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### Article (Published version) (Refereed)

**Original citation:**

Mansell, Robin and Nordenstreng, Kaarle (2006) Great media and communication debates: WSIS and the MacBride Report. [Information technologies and international development](#), 3 (4). pp. 15-36. ISSN 1544-7529

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2013

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## Research Article

# Great Media and Communication Debates: WSIS and the MacBride Report

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## Introduction

In 1980 UNESCO published *Many Voices, One World*, the report of its International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, also known as the MacBride Report, after the commission's chair, Sean MacBride, the Irish statesman and peace and human rights activist.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, in an acknowledgment of its importance in current debates about the evolution of information societies, Rowman & Littlefield republished it. *Many Voices, One World* was a groundbreaking report and became a milestone in the discussions that had been ongoing since the 1970s. We examine its insights in the light of debates leading up and subsequent to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. We argue that many of the issues and dilemmas highlighted by the MacBride Report's authors exist today.

The record of WSIS participants in tackling these issues is unfortunately little better than that of those who sought to influence debates about media and communication some twenty-five years ago. Although there has been much talk in the intervening years, there are few signs that international debates and diplomatic mechanisms are fostering the equitable development of the media and communication environment that is so crucial for the emergence of information societies in the twenty-first century. There is a profusion of smaller and larger initiatives aimed at reducing various social and economic inequalities including those associated with the media and communication industries. In our view, however, it is unlikely that the new institutional forums that have emerged since the WSIS will be equal to addressing sources of inequality in areas such as governance, financing, media diversity, freedom of speech, and human rights. Nevertheless, and partly as a result of the WSIS dialogue, participants in civil society are becoming better informed about the issues involved. Whereas the WSIS, as the MacBride Commission before it, failed to galvanize private and public sector participants into action to promote the massive investment that is needed, the WSIS process did heighten the profile of core international media and communication issues in many key international forums. It also confirmed the need to address these issues through multilateral platforms that encompass all stakeholders, including civil society actors.

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Earlier, shorter versions of this article appear separately in R. Mansell, "Las contradicciones de las sociedades de la información," pp. 41–44, and K. Nordenstreng, "Un hito en el gran debate mediático," pp. 45–48, XXV aniversario del Informe MacBride Comunicación internacional y políticas de comunicación, *Quaderns del CAC*, No. 21, 2005. We are grateful to two anonymous referees and to the editor for helpful comments; any errors or omissions remain our own. 1. For Sean MacBride's extraordinary record, including the Nobel Peace Prize and the Lenin Peace Prize, see Becker & Nordenstreng (1992).

In the next section, we summarize the principal insights of the MacBride Report and initiatives introduced during the 1980s and 1990s and compare them with the issues addressed during the WSIS. In section 3, we locate the MacBride Report and the WSIS in the context of the “Great Media and Communication Debate.” This is an ongoing and highly political debate with major economic and political implications for the diversity of the media and for the gap in the accessibility of communication networks between the wealthy and poor countries. In section 4, we examine why the passage of time has not prepared the ground for more effective concrete actions in key areas following the WSIS. In the concluding section, we consider the importance of the geopolitical environment for the media and communication debate and provide some recommendations, especially with respect to the contribution of the academic community in the form of future research.

## Building International Awareness; Persistent Inaction

Since the publication of the MacBride Report, there has been huge technological change. Nevertheless, the outcomes of the MacBride Commission’s work and those associated with the WSIS have some similarities. At the time of the MacBride Report, satellite technology was regarded as an innovation that would foster greater diversity in the media and provide improved and lower-cost access to communication services and an array of new telehealth and education services. Today, there is renewed hope that the Internet, digitization, and technological convergence will enable the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to reduce the inequalities between rich and poor. The need for diversity in media content, extension of affordable and global communication networks, and publication of information free from censure by the state or other actors are components of the ongoing information society debates. The similarities are in the focus of

recent debates and those that were taking place in the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized the links between media, communication, and the economic and social order. When the MacBride Report was published its authors were very concerned about the dominance of the industrialized countries—and especially the United States—in the production and distribution of media content. Today, interest is focused on the impact of the forces of globalization on media production (in terms of both concentration of ownership and opportunities for self-publishing through blogs and other new Internet-supported services) and in the resilience of local audiences in terms of their capacity to resist external media or to translate their content into their own cultural milieu.

Media regulation and governance of communication networks have long been important matters for international debate. The MacBride Report treated media and communication policy and regulation as formal matters for national governance institutions. State governance institutions, including regulatory bodies and legislative entities, still have an important role, but civil society actors are now increasingly recognized as essential actors. On the international scene, governance of the media and communication is involving a wider range of informal and formal institutions. It is questionable, however, whether these changes are alleviating the determinants of inequality in the media and communication environment.

### **MacBride and WSIS Participant Aspirations**

The aspirations of participants in the debates about communication in the decades preceding the 1980 MacBride Report and the aspirations of those active in the current information society debates are remarkably similar. Many of the latter want information societies to develop in a way that underpins efforts in the economic and political spheres to tackle inequality. In our view these aspirations remain elusive.<sup>2</sup> Although awareness has increased this has not produced the political pressure or eco-

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2. Our assessment is based, respectively, on Mansell’s participation in international forums hosted by the OECD, agencies of the United Nations, and the World Bank since the mid-1980s and her ongoing research on “communication for development” issues and the role of ICTs, and on Nordenstreng’s participation since the early 1960s in these discussions in his capacity as a media and journalism scholar and contributor to several UNESCO platforms, as well as to the MacBride Roundtable discussions in the 1980s and 1990s. Both authors were active contributors to the WSIS debates and monitor ongoing developments in their roles in the International Association of Media and Communications Research (IAMCR).

conomic investment necessary to alleviate unequal development, including access to and use of new media such as the Internet.

The MacBride Report represented the culmination of years of debate on the need to foster a New World Information and Communication Order, or NWICO (Carlsson 2005), involving wide-ranging discussion about how developing countries might use the media and communication networks to become more economically, politically, and culturally self-reliant. The NWICO discussion was closely linked to calls from the nonaligned countries of the "South" for a new international economic order (Hamelink 1978). They were supported by the Soviet-led socialist countries of the "East," which had their own reasons for pursuing self-reliance and state sovereignty. By the end of the 1970s, discussions in the political forums of the time, such as the United Nations, had reached a peak. The role of the media and communication infrastructure in governing the "free flow" of information was strongly contested during this period.

Today equally strongly contested are the need to expand the opportunities for open access to media content and the Internet, the desirability of limiting the expansion of intellectual property rights protection on digital information resources, and the importance of finance to increase literacy and acquisition of other capabilities necessary for people to participate in information societies. These information society debates are also occurring in a highly charged political environment. There are calls for debt relief for poor countries, and the United Nations millennium goals include numerous targets that focus attention on the importance of reducing poverty. Despite all the debate and effort, the strength of global forces of capital shows few signs of diminishing within the media and communication sphere. These forces are providing incentives for profitability that often restrict access to new ICTs and to content, and the tensions that characterized earlier debates between those that regarded the media as

essential to foster open and public debate and those that regarded the media as instruments of state control continue to be very much present.

