

# Communication and the New World Order: Strategies for Democratization<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

A new world order is emerging, but it is not the one that we thought it would be. The collapse of the East Bloc at the end of the 1980s and the accompanying end to the Cold War marked the emergence of multinational capital as the dominant force in a single-market world. Soon afterward, the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf allowed us to see some of the hidden political contours of this new order.

In a context where the United States of America was now the only global superpower, the former so-called "Third World" had replaced Communism as the threat and the challenge.

But the "first" world (also known as the West) continued to be wrenched by the divisions wrought by centuries of social and economic inequality (as manifested, for example, by native peoples' challenges to state authority in Canada) and its new periphery, Central Europe, faced political choices which left its future unclear. Possibly most significantly, the former Third World was itself fractured into rich and poor, newly-developed and undeveloped countries, with regional and ideological cleavages blurring the traditional patterns of alignment. In a very profound sense, communication, and mass media in particular, is playing a key role in this emerging context.

## The context of communication

Political and social changes today are inextricably linked to changes in the production and distribution capacities of communication systems, both as the hardware of social organization and as marketers

Relationships between transnational power blocs, between nations, between social groups within nations, between different categories of social groups across national boundaries, and ultimately between individuals are all qualified by their relative position in the communication environment. The rituals and practices of everyday life are inseparable from the structure and organization of the communication order.

In spite of their liberating potential, the media of modern mass communication have contributed to the creation of new levels of social stratification—communication classes—which in turn engender new forms of domination. As world citizens interested in democracy, equality and social justice, we have to develop strategies for dealing with this.

Despots and demagogues, as well as democrats, recognize that the capacity to control communication is a crucial element of political power. For some time now, communication and cultural industries have been major links in the restructuring of world capital and power alignments.

In response to western (largely American) media power (sometimes referred to as cultural imperialism), national communities the world over have tried to occupy, protect and develop their own communicational and cultural spaces. Even the most advanced European nations have had great difficulty doing so.

The efforts of communicational and cultural nationalists and the debates they have led signal the broad political awareness regarding the issues at stake. But both the nationalist and anti-imperialist positions mask some contradictory realities: many national communities have opted for institutional means which claim to defend pluralism of cultural production while being highly centralized, monopolistic and repressive toward their own minorities, while within virtually all of the world's national communication systems the official advocates of a new order reproduce internally the model of domination that they denounce on the international scene.

This problem was signalled by UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (chaired by Sean MacBride) in its 1980 report, *Many Voices One World*. Among the problems mentioned by the MacBride report was the need for further democratization in all societies, North and South. Communication systems reflect the nature of the societies in which they operate, and the unequal relations built into the major communication systems in the world today pose a fundamental problem for democracy. The report emphasized:

One barrier (to the democratization of communication) that exists almost everywhere is the structure of vertical communication, where the flow runs from top to bottom, where the few talk to the many about the needs and problems of the many from the standpoint of the few... (This is) particularly the case in developing countries, but also true for social and cultural minorities in both industrialized and developing countries...<sup>2</sup>

## Communication and conflict

As this is being written, the war in the Persian Gulf provides the best example of the disempowerment brought about by the alienation of media-consuming publics from the institutions that generate information about the world.

- Mass media have been building war support among the civilian populations on both sides, increasing tensions through the use of rhetoric, censoring information about the real human cost of the war, and generally preventing rather than facilitating rational discussion about the central issue: the insanity of seeking solutions to political problems through armed conflict.
- For the first time in the history of armed conflict, a central supplier of information is an apparent media-without-a-state—CNN—whose president has stated: “We will cover the end of the world, live”.<sup>3</sup> During the diplomatic phase of the conflict, CNN was the main channel of communication between the antagonists. Later—paradoxically, in view of its national origins—CNN was designated by Iraq as official broadcaster to the world of its point of view.
- As a result, the conflict appeared to unfold live, in real time. But this was an illusion. As genre, the prelude to war was presented in much the same format as an unscheduled sporting match. Hostilities, when they broke out, were sanitized and reduced to statistical counts like the scoreboard of a video game. Commentators spoke of the unseen human dimension, but the much-touted visual power of television was nowhere brought to bear on the reality of the war.<sup>4</sup>
- Propaganda, in the name of national and military security, was crucial as it took the place of public information and rendered public debate impossible. The issues, one seemed to be told, were far too important

to be left to the populace, and only military men, technocrats and diplomats could decide.

