

# XI

## Communication as a Human Need and Human Right

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**T**he German communication scholar Paul Watzlawick (1967: 53) coined the axiomatic sentence: 'One cannot not communicate.' He thus echoed Plato's early definition of the human being as the 'animal which speaks' (*zoon logon echon*), which was later submerged in Aristotle's definition of the human as the animal which thinks ('rational animal'). The philosophical position of Watzlawick is that human beings are both creatures and creators of language and all other signs, symbols and rituals. As Charles Morris explains:

Everything which is characteristically human depends on language. The human being is in a real sense the speaking animal. Speech plays the most essential but not the only role in the development and preservation of the human self and its aberrations, as it does in the development and maintenance of human society and its aberrations (Morris, 1975: 235; my translation).

The need to communicate, therefore, is intrinsic to human nature (Fisher in Fisher and Harms, 1983). Precisely because communication is such a fundamental human need, those who control communication also control people. The history of

communication is a long history of silencing people, from the persecution of 'heretics' and 'freethinkers' to the transfer of 'dissidents' to psychiatric wards or solitary confinement. It is also a history of people's struggle to speak up and speak publicly. The report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (known as the MacBride Report) states:

...the principle of freedom of expression is one that admits of no exceptions, and that is applicable to people all over the world by virtue of their human dignity. This freedom is one of democracy's most precious acquisitions, frequently secured through arduous struggles with political and economic powers and authorities and at the cost of heavy sacrifice, even of life itself (MacBride, 1980: 18-19).

The MacBride Report encapsulates the struggle towards a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which, broadly speaking, is an attempt to establish a more balanced and democratic multi-way flow of communication and information throughout the world. It proposes the establishment of free and equal communication at the national and international level. This entails the wresting of control from those who at present dominate international communications flow in the West, particularly the United States and, increasingly, the transnational corporations. Not surprisingly, those in control have resisted all calls for a NWICO. Thus the history of the right to communicate has become bound up with the fate of the NWICO.

In the following, I shall first explain the origin of the concept of communication as a right and refer, secondly, to its main articulation in the MacBride Report and through debate in UNESCO in particular. The third section is devoted to the question of control: should the State or the market control communication? The fourth part raises the issue of public responsibility for the right to communicate, and I conclude by highlighting some difficulties which need to be taken up in the debate.

## **The right to communicate in international human rights**

The first generation of human rights, born of the French and American revolutions, emphasised individual freedom. The second generation of human rights, first formulated in the Mexican Constitution of 1917 and the Soviet Constitution of 1918, invoked the co-operation of the State in implementing human rights (see Traber, 1992).

The present generation of human rights is still evolving. It has its origins in the anti-colonial revolutions of the years after the Second World War. These rights emphasise national self-determination and non-discrimination. They are also bound up with the spirit of internationalism which emerged after 1945, and the United Nations system that enshrines it. The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948 was of special significance. It has been described as a revolutionary development, perhaps the most important development in the history of law in the twentieth century (Humphrey, 1988: 5). Yet in spite of its Article 19 it did not formulate communication as a fundamental human right.

The present generation of human rights pertains primarily to certain planetary concerns, such as peace, people's self-determination, socio-economic development, ecological balance and communication. Their horizon is the family of nations, and their rights are, in principle, 'solidarity rights', thus carrying the French Revolution's notion of fraternity to its logical, global conclusion (see Marks, 1981). All of these rights have an individual and collective dimension. They mean, in the final analysis, that the State and all social organisations have a duty to place the common good of the people as a whole before state and individual interest.

In the debate over the concept of the right to communicate many have stressed the importance of recognising the equality of all partners in the communication process. Communications should embrace a multicultural, multi-way flow of information, including a passive as well as an active right to communicate,

while promoting the highest possible degree of feedback, participation and access.

According to different political traditions and socio-economic circumstances, some will emphasise the international, others the national connotations of this right. Furthermore, it will differ depending on whether one places society or the individual at the centre of the communication process; whether it means the provision of communication resources or the protection of individuals and communities from the redundancy of information and entertainment; whether there is a primary necessity to satisfy the basic need of all people to be informed or to safeguard them against the abuses and manipulation of the mass media; or whether the universal right to communicate can also mean the right to be silent.

The right to communicate, as a fundamental human right, clearly anticipates a communication model which is democratic rather than authoritarian. As Servaes (1988: 17) has pointed out, it aims at a redistribution of communication power; its 'point of departure is not an elitist position, but development from the grassroots'. It further stipulates another role for the State than the one described in the second generation of human rights. The State is only one of several players, because the right to communicate embraces several individual rights, and institutional rights, or 'people's rights' which were the main conflict at UNESCO in the 1980s (see Roach, 1988: 19-20). The policy makers of the Reagan and Bush administrations consistently refused to accept that there are people's rights, including solidarity rights, and denigrated the demand for a free and *balanced* flow of information among nations.

