

Media Pluralism and Cultural Diversity

Robin Mansell

Professor, Dixon Chair in New Media and the Internet, London School of Economics and Political Science

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) “Declaration of Principles: Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium” begins with a “Common Vision of the Information Society”, that is, a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.¹ It associates information and communication technologies (ICTs) with promoting the development goals of the Millennium Declaration,² and reaffirms “that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression”. It states that “communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. ... Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers”.

In the WSIS Plan of Action, consideration is given to the need for international and regional cooperation. It is argued that this “needs to be strengthened with a view to promoting universal access and bridging the digital divide, *inter alia*, by provision of means of implementation”. Governments of developing countries are invited to raise the relative priority of ICT projects in requests for international cooperation and assistance and to build on and accelerate public-private partnerships, focusing on the use of ICT in development.

¹ World Summit on the Information Society (2003), ‘Declaration of Principles - Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium’, 12 December, http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/osis/doc/S03-WSIS-DOC-0004!!PDF-E.pdf;

² See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

When it comes to the vital and important issues of cultural diversity and media pluralism, there are few signs, however, that important lessons of past decades have been learnt. First, considerable emphasis is given in the WSIS context to “the Information Society”, a singular rather than plural construct. It is the Information Society that we are asked to consider, not a system of diverse interlinked information societies with distinct histories and futures. Second, much of the discussion is about ICTs; it mainly is about access to technologies. This is very strongly emphasized in the WSIS Plan of Action,³ where paragraph 6, for example, provides indicative targets ... for improving connectivity and access in the use of ICTs ... to be achieved by 2015.⁴ Yet we know that if cultural diversity and media pluralism are to be fostered and encouraged, the emphasis must be placed on communication processes and on the diverse ways in which information and media content are produced and consumed.

On the theme of cultural diversity, paragraph 19 of the Declaration calls on stakeholders to “foster and respect cultural diversity”, but is silent on media pluralism, calling upon stakeholders only to “recognise the role of the media”. Later in paragraph 52, cultural diversity is linked to identity, linguistic diversity and to the production and accessibility of local content of all kinds. The Declaration turns to the United Nations’ and UNESCO’s work on a cultural diversity convention which is currently underway to achieve some of its goals.

With respect to the media, paragraph 55 refers to a “commitment to the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information, as well as those of the independence, pluralism and diversity of media ... Diversity of media ownership should be encouraged, in conformity with national law, and taking into account relevant international conventions. We reaffirm the necessity of reducing international imbalances affecting the media, particularly as regards infrastructure, technical resources and the development of human skills”.

In the WSIS Plan of Action, there are fifteen actions under the cultural diversity theme aimed at delivering on the broad goals of the Declaration and seven actions dealing with media pluralism. Most of the statements are worthy, but there is little sign that issues of the balance between market-led and government or civil society-led initiatives and its influence on the future have been fully understood. To understand the importance of this observation, this short paper provides a view from both the past and the present.

³ World Summit on the Information Society (2003), “Plan of Action”, 12 December 2003 available at http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsis/doc/S03-WSIS-DOC-0005!!PDF-E.pdf

⁴ All but one of the targets refer to ICT connection or access, i) is the exception, “to encourage the development of content and to put in place technical conditions in order to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet”.

A View from the Past

Twenty-five years ago, UNESCO published “Many Voices, One World”, a groundbreaking report that addressed many of the core issues around media pluralism and cultural diversity that remain relevant today.⁵ In the intervening years there have been many changes in technology, the globalisation debate has subsumed discussions of transnationalisation, and many more stakeholders are being explicitly acknowledged. Nevertheless, Sean MacBride’s comment that “full use of communication in all its varied strands is vital to assure that humanity has more than a history ... that our children are assured a future”, is as pertinent today as it was in 1980.

The MacBride Commission put substantial emphasis on the communication process, rather than on technology. It called for societies in which there would be:

...a) the diffusion of power through broader access to and participation in the communication process; (b) the benefits of communication used as an educational and socializing force; (c) the reduction of inequalities through democratisation; (d) the abolition of the vestiges of domination as full national liberation becomes a reality.

The authors of *Many Voices, One World*, argued that “...the basic decisions in order to forge a better future for men and women in communities everywhere, in developing as well as in developed nations, do not lie principally in the field of technological development: *they lie essentially in the answers each society gives to the conceptual and political foundations of development?*” (emphasis added). They acknowledged that “the subjects of imbalance and domination were among the most contentious in the early rounds of the world-wide debate on communications” in the 1970s, but they drew clear attention to the problems created by imbalance and the ways in which this was being articulated at the time in the cultural industries.

The report called for policies to achieve the necessary “...allocation of public resources, decisions about general structure for communication activities, elimination of internal and external imbalances, and definition of priorities, which naturally vary from one country to another”. It called for measures to “promote endogenous capacities in all countries for devising, producing and using new communication technologies, as well as programmes and their content....” It also called for the development of critical forms of education, a reduction

⁵ International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (1980/2004) *Many Voices, One World – Towards a New, More Just, and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order- The MacBride Commission*, first published by UNESCO, Lanham NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

of a fascination with technology, and the fostering of people's ability to choose more discriminatingly between the different products of the communication process.

The New World Information and Communication Order was envisaged as "...an open-ended conceptual framework", characterised by greater equity and a new balance of interests between stakeholders. In principle, this would offer "...the possibility of localized, inexpensive, flexible and decentralized communication structures which facilitate broader public access and participation". But it was acknowledged that this potential would transform into practice only under circumstances where technology becomes a servant – not the driver of change; where the social order and its financial and political control systems become less hierarchical and where inequalities (both intranational and international) are reduced substantially.