The republication of the MacBride Report in 2004 has increased accessibility to its insights for the current generation of researchers, activists, and policymakers. It is important that these be assessed in the light of today's developments to consider what has been achieved since the report's initial publication. In his foreword to the new edition, Calabrese (2004, xiv) argues that, "in the MacBride Report, we find a spirit of hopefulness about how a better world is possible, about the continuing importance of public institutions as a 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." This spirit of hopefulness was complemented by eighty-two recommendations for action, many of which are still relevant. These recommendations are set out under themes: strengthening independence and self-reliance; social consequences and new tasks; journalistic professional integrity and standards; democratizing communication; and fostering international cooperation.<sup>3</sup> These themes emphasize the essential link between media and communication policies and social, cultural, and economic development objectives. They also stress the importance of participation by all factions of society in the definition of these objectives, although the term civil society had not come into use. The report called for the elimination of all forms of communication gaps—foreshadowing present-day discussions about digital divides. It emphasized the use of *all* means of communication (using both older and newer technologies) and of education. The MacBride Report's emphases resonate with the current emphasis on the importance of fostering media literacies, of strengthening capacities for local content production, and of widening access to the communication infrastructure.

The MacBride Report authors acknowledged that

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3. *Space limitations do not allow a full exposition of the content of the report. The subissues addressed under these themes were strengthening independence and self-reliance (communications policies, strengthening capacities, basic needs, particular challenges); social consequences and new tasks (integrating communication into development, facing the technological challenge, strengthening cultural identity, reducing the commercialization of communication, access to technical information); professional integrity and standards (responsibility of journalists, improved international reporting, protection of journalists); democratizing of communication (human rights, removal of obstacles, diversity and choice, integration and participation); and fostering international cooperation (partners for development, strengthening collective self-reliance, international mechanisms, international understanding).*

achieving equity in all these areas would require major changes in the structure and organization of media and communication markets. Their call for changes in media and communication regulation and market structures presaged later moves to promote telecommunication market liberalization, and policies aimed at curtailing the monopoly power and dominance of the newspaper and broadcast companies; however, neither the work of the MacBride Commission nor the specific recommendations of the report can be regarded as having led directly to changes in policy, regulation, or market structures. Subsequent changes in communication markets were pushed through on a competitiveness agenda driven largely by the industrialized countries; only a few countries worldwide introduced measures, of varying effectiveness, to curtail the power of the major media companies.

Although some commentators have criticized the MacBride Report for its statist approach to financing the development of information content and the communication infrastructure, it can be seen in another light. It can be read as emphasizing noncommercial or public provision of communication services and media as an *alternative* to market-led mechanisms. This is similar to WSIS participants' calls for preservation of a public space for the media and for scientific, education, and information content, free from overly restrictive IPR protection. The MacBride Report also addressed the need for a code of conduct for journalists and measures to protect freedom of speech and diversity of media content; similar calls for codes and communication or information rights protections were made at the WSIS. The MacBride Report recommended "utilizing funds provided through bilateral governmental agreements and from international and regional organizations" (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 268) to tackle the gaps between the rich and the poor. The WSIS acknowledged that public sector or donor agency

funding would be insufficient to reduce the gap in resources needed to alleviate inequalities in the media and communication field. Civil society actors are calling for the use of multiple mechanisms for financing and a reduction in sole reliance on market mechanisms, echoing the recommendations of the MacBride Report.

The MacBride Report contained a diversity of urgent priorities for action. The WSIS Declaration and its associated plan of action emphasized the need for international and regional cooperation, universal access and bridging the digital divide, investment priorities, and mainstreaming ICTs within the work of donor organizations. Both sets of documents embrace a mishmash of actions and aspirations. In the WSIS case, and in contrast to the MacBride Report, specific targets were established for 2015; however, nearly all of these targets relate to technology rather than the media, communication processes, and human beings.<sup>4</sup> In the plan of action there are references to capacity and confidence building, the need for a conducive legal and institutional environment, issues related to cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content, the media, and the ethical dimensions of the information society. All these areas are highlighted as urgent for action and thus are a wish list that does not include means of implementation, at least not on a scale that would bring about a step shift in the reduction of information society inequalities.

While the detail from the MacBride Report and the WSIS is overwhelming and unlikely to be fully acted upon both for political and economic reasons, perhaps the renewed emphasis on media and communication as vital social processes will have an impact on decision making about information societies. The MacBride Report strongly emphasized the social aspect and the potential contribution of the media and communication to forces of democratization. Its authors expressed their hope for the

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4. *The targets in the plan of action illustrate the strong focus on ICTs. These targets may be taken into account in the establishment of the national targets, considering the different national circumstances: to connect (a) villages with ICTs and establish community access points; (b) universities, colleges, secondary schools, and primary schools with ICTs; (c) scientific and research centers with ICTs; (d) public libraries, cultural centers, museums, post offices, and archives with ICTs; (e) health centers and hospitals with ICTs; (f) all local and central government departments and establish Web sites and e-mail addresses; (g) to adapt all primary and secondary school curricula to meet the challenges of the information society, taking into account national circumstances; (h) to ensure that all of the world's populations have access to television and radio services; (i) to encourage the development of content and to put in place appropriate technical means to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet; (j) to ensure that at least half the world's inhabitants have access to ICTs.*

emergence of societies in which there would be “the diffusion of power through broader access to and participation in the communication process; . . . the benefits of communication used as an educational and socializing force; . . . the reduction of inequalities through democratization; [and] . . . the abolition of the vestiges of domination as full national liberation becomes a reality” (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 6).

This statement resonates with the aspirations captured in the WSIS Declaration, which expresses it slightly differently. The WSIS Declaration starts from a “Common Vision of the Information Society.” It emphasizes information and knowledge rather than the media or the communication process but expresses the “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” (WSIS 2003a, par. 1).

The WSIS Declaration also sees ICTs as contributing to the achievement of the development goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration<sup>5</sup> and reaffirms “that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression,” stating 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” (WSIS 2003a, par. 4).

### ***Confusing the Determinants of Inequality and Social Injustice***

Unfortunately, as Cees Hamelink (2004a, 281) has suggested, “the final Declaration of the WSIS commences with the aspiration of a common vision. The end result is however a blurred confusion.” The MacBride Report was similarly ambitious and in places also similarly self-contradictory. The official documents of the WSIS were complemented by an unofficial civil society declaration, “Shaping Informa-

tion Societies for Human Needs.” The centrality of people and of poverty reduction was very clear in this Declaration: “At the heart of our vision of information and communications societies is the human being. The dignity and rights of all peoples and each person must be promoted, respected, protected and affirmed. Redressing the inexcusable gulf between levels of development and between opulence and extreme poverty must therefore be our prime concern” (Civil Society Declaration to the WSIS 2003, 2).

Both the MacBride Report and the WSIS documents comment on the relationships between communication and society with special attention to the social, political, economic, and educational dimensions, as well as to the problems created by unequal access to media and communication networks. The MacBride Report, however, throws out a stronger challenge to the persistent overemphasis on technological advance at the expense of attention to media influences on the construction of meaning and shared cultural understandings. Its authors discuss in detail the problems created by the “one-way flow” of communication from the dominant economic centers of the world; by a failure to encourage critical awareness of the relationships among the media, journalism ethics, and democratization; and by the absence of policies to encourage the equitable spread of communication infrastructure and diversity in media content. Its central conclusion is that “the utmost importance should be given to eliminating imbalances and disparities in communication and its structures, and particularly in information flows. Developing countries need to reduce their dependence, and claim a new, more just and more equitable order in the field of communication. This issue has been fully debated in various settings; the time has now come to move from principle to substantive reforms and concrete actions” (MacBride Report 1980/2004, 253).

