New World Information and Communication Order: An essential remedy towards the "information imbalances" for the Third world Nations

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Abstract

New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) grew out of the New International Economic Order of 1974. From 1976-1978, the NWICO was generally called the New World Information Order or the New International Information Order. The debate which gave birth to this very structure centered around the idea of "Free Flow" or "Free and Balanced Flow" of information between the western industrisalised developed nations and the underdeveloped or the developing societies in the South part of the world.Accordingly,this study therefore analyses the information quest and the issues of free and balanced flow in the third world countries at present and its effect on the citizens of the same.

Key words: NWICO, Information imbalances , Third word nations

Introduction

The News Flow Debate (NFD), which is about the imbalance in the flow of news internationally, has continued to generate interest among the communication researchers till date. This is because the issues that gave birth to the debate in the first instance have remained fluid, notwithstanding the impact of social media on the unidirectional (vertical) flow of news and information due to the liberalization and proliferation of the newsgathering and dissemination processes at the grassroots level. The debate was basically about "Free Flow" or "Free and Balanced Flow" of information between the western industrisalised developed nations and the underdeveloped or the developing societies in the South part of the world. So, in order to find a solution rather a remedy towards this "information imbalance" NWICO was established. NWICO grew out of the New International Economic Order of 1974. From 1976-1978, the New World Information and Communication Order was generally called the New World Information Order or the New International Information Order. The NWIC0 is a rather an amorphous set of demands, originating principally from the Third World nations, aimed at correcting what these countries view as an imbalance in the international flow of information. As of yet, the NWICO is still a matter of debate within UNESCO and has not been expressly drafted as an official legal document. The NWICO is essentially a plan, albeit one which has yet to be formulated in any detail, that proposes to remedy the existing inequality in the flow of information. Its scope is quite broad, encompassing the exchange of all types of information relating to political, social, cultural and economic subjects. This study therefore analyses the

information quest and the issues of free and balanced flow of informations in the third world countries at present and its effect on the citizens of the same.

 CONTENT ANALYSIS:

The proponents of NWICO claim that this unregulated state of affairs in information exchange has produced the following effects a de-facto imbalance in the flow of information from North to South, inequitable distribution of communication resources, insufficient and negative reportage of the third world news, a western cultural bias in news about the Third World, and transmission of messages from North to South that are irrelevant, or even harmful to these developing cultures.

Although in December 1984, the United States withdrew its membership from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).One of the major reasons for the U.S. withdrawal was the perception held by U.S. officials that the UNESCO secretariat had supported the debate over the establishment of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) as U.S. strongly opposed the governmental control over the flow of information and has consistently fought against the adoption of the New World Information and Communication Order envisioned by UNESCO. In a society with no written language, literacy is not among the powers that constitute an adequate share. In a society with no electronic media, access to a radio or other electronic sources of information is not one of the material goods that constitute an adequate share. In a society in which information is transmitted mainly through the written word and electronic media, both these things should be included in the bundle of means that constitute an adequate share. It will also vary in part for reason that may be culturally specific. The ability to understand, read, speak, and write in the language or languages in which public affairs are discussed in one's society is a part of the bundle of means that constitute an adequate share.

Given the centrality of electronic media to effective participation in modern societies and international relations, they can be defined as a necessary aspect of basic human rights and fundamental to determinations of what is just and unjust. Applied to international communication, this framework allows us to claim as unjust a situation where the developing countries have control over only ten percent of the electromagnetic spectrum and less than half the population is unable to make even one telephone call in the course of their lives. For the half a million people of Kikwit, Zaire to be without any radio or television deprives them of basic access to an adequate share of communication resources and thus negatively affects their ability to participate in society and, more broadly, international relations. Hence when we start to think about communication within the framework of basic rights and justice, it immediately becomes apparent that communication equity becomes a prerequisite of modern society

