

# OCIC and Unda Creating « SIGNIS »

## The Roots of this Evolution

In November 2001, two international Catholic media organizations, OCIC (cinema and audiovisual) and Unda (radio and television) will merge to create a new World Catholic Association for Communication, with the name «SIGNIS». This development finds its source in both the evolution of the concepts of media and communications in our society, and in the specific histories of the two organizations.

### From Instrument to Communication

From the mathematical theory of information, proposed at the end of the second World War, to present day studies that seek to establish a science of communication, a long conceptual road has been travelled. The media, at first considered simply tools of diffusion, are today part of a range of complex perspectives that together embrace, amongst others, anthropological, cultural and social expression.

Not surprisingly media was initially seen as a «tool» within the Catholic Church too. Bishops were captivated by the media, which extended the pulpit, enabling them to reach far off populations via the airwaves, and bring them the Good News! Having a quality message, they needed quality tools to ensure the success of evangelization. Viewed in this way, each media had its specific technique and it was thus advantageous to have three distinct organizations, one for the press, another for radio and television and a third for the cinema.

This «instrumentalist» understanding has not completely disappeared. It is intellectually and pastorally comfortable. The media are thus merely intermediaries between a sender (the Church: Announcer of the Good News) and a receiver (the believer or the believer to be evangelized). If this simplistic concept still marks many of those in charge of the Church today, it is because it was popular at the time of their formation. To make a point, what is today the Department of Communication at the Catholic University of Louvain, was, up to the 1960's, called «The Institute of Transmission Techniques».



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As the focus today is no longer on the media as instruments but rather on the entire complexity of the phenomenon of communication that is at the heart of contemporary research, it is understandable that the former demarcations that separated the media organizations of the Church have been rendered obsolete. All the more as the technical development of the various media has led them to share the same digital language. They become inter-related. It is for this reason that the two organizations, Unda and OCIC, aspire to create a new association «for communication» and no longer one whose designation will be centered solely on audiovisual media.

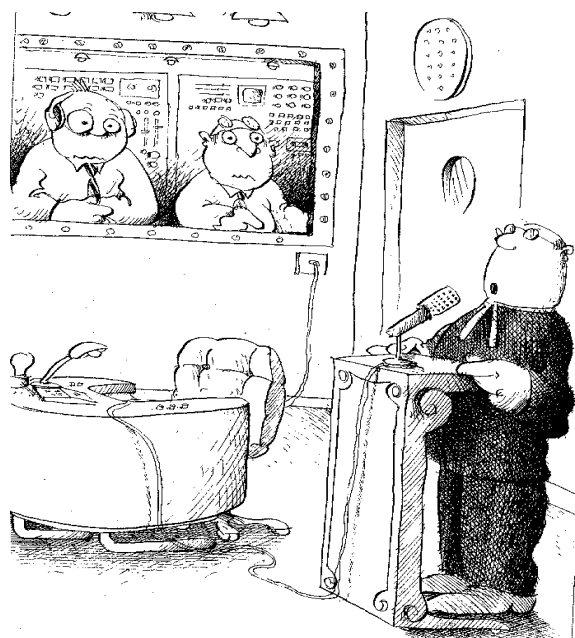
This fundamental change in orientation certainly stems from the evolution of society itself. It also comes from the particular history of the relationship between Unda and OCIC.

### In the Beginning, there was Nothing in Common

Towards the end of the 1920's Ucip (press), Unda (radio) and OCIC (cinema) came into being

When, towards the end of the 1920's, the three international Catholic media organizations, Ucip (press), Unda (radio) and OCIC (cinema), came into being, they each belonged to different «worlds». At the time there was no link between radio and cinema, which had just moved from the silent era to talking movies. The printed press and radio also had nothing in common. There was even some tension as the Marconi invention threatened the existence of the printed press. Why should the public be interested in reading, in the newspapers, news they could have heard the night before on the radio?