Today’s vocabulary perhaps makes the political and economic “dependence” on the wealthy industrialized countries less evident. Globalization has led to concerns about unequal interdependence among countries and regions, but the desire for a “just and more equitable order” remains strong. The MacBride Report was explicit about the importance of the social, political, and economic development agenda in

5. See [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) retrieved April 20, 2007.



the context of decisions about media and communication policy, emphasizing in particular the “political foundations of development”: “Since information and communication may today become—as never before—the sources of the creation of wealth, the system responsible for the existing communication gaps and the inequality in this sphere threaten to widen the gulf between the rich and the poor. . . . But 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*” (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 12–13 [emphasis added]).

Development issues, poverty, and inequality, and the importance of a political will to foster greater equity were clearly signaled by the MacBride Report as being more important than the potential of technological innovation in isolation. The MacBride Commission was relatively small, and the report reflected its members’ individual experience in the contexts of the wealthy and poor countries.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the WSIS documents were the result of a consensus, brokered by officials and a few accredited participants in the WSIS main, official forum. These were mostly government and intergovernmental officials, although some of the texts prepared by civil society representatives were incorporated in their reports.

The members of the MacBride Commission and UNESCO spokespersons were not alone in the 1980s in acknowledging the relationships among the media, the extension of communication networks, and development prospects. For example, in 1984, the Independent Commission for World Wide Telecommunications Development, established by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), produced the *Missing Link*, a report produced by the commission’s chair, Sir Donald Maitland, a senior British diplomat, which argued that “all mankind could be brought within easy reach of the telephone by the early part of next century” (Maitland 1984, 69). This report focused on development of the un-

derlying telecommunication infrastructure, but, like the MacBride Report, its authors emphasized that the main challenge was not simply greater investment in technology, but promotion of the strategies, market and regulatory mechanisms, technical and management capabilities, and training and financing from multiple sources. The *Missing Link* report authors, again like the MacBride Report authors, emphasized the “political character” of their task, stating that disparities between rich and poor were unacceptable “in the name of common humanity” (Maitland 1984, 3).

Both these reports stressed the need to address development of media and communication networks in the light of the problems created by inequalities throughout society. In the late 1970s, concerns focused on 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 impact of “transnationalization,” leading to the dominance of a few media producers over global and local markets. There was concern that an information explosion might defeat people’s capacities to produce and consume a diverse array of information. It was also acknowledged that “the subjects of imbalance and domination were among the most contentious in the early rounds of the world-wide debate on communications” (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 164).

Ongoing information societies debates have some commonalities in terms of the issues that were discussed and which proved to be the most contentious in the 1980s. Participants in the WSIS expressed their anxieties about the vast quantity of information resources circulating within the Internet and the increasing personalization of information resource access, which potentially excludes diverse sources of information, and continuing imbalances in the capabilities to produce and consume information among and within different regions of the world. The reasons why these issues are contentious are many, but in essence they reflect tensions among those keen to rely mainly on market-led developments and those that are lobbying for a major

6. *Canada, France, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States for the wealthy countries; and Chile, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, the former Yugoslavia and USSR, and Zaire. The report also benefited from the work of collaborating consultants from the media and communication research community including James Halloran, Fernando Reyes Matta, and Yassen Zassoursky.*

increase in public or public-private initiatives to reduce inequalities and imbalances. For instance, there are those who claim that today's digital divides are of small concern as mobile telephone networks are reaching even the poorest communities; for them it is simply a matter of time before market-led initiatives close the digital divide. For others, concern is growing about the widening disparities—not necessarily in terms of access to technology, but in terms of the capabilities and literacies required to benefit from its potential and the concentration and power of the media.

Although the MacBride and Maitland reports may for a time have languished on the shelves of those whom their authors sought to influence, by the late 1990s UNESCO was renewing efforts to foster discussion on the problems associated with inequality in the development of information societies, the term being used in place of NWICO. Part of its efforts consisted of sponsoring several INFOethics conferences aimed at highlighting the importance of access to public information content, and to networks and services, increased rights of access to educational, scientific and cultural information, and protection of privacy and freedom of expression. At its third conference in 2000, the then assistant director-general of UNESCO suggested that "Wisdom comes from our understanding of what the ICTs can be used for, how they can be used and with whom they can be used. . . . Our understanding of the ethical, societal and legal implications of the ICTs for human beings is essential. . . . Education, in its fullest sense, is, in my opinion, the ultimate answer to universal access to information and knowledge sharing" (UNESCO 2000, 65).

Ethical, societal, legal, and governance arrangements for ICTs were given precedence over concerns about the technologies themselves. This initiative signaled the need for substantial attention to inequalities in access to information, the communication infrastructure, and education and in legal protection of information or communication rights. Although the WSIS highlighted many of these issues as being important, there are reasons for some skepticism about whether the political will to address them is any stronger than it was after the publication of the MacBride Report. The situation appears to be as unclear as it was in the 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Nordenstreng and Schiller 1993). At about the same time as UNESCO

was rekindling these debates, the World Bank (1998) published its world report on "knowledge for development," highlighting both information and knowledge as keys to poverty reduction. By the end of the 1990s, debates about emerging information or knowledge societies had reached a new peak in numerous national, regional, and international forums.

By the 2003 and 2005 WSIS, there was heightened awareness of these issues, but no clarity about who would be best positioned to take the lead in fostering continuing open dialogue and action. In the next section, we examine some of the similarities and differences in the political and economic contexts surrounding the various stages of the "Great Media and Communication Debate." We do so to demonstrate why the political will to take actions to introduce fundamental change leading to greater equity in the media and communication field remains so weak.

## Historical Milestones and Political Momentum

The MacBride Report stands as a milestone in media and communication history just as the WSIS will with the passage of time. The work of the MacBride commissioners was not primarily a scientific exercise to discover the worldwide state of media and communication; it was first and foremost designed to be a political stock taking of the socioeconomic forces influencing the contemporary media and communication field. Similarly, the WSIS can be seen as a political response to a variety of pressures resulting in a process and events intended to give a high profile to measures aimed at reducing inequalities in information societies.

### *The Milestones in the Debate*

The MacBride Report emerged in the context of what came to be known as the "Great Global Media Debate" (Gerbner et al. 1993; Padovani and Nordenstreng 2005). This debate, for analytical purposes, can be seen as emerging through five, relatively clearly demarcated, major stages that began in the 1970s, each with one or more milestones of its own.

#### 1. 1970–75 Decolonization Offensive

- Idea of information imperialism
- Concept of a New International Information Order (NIIO) proposed by UN



## GREAT MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DEBATES: WSIS AND THE MACBRIDE REPORT

2. 1976–77 Western Counter-Attack
  - Establishment of World Press Freedom Committee
  - Delayed introduction of UNESCO's Mass Media Declaration in Nairobi
  - Proposal of a "Marshall Plan for telecommunications"
3. 1978–80 Truce
  - Adoption of UNESCO's Mass Media Declaration
  - Work and report of the MacBride Commission
  - Consensus on the concept of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)
  - Establishment of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC)
4. 1981–90 Western Offensive
  - Conference of Voices of Freedom in Talloires
  - United States and United Kingdom withdraw from UNESCO
  - Unseating of UNESCO's Director General M'Bow
  - Killing the concept of NWICO
5. 1991– Globalization Culminating in the WSIS
  - Global markets versus cultural exception
  - Multinational corporations versus global civil society
  - Digital divide concerns
  - Information societies and knowledge societies in the context of poverty reduction

The politics of the first four stages have been examined elsewhere in terms of how they influenced developments in the international policy arena for media and communication policy (see Nordenstreng 1984, 1999). The fifth stage, commencing in the early 1990s, focused on the role of the media and communication in the face of the forces of globalization. It culminated in the WSIS. Although this globalization stage can be broken down into several

phases, for our purpose, which is to consider the political forces influencing the narrative about policy in the media and communication sphere during this period in terms of the way it both parallels and departs from earlier phases of the "great debate," this is not essential.

