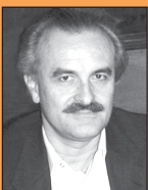


From the summit to the people

There cannot be information society when there is no room for the civil society to participate in the design or when the perception on civil society by governments and international organisations is of marginal minorities.



Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron
Communication for Social Change
Consortium, USA
Gumucio@CommunicationForSocialChange.org

It would seem that while we remember the 25th anniversary of the MacBride Report on communication and information, there is not much to celebrate. UNESCO led 25 years ago the highest and largest assault against the hegemonic control of information flows by industrialised countries, the United States in particular. The international organisation achieved early in the 1980s the establishment of regional news agencies capable of counteracting, in a rather small measure, the abundant flow of news distributed through the AP (Associated Press), the most powerful still today, and the UPI (United Press International) which disappeared in the mid eighties. At a given time both agencies carried 90% of the flow of news worldwide. UNESCO contributed to the creation of ALASEI (Agencia Latinoamericana de Servicios Especiales de Información), and other similar news agencies for Africa and Asia. During the following years, ALASEI produced thousands of special features that were distributed to mass media throughout the region, thus offering a different and more appropriate perspective on regional politics, economy, society and culture. UNESCO also supported the development of national communication policies, which did not exist before in most Third World countries.

The strident withdrawal of the United States and England from UNESCO, in disagreement with the measures favouring the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), left the UN organisation deprived of significant funding and had impact on programmes such as ALASEI, that eventually disappeared. The only independent world wide agency, which has survived and has managed to maintain both its quality and the principles that motivated its creation is Inter Press Service (IPS). Other than this, a

few national agencies such as Notimex (México) and Prensa Latina (Cuba), kept swimming crosscurrent.

ICTs for community and communication

In a more conservative and tepid mood, UNESCO tolerates today, the privatisation of frequencies used by community radio stations in the Third World; in the name of press freedom defends the freedom of media owners, and signs agreements with Microsoft, ignoring its own commitment with open source and free software alternatives. Even though, UNESCO is still among the most interesting organisations within the UN system, it is the agency that contributes with knowledge and protects cultural diversity and the world heritage. The paradox is that in the communication sector of UNESCO, the United States now imposes technocrats of its choice to prevent anything similar to what took place twenty-five years ago.

After twenty-five years, we continue raising similar banners: the right to information and communication. The control of information by multinational companies goes much further today than three decades back, largely thanks to the advances in technology, which allows concentrating mass media in the hands of multinational companies. Other than the Associated Press, still dominating the market of press agencies, we've got CNN, which alone exerts an almost absolute hegemonic power over the planet, with its multiple regional networks in various languages. In countries such as my own, Bolivia, information structures are weak, television channels download material from CNN to cover international news, often without even making the effort of elaborating its own analysis.

We are certainly worst now in many ways; the concentration of the information sector in fewer hands is higher, and through the privatisation of the frequency spectrum most national-state and public radio and television media have virtually disappeared. Under the influence of large multinational conglomerates, information is no longer considered a cultural factor in development but just a market commodity.

There are, however, two new encouraging elements that have emerged since the 1980s; on the one hand, the emergence of new technologies of information and communication (ICTs), too often visible in a discourse with little content, and on the other hand, the renewed participation of the civil society, which keeps a watchful attitude on the ways our future is being designed.

The first of these two facets has a double edge: ICTs are like a knife, they are not good or bad per se, but because of the use we make of them. Technological advances are fabulous, and they amaze us. Those privileged enough to access them feel bewildered by its potential. However, it is not true that in their current configuration the new technologies are the universal remedy for the failures of development in Third World countries.

We are certainly better since the international debate is around the right to communicate of the common people and civil society and not only about the right to be informed, and since this debate now takes place at the core of the civil society, the difference in content is substantial. The right to information refers to 'access' whereas the right to communicate refers to 'participation'. Access has much to do with a gracious concession from above while participation re-aligns the axis of decision-making from the power of a few to the consensus of many.

Right to communicate

Twenty-five years ago, it was a few progressive individuals at UNESCO and the non-aligned governments that prompted the situation analysis (the report from the commission chaired by Sean MacBride, 1974 Peace Nobel Prize winner) and the necessary measures aimed to re-establish the balance in information exchanges. However, that international discussion developed mainly at the highest circles of political power and thus when the



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undertaking was threatened and eventually buried by the United States, nobody came out to defend it. The problems signalled by the MacBride report intensified over time.

Nevertheless, it didn't take long before civil society took responsibility and leadership in the struggle to bring back to the discussion table the right to communicate. The new world information order is no longer the only key issue nowadays, but that 'another communication is possible'. It is only possible if the issue of communication and information is discussed along with the other social, economic and political issues that concern our society. In view of the loss of many of the traditional political demands, the ideological desertions and the compromises that leaders of the world make with each other, the civil society, independent and multiform, went down the streets with demands that the powerful do not want to listen; these demands are loudly spelled as the powerful meet in increasingly isolated spots of the planet, surrounded by high security measures, unthinkable only a couple of decades ago.