### **The articulation of the international right to communicate**

It is particularly significant in the context of the NWICO debate that the right to communicate was originally a *Western* concept (Roach 1988: 19). The Frenchman Jean D'Arcy was the first

specifically to express the need for the right to communicate. He saw the need to extend Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which calls for freedom of opinion and expression), in recognition of the fact that the right to communicate is more fundamental than the right to free expression (which can be justifiably restricted in exceptional circumstances). The MacBride Report in its final recommendations calls for the implementation of just such a right (Recommendation 54):

Communication needs in a democratic society should be met by the extension of specific rights such as the right to be informed, the right to inform, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public communication – all elements of a new concept, the right to communicate (p. 265).

In particular the right to communicate is not the same as freedom of information, which is more likely to benefit those with more powerful (and profitable) means of information. One point often neglected in the crusade for a free flow of information (a standpoint which became opposed to the NWICO) is the concept, mentioned in the MacBride Report (p. 24) and elsewhere, that the freedom to communicate implies responsibility, to use such a freedom wisely and with care.

The MacBride Report describes the right to communicate as follows:

Our conclusions are founded on the firm conviction that communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information and, more specifically, the right to seek, receive and impart information is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others. The inherent nature of communication means that its fullest possible exercise and potential depend on the surrounding political, social and economic conditions, the most vital of these being democracy within countries and equal, democratic relations between them. It is in this context that the democratization of communication

at national and international levels, as well as the larger role of communication in democratizing society, acquires utmost importance (p. 253).

Fifteen years after the publication of *Many Voices, One World* (the MacBride Report's official title) the world has changed. On the one hand, the voices are now fewer, becoming monotonous, and the world is seen merely as a global market. On the other hand, the movement in many parts of the world towards greater democracy and participation by the people has been matched by an increase in alternative, popular media, which has also affected the mass media.

### **State control or mass media empire?**

The right to communicate has in many countries degenerated into a question of whether the State or the market place are the best guardians of a country's communication systems. The State has largely been discredited in this role. In the NWICO debate the USA took an aggressive stance against what it saw as the facilitation of the control and censorship of information by the State; though much of its criticism was based on a faulty understanding of what the State theoretically is, namely a representation of the entire body politic, its citizenry and varied institutions. As such the State has responsibility towards its citizens to allow them the right to communicate their views, facilitating both access and adequate information with which to communicate effectively.

There is no doubt that some governments do abuse their control of communications systems. But this does not mean that the State should lack any role in the elaboration of a right to communicate. The right to communicate is very much dependent upon the social structures in which it has to operate. As Kleinwachter argues (in Fisher and Harms, 1983: 104-105), the right to communicate is linked to other rights such as education: when these rights are denied, the right to communicate cannot be realised. The necessary resources must

be available in order to make practical the right of every person to communicate. Such conditions require the active co-operation of the State. In national terms this means policy decisions to ensure good educational and cultural provision, and so on. Internationally, it involves the control of the powerful international media conglomerates, so that the less powerful voices are heard.

The controversy about the role of the State, with its dangerous potential for control of expression, has removed the limelight from other key players in international communications: the media conglomerates. The Western demand for a 'free' flow of communications frequently means the preservation of media dominance by the mass media empires – which are usually Western. Kolosov (in Fisher and Harms, 1983: 116) points out that the dissemination of mass media beyond national boundaries has not been specifically codified as a right.

Western countries usually point to market-based private enterprise as a way of ensuring a free flow of information, unhindered by any form of government intervention. A free flow of communication that is purely market-based does not actually occur now, and is not likely in the future: most governments will intervene to give their media enterprises the edge in international competition. Indeed, this is one reason for the US government's intervention in the international communications debate. But in any case media controlled by private enterprise is hardly free. Commercial enterprises will only sell media and information products that are profitable. Instead of having free access to the gamut of information, we are sold information packages from a limited range:

...the principle of maximization of power and the principle of maximization of profit merge in the communication sphere to the detriment of that part of global society which is not governed by these principles. As a consequence, citizens are shifted away from participation in decision making and control towards strengthening their consumer function. The consequence of this process is an erosion of civil society' (Splichal, 1991: 5).

The consequence is also an erosion of the right to communicate, if such a right depends upon its profitability.

### **The right to communicate is a public responsibility**

Neither the State nor the market can adequately uphold the right to communicate. This is the task of the people, the citizenry, although both State and market have their part to play. It is the responsibility of each citizen to participate actively in public communication, through political and social debate and action.