The MacBride Report was published soon after the release of UNESCO's Mass Media Declaration in 1978. The idea of an international commission to study the global problems of media and communication grew out of a political deadlock within UNESCO in the mid-1970s. The drafting of a declaration on "fundamental principles concerning the contribution of the mass media to strengthening peace and international understanding, to the promotion of human rights and to countering racialism, apartheid and incitement to war" was underway (UNESCO 1978, 1). A draft was voted on by the majority of participants in an intergovernmental conference in 1975; it contained strong formulations of state responsibility for the media and reference to a controversial UN resolution equating Zionism with racism, which galvanized participants to express their views on the declaration, culminating in a walkout by the Western countries. UNESCO's director general Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow suggested a "reflexion group of wise men" in a bid to circumvent a political crisis during the General UNESCO Conference in Nairobi in 1976 (Nordenstreng 1984, 20, 112). This crisis was largely due to mounting disagreements about UNESCO's competence for establishing normative standards for the media and communication. Those governments that supported the declaration were from the nonaligned developing countries and the socialist economies of eastern Europe. Those in the camp against the language of the declaration were the governments of the West and the major media producers and publishers.

A compromise achieved at the Nairobi conference was to postpone the launch of a standard-setting declaration and establish a commission. This broke the political deadlock and created a positive environment conducive to the redrafting of the Declaration.<sup>7</sup> A three-year process was set in place for preparation of the report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, or the MacBride Commission. In the course of pre-

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7. Nordenstreng served on a team of three, which in 1977–78 prepared a "behind-the-scenes" revised draft declaration for UNESCO's secretariat. A detailed account of this process is given in Nordenstreng (1984).

paring the report the commission studied more than a hundred background papers (see MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 295–302).

At the same time, a parallel instrument was being discussed that was intended to help to avoid any future impasse. The idea was to establish an international fund to support the development of the media and communication infrastructure in developing countries. This was a joint initiative by the moderate developing countries, notably Tunisia, and leading Western countries, and offered material assistance to developing countries in the form of a “Marshall Plan of Telecommunications.” The Western offer was led by U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s administration. The aim was to adopt a tactical shift from stick to carrot with the intention of persuading the developing countries from espousing a militant line, thereby “trading ideology against cooperation.” This diplomatic “buy out” led to the establishment of the IPDC within UNESCO (see Nordenstreng 1984, 16–22; 1999, 244–245); however, this initiative failed to attract the financial support envisaged.

The MacBride Commission was the basis of a maneuver to play down the anti-imperialist momentum of the nonaligned movement’s advocacy of a new international economic order and to neutralize attempts designed to enable the agencies of the United Nations system to set standards for the mass media. For the political West this momentum presented a serious threat as the political South was empathically supported by the Soviet-led political East. Of course, there were idealists, including Sean MacBride himself, for whom the commission represented a genuine quest for discovering and addressing the global problems of media and communication, but the main motivations and crucial forces lay with the realists, including M’Bow, who wanted to achieve a compromise between the aspirations of the capitalist West, the socialist East, and the nonaligned South. And there was room for compromise—a truce in the information war—in the late 1970s, largely due to East-West détente and the oil crisis, which supported those Western strategists that preferred the carrot to the stick.

It was in this spirit that the idea of a new international order in the field of media and communication came to be broadly accepted as a consensus, understood as “an evolving and continuous process” instead of a fixed standard. The NIIO echoing

the anti-imperialist drive of the South and the state-sovereignty approach of the East was replaced with the less controversial “New World Information and Communication Order,” or NWICO. This watered-down new order thinking was manifest in the MacBride Report’s subtitle: *Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*.

The balance of global forces changed dramatically soon after the MacBride Report was published and the rebalancing process led to a shift in the fortunes of the NWICO concept and its lobbyists. Following Ronald Reagan’s election to president in 1980 the policy of the United States was redirected from multilateralism toward unilateralism and the employment of power politics, with a relative weakening of the then USSR and the nonaligned movement. The truce of the late 1970s was followed by a new Western offensive in the 1980s. At this stage the elements of compromise that earlier had been regarded as valuable and honorable, very suddenly went out of fashion and became liabilities. M’Bow departed, mainly for political reasons, although his management style and profile were used to veil the real reasons for his departure, and NWICO became a taboo topic at UNESCO.

In the broader context of Western politics, UNESCO came to be regarded as a burden. The Reagan administration decided that the United States should leave the organization, and the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher followed suit soon after. It is important to understand that the reasons for the American and British departures from UNESCO were not primarily the NWICO debate, the MacBride Report, or M’Bow’s leadership. The underlying cause in both cases was a strategic shift away from multilateralism—a warning to the international community that leading Western powers refused to be outvoted by the majority of the world’s nations. As expressed in a *Newsweek* interview with a former assistant secretary of state in the Carter administration, “UNESCO was the Grenada of the United Nations”—a relatively small target used to demonstrate what could be done on a larger scale if the interests of the big powers were not respected.

UNESCO’s record after M’Bow’s reign—in media and communication and in other sectors—for a period of time was far from honorable. The organization not only abandoned the strategic direction of the South and the East; it did its utmost to appeal

to the West—not least to the nonmember state, the United States. For example, it attempted to censor a book that exposed UNESCO's about-face in the area of media policy (Preston et al. 1989). The culture in UNESCO during the 1980s and early 1990s was to view the MacBride Report, and the NWICO debate, as politically incorrect. During this period there was no interest in making new imprints of the MacBride Report.

### **Controversy and Political Momentum**

These then were the political conditions that gave rise to the commission and to the context within which the MacBride Report was prepared. The report itself can be assessed in terms of whether it represented a document that adequately captured the emerging world of media and communication at the time. Communication scholars came together as a group to produce a critical assessment of the report (Hamelink 1980) immediately after its publication.

A critical reading of the report suggested that it treated the history of the media and communication in isolation from fundamental social and global developments (Nordenstreng 1980). For example, although it referred to "one world," it was argued that the report did not project a coherent picture of the dynamics and conflicts informing the history or likely future of the media and communication industries (Nordenstreng 1980). Instead, as Nordenstreng suggested, it provided an abstract image of these developments, accompanied by a discussion of a number of more or less disconnected phenomena and debates. It presented the "crucial problems facing mankind today" as a simple list of familiar issues with no explicit explanation of the theoretical and political controversies that they represented. The report was viewed as counterproductive because it did not reveal the deep interrelationships between the media and communication and other social phenomena. These interrelationships were not evident because the concept of communication used by the report's authors was drawn principally from the mainstream of bourgeois liberalism. It incorporated a functionalist, positivist, and ahumanistic approach, which came increasingly to predominate in later debates about the role of the media and communication in society. This profound weakness was summed up at the time in the following way. "The Report is an excellent illustration of the dilemma of eclecticism: you try to be comprehensive but you

lose the totality which you are supposed to discover. In this respect the Report could well be called 'Mission Impossible'" (Nordenstreng 1980, 249).