Source: *Handbuch für die kirchliche Rede*



In Catholic circles radio posed other difficulties. Would broadcasts of the Mass on radio release Christians from their Sunday obligation? Would radio empty the churches? Cinema had already been considered a great danger. Screenings were taking place on Sundays! For a time the Church tried to stop these projections, then, so as to control this media which drew in the masses, parish halls multiplied in some countries, up to eight thousand in Italy. A very good film, "Cinema Paradiso" colorfully recounts this page of history.

Thus, at the end of the 1920's the existence of three distinct Catholic organizations was justified. Collaboration also existed. OCIC had for a long time hoped that the moral ratings established by the film selection commissions would be printed in the press. This was often for mutual support. The Catholic press was reluctant. In general Catholic newspapers announced the religious radio programs.

### Is Television linked to Radio or to Cinema?

Television was not widespread among the general public until the 1960's. This development was to raise a question. What predominates in television? Sound or image? If it is was sound, then it should be Unda's responsibility. On the other hand, if it was image, then OCIC, with

its long tradition of cinema analysis, would be better suited. In France, from the 1950's, "le Jour du Seigneur" embarked on its series of televised Masses. It quickly became evident that the Church's first use of television, seen exclusively as a public service in many countries, would be of the same sort as radio broadcasts, the re-transmission of religious services. Other programs were added but for the main part television was essentially the vehicle of re-transmitting religious services. It was thus Unda that broadened its scope to become the International Catholic Association for Radio and Television.

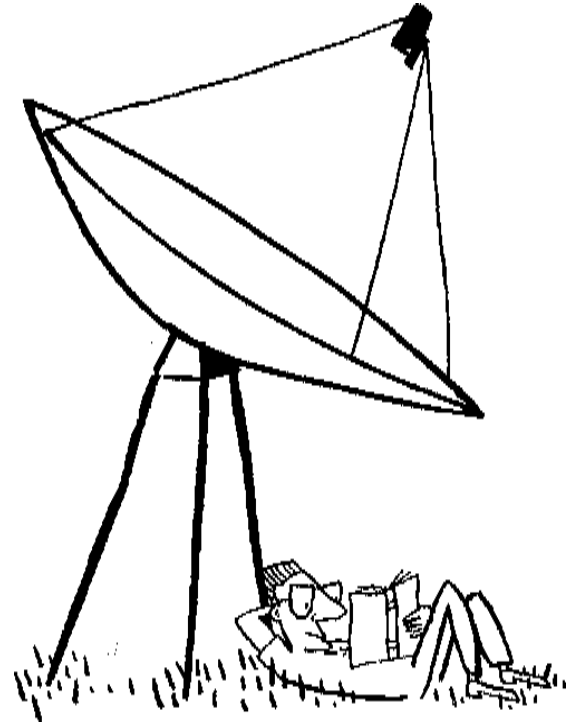
This decision was not taken in a totally serene climate. Prophets of doom announced that television would kill cinema. A little while later the neighborhood cinema halls began to close. It was the same for many parish halls. Projection techniques improved, multiplex cinema halls were created. But not everyone could adapt. At OCIC the fear was growing that cinema would disappear or at least slide more and more towards the small screen. Shouldn't OCIC get involved with film on television? But would that not mean intruding on Unda's territory?

If the leaders of the two organizations met to discuss this issue, they could not avoid being influenced by the tensions that already existed between television and cinema within the professional world itself. At the end of the 1960's OCIC experienced some difficult moments, following controversial prizes awarded by its juries in Venice (Teorema, by Pasolini) and Berlin (John Schlesinger's Midnight Cowboy). In these circumstances the climate for collaboration was far from favorable.

### **Liberation Theology and The New Information Order**

In the 1970's two currents were to influence relations between OCIC and Unda. The first was strictly ecclesial. Liberation theology in Latin America extolled the notion of a Church constructed from basic Christian communities. To develop, these communities made use of simple media: slides, posters, billboards, drawings, sound recordings, local «community» radios, in short, a series of media designated «Group Media». The Church favoured these group media to train pastoral workers in their use and to assist centers to produce them. The idea of creating a new international Catholic association devoted to the development of these media was raised. In Rome, this usage of simple media at the service of religious education was noted to the point that the Pontifical Commission (it was not yet called a «Council») for Social Communications asked OCIC to organize a global meeting on the subject. This took place in 1977, in Munich in collaboration with Unda, with the theme «Evangelization and Media». The meeting gave birth to a joint Unda-OCIC service MG-EV (Group Media and Evangelization).

