

## **The Forgotten History of Global Communication Negotiations at the League of Nations**

Kaarle Nordenstreng  
*Professor, University of Tampere*

WSIS represents the highest and broadest platform of global negotiations on communication which ever has taken place. Surely the ITU, the oldest specialized United Nations agency, has handled the international regulation of telecommunication and radio spectrum for over a century; UNESCO has contributed to the development of mass media and other information systems since its foundation sixty years ago; and the United Nations itself held already in 1948 a historical Conference on Information, which among other things drafted the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, none of these other platforms has reached the profile and prestige of WSIS.

On the other hand, WSIS has not yet produced more than good intentions: a declaration and a plan of action. True, the declaration exists also as a version by the non-governmental organizations – a manifestation of the new multi-stakeholder culture – and in this respect WSIS paves the way towards a more democratic global governance. But still it is too early to say whether the high profile and prestige of WSIS remains in history as a platform to turn visions into reality or merely as a show-place – a late repeat of the dot-com bubble at the level of international diplomacy.

In any case it is important to realize that WSIS is not a unique event without historical roots. On the contrary, it should be seen as a crystallization of long-term developments in political, economic and cultural spheres. And in this respect it stands for a long history of multilateral negotiations concerning communications.

A relatively well-known story of global negotiations on communication is found in the celebrated history of the 60-year-old United Nations and UNESCO, including the rise and fall of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). But there is a

prehistory to this post-World War Two period: a forgotten story of the League of Nations. Actually the roots of WSIS lead to Geneva in 1925 as much as they lead to San Francisco or London in 1945.

After World War One it was believed that a new era was to begin in international relations. The horrors of war were fresh in people's minds; there was a need to prevent future wars and to establish conditions for lasting peace. Power politics and secret diplomacy were regarded as major reasons for the outbreak of war. Now the time had come to replace them by international cooperation, collective security and open diplomacy. The League of Nations was established in 1920 to channel these aspirations; it was the first great exercise of the world in organizing itself for peace.

One of the leading ideas that the League had was to work in public and to give wide publicity to its activities, marking the dawn of open diplomacy. The League also relied upon the influence and impact of public opinion in international relations; President Woodrow Wilson even called the League "the court of public opinion". Accordingly, the press was incorporated into the system of international relations in an unprecedented manner – comparable only to the step taken earlier when the press assumed its central role in bourgeois democracy by operating as the "fourth estate" next to the legislative, executive and jurisdiction powers.

It was in this spirit that the delegate for Chile said at the 12th plenary session of the League Assembly on 16 September 1925: "We must stimulate among the people that new spirit which the war produced and which the League of Nations is trying to spread throughout the world... A universal bond of feeling unites all men and all peoples on the question of peace and the welfare of the working classes. The Press is the vanguard of these ideas, and that is why I submit the following draft resolution to the Assembly." The proposed resolution was thoroughly discussed by the Assembly and adopted unanimously on the same day in the following form:

The Assembly,

Considering that the Press constitutes the most effective means of guiding public opinion towards that moral disarmament which is a concomitant condition of material disarmament:

Invites the Council to consider the desirability of conceiving a committee of experts representing the Press of the different continents with a view to determining methods of contributing towards the organisation of peace, especially:

- a. By ensuring the more rapid and less costly transmission of Press news with a view to reducing risks of international misunderstanding;
- b. And by discussing all technical problems the settlement of which would be conducive to the tranquillization of public opinion.

The resolution became the first overall position regarding the mass media that has ever been taken by the international community through its multilateral organization. It is a remarkable resolution not only because of its historical nature but also because of its political and professional substance. It sets the agenda for a deliberation of technical problems, not only in loose relation to a political context (as is the case of WSIS), but explicitly subordinated to the overall objective of peace and international understanding. Moreover, it combines press and disarmament – two topics which over the decades have become more and more sensitive separately, not to speak of them in combination.

The resolution was followed up by a round of consultations with various countries and international associations (replies from more than 25 countries by March 1926), a meeting of 16 news agencies in August 1926, a meeting of press bureaux of 17 countries in October 1926, as well as an ad hoc committee drawn from the members of the International Association of Journalists accredited to the League of Nations in January 1927. On the basis of these preparations the League Council decided in March 1927 to convene a Conference of Press Experts in Geneva on 24-29 August 1927.

Accordingly, the Prepcom of those days led to a major meeting in less than a year, and the conference itself was extremely productive. It was attended by over a hundred delegates from 38 countries, and it adopted a number of resolutions amounting to a programme: In order that journalists may have every facility in residing, travelling, securing news and improving their professional equipment, and that news itself may be free at the source, expediated in every possible way in its transmission, protected before and after publication against unfair appropriation, and given the widest possible dissemination, to the end that the work of the Press may be made more effective in its responsible mission accurately and conscientiously to inform world public opinion and hence to contribute directly to the preservation of peace and the advancement of civilisation.