Although this judgment about the scholarly worth of the document still stands, as a political milestone the report, together with the scholarly commentary, has withstood the test of time. Cees Hamelink, for instance, noted that the report had underplayed the growing strength of transnational corporations and their implications for the output of the media and the development of communication networks and services. He argued that the MacBride Report did not adequately foresee that the "one world" of the future, in the absence of changes in policy and regulation, would be one in which major corporations would play a very major role in shaping the media environment. In this assessment he was prophetic: "The Report, although rightly pointing to the crucial role of transnational corporations in the field of international communications, did not sufficiently recognize that the new international information order is indeed likely to be the order of the transnational corporations. The 'one world' the Report ambitiously refers to in its title may very well be the global marketplace for transnational corporations" (Hamelink 1980, 281). The next generation of media and communication scholars reached similar conclusions about the way that the MacBride Report had served not to open up informed scholarship and policy debate but rather to close it down because of the assumptions it made about the openness of global markets and the roles of major media and communication firms. (Samarajiva and Shields 1990; Samarajiva and Hollifield 1994; Mansell 1995).

In the fifth, globalization, stage of the "Great Media and Communication Debate," we can return to the report to reexamine the insights it holds for researchers and policy analysts. In the later part of the 1990s, as we have seen, there were signs of a renewed willingness to address many of the issues that the MacBride commissioners had addressed, this time under the rubric of information or knowledge society issues. Concerns about the digital divide and its implications for social and economic inequality, together with the political momentum created by the civil society movement, began to foster a new political space for dialogue.

Although the MacBride Report is relatively lightweight when measured against scholarly criteria, it provides today's civil society organizations and the

current generation of researchers a text signaling the crucial role of the media and communication in a globalizing world in which democracy, participation, ethics, and rights are high on the international agenda. Its observations on these issues help to clarify directions for the global movement toward democracy and equity in media and communication, building on the decolonization offensive of the early 1970s. Most of the MacBride Report's eighty-two recommendations were never implemented (Hancock and Hamelink 1999), and most of the issues reappeared on the agenda of the WSIS in one guise or another.

The MacBride commissioners' views are nevertheless valid and important. They point to measures that are needed if we are to halt the trends that are producing deeper divisions between the wealthy and the poor and the media and communication networks that are sustaining such divisions, even though the technology and the political context they initially referred to have changed. For example, the MacBride Report (1980/2004, 206, 214, 219) called for policies at national and international levels to achieve the necessary "allocation of public resources, decisions about general structure for communication activities, elimination of internal and external imbalances, and definition of priorities, which naturally vary from one country to another." The need to develop such policies is as urgent today as the need to define priorities. Although the MacBride Report highlights certain priorities, its long list of recommendations is akin to, and covers similar areas as, the long list of measures encompassed by the WSIS Plan of Action, which introduces the risk that efforts to redress these issues will be inadequate in light of the huge number of topics.

The MacBride commissioners called for measures to "promote endogenous capacities in all countries for devising, producing and using new communication technologies, as well as programs and their content." They observed that "international assistance in general, tends to remain of ad hoc nature, sporadic and poorly integrated into overall development plans." The huge effort that still is needed to build local capabilities, combined with the "stop-go" nature of ICT and "communication for development" projects, suggest that little heed has been paid to these earlier recommendations. Efforts to mainstream ICT-related issues continue to be controversial, and the emphasis is on technology diffusion

rather than on the assessment of information and communication needs, specifically tailored to poor communities, countries, and regions of the world.

The MacBride commissioners called for new education programs to counter what they regarded as forces that could foster the standardization and homogenization of the media environment. In line with their emphasis on education, they called for less focus on the fascinating potential of technology and greater effort to foster literacies to equip people to choose and discriminate between the products of the media and communications industry. The WSIS puts some degree of emphasis on literacies, although associating them more broadly with information and knowledge than with the media in particular.

Those supporting the concept of the NWICO in the early phases of the Great Media and Communication Debate envisaged it as "an open-ended conceptual framework . . . [that] pre-supposes a new distribution of available resources in accordance with their [the poorer sections of the world's population] vital rights and needs" (MacBride Report 1980/2004, 39). Similarly today, civil society actors and business community stakeholders that support the open software movement envisage information societies that respect the rights and needs of all, providing open communication and media diversity rather than exclusion for all but the loudest media industry voices. The spread of the Internet and the new opportunities for self-publication and expression via blogs, e-mail, chat rooms, and webcams offer new prospects for such developments, but do not mean that the problems of the past with respect to media closure and control of communication networks have dissipated. Not only are new media such as the Internet unavailable or too costly for many of the world's poor, but issues such as the role of the traditional and new media in the education of citizens, in promoting trust and democratic participation, and the reliability of information of both known and unknown provenance continue to demand attention from all the stakeholders in the current phase of the debate.

Despite the fact that they were writing in the late 1970s, the authors of the MacBride Report envisaged a network akin to the globally distributed Internet that has emerged. They pointed to the potential democratizing influence of "a web of communication networks, integrating autonomous or

semi-autonomous, decentralized units" (1980/2004, 12). Under certain conditions, they argued, "the advance in modern electronic systems . . . also offers the possibility of localized, inexpensive, flexible and decentralized communication structures which facilitate broader public access and participation" (1980/2004, 150).

Some of those conditions have been fostered by innovations in ICT hardware and software, not least the Internet protocol and the introduction of the World Wide Web. The Internet's evolution has been characterized by decentralized forms of governance. This situation, however, could quickly change if the political climate were to shift in the face of an enforcement of the security agenda. This agenda threatens to override established media-related rights and freedoms as well as the open and, so far, relatively insecure Internet. If achieving greater information and network security and reliability as a means of reducing real or perceived risk become a higher priority for governments and firms, the potential of localized, flexible, and decentralized networks and media could be jeopardized. The political and economic context clearly has changed since the NWICO debate, but many of the political and economic issues are the same.

The momentum provided by the WSIS makes it very important to draw on the insights documented in academic publications and professional forums such as the MacBride Round Table discussions organized since 1989 (Vincent et al. 1999) and work by scholars in the field of media and communication. There are some scholarly works that brought these issues into focus in the years leading up to the WSIS (for example, Mansell and Wehn 1998; Mansell 1999a, 2001, 2002; Hamelink 2000, 2004b; Raboy 2002; Goonasekera et al. 2003). Government officials, private sector spokespersons, and representatives of civil society sought support for measures to encourage more transparent governance of the Internet, improved policy aimed at extending infrastructure and services, and codes of conduct supporting open dialogue and debate in the media (see for instance, the special issue of *Information Tech-*

*nologies and International Development* (2004) on the WSIS; Instituto del Tercer Mundo [2005]; Milward-Oliver [2005]; and Stauffacher and Kleinwächter [2005]).

Following the WSIS there has been debate about whether the process and its outcomes succeeded in providing a renewed foundation for action to address the problems confronted by the economically disadvantaged. For example, Cammaerts (2006), Hamelink (2006), and Raboy (2006) have all suggested that the WSIS process was important in terms of raising awareness among civil society actors about the issues, but they are less than convinced that the WSIS created a political will for action to tackle injustices and inequalities in the media and communication field. In the next section, we examine three key areas where there is a crucial need for action but little sign that the WSIS can be regarded as being instrumental in bringing about fundamental changes in direction.