A short time later UNESCO appointed Nobel and Lenin Prize laureate Sean McBride as president of a commission charged with studying the question of global information and communication. The commission's report entitled «One World, Multiple Voices» came out in 1979. Public opinion retained mainly two elements, that mass media was either in the hands of economic



*Source: Investigación Radiofónica*

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powers or governments, and the need to build a new world order of information and communication that would permit the re-establishment of a global equilibrium in the flow of information and create a more just world in these spheres.

This critical judgment of mass media re-enforced the trend that, in Church organizations, favored group media. Some even advocated the abandonment of the Church's presence in mass media and championed its presence only in group media which were now designated as «Alternative Media», counter-cultural to mass media. Protestant organizations (such as Interfilm and WACC) shared the same point of view.

### 1980, a Joint Congress in Manila

In 1980, OCIC and Unda held a joint congress in Manila, Philippines. It was mainly the location that was common. The program, however, included a follow-up of the Munich meeting. «Group media» became the point of convergence for the two organizations, although this point of intersection was not appreciated by all. There remained some advocates of the creation of a new association. They felt that Unda and OCIC were too involved with the mass media and would not give sufficient support to this new domain, which was considered essential for the Church and the democratization of societies.

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At the Manila Assembly it was decided that a joint meeting of the boards of Unda and OCIC would be held in Washington in 1982 to study mutual relations. There was already talk of three possibilities: the status quo, that is two organizations, the creation of a federation and a merger pure and simple.

Source: *The Tablet* 16.12.2000



In 1983, indicative of the continued impact of the UNESCO commissions analysis, it was Sean McBride himself who was invited to be the principal speaker during joint Unda-OCIC study days in Nairobi. The supporters of the creation of an international association for Group Media continued to voice their dissatisfaction. However, the Assemblies maintained the joint Group Media service, which up to that point had been based in Rome, but was now to join the two secretariats in Brussels.

### Video: an Unda or OCIC Responsibility?

In the following decade, UNESCO experienced a crisis. The work of the McBride Commission and the proposal of a New World Order for Communication and Information drew criticism. The management of its director Mahtar M'Bow was also strongly criticized. The United States withdrew from the organization. Voices emerged providing the stance on mass media. Within Christian organizations some insisted on the indispensable need to retain a presence in this media.

And then, voila, a new technology appears: video! Not only did it permit a renewed circulation of films, it also made audiovisual programs much more accessible. At least that's what it proclaimed. Posters and slides... were good, but wouldn't video now replace them? This raised a new problem in the relationship between Unda and OCIC. Is video part of the television world? On the other hand, if videocassettes, used principally as a support for catechetical programs, circulated in groups, in parishes and associations... wouldn't they be much more the responsibility of OCIC, which had in recent years displayed a greater interest in Group Media?

### Rejection of a Merger in Quito

The question was posed at the time of the congress in Quito, in 1987, which had to decide on the future of relations between Unda and OCIC. It had to decide on the basis of a report written by a commission set up in 1982 at the Washington meeting. The commission, led by the American John Geaney, had concluded that the two organizations should merge. This proposal was not accepted. The participants went away expressing the desire that collaboration between the two organizations intensify, but that they remain separate.

