

25th anniversary of ORBICOM

Remarks by Alain Modoux, co-founder of the network

Madam Rector of UQAM,

Mr. Assistant Director-General of UNESCO,

Mr. President of ORBICOM,

Mr. Secretary-General of ORBICOM,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends, chers amis, queridos amigos, liebe Freunde,

When we talk about anniversaries, we inevitably come back to the past. As far as we are concerned, this backtracking brings us back to the 1990s, a decade that was for UNESCO, especially for the communication and information sector, a boom period, after over a dozen years of the sterile controversies around the establishment of a *New World Information and Communication Order* (NOMIC). Actually, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent end of the cold war brought about this boom period. This geopolitical tsunami paved the way for an extraordinary process of democratization worldwide, especially with regards to freedom of expression. UNESCO, under the leadership of its new Director-General, Federico Mayor, was the first amongst the intergovernmental organizations to step into the breach and to launch initiatives to reaffirm this fundamental freedom contained in Article 1 of its Constitution, namely that UNESCO's mission is *"to promote the free flow of ideas, by word and image"*.

The promotion of freedom of expression and its corollary, the freedom of the press, became throughout the 90's one of UNESCO's top priorities on every continent, in Africa first, on the occasion of the historic *Seminar for the Development of an Independent and Pluralistic African Press*, which was held in Windhoek, in May 1991, then in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab countries and finally in Europe and North America. Eighteen months after the Windhoek Seminar, in New York, in December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly decided, on the proposal of UNESCO, to proclaim May 3, the anniversary day of the Windhoek Declaration, *World Press Freedom Day*. By choosing this symbolic date, the General Assembly paid a heartfelt tribute to the 60 or so brave African journalists who, a year and a half earlier in the Namibian capital, had launched this extraordinary process of democratization that would then, continent after continent, turn freedom of the press into a universal cause.

But UNESCO could not have achieved these outstanding results without the active support of the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI) in New York headed at that time by a great communication professional that I had known a few years earlier, in the context of the *International Public Relations Association (IPRA)*. I am talking about Mrs. Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny, co-founder of ORBICOM. Thérèse, then United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Information, had accepted without hesitation that the United Nations Department of Public Information would join UNESCO in organizing the Windhoek Seminar.

Our collaboration, based on friendship and mutual trust, was exemplary. Thérèse not only put all her energy into finding a large part of the resources needed for the organization of the seminar, but she then largely contributed to ensuring that its results would be widely disseminated among the international community and duly recognized by Member States of the United Nations. Even today, I sincerely believe that, without her material and diplomatic assistance, UNESCO would have had great difficulty in setting up the Windhoek Seminar, at least in its dimensions, and in getting the UN General Assembly's official recognition of its accomplishments by proclaiming May 3, the anniversary of the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration, *World Press Freedom Day*.

Thérèse left the United Nations, shortly after the new Secretary-General, the Egyptian Boutros Boutros Ghali, took office in 1992. She moved back to Canada in the course of the same year to take up a teaching position in January 1993 at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), in the Department of Communications. The Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, aware of the decisive role that Thérèse Paquet Sévigny had played in facilitating the organization of the Windhoek seminar, had wished to express his gratitude to her by proposing, in agreement with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and the Rector of UQAM, Claude Corbo, to link her teaching into the framework of a UNESCO Chair in Communication located at UQAM. Thérèse welcomed this proposal with pleasure, but she voiced a few requirements which, should they have emanated from another person, would have appeared not only unreasonable, but totally unsuitable according the usual protocol rules:

when a person is honored, she or he is not supposed to set out the conditions for her or his acceptance. But Thérèse did not care. What mattered to her was the efficiency and sustainability of the mission that UNESCO and UQAM wished to entrust to her. Her demands were all the more significant since their fulfillment led to the creation of ORBICOM and definitely contributed to the rapid development and prosperity of our network for a quarter of a century, until today ... and far beyond, I hope!