In the early nineties, this movement, which was internationalist and global but opposed the kind of economic and cultural globalisation, was characterised as lacking in strategy and direction. Its strength was initially undervalued and it was said that it wouldn't last very long. However, the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil) showed how much the movement has grown, and initiatives across borders such as ATTAC, reveal that there are concrete actions suggested, such as the Tobin tax over stock transactions. As for communication rights, the CRIS campaign has contributed to enrich the debate; ideas and proposals are discussed in each country, in every region, and eventually presented within a common platform during international conferences such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

In 2003, Ignacio Ramonet, the Director of the prestigious monthly journal *Le Monde Diplomatique*, argued about the need of constituting a 'fifth power' since the 'fourth power', the media, is completely sold and compromised with political and economic interests, and does not represent the majority of the population. We actually knew this for a long time, thirty years ago, when we were fighting a kind of mediatic guerrilla through community radio, small journals, street theatre, testimonial video and so many other forms of alternative communication. It was our way of building a fifth power from the civil society. We were, however, accused of

isolating ourselves in ghettos and of developing alternative experiences that had little impact. Many of our colleagues, working within commercial media houses, were still confident that they could change mass media from inside. That didn't work, as Ramonet acknowledges today. French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once said in reference to the film industry: "We tried to take the fortress by assault, but we were trapped inside".

'Digital solidarity' for information society

The discussion on the information society generated many expectations before the first summit that took place by the end of 2003 in Geneva. Civil society organisations from all over the world worked with seriousness and responsibility during the preparatory process (and are doing it again now towards the second phase), and were 'admitted' at the negotiation table. Organisations from the communication field and networks such as AMARC or CRIS were allowed to camp at the same Conventions Palace of Geneva where government envoys met delegates from the United Nations specialised agencies. Nevertheless, a significant detail worth mentioning is 'multilateral organisations and governments met on the upper floor whereas civil society organisations were busy on the lower floor'. I was struck by the medieval symbolism of the image: the powerful were on top of their towers while the people buzzed downstairs in a labyrinth of corridors, where a huge communication fair camped. After all, we live in the 21st Century, so mechanical stairs communicated both floors, but they were helpless to communicate with similar efficiency between the representatives from the civil society with those from governments and the United Nations. Moreover, to access the upper floor, special security measures were taken, and after a police checkpoint, passes to get into the plenary were still required.

As the meeting progressed, also did the actions that contributed to build an increasingly higher wall between civil society and governments. Access to the convention centre was barred for a few groups of alternative media; copies of *Terraviva*, a journal produced and distributed for free by IPS, magically disappeared when an article was printed, denouncing the repression of journalists in Tunisia, where the second phase of WSIS will take place in November 2005. Only a handful of civil society representatives

made it to the plenary on the second floor, where one after the other presidents from Asia, Africa or Latin America took turns to tell their colleagues how much they had already done for a more democratic information society, and asked the wealthier nations to show their 'digital solidarity'.

Lower and upper floors of summit

The truth is that a few Third World countries did real efforts of dialogue and coordinate in preparation of the summit. Mine is a good example. In Bolivia, the group of organisations and activists that gathered under the CRIS label, met with government representatives to jointly prepare a declaration, encouraged by the positive attitude of the then Vice-President Carlos Mesa, a journalist himself, who in October 2003 became the constitutional President of Bolivia. Due to the events that precipitated the presidential succession, Carlos Mesa cancelled his participation at the Geneva summit, but he sent a taped declaration, in video, making clear his position favourable to communication rights. Like no other president at the summit, he mentioned several times the CRIS campaign in his message.

Those on the upper floor of the summit avoided any confrontation with the civil society, any split that would reproduce the antagonising scheme of Davos/Porto Alegre, or the divide that has been established with the World Trade Organisation (WTO). And those in the lower floor, with an endless willingness to continue the dialogue, did not wish to sever the channels of communication and continued working around the preparatory conferences towards the next summit in Tunisia. Yet the dialogue seemed to be increasingly difficult. The pre-conferences had not indicated any better mind-set from governments or multilateral organisations that are controlled by the governments. We should not forget that the gridlock was in part the result of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) being in charge of the organisation of the summit, and not UNESCO as it should have been. Thus the strong love affair with technology was there at the summit.