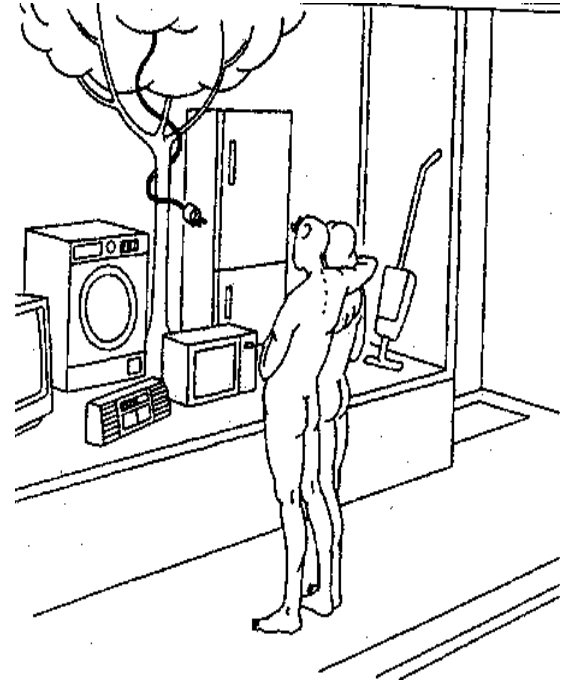
The decision of the Quito General Assembly was made all the more paradoxical by the fact that a few days earlier the Latin American branches of the three organizations (Uclap, OCIC-AL, Unda-AL) decided to create a joint secretariat and formulate a program of activities that covered all the media, but the rest of the world did not follow them...

The video question was to strain relations for a while. It was to be surmounted in an ideosyncratic way. A joint executive committee came to the conclusion that the production of videos created initially for television belonged to Unda's domain. Those that were circulated mainly amongst groups, and thus not destined for broadcast, were OCIC's domain. This decision, that was difficult to arrive at, did not satisfy many people. In practice Unda was to take on mainly the support of program production projects and OCIC was to develop activities in favor of the distribution of programs (such as organizing a number of international gatherings called «Educational and Religious Video Forums».

And so we find ourselves in the 1990's. While Unda and OCIC found themselves confronted, on many occasions, by issues regarding mutual relations, sometimes in conflict, other times serene and harmonious, collaboration with UCIP did not go much beyond meetings between the Presidents and Secretaries General. Of course there were mutual invitations to congresses, but there were few activities in common.

### The Lumen 2000 Satellite

The nineties were marked by another phenomenon, an initiative undertaken by the wealthy Dutchman Piet Derksen, who under the name of a charismatic association, Lumen 2000,



Source: Kirche Intern 1/2001

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thought of various ways of entering the world of the media. He first imagined a satellite that would permit a global diffusion of programs whose influence would allow for the Christianization of the entire planet by the year 2000 (from which the association drew its name). In the meantime he looked for partners amongst Catholic media institutions with the aim of publishing magazines, producing programs that he would finance and which he would offer to his partners on condition that they distribute these in their countries.

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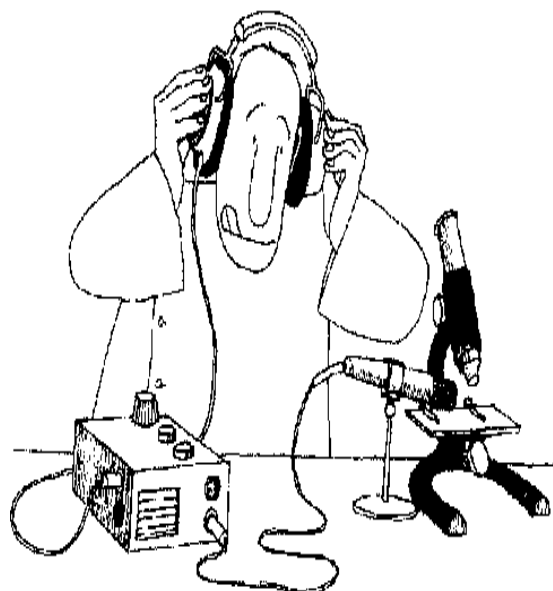
The activities of Lumen 2000 quickly became controversial. Piet Derksen sought Rome's endorsement and he was advised to join the existing associations. Lumen 2000 asked for membership of OCIC and Unda at the Bangkok congress in 1990. It was accepted in Unda in a climate of immense tension, to the point that the subject of relations between Unda and OCIC could no longer be tackled at that congress. More time was needed.

