was written in a much different global context than we witness today. In 1980, the Cold War had a pronounced influence on geopolitical alliances, and the choice to be "non-aligned" was in reference to this great polarity. The MacBride Report, and the call for a "new world information and communication order" (NWICO) that followed, precipitated the decision by the U.S. government to withdraw its membership from UNESCO. In a letter dated December 28, 1983 from Reagan administration Secretary of State George Schultz to UNESCO director-general Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, the reasons for the U.S. withdrawal were given. Equal emphasis was given to issues of mismanagement and "the injection of political goals beyond the scope of the cooperative enterprise" (Schultz, 1984, p. 84). What was clear to all involved was that the decision was made on behalf of big mass media and telecommunications industry interests in the United States. Stating that the U.S. government, "along with the American people generally" (p. 82), believe in UNESCO's constitution, Schultz stated that "We plan to use the resources we presently devote to UNESCO to support such other means of cooperation" (p. 84). A key effect of withdrawal was to undermine the legitimacy of efforts to articulate multilateral principles of global media governance that were not guided entirely by market logic.

The underlying ideological position of the U.S. decision has been one that has been sustained for many years in

both the government's domestic and its foreign media policy. In a 1983 speech by Mark Fowler, Chairman of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) during the Reagan administration, he referred to television as "a toaster with pictures." Fowler's point was that culture in general, including the media, should be given no special consideration or treatment by governments in comparison with other areas of commerce (Mayer, 1983). The logic behind this view is that governments should play no role in the shaping or nurturing of culture, and that it is the marketplace alone that should govern culture. Of course, it is not true that a government that responds to big corporate interests is one that necessarily favors a free and competitive marketplace (Calabrese, 2004a). The "marketplace" view was consistent with the withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO, an organization that had become the locus of multilateral efforts to oppose allowing the discipline of the big media market to dominate cultural production and distribution. Despite the resistance that many countries have held towards submitting cultural practices to the discipline of market- (or neo-) liberal trade and investment policies, the United States has relentlessly pursued a foreign media policy that aims precisely at that outcome (Calabrese & Redal, 1995). Since the United States could not control the outcomes of UNESCO recommendations, and since UNESCO (through the MacBride Report) was recommending positions that ran counter to U.S. ideological positions and economic interests, it made sense for the United States do so as Secretary of State George Schultz stated, which was to pursue "other means of cooperation." Schultz may not have anticipated the exact ways in which such cooperation would be achieved, but U.S. efforts to end the "cultural exception" within the World Trade Organization (WTO) are clear evidence of a single-minded trajectory in U.S. foreign media

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policy over the past twenty-five years, notwithstanding the seemingly incongruous recent re-entry of the United States into UNESCO.

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 decision by the United States to rejoin UNESCO should come as no surprise. Since 1984, UN leaders have worked assiduously to attract the United States back into the fold, even to the point of rejecting the organization's own past. Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny, UN under-secretary-general for information in 1990, clearly articulated an anti-NWICO position that was consistent with U.S. policy and official ideology: "Over many years, the international debate on information and communication did not result in agreement on a common approach. I wish only to refer to some of the discussions, for instance, on concepts of a new world information order, which in the eyes of many actors in the field of communication have harmed international efforts to construct a world-wide information society" (Paquet-Sévigny, quoted in Roach, 1997, p. 116). The path to "a world-wide information society" was not and is not something that has had to be constructed in a particular way, as this statement implies. But following the U.S. withdrawal, UNESCO officials have tended to subordinate that organization's past pretenses to moral leadership to one of appeasement and conciliation, and in the process they embraced the official U.S. vision of what a global information society should look like. For the U.S. government, and for the governments of other affluent countries, the political task for the future has been one of engineering the "creative destruction" of social welfare

states and redirecting national policy efforts to build a neoliberal global information society (Calabrese, 1997, 1999a, 1999b). That task has been based on an intellectual shift in economic thought from Keynes to Hayek. UNESCO has conformed to that agenda by embracing, or at least not significantly opposing, a pro-WTO ideological framework as far as the idea of the global information society is concerned. Within this framework, not only has UNESCO lost much of its former relevance as a deliberative forum for global media policy, but it also no longer poses a symbolic threat to the cultural norms of neoliberalism. With UNESCO no longer at the center of global media policy discourse, noteworthy struggles to develop democratic principles of global media governance have shifted to other forums, most visibly the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

The WSIS, which met in Geneva in 2003 and will culminate in Tunis in November 2005, represented for many people throughout the world, particularly in the global South, new hope for making important progress in articulating global norms and related policies in the area of communication rights. Global, or at least transnational, policy-making is not a recent phenomenon, although the degree of public participation in global policy forums arguably is on the rise. That broadened participation has been represented as the voice of "civil society" – that part of social life that is often distinguished from the state and the corporate sector – in the generation of a worldwide public discourse about the future of communication rights and the global policies that are needed to secure them. Of course, there are grounds for disagreement about how unified the voice of "civil society" is, given the inherent non-singularity that characterizes the history of the very idea of civil society, and given the broad range of issues that were brought to the WSIS under the banner of that idea (Calabrese, 2004b). Those issues include the communication rights of indigenous groups, workers, women, children, and persons with disabilities; intellectual property; community media; open source software; access to information and the means of communication; global citizenship and much more (Civil Society Declaration, 2003). At the WSIS in Geneva, it became clear that there was considerable political will to establish and maintain an effective presence to represent "civil society" in a process that, for the sake of legitimacy, was ostensibly opened to multiple stakeholders. Apart from

ongoing questions about the feasibility, implementation and enforceability of the WSIS action plan, one of the greatest challenges for non-governmental and non-corporate representation in future global policy forums, including the second phase of the WSIS, will undoubtedly be related to the question of *sustainability*. How sustainable will policy participation be by the contingent “civil society” coalition that has come together, in episodic fashion, as a response to a major summit? Can they maintain longevity, responsiveness and legitimacy in the absence of the kinds of institutional and financial supports that are available to corporations and industry trade groups? Will the power of networking that has enabled this coalition to claim a legitimate space in the WSIS process be a kind of power that can continue to offer a platform for diverse voices to be heard and heeded once the summit is over?

Much has changed since the MacBride Report was published, not only in global politics, but also in global communication. The year 2005 and the WSIS do not mark

a stopping point in a global dialogue about the right to communicate, but this year is an auspicious occasion to commemorate the political legacy of the MacBride Report. Despite the geopolitical limitations that filtered the contributions of its authors, they had the foresight to hope for a kind of “globalization” that, rather than signify divisions among citizens of the world, acknowledged our common humanity. With all of its flaws, for which progressive communication activists understandably have distanced themselves over the past twenty-five years, the MacBride Report projects 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. For these reasons, the anniversary of the MacBride Report should be celebrated, and the complexity of its legacy understood, by a new generation of communication rights activists.

## Notes

- 1 Andrew Calabrese is an associate professor at the University of Colorado. His articles and books focus on communication politics and policy. He won the McGannon Award for Communication Policy Research and was a Fulbright scholar in Slovenia. He edits the book series “Critical Media Studies: Institutions, Politics and Culture,” for Rowman and Littlefield, which recently re-published the MacBride Report in commemoration of its twenty-fifth anniversary.

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