The public must become an active partner with the media in the maintenance of their right to communicate. In order to ensure critical media, we need a critical public, as Majid Tehranian suggests:

...the critical role of the media is contingent upon the existence of broad-based democratic movements. Otherwise, the decline of the public sphere under the present commercially dominated media systems spells a continuing decline of the critical functions of the media in public affairs. The ultimate threat in this process will be an imperceptible but effective evolution of democratic institutions into technostructures that are insensitive to and intolerant of public needs and interests (Tehranian, 1990: 173).

The media are dependent upon the public to act as a forum for public democratic discourse. However, the public are also dependent upon the media to provide relevant information, to place issues on the agenda for debate and to encourage people to act upon their responsibility as citizens rather than sink into an entertainment-saturated inertia. Social movements need greater access to the media at both a local and national level, to foster a truly public debate. Efforts to work out more comprehensive and profound media ethics and principles of journalism should not be confined to the media professionals. The whole community must be involved in the debate about the media's responsibilities to the public.



Active citizens' involvement in the struggle to attain and maintain a right to communicate, presupposes a change in political culture: from passive to active and responsible citizens working for the common good of the people. If we have learned any lesson from our political culture of the past ten years, it is that genuine democracy requires more than the election of representatives to a legislative assembly in a multi-party system, no matter how essential this is. Over and beyond voting and party politics, democracy requires people who can make their wishes known in public and who participate in the debate about the type of society and political process they aspire to.

The media should interact in new ways with their public, making them the principal subject, rather than objects, of their reporting. Responsible media are the champions of responsible citizens: they are orientated towards them, they seek them out, they provide access to them. Together, in mutual responsibility, media and public can develop a political culture which is participatory and free, jointly working for the common good of all.

There are already many alternative media initiatives throughout the world that seek to give the people a different voice: from independent press agencies to storytelling, from popular theatre groups to alternative computer networks. John Keane puts it thus:

The uncoordinated and dispersed character of state power makes it more susceptible to the initiatives of social movements and citizens' groups, backed by countervailing networks of communication, which challenge prevailing codes and practise the art of *divide et impera* from below. Dispersed networks of communication can more easily penetrate the pores of civil society and build networks of meaning among various groups of citizens... they indicate ways in which new forms of social solidarity, especially among the less powerful citizenry can be developed against the atomizing effects of modern life (Keane, 1992: 3081)

Alternative or people's media are one way of securing the right to communicate, even though the mass media may ignore them.

## Conclusion

Communication, both public and private, is a *fundamental* human right, and as such the precondition for other human rights, because communication is intimately bound up with what it means to be human. The freedom to speak and to publicise, and to create works of communication (cultural goods) is not only an essential component of human dignity and cultural identity, but is also necessary for any progress in other rights, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, and work. The core issue is the right to be fully human both as an individual and as a member of a community and a society. It would seem that the human being is as little able to cope with the systematic suppression and control of the means and possibilities of communication as with physical degradation or material poverty.

It is one of the principle insights of the MacBride Report to have analysed communication as a human right on the international level and to have tied this to the democratisation of communication. Thus the right to communicate should exist not only within a nation but also between nations. (The latter was the primary focus of debate on the NWICO.)

There remain many questions to be taken up in the debate. The first is the problem of the nation-state, with its concomitant phenomenon of patriotism. Nationalism and patriotism have profoundly affected public communication both within and between nations. What roles can they play, or should they play, on the different levels of a new and democratic communication order? How can national sovereignty be maintained *together* with international rights?

Another unresolved problem is that of ethnicity and cultural identity. The reassertion of these cultural rights within and sometimes between nation-states presents one of the most formidable communication challenges today. It is a basic issue

in most parts of Africa and in many countries of Europe. It is not sufficient to treat ethnic and cultural identity under the rubric of minority groups, as the MacBride Report tends to do (MacBride Report, 1980: 309). Each ethnic and cultural group must be seen to make a unique contribution to public communication and its national and international order.

In regard to communication technology and power, the world has changed radically since the MacBride Report first appeared. The gap has widened between the technology-rich and the technology-poor. Deregulation has increased the monopolisation of media ownership and trivialisation of media content, particularly in the electronic media. What is lacking in research is not the analysis of these trends but policy proposals in the search for alternatives. The active right to communicate, interpersonally and with spacially dispersed communities, calls for radical rethinking of technological alternatives, of which video technology and computer networking are examples.

The right to communicate is ultimately a right to democracy. The MacBride Report puts it thus:

...the success of measures to improve communication, in both form and content, is inextricably linked with steps to make society itself less oppressive and unequal, more just and democratic (MacBride Report, p.18).

The right to communicate cannot, therefore, be pursued in isolation, but should be seen as a vital, integral part of a wider pursuance of people's democratic rights. The right to communicate can only be realised in a context of more equitable education, culture, technology, and economic and political situations. But equally, none of these characteristics can be achieved without the right to communication. All must be worked for simultaneously, in a process that ensures the participation of all: the State, the media and, above all, the people.

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