The results of the Conference were welcomed by the League Council at its subsequent session in September 1927. The most technical issues were referred to the Organisation for Communications and Transit, while other resolutions including those on protection of news and on professional facilities of journalists were followed up by the Council in consultation with different governments. However, no spectacular achievements seem to have taken

place in this area in the course of the following few years. This shows that despite good intentions and even euphoria, practical steps to implement were slow and few.

Still the League went on in this field, and the next milestones were in the early 1930s in the context of the 1932-33 World Disarmament Conference – and a deteriorating international situation. The Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press was convened in Copenhagen in January 1932. The scope of this Conference was less technical than that of the 1927 Geneva Conference with its main concern on the inaccurate news, the rest covering follow-up of the earlier Geneva Conference and cooperation of official press bureaux.

The Copenhagen Conference was followed up by the Second Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press, convened in Madrid on 7-11 November 1933. It reviewed the action taking under the earlier Copenhagen resolutions and considered various related problems such as the right to correct false information in the international field, the intellectual role of the press, broadcasting and international relations, and the status of press correspondents in foreign countries. However, its resolutions full of good intentions were never put to practice. The mounting contradictions in the international political atmosphere paralyzed these activities.

Apart from these expert conferences, mass media emerged as a central issue in the World Disarmament Conference preparation which started already in 1925, soon after the first resolution on media. In the early 1930s the Polish, Swedish and Spanish delegations made proposals regarding “moral disarmament” and the flagrant contradictions between demands for reduction of armaments or demands for total disarmament and an increasingly violent propaganda of hatred tending to promote disorder and even war – false information about other countries which appear in the press. When the Conference was finally convened in 1932, it appointed among others a special Committee on Moral Disarmament. However, despite a draft text with four Articles on this topic to be included in the General Convention for the Limitation of Armaments, the moral disarmament remains but a footnote in history – most interesting and intriguing, but still a footnote.

Towards the end of the Disarmament Conference in 1933 the international situation was deteriorating all the time, and what happened outside the League had severe influence on the fate of the Conference. Philip Noel-Baker, the British statesman and Nobel Prize winner who at the time was Personal Assistant to the President of the Disarmament Conference and later wrote a book about the Conference and on the reasons why it failed, has stated that the chances of success for the Conference would have been much greater if the time for it had been earlier, in 1931 or even 1930. The same assessment was confirmed at the symposium

“The League of Nations in retrospect”, held in Geneva in 1980 where it was stated that “the Disarmament Conference came far too late” and that “the collapse of the Disarmament Conference cannot be imputed to the League of Nations”.

As pointed out by Noel-Baker, in many countries there were people who thought the League and disarmament were utopian nonsense since “whatever you do, war will come”. Such an attitude was to be found in certain circles both within and outside governments. It was not only a spontaneous attitude but also something that was deliberately mobilized by anti-disarmament lobbies. For example, in Britain some private manufacturers of arms were eager to support and re-arm Hitler, and this support of the military-industrial complex had all the effect of creating the illusion of public support for the militarist Ministers in the Government. The same happened in France where most important newspapers were brought under the control of the Comité des Forges – the Private Arms Manufacturers of France, with a merciless campaign against the League and its Disarmament Conference. Likewise in Germany, the Hugenburg Konzern bought more than half of all the daily newspapers and key other media using them against the Treaty of Versailles, against the League and against disarmament. And it worked. As Noel-Baker has noted, in this struggle the internationalists have won all the arguments, but the bureaucrats and militarists have won all the material victories that count.

Still, there was some progress in the League of Nations in the beginning of the 1930s, particularly regarding the “modern methods utilized in the cause of peace”, along with the general development of film and broadcasting media. The first manifestation of these media emerging outside the conventional press was the attention devoted to the educational use of “cinematography”. Thus film was not primarily considered as a political factor related to peace but rather as an educational method within the overall framework of “intellectual co-operation”.

Radio – or as it came to be called by the 1930s, “broadcasting” – was the real “modern means” that captured the attention of international politics at the League. Here also a point of departure was the educational use of the medium: on 24 September 1931 the League Assembly passed a resolution relating to the intellectual cooperation, in particular to an enquiry being carried out by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation on the educational aspects of broadcasting, and this resolution recommended that the enquiry “should cover all the international questions raised by the use of broadcasting in regard to good international relations”. The resolution, backed by the consideration of moral disarmament, launched a five-year process which culminated on 23 September 1936 in the adoption and signing by the Plenipotentiaries of 28 States the International Convention on

the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace – an instrument still in force, although outdated in many respects.