Everything was played out in the second half of May 1994, during a tripartite meeting between the Rector of UQAM, Claude Corbo, Thérèse and myself as representative of the Director-General of UNESCO. Eager to contribute to the international influence of his young university, Rector Claude Corbo really wanted UQAM to have a UNESCO Chair in Communication, all the more so since relations between the Organization and Quebec were at their best. The historic district of Old Quebec had been registered a few years earlier on the UNESCO World Heritage and, following an agreement signed in 1989 with the Government of Quebec, UNESCO had decided to open a permanent office in the old city of Quebec.

As a first condition, Thérèse requested that her chair should not be an isolated island in the Montreal academic community, but that it be part of an international network extending beyond the academic world, that is to say, open to communication professionals, both at the individual and corporate levels. The network should therefore include, alongside UNESCO Chairholders, a certain number of associate members, be they

communication practitioners integrated into a company or an administration, communication consultants, researchers or teachers, or be they companies specialized in one or other field of communication. This first condition seemed to us not only very relevant, but also of paramount importance because the network would serve as a bridge between the academic community and the various categories of communication practitioners, both from the public and the private sectors. Therefore, her request was accepted without reservation.

The second condition was more delicate: Thérèse demanded that her teaching program be partly reduced by the University management so that she would have enough time to build, develop and manage the network, that without her conditions of employment at UQAM being affected. In his response, Rector Claude Corbo committed to do everything possible to ensure that UQAM would respond positively to her request, which was done.

The third condition concerned the very organization of the network secretariat: assuming that it would be installed inside the University campus, Thérèse expected the UQAM administrative services to put at her disposal working premises and provide logistical support, including computer and accounting assistance. As for the second condition, the rector Corbo pledged that this 3rd request would also be fulfilled.

Finally, Thérèse wished that the UNESCO Chairs should be permitted to be sponsored by private companies, so that they could receive financial support allowing them to carry out programs not covered by the ordinary

budgets of their universities. She stated that, with respect to her Chair, she was in touch with the Vice President for Communications of the Canadian telecommunications company Bell, Mrs. Monic Houde, who had already assured her of her unconditional support . As a result, the UNESCO Chair in Communication at UQAM would be called *"UNESCO-Bell Chair in Communication and International Development"*.

It was on this basis that the network imagined and negotiated by Thérèse started. One month after our tripartite meeting, the Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, and the Rector of UQAM, Claude Corbo, signed two memoranda of understanding establishing the UNESCO–Bell chair and the ORBICOM network. Then, the existing UNESCO Chairs in Communication in various parts of the world were invited to become members of the network, what they enthusiastically accepted. At the same time, associate members were recruited from various communication professions, including media, public relations, advertising and other communication-related disciplines.

ORBICOM has quickly established itself as one of the most dynamic networks, if not the most dynamic, among the various networks bringing together the many chairs that UNESCO has been creating around the world in connection with its fields of competence, namely education, natural sciences, social sciences, culture and communication. These networks, grouped together within UNITWIN, the network of networks, today bring together more than 700 academic institutions from 116 countries.

Allow me to conclude by remembering the first President of ORBICOM, the late Rainer von Schilling, publisher of the *Mannheimer Morgen* in Germany, who presided over the destiny of the network alongside its first Secretary-General, Thérèse Paquet Sévigny.

And finally, I would like to express on behalf of all of us here our deep gratitude to former Presidents Rosental Calmon Alves and Bertrand Cabedoche, to our current President Jamal Eddine Naji, to the past and current Secretaries-General, Claude-Yves Charron and Yves Théorêt, to our faithful and tireless Undersecretary General Pierre Giguère, to our Director Rania Aoun, and last but not least, to the Rector of UQAM, Magda Fusaro, and her predecessors for the unwavering support that the University has provided to ORBICOM for a quarter of century. May they all be thanked wholeheartedly for their commitment and loyalty to ORBICOM.

Long live ORBICOM!

Vive ORBICOM!

Viva ORBICOM!

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