

**IAMCR Conference Closing Session: Celebrating IAMCR's 60th Anniversary  
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Here is a story about communications and power.

**Chapter 1** starts 12 years before IAMCR's birth in 1957, when UNESCO's constitution was adopted in 1945 on the ashes of the titanic power struggle that was World War Two. UNESCO's mission is inscribed in its constitution as promoting international understanding through inter alia "the free flow of ideas by word and image." This mission is exactly why UNESCO contributed to the formation of IAMCR as a global body of scholars who research information while keeping a strong international awareness in mind.

The drafters of UNESCO's constitution believed that war can be avoided if people have a choice between free and pluralistic media – the absence of which enables a regime to control communications and indoctrinate people for aggression and genocide. Today, free flow remains a noble and relevant ideal – with freedom being the normative default, and any limitations being restricted to narrowly tailored exceptions that accord with international human rights standards.

In this light, it is evident that if flow is to be free, then it should not be captured by one power centre or another – a situation which could easily lead to disproportionate or illegitimate limitations that violate international standards for free expression as per the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

To fast forward to **chapter 2** of this story, in the 1970s and 1980s, fair criticism emerged that the free flow of information had become a recipe for a one-sided flow. But some of the critics simply wanted to switch control of international flows to own narrow political interests. Their interpretation of the proposed New World Information Order (NWICO) was not about promoting communications development within media-poor countries, or for media-poor peoples, let alone about improving flows through promoting independent, community or gender-sensitive media.

In this context, UNESCO's MacBride report became a geopolitical football in a binary polarization between those championing wholly open media markets, and those seeking to regulate content for non-democratic political purposes. In this either/or reductionism, we lost MacBride's attempt to preserve freedom of expression while simultaneously addressing imbalances.

Looking back, we can recognize that it was not a bad thing that the statist control position was also a loser in that historic contest. The scenario of global authoritarian political control over communications would have been more problematic for free flow, than was a flow dominated by Western media companies.

Let me turn now to **Chapter 3** of this story.

The post-NWICO phase that superceded the statist push, ushered in a neo-liberal period. This widened the public's information choices – not so much internationally as domestically within many countries. It started after the Cold War and it was symbolized by the 1991 UNESCO-convened Windhoek Conference of independent African journalists – an event that led to World Press Freedom Day every 3 May, and to the formation of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, IFEX, amongst other impacts.

This neo-liberal period meant less control by authoritarian governments in many countries. Deregulation under the “Washington Consensus” – for all its other problems - meant space for local free, pluralistic and independent media in much of the global South.

With the focus on *national* press freedom in this period, from 1990 to 2000, there was a shift away from considerations of *international* media policy. This same shift led to UNESCO no longer being a centre of global attention as regards media policy, even though the Organisation was very active in press freedom issues at country level. As the dominant arena for contestation, the national level became the site of struggles such as whether a legacy of government-controlled broadcasting could successfully be transformed into public service broadcasting. As the period evolved, contestation came to cover the emergence – precisely out of liberalized markets for media – of ownership and exploitation of private media by oligarchs, politicians and large companies. Such outcomes of the neo-liberal period were not exactly friends of free flow based on independent journalism.

This brings us to **Chapter 4**.

The national level predominated in terms of global agendas until the Internet started becoming mainstream – initiating in our more recent historical phase and signalled by the World Summit on the Information Society (2003, followed-up in 2005). Significantly, the rise of the Net flourished largely within national and international deregulation spaces post-NWICO. The related platforms have been very positive for free flow – especially for many actors in the South, where remaining (or new) controls over legacy media and curbs on access to information could be bypassed by using unregulated new media.

This phase has, however, more recently witnessed the return of the state as significant actor. From the point of view of free flow, this come-back has been for better or worse largely depending on the character of the state at hand. More and more countries, and regional authorities, are asserting sovereignty over Internet companies. No surprise, however, that regulation that respects (free flow) in democratic countries is, however, being cited as a justification for problematic controls over flow in non-democratic countries. The overall result is not a world of free and equal flows, but increasing frontiers and fragmentation in international communications on the one hand, and excessive controls at national or regional levels, on the other.

We are now at **Chapter 5** of the story.