## Prospects for Critical Debate and Action

The current terminology refers to the information or knowledge society.<sup>8</sup> There has been a shift in the rhetoric compared to the early stages of the so-called Great Media and Communication Debate. Nevertheless, the contemporary terminology echoes the MacBride Report's notion of "one world." The emphasis in debates in international forums has shifted toward the role of ICTs in knowledge accumulation and increasing emphasis on the economics of the production and consumption of information.<sup>9</sup> Today's discussion is perfunctory about the problems created by imbalance and domination in the media and communication industries and the political and economic contexts in which information societies are developing. For instance, debate tends to be centered on the emergence of *the* information society rather than a diverse interlinked set of information societies with distinct histories, voices, and futures. The MacBride Report, however, emphasized the centrality of media diversity, the communication

8. The use of the preposition "the" suggests that there is only one society characterized by the importance of information, a suggestion that is clearly contradicted by historians such as Innis (1950). Similarly, references to "the" knowledge society convey a singular vision of the role of knowledge in society.

9. During the WSIS process, UNESCO tried to move a more socially and culturally oriented concept of knowledge societies onto the agenda (see UNESCO 2005). However, "the" information society prevailed as the main concept and "the" knowledge society (singular) appeared only in the last sentence of the WSIS Declaration of Principles.



process, and the need for a major investment initiative.

Of course, the debates about the information society are occurring within the wider political and economic context of globalization. Politically, talk of fostering democracy is coinciding with state-led or encouraged wars within states, supported by the wealthy industrialized countries, notably the United States and the United Kingdom. Economically, the growing dependence of the global economy on electronic services means that efforts to preserve and extend the commodity model of information production are strong, as evidenced by attempts to strengthen intellectual property rights protection of digital information (Mansell and Steinmueller 2000). Civil society organizations are increasingly visible and their representatives are vocal on citizens' rights issues, and, in some areas, technological innovation is supporting open access to information and media production by citizens, in new ways. Examples include the many efforts in both the wealthier and the poorer countries to promote open source software and to develop intellectual property rules consistent with an open information commons, alongside existing restrictive rules.

The political context of the globalization stage of the Great Media and Communication Debate, like the MacBride Commission before it, is the result of a political compromise. A WSIS was proposed initially during the International Telecommunication Union plenipotentiary conference in Minneapolis in 1998. It was argued that the "ITU is the organization best able to seek appropriate ways to provide for development of the telecommunication sector geared to economic, social and cultural development." The ITU was seeking at the time to reposition itself as a forum capable of shaping an international communication environment following years of telecommunication privatization and liberalization. In the effort to achieve this it needed to promote issues of interest to developing countries, as well as the wealthier countries that were home to many of the ICT producer firms.

The summit later became the subject of a United Nations (2002) General Assembly Resolution, giving it potential prominence on the world stage. Although the relevance of many United Nations agen-

cies was acknowledged, UNESCO does not figure in these early documents, despite the fact that, in the latter part of the 1990s, it had promoted ethical, societal, and legal debates. The ITU became the lead organization in the WSIS, with UNESCO playing a less visible role in the preparations. Its Web site stated that "UNESCO's contribution incorporates the ethical, legal and sociocultural dimensions of the Information Society and helps to grasp the opportunities offered by the ICTs by placing the individual at its centre,"<sup>10</sup> but the strong emphasis on technology in the final WSIS documents, especially the ICT indicators, shows that it was the interests of those more closely aligned with the ITU that prevailed at the summit.

The formal parts of the WSIS did not reach the kind of impasse that led to the withdrawal from UNESCO of the United States and the United Kingdom in an earlier stage of the debate. Globalization had changed the geopolitical landscape and increased the prominence of countries such as China and India in various hardware, software, and services segments of the ICT market. On the economic front, little progress was made in the WSIS in terms of finding the resources to reduce the digital divide. On the political front, although the post-9/11 environment meant that the United States government had a very strong potential interest in the role of the media and in promoting the use of ICTs in support of democratization movements in the Middle East and elsewhere, by the time of the summit in 2003 the focus was shifting to concerns associated with national security and the role of ICTs and the media in this context. The heady days when ICT market saturation in the wealthy countries was creating new pressures to open developing country markets to new media products and services had all but disappeared. The dot.com crash had dampened the enthusiasm of investors in ICTs and Internet-related developments and markets were languishing, in contrast to conditions when the idea of a WSIS was first discussed. By 2005, many new commercial opportunities were emerging in relation to the development of more secure networks, and the impetus to extend networks into poor areas regarded by ICT firms as marginally profitable had reduced.

The contradictions in the wider political and eco-

10. See [portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID?1543&URL\\_DO?DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION?201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID?1543&URL_DO?DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION?201.html) retrieved April 20, 2007.



conomic environment to some extent explain why the issues raised about Internet governance (and control) during the WSIS were so problematic. These same contradictions help to explain why little progress was made on issues related to media freedom, information or communication rights and responsibilities, or finance and investment. These were among the many issues that remained unresolved after the first phase of the WSIS in December 2003. The most contentious issues in the MacBride deliberations were finance, governance (or policy and regulation), and rights—albeit for different political reasons.

### **Financing Information Societies to Meet Demand**

The Plan of Action of the WSIS (2003a, par. 27) called for a “digital solidarity agenda” that “aims at putting in place the conditions for mobilizing human, financial and technological resources for inclusion of all men and women in the emerging Information Society.” Reminiscent of the 1970s “Marshall Plan for Telecommunications,” this reflected the need to finance efforts to expand the development of the media and communication infrastructure, equipment, capacity building, and content. Following the 2003 WSIS, a task force was set up to examine existing financing mechanisms and the feasibility of creating a voluntary digital solidarity fund.<sup>11</sup> This fund, led by the president of Senegal, was established and received some relatively small contributions prior to the second phase of the summit in 2005. At the end of 2004, the Report of the Task Force (2004, 10–11) included the observation that funding “should be seen in the context of available financing for the broader set of development agendas and goals.” It called for improved cross-sectoral and institutional coordination, more multi-stakeholder partnerships, stronger emphasis on domestic finance, private sector support for locally relevant applications and content, strengthening capacities to secure and use funds effectively, and increased voluntary, consumer-based contributions. In referring to the digital solidarity fund, the “Task Force felt that it was not in a position to assess its role among the various ICT financial mechanisms” (Report of the Task Force 2004, 13). Just as the IPDC in the 1980s had failed to attract substantial fund-

ing, so the new solidarity fund has been poorly supported in spite of the enthusiasm of a few cities and the Swiss government. The opportunity to undertake a huge financial effort, at the time of the MacBride Report envisaged as being through the IPDC, has been missed again.

In the lead-up to the WSIS independent analyses were made of the adequacy of existing financing mechanisms (Instituto del Tercer Mundo 2005; Peyer 2005). They concluded that, whereas market-led forces would continue to predominate in financing information society development, there are many complementary and creative approaches that could be adopted. This is essentially the conclusion reached by the MacBride Report’s authors. Some of these approaches involve adjustments to market mechanisms, while others require community or cooperative initiatives and public funding through taxation or development assistance. Over the years, there have been many efforts to persuade firms that innovative approaches to providing affordable communication services in poor areas could be profitable in the medium term (Mansell 1999b). Such approaches require proper assessments of the proportion of disposable income that the poor would be willing to spend on communication (rather than misleading estimates that are based on the experience of wealthy countries), examinations of the cost-revenue relationships associated with micro-prepay services for new services such as mobile telephony, and reconsiderations of the policy and regulatory barriers to such schemes. Although some work has been done in these areas, there is little enthusiasm on the part of either major ICT or communication service providers, which continue to resist such developments on a large scale in most countries for commercial or competitiveness reasons (Milne 2006).