- More so than at any time in living memory, media made us aware of the gap between what people wanted—peace—and what political leadership was committed to—war. In the West, saturation coverage of the political posturing of national pro-war leaders like US President George Bush, the parade of “experts” pronouncing on the likely futility of the allied military exercise, and the apparent absence of effective avenues of channelling public opposition into political results accentuated the prevalent feeling of public helplessness. The media treated opposition to the war as a minor sidebar to the main story, the war itself—on which it “reported” by transmitting official communiqués and censored dispatches by journalists given tightly managed access to the front.
- In general, the over-abundance of information made critical observers aware how poorly informed they really were. All one could do was watch. Lacking the tools with which to intervene, we had to settle for expressions of ethnocentrism, jingoism, Ramboism...and media admissions of impotence.

Alternatively, despite the constraints under which they were operating, the media could have placed themselves in the vanguard of the movement for peace—not years after the fact, as in the time of Vietnam, but in the early stages, when their impact could have been felt. They could have fostered public dialogue. They could have provided an accurate portrayal of the horrific reality of war, and taken the position that war is not an acceptable solution to conflict. They could have contributed to cross-cultural communication instead of framing the conflict in terms of “us” and “them.”

Instead, they lined up, as they invariably do, with governments and functioned, in a classic textbook sense, as the “ideological apparatus of the state.”

## Shaping the New Order

In a provocative analysis updating a book published at the end of the 1970s on the role of media in times of crisis, French scholars Armand and Michèle Mattelart illustrate the way in which the practices and processes

of mass communication have kept pace with the geopolitical and macro-economic changes of the last decade.

According to A. and M. Mattelart, the media have acquired a "strategic status" in the redefinition of the public sphere and the democratic process. One sees this notably in times of "crisis"—itself one of the key structuring elements of modern societies and geopolitics.<sup>5</sup>

But even—perhaps especially—in "normal" times, mediatized communication constitutes a key structuring factor in society. Media frame the way we see the world and suggest that certain things are important to think about while others are marginal. They turn politics into a spectacle and put us in a mood to buy.

- The importance of media is a corollary to the increasing mediatization of social life at every level.
- Communication technologies and their products—as well as the related processes—effectively transform the social fabric of which they are a part.
- The media are the main institutions of the public sphere in which democratic social life evolves.

It is therefore unquestionably essential to understand the forces and tendencies at play at making them work.

### **The political economy of communication<sup>6</sup>**

The 1980s were a decade of rampant commercialization of the cultural industries and of drastic shrinking of the public sphere in communication. As a result, the current world media environment is marked by the following characteristics:

- the globalization of markets and economic and industrial structures
- the withdrawal of national states from public service media and the tendency toward monopolization by transnationals of the private sector
- the diminishing of public controls on media business activity through deregulation

... of contents, despite a multiplicity of vehicles

In sum, the present era is marked by concentration, commodification, and the slide toward a homogeneous world media system where the commercial replaces the public and the citizen is redefined as a consumer. Whether on a world scale, or at various national, regional and local levels, this situation is providing media entrepreneurs with a type of power of which politicians can only dream.

In the crucial audio-visual sector, the multiplication of channels leads to a fragmentation of audiences and undermines the former hegemony of national broadcasting monopolies. Meanwhile, the expansion of distribution capacity has created a dramatic new problem: what to fill the channels with. So far, the dominant producing media have not risen to the challenge, and the economic crisis that faces much traditional (over-the-air) television bears witness to this fact. At the same time, alternative groups have emerged, but as yet—with some extraordinary exceptions, as we see elsewhere in this volume—have not occupied significant space.

A struggle remains over the development of new technologies and over the social uses to which they will be put. Here, the changing role of capital and the state is crucial—we must not accept the withdrawal of the state from the socio-cultural arena, but rather adapt its role to the new context, redistributing the productive wealth generated by the marketplace to the noncommercial sector, and generally ensuring that all media be made to serve a social function.

In spite of the sombre picture we draw of the dominant media scene, we also know that people are not in fact manipulated by the fabricated, spectacularized and sometimes quite fraudulent mediatized version of reality to which they are exposed. Instead, they set their own life experience against it and, indeed, can find considerable enjoyment in their capacity to invent their own culture. The social and political uses to which people put media often have nothing to do with the meanings inscribed in the messages by their producers.