.While the above ways of thinking about international communication may appear to be novel, this is not really the case. Such efforts have been at the core of US international communication policy for at least 70 years, and a central element effecting the way in which international institutions from the League of Nation to the present day UNESCO have historically thought about relationships between communication, technology and society. For the US, the historical link between human rights, justice and communication was forged through a commitment to the "free flow of information" doctrine that was underpinned by a broader philosophy of libertarianism. For international institutions, the historical link between communication and ethics has been forged on different

grounds. Within such institutions there has been more emphasis on communication imbalances in the world, and how such inequities might cause universal harm. These concerns can be traced back to late nineteenth century efforts to seek agreement about the responsibilities and practices of journalists. The concern with unfairly distributed opportunities for access to and the use of the communication media were also prime topics within the League of Nations during the 1920s and 1930s. While this is only a brief historical survey of the issues at hand, the examples nonetheless indicate that concerns over journalistic practices, the distribution of communication technology and international communication are long-standing topics that precede the United Nations (UN). However, it is within the UN and its sub-agencies that more recent attempts to deal with communication issues have taken place. This recent history can be traced back to the formulation of the UN in 1948 and its early efforts to situate communication as a fundamental aspect of universal human rights. As Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights put the issue:

Every individual has the right to freedom of opinion and of expression, which entails the right to be free from harassment for his opinions and the right to seek out, to receive and to communicate, regardless of frontiers and ideas, by whatever means of expression he may choose. The UN and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have been involved in freedom of expression and freedom of information issues since their inception. For UNESCO, such involvement took place through the development and adoption of the Beirut and the Fiorenze Accords, and then through some of the early studies on one-way information flow between developed and developing nations. Resolutions were adopted on these issues as early as 1954, and the results of studies on international communication shared among members and non-members. As these issues became more central to the organization during the 1950s and 1960s,UNESCO sponsored a number of meetings on factors impeding the "free-flow of ideas". However, the expansion of activities and research within UNESCO began to produce findings and conclusions that were not always welcomed by all of the organization's members. In particular, three broad conclusions coming out of UNESCO-supported research located at the center of future debates about international communication and ultimately lead to efforts to severely curtail UNESCO's role in international information and communication issues. The first conclusion was that "contemporary individual[s] were becoming . . .prisoner[s] of foreign concepts of the world for they are being incessantly and systematically forced upon [them]. Another conclusion stemming from these observations was that information media are treated as a privilege of the ruling elite, a power which is out of the influential sphere of the public. The ultimate conclusion stemming from these observations was that it might be necessary to find ways to protect the concepts of independence and freedom of information .These results were important for two reasons. On the one hand, they marked the beginning of a loosely organized discourse that linked communication issues of international political and economic power. On the other hand, they raised the claims that UNESCO had far over-stepped its mandate and became politicized. While nothing immediate ever came out of these early observations, the seeds for a NWICO-sponsored debate had been sown and the rhetoric over problems in international communication became louder and stronger. Indicative of the changing circumstances, during the Sixteenth Session of the UNESCO General Conference in 1970 a delegation lead by India presented its concerns on inequitable information flows. The group "asserted that [UNESCO] must continue to emphasize the rights of less privileged nations to preserve their own culture," and assist in the formulation of appropriate mass communication policies. UNESCO responded to these calls by mapping out a research agenda on news

flow, and holding several meetings where the idea of "cultural neo-colonialism" was formed and identified as a consequence of the rapid, but imbalanced, expansion of communication technology. The continuation of these activities into the1970s contributed to the formation of a broad-based movement for a NWICO.

While NWICO obviously involves concerns with journalism and particular communication technologies, it can be more properly thought of as an effort to locate communication and issues of equity, human rights and justice within the context of global history and political economy. It espouses structural modifications, not challenging capitalism per se, but improving the ability of developing countries to define and determine their position and future within the world system. It is an effort to engage in a dialogue, on an international level, concerning the role of communication and the possibilities of organizing and using the means of communication to better reflect the needs and aspirations of all the world's people.