Although the major ICT supplier firms were visible in the trade shows that were mounted during the WSIS, and they conducted product launches aimed at the poor, their presence was rather muted in the formal debates, and in terms of making durable commitments to new, much-needed, investment schemes to address the digital divide. Although it was recognized that a huge financial effort will be needed to correct imbalances and reduce the domination of major media producers and communica-

11. See *Digital Solidarity Fund, 2004*, [www.dsf-fsn.org/en/15c-en.htm#](http://www.dsf-fsn.org/en/15c-en.htm#) retrieved April 20, 2007.

tion operators, the summit report on financing did not recommend new means of mobilizing the necessary investment. Those whose interests in short-run profits outweigh their interests in extending networks and media diversity in many parts of the world, prevailed. WSIS participants could have resorted to existing partnership initiatives to deliver low-cost Internet access terminals that were in the planning or prototype stage based on a combination of government and private funding (Mansell 2006); indeed, they could have initiated a new twenty-first-century Marshall Plan for media and communication. And if such a plan had won the backing of investors, they would have done well to heed the MacBride Report's exhortation to focus more on communication needs than on the technology.

In contrast to the MacBride Report's statist approach to media and communication planning and financing, the WSIS process emphasized the importance of partnerships between public and private stakeholders and the inclusion of civil society organizations in decision making. The development and use of media and communication products and services depend ultimately upon market-led supply and demand, something clearly recognized by the WSIS participants and by the MacBride Report's authors. In a global environment in which disparities persist,<sup>12</sup> numerous regulatory and policy measures are still needed to augment market forces. For the most part, however, the WSIS participants focused on new media or Internet governance-related issues rather than on attempts to grapple with barriers to greater investment.

### **Internet Governance**

Internet governance proved to be a strongly contested issue for the WSIS participants, and many of the developments in this area have implications for older media and communication platforms as overlaps between online Internet-based and traditional markets increase in the publishing, press, broadcast, and communication fields. The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) was established to make proposals for action at the 2005 summit. This move was designed to circumvent a political deadlock between those, including the United States, favoring status quo arrangements and those calling for more transparent, public oversight of the devel-

opment of the Internet (Kleinwächter 2004a, 2004b). The WGIG was given a mandate that included developing a working definition of Internet governance; identifying public policy issues relevant to Internet governance; and developing a new understanding of the roles and responsibilities of governments, international organizations and other forums, the private sector, and civil society.<sup>13</sup> Its report (WGIG 2005) presented alternatives for facilitating Internet access for all and for fostering a stable and secure Internet with diverse, multilingual content.

The controversies over governance arrangements were essentially over scarce resources whose characteristics and distribution have major political and economic implications. The treatment of Internet addresses and domain names and their management are of major importance for the Internet's long-term development. The Internet's architecture and its protocols will be influenced substantially by the prevailing governance arrangements which are maintained by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and several related organizations. These arrangements were criticized for failing to account adequately for the interests of developing countries and civil society actors. As a public-private organization, there was unease about ICANN's decision-making structures and processes. Proposals for change made prior to the 2005 summit ranged from introducing a global governance system through a UN agency, such as the ITU, to maintaining the status quo. Those backing the status quo included major media and communications producers based mainly in the wealthy industrialized countries as well as some members of the academic community (see Oxford Internet Institute 2005). Despite the fact that the Internet is an open network, those organizations seeking to profit from its use are regarded by some as having disproportionate sway over its development, especially in relation to plans to introduce differentiated quality of service for Internet services (David 2007).

The WGIG Report (2005) made suggestions for improved governance with a view to strengthening the inclusiveness of participation, coordinating policy at world level, and bringing greater transparency and equity to all facets of Internet governance. It

12. As documented by empirical studies, see for example Gillwald (2005) and Zainudeen et al. (2006).

13. Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), see [www.wgig.org/About.html](http://www.wgig.org/About.html) retrieved April 20, 2007.

was explicit that, although by no means the only issue, high priority should be given to the question of unilateral control by the U.S. government of the administration of the root zone files and system. It concluded that “no single government should have a pre-eminent role in relation to international Internet governance” (WGIG 2005, 12). Proposals were made for the creation of global forums or councils for discussion of policy-related issues. The response of the WSIS in Tunis in 2005 to these proposals was for an Internet governance forum (IGF) to be established under the auspices of the United Nations. The stakeholder groups who would participate formally were selected but there were some concerns about the representativeness of the civil society actors. Nevertheless, the forum’s initial meeting in October 2006 was open to civil society actors and academics. Although an important initiative, it will be some time before it becomes clear whether the IGF can influence the future accessibility and openness of the Internet. This will remain a politically charged issue, with continuing frictions between those keen to guard against pressures to introduce a high-quality and uncongested Internet for those who can pay and a second-tier Internet for those unable to afford the costs of the high-quality service.

How the Internet and its governance regime finally evolve will be subject to the geopolitical winds of change. A probable outcome will be that the actual or perceived risks from the Internet’s content or threats to the infrastructure will result in strong efforts to control the Internet’s development in line with state and economic interests in the wealthy countries, and the United States in particular (Mansell and Collins 2005). The concerns expressed in the MacBride Report about the potential for innovative technologies to be shaped to the interests of powerful economic or political forces are extremely relevant today.

**Human Rights and the Right to Communicate**

The MacBride Report’s authors signaled that contradictions in society—that is, conflicts between the interests of major political or economic actors—could lead to media and networks that would embed the values of hierarchy and centralization and increased social control, accompanied by inequalities. As one means of resolving such contradictions in the inter-

ests of all citizens, they called for a “right to communicate” to be enshrined in a UN declaration on association, information and development rights. At the time, their thinking was informed in part by Richstad and Harms (1977, np) statement to the effect that

Everyone has the right to communicate: the components of this comprehensive Human Right include but are not limited to the following specific communication rights: (a) a right to assemble, a right to discuss, right to participate and related *association* rights; (b) a right to inquire, a right to be informed, a right to inform, and related *information* rights; (c) a right to culture, a right to choose, a right to privacy, and related human *development* rights. . . . The achievement of a right to communicate would require that communication resources be available for the satisfaction of human communication needs.

During the WSIS, communication or information rights issues and the potential for far-reaching change to redress inequalities in this area emerged and became the subject of major debate, at least among the civil society participants (Padovani 2004). These concerns were less visible in the texts produced in the WSIS formal sessions.

In the post-9/11 environment and in the face of the “war on terror,” proponents of measures to promote information surveillance and intrusive monitoring of citizens’ access to information and communication networks are voluble (Lyon 2004). The political environment in most of the wealthy countries is fostering these developments in the name of security. Although there is resistance in some quarters, many national surveys are being interpreted by governments as suggesting that, for the most part, the general population is not averse to measures that challenge existing human rights legislation. Despite the results of independent analyses of citizens’ perspectives on issues of privacy protection and surveillance (see Bennett and Raab 2003), since 2001 new national security legislation has been passed in many countries, including poorer ones (Caidi and Ross 2005). Discussion about the information rights or communication rights that need to be upheld in the face of such measures continues, but it is fragmented and contested even among civil society actors and within the academic community.