But this is no more than a kind of cultural equivalent to civil disobedience—ennobling as it may be when no other avenue is available, ultimately it is necessary to challenge the dominance of capital and state power. This implies an approach to the question of communication with a view toward strategies of resistance and change.

In Central Europe, civil society is being reinvented, and with it new social spaces for communication. It is essential for those of us who have matured in the West in the 1960s and 1970s to point out, in solidarity, the

pitfalls of market-driven communication as a replacement of authoritarian state-run media. We must hope that our Central European friends will resist the comforting temptation to substitute one unsatisfactory model for another, and will take advantage of the historic moment to invent something else. Czech president Vaclav Havel writes:

I favour 'anti-political politics', that is, politics not as the technology of power and manipulation, of cybernetic rule over humans or as the art of the useful, but politics as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them. I favour politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans. It is, I presume, an approach which, in this world, is extremely impractical and difficult to apply in daily life. Still, I know no better alternative.<sup>7</sup>

One is tempted to substitute the word "communication" for "politics" in the above citation.

We are experiencing the internationalization of the public sphere and with it, along with the globalization of capital and the marketplace, the emergence of a new internationalist (i.e., transnational) and communitarian morality, in which all hope was possible—until the outbreak of war in the Gulf. Indeed, in a remarkably short period of time—less than one year—the euphoria engendered by the collapse of authoritarian communism turned into the dismay of war, reminding us that the main contradiction in world relations in the 1990s runs North-South, not East-West.

### **Communication and the new world order**

This contradiction, of course, was at the origin of the debate on a new international order in information and communication, launched by the group of non-aligned nations within UNESCO in the 1970s and culminating in the MacBride report.<sup>8</sup>

The substance of many of the MacBride report's recommendations, in favour of reducing communication inequality, mainly between "developed" and less-developed nations, was sharply criticized by many western nations, notably the U.S.A., and was a major influence in the U.S.,

and later British, decisions to withdraw from UNESCO. But to many people the world over, it highlighted the centrality of communication to the problems and solutions of inequality—and hence, democracy.

In the wake of the deteriorating situation within UNESCO following the withdrawal of the United States and Great Britain in the mid-1980s, the debate on the new order appeared to go moribund. In a formal sense, the debate sponsored by UNESCO during the 1970s and 1980s was profoundly rooted in the logic of international diplomacy and relations between states seeking to affirm their national sovereignty. This debate has given way today to one more concerned with relations between peoples and with internationalist solidarity.

An important moment in the relaunching and refocusing of this debate took place in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1989, when communication professionals, specialists and politicians from 14 countries and 18 non-governmental organizations met for the "MacBride Round Table on Communication," convened by the Federation of Southern African Journalists in collaboration with the International Organization of Journalists and the Media Foundation of the Non-Aligned.

According to participants and observers at this meeting,<sup>9</sup> the accent was placed on a greater grass-roots orientation (as opposed to the inter-governmental approach of the previous decade). As in the period of the MacBride report, the key word was still "the right to communicate," but this right was now defined as a human one—both for individuals and communities—and in this redefinition, the question of cultural sovereignty of nation-states appears to play a less central role than before. This is more than a mere nuance, which will be appreciated especially by members of national and cultural minorities living within states where they are dependent on a relationship with a dominant majority.

The "Harare Statement" adopted at the meeting reflects this new grass-roots orientation. For example, in its discussion of strategies to adopt for promoting the new world order, the statement emphasizes values such as co-operation, pluralism and decentralization. In its analysis of the contemporary role of mass media, the Round Table not only recognized the importance of media for national sovereignty, economic development and cultural identity, but also showed a concern for emergent social forces working toward cultural emancipation. Finally, when it spoke of the "cultural ecology" engendered by communications on a global scale, it introduced a new concept that deserves to be explored further.



Gatherings like the Vidéo Tiers-monde conference on alternative communications development, held in Montréal in June 1990, are further examples of this new tendency. An interesting feeling emerged from the symposium, to the effect that it was possible to read new meaning into the traditional dichotomy between North and South. As worldwide networks of mass communication fall increasingly under the control of giant transnational corporations, and as national boundaries become somewhat hazy and less effective as definers of difference, those who seek to raise their voices in opposition to power and domination find that they have a much stronger basis for solidarity than once seemed to be the case.

Indeed, the geopolitical context has evolved enormously since the launching of the debate on the New World Information and Communication Order. Particularly, as we have seen, the lines of demarcation between "worlds" are not where we thought they were. Nor, clearly, can we yet speak of "one world."