Despite their aspirations, it also seems apparent that individual states (and regions) can only have partial authority as regards regulating the Internet. Mediated information flows, through the vectors of language and culture, along with disinformation campaigns, hate speech, misogyny, fake news and cyber-viruses, do not respect national boundaries. Neither does surveillance, nor hacking. So, too, democratic discourse and cross-border investigative journalism like the Panama Papers, can also traverse jurisdictions. The question that this raises is whether the constraints on the role of individual states (and regions) therefore presage a re-entry of international organisations like UNESCO or the ITU back into the global communications power arena.

Indeed, there are growing pressures for a revived UN role – for example, with Microsoft today calling for an international cybersecurity treaty. But interested states would need to address issues such as the lack of resources for an expanded UN mandate, and the challenges that arise when members seek to secure national and regional advantage rather than privileging the common and shared interests of the international community.

At the same time, the overall theatre is also very different to the NWICO days. There are a lot more international media today, especially transnational broadcasters, than was the case with the historical imbalanced communications power of the 70s. However, even with this, it also seems that news media are less and less the central actors in information flows – whether globally or nationally. This reflects their diminished status as they compete with many other actors playing media roles, and also because of the inexorable loss of advertising in the face of Internet companies which have the big data required for matching sellers with buyers, and increasingly also the capacity to directly mediate political actors and their constituencies.

This means that although news media remain significant factors in national and international power arrangements, what we now see at the centre of the international communications stage, is that the

lead actors are the transnational and Western-owned Internet and tech companies. On balance to date, these entities have so far been good for free flow – providing powerful platforms for expression and access to information, resisting disproportionate state attempts to curb encryption, and publishing corporate transparency reports about government demands on them related to privacy and expression. They have been slow, but they have at least begun (under pressure from users, civil society and advertisers), to respond to issues such as gender abuse and hate speech in the online space.

Yet nothing is set in stone vis-à-vis the current relatively independent stance of the Net giants. Nor for potential rivals, nor the underlying technology which lacks privacy by default and is often vulnerable to security breach. In addition, the Internet industry's attention-economics and data-tracking business models pose different kinds of capture threats to free expression and free flow.

Put all this together, and it is clear that the current power situation is one of intensified jostling. On one side, mega-internet companies. On the other, the states, acting at national, regional and UN level, in a bid to seek leverage vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the Internet companies. Like the MacBride report, once again, the ideal of genuine free flow and an authentic global public sphere for pluralistic and independent communications risks becoming a casualty in this emerging contest.

However, there are several countervailing forces in regard such a scenario. With this, I open **Chapter 6** to discuss two such factors.

The first countervailing weight is the UN's agreed Sustainable Development Agenda, which symbolizes not just words but common hope. And particularly, we should take seriously that there is Target 16.10 which calls for "public access to information and fundamental freedoms". This objective necessitates a vision of communications power that is shared beyond states and internet companies. Indeed it is hard to see how any of the SDGs can be achieved without this. Take for example, combatting climate change – without the power of investigative journalism to check on companies and governments, and without civil society NGOs using digital communications for research and communication, we can likely expect widespread shortfalls on the Paris commitments to reduce carbon emissions, with enormous repercussions on us all. This is but one example of why the SDGs and communications power should be part of the IAMCR research agenda.

The second force that can help ensure that the ideal of free flow is not lost to capture to a single power centre in the years to come, is you, the IAMCR members. You are part of a global organization of mass communication academics – fit for purpose at the very time when the resurgence of global communications issues is likely to shape more and more of the national.

In short, if we are to have expression and flow that is free of one power centre or another, this can only be ensured if other actors, like academia, join the fray and help balance corporate and state power in terms of the wider global citizenship interest.

In conclusion, let me signal that 2018 is the 70th birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It would be a wonderful way to mark this anniversary if IAMCR members could do more to promote Article 19 of the Declaration. The text is well known, but ever-inspiring to repeat:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

The question therefore is: can you as IAMCR members locate yourselves in this bigger picture and help to write (not just read) the rest of Chapter 6? Can you step up your intellectual work to help preserve, protect and promote the enduring ideal of free flow and the grand promise of Article 19?

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