There is unlikely to be an early resolution of controversies in this area. A surge, at least in the short

term, in the political will to incorporate such rights in a new international declaration is unlikely, regardless of the WSIS document's recommendations about the need to respect human rights. If the WSIS had prompted action in the direction of a new declaration, this could have committed the signatories to foster media and communication environments consistent with the objectives of "sustainable development, democracy, and gender equality, for the attainment of a more peaceful, just, egalitarian and thus sustainable world, premised on the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Civil Society Declaration 2003, 2). In the absence of such action, there is good reason to monitor the conformance of state and nonstate actors to existing citizen rights. The main impetus at present is to improve collaboration in information security and monitoring globally, with respect to potential terrorist actions. Questions of freedom of speech and the implications of politically or commercially motivated censorship of media and information content will give rise to ongoing debate about the need for human rights protections (see, for example, Thomas and Nain 2002; Kalathil and Boas 2003; Klang and Murray 2005; Dean et al. 2006). In this regard, there are substantial differences in the focus of current discussions and those that took place in earlier stages of the Great Media and Communication Debate. It is the availability of the Internet and developments in new media that facilitate monitoring and surveillance that are rendering protection and infringement of human rights topics of very high priority, such that the MacBride commissioners could not have foreseen.

## Conclusion

Our conclusions about the impact of the WSIS are similar to those of the scholars who commented on the MacBride Report. Regardless of the potential of the WSIS to garner widespread support for the kinds of changes needed to reduce inequality in today's information societies, especially in those issue areas highlighted in this article, it is to the sphere of geopolitics and the forces of globalization that we must turn for an explanation of the failure to introduce the necessary changes in governance, finance, and human rights protection. There was a major change in the geopolitical environment following

the MacBride Report's publication with the shift from U.S.-led multilateralism to unilateralism. This brought with it an overriding concern for U.S. interests in the media and communication field, rather than a desire to support development initiatives aimed at the disadvantaged. In the present stages of the Great Media and Communication Debate, and around the time that the WSIS was being planned in the first years of this century, there was a shift from the relatively outward-looking multilateral politics of the Clinton administration to the equally outward-looking, but unilateral, politics of the Bush administration. This shift, combined with a more globally interdependent economy, has meant that the likelihood of the WSIS aspirations being converted into concrete actions aimed at achieving greater equity in information societies is much reduced. In addition, the turmoil created by the continuing "war on terror" has meant that financial resources are likely to be devoted to measures to enhance the security of existing networks and services. This will create growing markets for software developers and hardware manufacturers in the wealthy countries, alleviating pressures on firms to expand into less lucrative markets in developing countries, at least for the time being.

Our conclusions must be tempered, however, by the advances made by civil society actors as a result of the WSIS, in prizing open formerly closed decision-making forums at the international level. The civil society coalition that participated in the WSIS may not have represented a broad alliance that would enable the full participation of the poor and other excluded groups (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2005); however, its members have succeeded in raising the profile of finance, governance, and media and communication rights and responsibilities. Although this coalition may have failed to modify the actions proposed in the mainstream WSIS Plan of Action substantially, it introduced some helpful language into the documents in relation to issues of education, media freedoms, and gender, for example. There has also been a precedent set for greater participation in the IGF and future international forums and a greater awareness of the need for financial support to extend the reach and inclusivity of global media and communication networks.

It may be argued that incremental policy reform is the answer to reducing inequality, that market forces ultimately will provide media and communica-

tion services that are affordable for all, and that top-down government intervention to provide financing will only distort the efficient working of markets; however, the record of market liberalization and privatization in the communication industry in the poorest countries is not good (Gillwald 2004). In addition, media ownership and concentration concerns with respect to media diversity have not disappeared from the political agendas in many countries, and, in some industry segments, there is evidence of increasing concentration (Thomas and Nain 2002). A mix of public- and private-sector initiatives is essential if the poorest areas of the world are to be included in the information societies that are championed by those that supported the aspirations in the WSIS Declaration.

As can be applied to the MacBride Report, we must look to the wider political and economic context in which the WSIS occurred for an explanation of the slow progress that is being made to redress the digital divide and related issues. In the context of the MacBride Report, it was understood that problems could be tackled only by a huge effort involving the establishment of mechanisms to achieve international cooperation and partnerships for development. The MacBride Report did not explicitly acknowledge that this would require a favorable political environment. Similarly, explicit discussion of the politics informing information society developments is missing from the WSIS documents. Following the WSIS, the political environment might be thought to be rather more conducive to addressing the problems underlying poverty and inequality and the constraints to the emergence of equitable information societies. After all, the governments of the United Kingdom and many of the European Union member states have made efforts to tackle poverty and to agree on debt relief for poor counties.

Contradictions will remain, however, between the interests of those who seek to profit from information societies and those who seek to promote them in ways that are consistent with reducing world poverty and fostering communication that supports human dignity and respect. It will be insufficient to rely on technological innovation and the market to bridge the gaps. Similarly, it will be unsatisfactory to assign the development of media and communication for the poor, to those espousing the benefits of public-private-civil society partnerships. This will produce little momentum to imple-

ment or scale them up. Without action to tackle market and nonmarket barriers to greater investment and more effective participation by all stakeholders in the debate about information societies, twenty-five years on from the WSIS we are likely to see yet new forms of injustice that discriminate against the poor. Measures are needed to encourage the diversity of media content, to encourage the ethical conduct of journalists, stem abuses of citizens' rights, and overcome uneven access to new generations of ICTs.

Research on the role of media and communication in development (Hemer and Tufte 2005) is producing a strong argument for positive action at the international level in the areas of governance, finance, and human rights with respect to media and communication. The argument rests heavily on the fact that the media and communication in information societies are intertwined with social justice and equity. As Cohen (2001, 168, 183) so vividly argues, the media "have a near monopoly in creating the cultural imagery of suffering and atrocities. . . . The principle of social justice does not depend on your moral awareness of people like you—but your readiness to extend the circle of recognition to unknown (and even unlikable) people who are not all like you."

The topics we have highlighted will be the subjects of hotly contested debate in multiple forums in the coming years. Averting a negative outcome of the WSIS and associated initiatives will not be easy and will require the involvement of all stakeholders, including the academic community. As media and communication scholars, we have an obligation to spotlight the contradictions that arise from the varying stakeholder interests. We are often well-placed to suggest political action, economic development strategies, and organizational coalitions that will provide a buffer against the forces that threaten to undermine the construction of equitable information societies. Critical analysis is needed of the dynamics of institutional change with respect to policy and regulation at national, regional, and international levels and studies of alternative ways of supporting multistakeholder involvement in dialogues about the media and communication needs of the poor. We need to examine the interfaces between bottom-up and top-down strategies for change and to maximize education, learning, and capability building. Evaluations must be made of the multiple factors



that must coalesce to enable the spread of media and communication networks to support the poor.

Understanding people's needs must be the overriding concern of development strategies that, in turn, should inform media and communication initiatives. Research alone will not provide the necessary solutions. Research needs to be translated into political action sponsored by broadly-based coalitions of actors. This remains essential for the reason expressed by Sean MacBride just over twenty-five years ago: "As communication is so central to all social, economic and political activity at community, national and international levels, I would paraphrase H. G. Wells and say human history becomes more and more a race between communication and catastrophe. Full use of communication in all its varied strands is vital to assure that humanity has more than a history . . . that our children are assured a future" (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, xxi).

This interplay between research and practice is very difficult but is unavoidable if we are to tackle the causes and consequences of world media and communication inequalities. The MacBride Report, combined with recent work on the determinants of inequality in information societies, provides a foundation for essential future work on the politics of the media and communication globally, and on the prospects for equitable evolution of information societies. ■

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