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Contradictions of Information Societies

Robin Mansell

The rhetoric, practice, technology development, and policy initiatives of today are no better aligned with each other when it comes to fostering inclusive and beneficial information societies than they were twenty-five years ago when UNESCO's *Many Voices, One World* groundbreaking report was published.¹ Many of the same contradictions, albeit in different forms, that were highlighted in the MacBride Report are present today. There have been substantial changes in technology, the globalization debate has subsumed the transnationalization debate, and a wider range of interested stakeholders is explicitly acknowledged. However, the aspirations of ensuring that 'communication' or 'information societies' develop in the interests of all remain elusive.

The *Many Voices, One World* Report was the culmination of years of debate over the need to foster a New World Information and Communication Order or NWICO. Much emphasis was placed on the *communication process* as a means of diffusing power and reducing inequalities. The future information and communication environment was envisaged with considerable prescience and it was argued that '... the basic decisions in order to forge a better future for men and women in communities everywhere, in developing as well as in developed nations, do not lie principally in the field of technological development: *they lie essentially in the answers each society gives to the conceptual and political foundations of development*' (emphasis added) (pp. 12-13).

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The report stressed the need to address the deeper problems within the development process. In the language of the late 1970s, major problems and worrying trends included the potential for the spread of cultural domination as a result of one way or vertical flows of information and communication, the intensification of the 'industrialization of communication' and the effects of the dominance of markets. It was acknowledged that 'the subjects of imbalance and domination were among the most contentious in the early rounds of the world-wide debate on communications' (p. 164). They remain so today.

Today, there are new expressions of imbalance and domination with respect to 'the information society' and there continues to be a very great '...need for the development of critical forms of education ... and the fostering of people's ability to choose more discriminatingly between the different products of the communication process'.² The NWICO was envisaged as '...an open-ended conceptual framework' which pre-supposed a new distribution of resources in line with the rights and needs of the poor. Although it was written in the late 1970s, the report's authors also envisaged something akin to the Internet - '... it is feasible to envisage ... a web of communication networks, integrating autonomous or semi-autonomous, decentralized units' (p. 12). They said that the contradictions in society could lead to computer networks that would embed values of hierarchy and centralization and increased social control, accompanied by inequalities. As a counterweight to such developments, they called for a 'right to communicate' to be enshrined in a UN declaration.³ They understood that the problems of their time could be tackled only through a huge effort that would involve measures to foster international cooperation, encourage partnerships for development, and put international mechanisms in place to achieve these goals.

In the intervening years information and communication technologies (ICTs) including the Internet have become pervasive in the lives of those who have the necessary resources. But too much has remained unchanged. The underlying contradictions that operate to prevent rapid closure of the gaps and divides within the information societies of today are very much with us.

On the surface we have a major shift in rhetoric. The NWICO is now called the 'information society'. The 2003 WSIS produced a Declaration which begins with a 'Common Vision of the Information Society'. It stresses information and knowledge rather than the communication process, but there are many echoes, nevertheless, of the language of the MacBride Report. The Common Vision entails a:

'... common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.⁴

The Declaration associates ICTs with promoting the development goals of the Millennium Declaration⁵ and reaffirms 'that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression'. It does state that 'communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. ... Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers'.

In this WSIS Declaration and its associated Action Plan, consideration is given to the need for international and regional cooperation, to promoting universal access and bridging the digital divide, to priorities, to public-private partnerships and to 'mainstreaming' ICTs within the work of organizations. There are targets to be reached by 2015, but nearly all of them focus on ICTs rather than on the communication process itself. To be fair, in the detail of the text of the Action Plan, there are references to issues involving communication including capacity building,

confidence building, a conducive legal and institutional environment, cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content, the media, and the ethical dimensions of the Information Society.

Consideration of some of the unresolved issues at the end of WSIS in December 2003 suggests, however, that the contradictions that confronted the authors of the MacBride Report are present today in at least two key areas – finance and governance.

With respect to finance, the WSIS Action Plan set out a 'digital solidarity agenda' aimed at 'mobilizing human, financial and technological resources for inclusion of all men and women in the emerging Information Society'. A taskforce was established to examine existing financing mechanisms and the feasibility of the creation of a voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund. Such a fund has in fact been established.⁶ In its report at the end of 2004, however, the Task Force report observes that funding 'should be seen in the context of available financing for the broader set of development agendas and goals. ... (p. 10-11).⁷ It calls for improved cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination, more multi-stakeholder partnerships, stronger emphasis on domestic finance, private sector support for locally relevant applications and content, strengthening capacities to secure funds and to use them effectively, and encouragement of increased voluntary, consumer-based contributions.

But, as for the Digital Solidarity Fund, it seems that the 'Task Force felt that it was not in a position to assess its role among the various ICT financial mechanisms' (p. 13). Once again, the opportunity to undertake a 'huge effort' as recommended by the MacBride Report looks likely to be missed. The financial responsibility for major initiatives will default to countries themselves and to the overall development community with its many competing priorities. Just as the MacBride Report said that finance (tariffs) was one of a triad of crucial issues that would need to be resolved to correct the imbalances of the time, finance in terms of communication tariffs or prices continue to disadvantage poorer regions or countries. This is so despite several decades of attention to this matter through liberalisation and related policies. Financing arrangements continue to work against the interests of fostering inclusive communication in poor countries.

The second area of contestation is governance. In the face of controversy a Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) was established to investigate and make proposals for action on the governance of the Internet.⁸ Its report is due in 2005. It will consider the implications of the Internet's commercialization in the light of globalization. It will present options to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources to facilitate access for all and to foster stability, security, multilingualism and diverse content. In this area there are major contradictions between the interests of those advocating private sector management of the governance process and those who see a role for governments or civil society actors.

As in the MacBride Report era, the contestation is over a scarce resource. The MacBride Report's authors were concerned about equity in the allocation of the radio frequency spectrum – a scarce resource that required fair treatment in order to foster participation in the communication environment by all. Today scarcity, with respect to Internet domain names and as a result of efforts to protect information, gives rise to substantial tensions between all those with an interest in how the Internet will be governed in the future. The consequences of the outcome of deliberations in this area will be substantial.

These contradictions in the areas of finance and governance are deeply rooted in the economy and they are persisting between those who seek to profit from information societies and those who seek also to promote information societies that are consistent with world poverty reduction and with a communication environment that fosters human dignity and respect. Until these diminish, today's digital divides or 'gaps' will persist. This is so in spite of great changes. There is now at least the potential for diversity and choice through both mainstream and alternative media, but this is unlikely to be extended to all without a major effort to intervene in support of the interests of those who remain excluded through poverty.

Notes

- 1 International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (1980/2004) *Many Voices, One World – Towards a New, More Just, and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order- The MacBride Commission*, first published by UNESCO, Lanham NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- 2 The text of the MacBride Report referred to 'he' or 'him' throughout, although it did emphasise gender issues in some sections, quotation is from p. 29.
- 3 As formulated by L. S. Harms in 'An Emergent Communication Policy Science: Content, Rights, Problems and Methods', University of Hawaii, and see also <http://www.righttocommunicate.org/viewDocument.action?sectionName=rights&id=36>.
- 4 World Summit on the Information Society (2003), 'Declaration of Principles - Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium', 12 December, http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsis/doc/S03-WSIS-DOC-0004!!PDF-E.pdf;
- 5 See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>
- 6 See <http://www.dsf-fsn.org/en/15c-en.htm>
- 7 The Report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development (2004), *Financing ICTD*, Executive Summary, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/tffm/final-report-executive-summary.doc>.
- 8 See <http://www.wgig.org/About.html>