The dominant "new" new world order is far from the one envisaged by MacBride. In its place, there is a certain temptation to wave the white flag, to resign, to rest on one's laurels or on the secure certainty that there is nothing to be done. But in fact, it is precisely in such a context that mobilization is important, and happily there are ample signs that this is possible and happening. (This publication attests to that.)

## **Strategies for democratic communication**

In the spirit of this grass-roots movement toward a new world order in information and communication, it becomes essential for democratically inclined people involved in communication activities to think strategically about their intervention. I would like to propose some elements for such a strategy.

During the past fifteen or twenty years, numerous people around the world have been involved in activity that one can designate—admittedly somewhat vaguely—as "critical communication."

One of the commonalities of this activity has been its basis on the position or feeling that mass-communication media, despite their vast emancipatory potential, act in fact as an obstacle to liberation. People respond to this realization in different ways—and, sometimes, their actions end up cancelling one another out. Too often, the analysis leads to a path of conduct that seems to exclude others.

It is time to consolidate the gains of the 1970s and 1980s and to develop a multi-faceted approach to communication that takes into account various different possible types of intervention. I would like to propose five. Interestingly, each one corresponds more or less to activities generally undertaken by one type of social actor or another.<sup>10</sup>

Rare indeed are those whose range of action covers all five, but that is not what I suggest: the point is for all of us to recognize the mutual importance of each area, and to work toward maximizing their complementarity.

The five types of intervention are:

1. *The permanent and ongoing critical analysis of the processes, products and institutions of mass communication.*

This is a wide-ranging role for professional and lay researchers, to monitor the changes in the political economy of communication and develop new insights into the relationships between media institutions, their products and their audiences. Knowing and understanding who owns what, who says what to whom, and how it is received is one of the crucial foundations for appropriating the sphere of mass communication. It is a key support for both educators and activist intervention, as well as essential for media workers to help them contextualize their work. In the most optimistic scenario, research can also inform the political decisions that ultimately determine the type of media that we have.

There is an international research community of critical scholars, active since at least the early 1970s (although individual efforts go back even farther). A key organization is the International Association for Mass Communication Research, with over 1,000 members worldwide, which has been deeply involved with the debates of the past twenty years.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, its members are invariably active in policy debate and community-support activity in their own countries. A younger organization with even deeper activist links is the ten-year-old Union for Democratic Communications.<sup>12</sup>

2. *Media literacy education—equipping communities with the basic tools necessary for “reading” the media—using and understanding the effects of media on their everyday lives.*

Until further notice, most people on this planet will be getting most of their information about the world beyond their immediate communities from mainstream media. The type of specialized understanding acquired

from the intervention mentioned just above needs to be translated into popular education, so that people can use media as informed citizens and not merely as passive consumers of entertainment. Numerous excellent tools are already in use in this respect. Media literacy needs to be taught, formally and informally, from grade school through university and beyond. But it needs to be seen as not only the affair of schools and educators. Media criticism needs to be validated as an important social function, and not an extension of show-business lifestyle journalism. At the very least, everyone should be able to know who owns their local newspaper, TV station and cable company. People should know how a newspaper or TV news program is produced, so as to realize the limitations of the respective news formats as means of communication. There is good sense to the argument that we need campaigns to encourage responsible patterns of media consumption along the lines of those organized to control the use of noxious substances.<sup>13</sup>

3. *Creation and support for autonomous media*—what are often called “alternative” media (with reference to the dominant institutions, but I prefer the positive connotation of the notion of media that emanate from and are controlled by the communities concerned).

The main type of communication intervention on the left since the 1960s has taken the form of “alternative” media, which have contributed to the general alternative political culture and to the availability of counter-information, to be sure, but have not countered the widespread impact of dominant media forms on institutions and individuals. Alternative media have to be careful to avoid falling into a kind of technological fetishism, or obsession with process, and concentrate on contributing to the debates that mark and preoccupy the general public sphere. Alternative media also oblige us to ask serious questions about structure and control as well as pluralism and market economics.

Critical observation of the role of alternative media since the 1960s especially obliges us to recognize the centrality of the mainstream media that continue to be the main disseminators of information available to mass populations on a daily—and in time of crisis, hourly—basis.

But alternative media are particularly useful as oppositional forms to counter exclusion from mainstream media for political or economic reasons, or as media in the service of particular minority groups or social movements. While insufficient on their own, they are indispensable as complements.<sup>14</sup>