The Challenge to Power: Autonomy, Critique and Alternative Proposals for the Future:

Historically, as part of the efforts to redefine the terms of participation in the world system, developing countries have established formal alliances to lobby for their mutual interests in the world community and to avoid slavish alignments with either of the superpowers. The most important of such alliances has been the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (also known as the Group of 77), formed in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. While many meetings of NAM occurred in between, perhaps one of the most important meetings influencing international relations between developed and developing countries was held in Algiers in 1973. During this conference the members of NAM put forth heir concerns about information flow and cultural imperialism. Some have suggested that later resolutions by UNESCO on the New International Economic Order (NIEO) were also a consequence of this meeting.The Algiers meeting of the NAM also introduced the idea of a Third World news agency, a notion that was taken up later by UNESCO-sanctioned symposia held in Lima, Tunis, and Mexico City. After much discussion the proposal was turned into reality by the Ministerial Conference of NAM during a meeting in Delhi, India in 1976. As a result, a self-financing news pool was created, with none of the participants having a dominant role. Operational guidelines were later approved at the Fifth Summit Meeting of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. With the organization of the news pool, developing nations had finally created a mechanism they hoped would effectively compete against the major Western agencies, and would provide a vehicle for a more balanced international news flow. While this was occurring, efforts were also taking place to create a set of non-binding principles to guide the operations of the international media and journalists. Such efforts later came to be known as the Mass Media Declaration, a document whose first draft was presented in 1974.

While restating the ideas of freedom of speech and the press laid out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafts of the new Declaration also called for media responsibility in disseminating information and opinion .The Declaration attempted to stretch the conceptual boundaries of freedom of expression beyond merely the rights of those who owned and controlled the international media to insure that the public had an effective "right to seek, receive and transmit information. . .However, this attempt to formally expand the boundaries of the public's participation in the systems of international communication immediately raised resistance in the West. Two years later, at the Nineteenth session of UNESCO's General Conference in Nairobi (November, 1976), efforts to push the concept of NWICO forward were made by the Secretary-General M'Bow. M'Bow's comments were two-pronged, as he acknowledged "the efforts of non-aligned countries to institute

regional co-operation in the field of communication and information", but also noted that "the distribution of communication media and the immense potential they represent reflects the uneven international distribution of economic power",. During the same conference the Soviet Union also floated proposals for strong government control of mass media (Legum and Cornwell, 1978). While this proposal was never adopted, and met the resistance of many First and Third World journalists who strongly supported the concept of a free press, the critiques being levelled against the Western media and the Soviet proposal brought forth a back-lash from Western countries, especially from the US,from which UNESCO has never fully recovered.

The MacBride Commission

The newly formed Commission was headed by the Irish Ambassador, who was also the Director of Amnesty International and a Nobel Peace laureate, Sean MacBride. MacBride's task, along with the other sixteen members appointed to the Commission by M'Bow, was to study the existing state of affairs in international communication and to make recommendations that might form the basis of a new communication order. In 1978, the Commission submitted an intensely debated interim report to the 20thGeneral Assembly. The interim report focused on the nature and organization of the Western press, especially the transnational wire services (TNNAs). Key proposals concerning communication policies and the protection of journalists, an idea that was personally promoted by MacBride, were received very poorly by Western media organizations and governments. Nonetheless, there was enough common ground in the report that a compromise declaration could be issued by the Conference participants.

The US Withdrawal from UNESCO

Despite the ability of the US to secure its "vital interests" in international forums dealing with communication issues, there was nevertheless a surprising amount of discontent in some circles over the international communication debates and calls for the radical reformation of UNESCO and the ITU, or even outright withdrawal from these UN organizations. Much of this discontent was circulated in the American press during the height of the NWICO debates, and among a relatively small group of fairly conservative editors. While much of this early activity amounted to very little, especially after the development of a compromise plan to guide the approach taken by UNESCO with respect to NWICO in 1983, serious hints about the possibility of a US withdrawal from UNESCO began to be floated in the early 1980s. Then in late December 1983, Secretary of State George Schultz sent a letter to UNESCO Director-General M'Bow, informing him of the US intent to withdraw its membership at the end of 1984. In the letter, Schultz further charged that UNESCO had drifted from "the original principles of its Constitution," leading to a situation which now "served the political purposes of member states".There is strong evidence that the withdrawal itself was something less than a well-reasoned move by the Reagan Administration. In order to make sense of the ultimate decision to depart from NWICO, it is necessary to look at two other factors that help account for the decision. The effect of the NWICO debates was to solidify their opposition, while the debates themselves, with their discussions regarding the concentration of media ownership and control, the right to communicate, the responsibility of journalists etc.

