

# The MacBride Report Revisited

**Hamid Mowlana**

Two major developments have characterized the state of international communication and international relations during the last several decades. First, a new global information and communication order has been in the making since the early 1990's. This emerging order has now replaced the old information and communication regime. It is fundamentally different in both substance and form from the one demanded three decades ago—in the 1970's—by the group of non-aligned and Third World nations, generally known as NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order). It is the new order of the advanced industrialized nations that quintessentially evolved as a result of a number of economic, political, and technological developments, the least of which was to limit and block the original demands put forward by the Third World.

Second, since the MacBride Report (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems) in the 1980's, the world also has witnessed another fundamental development—a desire, and indeed a quest, for a new cultural order that goes beyond the simple notion of communication and information. This new discourse, which has potential to become a major international and worldwide debate, makes communication and information concepts subservient to the broader notion of culture and social ecology. This discourse proceeds with the notion that although the early advocates of NWICO rightly recognized and acknowledged the interrelationship between information and culture, they nevertheless made technological,

economic, and political factors the foci of their demands.

It is precisely in this environment that cultural forces have come into play globally. As international relations have expanded into a multitude of diverse interests and structures, ranging from military to political, and from economic to cultural, the question of communication ecology, and the environment in which new structures are taking its roots, occupies a prominent role. The ideological, religious, and spiritual struggles of recent years highlight both the urgency and the depth of cultural forces in international relations. In short, the battlefield of international politics has shifted from the geographical, technological, and physical to the ideological and cultural levels, with new players and actors.

The NWICO debate, which dominated the 1970's, had a number of major features, which demonstrated both its strength and weaknesses. The debate was mainly a North versus South issue, with the United States and the capitalist countries at the center of controversies. The new emerging world order now includes not only the North and the South, but also the conflict and controversies within the Western and industrialized world itself. Another element in the NWICO debate was the fact that information was assumed to be a universally understood term, with an agreed-upon meaning, which was not in fact the case. Perhaps more than any other element, the debate was mainly a political process at the time when the Cold War between the two superpowers was at its height. Today, however, not only are there diverse opinions about the meaning of information and culture, but there is also disagreement over the allocation of the way political and economic resources are legitimized.

The NWICO debate also had a number of other political, economic, and socio-cultural impacts. It legitimized communication and information as major areas of con-

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tention in international relations, as well as international organizations. It also created a greater awareness of the importance of communication and information at the national and local levels, leading to new coalitions as well as divergent opinions.

Neither the NWICO debate nor the MacBride report sufficiently treated the questions of culture, spirituality or ethics. The first NWICO debate focused mainly on mainframe and infrastructure issues. The emphasis on political and economic dimensions precluded cultural considerations from the discussion arena. A second debate arose following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the late 1970s, when the questions of culture become more important than technology and the new world cultural order became the point of focus. The inclusion of the Islamic worldview did not come into the debate until the late 1980s, when the offensive of the First World against the non-aligned movement's claim to equality caused a great dispersion of dissenting viewpoints. In the closing decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decline of the non-aligned group and the collapse of the Soviet Union had left the Islamic voice as the major voice to challenge the West.

Today, two unclear and yet visible notions of the new world communication and cultural order exist. One is the official and publicized version of the United States and a number of European and highly industrialized countries under the banner of the National Information Infrastructure (NII) and the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). These new infrastructures, already underway, envision a totally unrestricted market economy, globalization of information by dominant Western transnational firms, and military and geopolitical coalitions composed of a handful of states who use their might to police the rest. The second is the unofficial, less publicized and often desperate call for a new

cultural order and access to information by the less fortunate groups, nations and citizens at the grassroots. The central question in the new communication and cultural era is who owns and controls the production and distribution of information, for what purpose and intent, and under what conditions and values.

In sum, within the span of twenty years since the MacBride Report, the world of information and communication has changed considerably. It has been characterized first by the fierce competitive climate among the industrialized economies of Europe, the United States, and Japan, and second, by a series of technological and financial agreements, creating the foundation for the emerging new global information and communication order, which has, at its center, the Western economic powers. Whereas the NWICO debate was conducted in such fora as the United Nations' specialized committee on information and communication, and UNESCO, the emerging new order now is being tested in such places as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Embedded in the rhetoric and conduct of international politics over this period is convincing evidence of the interlocking of ideology and technology, and with this, a direct or indirect call on the part of individuals and nation-states for a new information ecology with culture at the center. Thus, the debate on information and communication that began several decades ago with the MacBride Report not only has not died or diminished, but in fact has evolved into a new context on the global scale. It has created new alliances and norms. This novel emerging order is replacing the old regime of international communication with an intense debate on cultural and ecological grounds yet to come.