The strategy of governments to avoid confrontation has been to ignore the issues and change subject, attaching more weight and importance to the new technologies and the digital divide, instead of discussing communication rights. The discourse of power on

Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI)

ALAI is a rather small association of journalists and other media people, who are dedicated for more than 25 years to information supply and exchange for social organisations and movements. In the context of regional activity the regional networks and other co-ordination institutes are the first clients and users of ALAI-products. Along these networks, membership organisations (national or more local) also had direct profit by way of courses and seminars about communication. During training, attention is paid to both communication between and within organisations. The activities of ALAI are directed to the organised sectors of the social movement in Latin America. It focuses on farmer organisations (CLOC- Via Campesina), indigenous organisations, women and feminist organisations, human rights organisations and instances specialised in alternative communication. Apart from these sectors, ALAI strives for the mainstreaming of 'gender' and 'human rights' at all levels and in all activities of the organisation.

ALAI acknowledges that communication plays an important role in processes of influencing policy, but it focuses on its lobby activities concerning the right to communicate and thus the democratisation of the access to information. ALAI specialises on supply of news and backgrounds via a network of correspondents in Latin America. ALAI also publishes a bulletin every two weeks, a daily background newsletter, several discussion sections and it also provides a web portal. (www.movimientos.org).

new technologies is, like the way to hell, paved of good intentions. The word 'access' to information and knowledge is repeated endlessly, while, in fact, most of the countries that demagogically undersign their commitment to facilitate greater 'access', with the other hand, actually privatise radio electric frequencies, shut-down indigenous radio stations and prosecute those reluctant to close down, treating them as 'pirate' stations. We know those pirates, poor Maya Indians in Guatemala or popular educators in Brazil, both countries where community radios have been repressed recently. It is hard to admit, but President Lula's government has not taken a position to prevent ANATEL, the national telecommunications company, from strangling community radio using technocratic pretexts.

The digital divide issue and the access to new technologies of information and communication, which is presented as the main thrust of the information society, cannot be discussed outside the democratisation of society. We could hardly accept an argument that only values the expansion and generalisation of new technologies, outside of communication rights and freedom of expression.

By focusing the discussion on the new technologies and inventing catchy wordings such as 'digital solidarity', governments avoid referring to other gaps in society that are the real causes for the digital divide: the economic divide, the social divide, and other multiple inequality gaps that are increasingly widening. Those on the upper floor would like us to believe that new technologies will allow leapfrogging to a just society. However, we already know and many colleagues have said it before, that the concentration of information and scientific knowledge in the hands of a few large corporations is growing and their distribution networks see the world as a big market in constant expansion.

Those large companies that 'generously' donate computers and software, sell to the Third World an illusion of a better world through ICTs. In places where not even electricity, safe water or telephones are available, telecentres are put up with solar energy and satellite connectivity. The triumphal language of certain reports and auto-evaluations contrasts with a much gloomier reality. The poorest who are thought to be benefitted, do not approach the telecentres, only those who are in better social condition will do. However, they do not represent the majority of the community. And even among these, not everyone visits the telecentre to use Internet, email and the web, but only to use the telephone, the photocopier or the fax, when available.

In other places, the author has written profusely on the Promethean myth that sees ICTs as the magic wand of development, and have alleged that 90% of the current content of the world wide web is irrelevant to 90% of the world population. The web, which for many of us is a wonderful tool, is not even an object of curiosity for most of the poor of the world. It doesn't contribute at all to the solution of their daily problems, unless it is 'localised'; meaning, unless there is a new design whereby local content are developed on the basis of specific questions and demands from the community, as it happens with the project conducted in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, India, by the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation.

There are essential conditions, seldom achieved, for new ICTs to effectively become a driving force in development and a guarantee

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for the right to communicate. Community participation and appropriation is one. The development of local content is another fundamental requirement. Language and cultural pertinence are also essential. The use of appropriate technology and the technological convergence between audio-visual means and the Internet are necessary to ensure sustainability, as it is networking with other similar projects, on the basis of common objectives and principles.

Information is power, communication is counter-power

In its current construction, the information society obscures the communication society. The information society suggested from above is based on 'access', not on participation let alone on appropriation of processes and contents. Civil society is now a grown-up movement and will not be again deceived with mirrors. There cannot be information society when there is no room for the civil society to participate in the design or when the perception on civil society by governments and international organisations is of marginal minorities.

If the summit in Geneva and Tunisia had not been in the global agenda, perhaps the CRIS campaign for communication rights would not have developed with the multiplying force that we have seen. Clarity has been gained in the discussion and the movement has grown globally, with articulations among numerous organisations and networks in each country and region.

This time, the discussion has moved from the summit to the plains and to the people. While on the upper floor speeches are made, in the lower floor serious reflection and debate is taking place. On the upper floor, ways to catch-up with technology developments are being considered, in ways that do not endanger the foundations of political power. Down at the lower floor, civil society organisations are busy preparing, not for the assault of the upper floor but to gain recognition for their arguments, making the case of communication rights as essential for development, for the struggle against poverty and hunger, and for the right to identity and cultural diversity.

Let's close with Manuel Castells: "Information is power, communication is counter-power". ■

The complete article with references can be read at www.i4d.csdms.in