It was understood that the problems of the day could be tackled only as a result of a "huge effort". In addition to finance, the report acknowledged the need to integrate communication into development strategies, to strengthen cultural identity, and to reduce the commercialisation of communication, that is, the cultural industries. Considerable attention was given to the need to foster professional integrity and standards in the media and among journalists and to emphasize the need for the democratisation of communication by removing obstacles, promoting diversity and choice, and through integrating all people and enabling their participation in society.

In the intervening years some of the rhetoric has changed and various ICTs including the Internet have become pervasive in the lives of those who have sufficient resources to afford them. Over twenty-five years what has not changed, however, is the dialectic process that continues to foster poverty, scarcity and exclusion, a dialectic that has major implications for media pluralism and cultural diversity.

A View from the Present

Parallel to WSIS activities, UNESCO has been working on the text for a convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions to back up its 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.⁶ The dialectic that fosters poverty, scarcity and exclusion and which works against media pluralism and cultural diversity is one that will continue to be permitted to operate if the lessons of research over recent decades are

⁶ UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted unanimously by the 185 Member States represented at the 31st session of the General Conference in 2001 in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001, http://www.unesco.org/confgen/press_rel/021101_clt_diversity.shtml

ignored. Research on media and ICT history, from a political economy perspective⁷ and from perspectives focusing on social processes and practices⁸ has shown that market forces alone do not generate cultural diversity and that the market and commercial forces on their own, do not give priority to the protection of the local expression of cultural identities in many cases.⁹

The global cultural industries continue to give rise to dominant positions that foster inequalities. While there is the appearance of variety that sometimes passes for diversity, this is not a warrant of plurality. This is so despite the potential of the Internet and other forms of new media to foster inclusiveness. Research also shows that state monopolies can contribute to local scarcity of media and other cultural materials and this can be damaging to identity expression. Monopolies or market dominance can stifle the expression of cultural diversity.¹⁰ In addition, the cultural industries have benefited from public funding for their development in regulated environments. This has often been required in order to foster public as well as market-based production and consumption of media and other cultural materials.

Research indicates that there is a need for balance between the openness of the market and cultural policies if diversity and pluralism are to be achieved. There is a need to promote a balance between the promotion of creativity and the protection of intellectual property rights.¹¹ There is also a need to achieve a balance between what industrialised countries offer to the market and what developing countries may produce, offering fair access to the same historical public funding opportunities, mechanisms and processes as industrialised countries have benefited from in the past. There is a need to foster non-proprietary and non-commercial forms of cultural exchange as in the form of a public domain information, public media services, and the application of concepts of fair use of content. Fostering cultural diversity means being inclusive and acknowledging and supporting a plurality of channels and genres, from media and ICTs to wider cultural practices. This is essential to allow spaces for freedom of expression and creativity. Achieving the necessary balance

⁷ See N. Garnham and F. Inglis (1990) *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, London: Sage; N. Garnham (2000) *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity: Arguments about the Media and Social Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 and R. Mansell (2004) 'Political Economy, Power and New Media', *New Media & Society*, 6(1): 96 – 105.

⁸ See for example, A. Sreberny (2002) 'Globalization and Me' in J. Man Chan and B. MacIntyre (eds) *In Search of Boundaries: Communication, Nation-States and Cultural Identities*, Norwood NJ: Ablex Publishing; and D. Frau-Meigs (2002) "Cultural exception", national policies and globalisation: Imperatives in democratisation and promotion of contemporary culture', *Quaderns del CAC*, No. 14, Sept-Dec., <http://www.audiovisualcat.net/publicacionsing/Q14france.pdf>

⁹ This discussion draws upon IAMCR's contribution to discussions of the draft text of the Convention in February 2005.

¹⁰ R. Mansell (1999) "New media competition and access: The scarcity-abundance dialectic", *New Media & Society*, 1(2): 155-82.

¹¹ See R Mansell and W E Steinmueller (2000) *Mobilising the Information Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 7.

means attention to the regulation of cultural industry ownership, to content production and consumption issues, and to financial support mechanisms.

Towards the Future

At the end of the first phase of WSIS in December 2003 the last of these issues – financial support mechanisms – had not been dealt with. The WSIS Plan of Action sets out a “digital solidarity agenda” aimed at “mobilizing human, financial and technological resources for inclusion of all men and women in the emerging Information Society”. A task force was established to examine existing financing mechanisms and the feasibility of the creation of a voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund. Such a fund has in fact been established.¹² In its report at the end of 2004, however, the Task Force observed that funding “should be seen in the context of available financing for the broader set of development agendas and goals...”¹³ It called for improved cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination, more multi-stakeholder partnerships, stronger emphasis on domestic finance, private sector support for locally relevant applications and content, strengthening capacities to secure funds and to use them effectively, and encouragement of increased voluntary, consumer-based contributions.

As for the new Digital Solidarity Fund, however, the “Task Force felt that it was not in a position to assess its role among the various ICT financial mechanisms”. The opportunity to undertake a “huge effort” as recommended by the Many Voices, One World report will be missed if this issue cannot be resolved in a more imaginative way. Without resources the ambitions of the texts of the WSIS that do call for measures to foster cultural diversity and media pluralism are unlikely to be met. Where policy measures and investment are needed to alter the balance of activity in the media and cultural industries, this entails costs to create or strengthen capacities in ways that are tailored to local contexts and circumstances.

If no new financial measures are supported, the cost of the responsibility for fostering cultural diversity and media pluralism will default to poor countries and to the development community with its many competing priorities. Financing arrangements will continue to work against the interests of fostering inclusive communication in poor countries and against media pluralism and cultural diversity.

¹² See <http://www.dsf-fsn.org/en/15c-en.htm>

¹³ The Report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development (2004), *Financing ICTD*, Executive Summary, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/tffm/final-report-executive-summary.doc>.