### The Idea of a Merger comes to the Fore

The idea of merger was still alive and that this question, which had lingered for so long, needed to be tackled

In 1994 OCIC and Unda held their joint congress in Prague. On the eve of the Assembly the OCIC Directors Committee made its position known. OCIC was in favor of a merger. The idea was addressed during the joint Assembly, but only as an exchange of opinions and with no precise decision taken. The discussions did however reveal the fact that the idea of merger was still alive and that this question, which had lingered for so long, needed to be tackled. During the first meeting of the Presidents and Secretaries General after the congress, the decision was taken to put the question of a merger on the agenda of the next congress, to be held in 1998 in Montreal. It would no longer be a commission that would study the question, rather the boards of the two organizations would be asked to make a decision and present to the Assembly which of the three options they felt was best: status quo, federation or merger.

Source: *Investigación Radiofónica*



In 1997, at a meeting in Brussels, the joint boards of Unda and OCIC decided to submit a joint proposal to their respective Assemblies, to proceed with the merger of the two organizations in the three years following the Congress in Montreal.

The proposal was accepted almost unanimously by the two Assemblies in Montreal in August 1998.

### Why not UCIP?

This overview of certain key moments in the relationship between Unda and OCIC shows how the theme of a merger emerged far back in their history. Some will no doubt recall that the first joint World Congress took place in 1962 in the same city of Montreal. Nonetheless, it is understandable that, despite the dream nurtured at one time by many, to see the three organizations, including that of the press (UCIP), unite as one, this cannot be realized in Rome in November 2001. The

long road that brought Unda and OCIC together was not experienced in the same way with regard to relations with UCIP. If such a merger were to take place one day, it can only come about at the end of a journey which circumstances have not as yet provided.

The future remains open.

**Robert Molhant, Secretary General of OCIC**

**Annex:** The World Congress „Together towards SIGNIS“ is scheduled for 19-27 November 2001 in Rome. The Multimedia Forum will take place from 23-25 November. This forum will offer opportunities for professional sharing, a market, a competition, a video library, a webmasters' colloquium and other activities. The venue is:

Congress: Domus Mariae, Via Aurelia, 481 - 00165 Roma Tel.&Fax: 39 06 662 31 38

Forum: Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane, Via Aurelia 476, 00165 Roma (C.P. 9099 - Aurelia 00100 Roma), Tel. 39 06 665 231 Fax: 39 06 663 88 21

For more information contact E-mail: [sg@ocic.org](mailto:sg@ocic.org) / [sg@unda.org](mailto:sg@unda.org)



Source: aler/La Musica

## S U M M A R Y   R E S U M E N   R E S U M E E

En novembre prochain, à Rome, les deux organisations catholiques pour les médias, OCIC et UNDA, fusionneront pour créer une nouvelle Association Mondiale pour la Communication qui prendra le nom de "Signis". Ce sera l'aboutissement d'un long processus de dialogue fraternel, ce qui inclut disputes et bouderies, entre ces deux organisations. Mais c'est aussi le fruit de l'histoire même des médias et de la communication ainsi que des relations entre l'Eglise et les médias tout au long du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. C'est cette double histoire que retrace ici Robert Molhant, secrétaire général de l'OCIC et, depuis le 4 mai 2001, membre du Conseil du CAMECO.

En noviembre de 2001, Unda (la organización católica de radio y televisión) y OCIC (dedicándose al cine y audiovisuales) crearán juntas la nueva asociación internacional de comunicación SIGNIS. Para entender el desarrollo hacia esta „fusión“, es útil conocer sus raíces en la situación de los medios en las diferentes décadas del siglo pasado y de los conceptos correspondientes de comunicación discutidos. Entretanto se ha realizado un cambio profundo hacia una interrelación fuerte de los medios gracias a la digitalización, un cambio que también tiene que reflejarse en el perfil de una nueva organización católica activa en este campo. Por eso, el secretario general de OCIC y miembro del Consejo de CAMECO, Robert Molhant, reflexiona sobre la „doble-via“ tanto del desarrollo de las comunicaciones como de la cooperación de Unda, OCIC y también UCIP (la unión católica internacional de prensa).