THE FUTURE OF NWICO:

The New World Information and Communication order debate has been heavily criticized for its inability to sharply delineate the problem, failure to effectively merge the NWICO with a major examination of economic

concerns, and an inability to find an equitable solution to the gross imbalance in information flows and exchange. As Eli Abel has observed, "nobody knows what it would mean. . .The new world order obviously means different things to different people. It is more slogan than plan of action." It is this situation of uncertainty, with no real alternative, that has lent to the quandary. UNESCO efforts are now directed towards the development of infrastructures and capacities, personal training, and media education. While these initiatives are designed to help ensure "a balance in regard to the flow of information", and includes the study of media and new communication technologies, it is a more moderate stance toward communication issues necessitated by the costly lessons of the 1980s.

Numerous efforts seem to have contributed to the brightened prospects for the future of UNESCO and continuing discussions concerning international communication issues. For instance, in 1989 a panel chaired by former US Senator Robert T. Stafford recommended that the US reinstate formal membership with UNESCO. In the recommendation it was noted that UNESCO performs a vital role in the promotion of free speech and unimpeded international dialogue. Four years later, in April 1993, the Washington Post called for re-entry). In that year the same recommendation was issued by a United Nations Association Panel and by a task force headed by US Assistant Secretary of State Douglas Bennett. The latter recommended a return by October 1995, the requested delay being due budgetary concerns in the early days of the Clinton White House. Even with these endorsements pointing to a more conciliatory approach towards UNESCO, there remains a certain scepticism in the US as reflected in one New York Times editorial. According to the editorial, the country should not "rush back into UNESCO" even if Secretary General Frederico Mayor has "cut the payroll and generally returned UNESCO to its original mission as a promoter of literacy, a protector of cultural movements and a champion of a freer flow of information." In a somewhat ironic shift of topic, The Times suggested that one of the primary roles of UNESCO should be "to represent the world's cultural conscience by speaking out against the deliberate targeting of cherished monuments and then to restore as best it can what wars tear apart". This lack of a true understanding of the issues and a likely desire to keep UNESCO in an apolitical posture when it comes to promoting "cultural consciousness", has long been a problem with the Western, and in particular the US press. With this, the continuing move toward political conservatism and isolationism in the US government, the growing anti-UN and anti-UNESCO rhetoric heard each day at all levels of the Congressional leadership, the future of UNESCO and even the UN as effective agents for the promotion of mutual understanding and dialogue on culture is not at all promising. In fact, with the current wave of budget cutting since the start of 1995, it appears highly unlikely that the US will rejoin UNESCO at any time in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

As has already been indicated above, many anticipate that the benefits of the "communications revolution" will be equally shared by all. Those who support such a view point to the recent role played by television and other forms of electronic media in the collapse of the Soviet Union, the resistance movement in Kuwait during the Gulf War, and in political movements in China, Thailand, Mexico and elsewhere. From this perspective, the new media, especially the private sector communication networks, have made these momentous political changes possible by linking people together across space, and in real-time. Thus, it was the ability of television to spread the news of the Moscow political turmoil to the neighboring republics that allowed formerly disparate pockets of

resistance and political action to coordinate their actions into unstoppable nation-wide acts of civil disobedience and political transformation. The decentralized technologies of the telephone, cellular, fax and computer networking allowed news reports to be spread to the outside world, even once the official media had been closed down or brought under control. Furthermore, alternative print, broadcast, photographic, performing and computer media are credited with allowing those with oppositional viewpoints in the developing world from Southern Asia and the Philippines to the Caribbean and Africa to link with others across time and space into coordinated networks of political action and social change. While the potentials of the new communication technologies have no doubt facilitated coordinated political action and quite radical social changes, it is crucial to think about some of the following points. First, it is primarily people that initially hold the ideas and capacities for action that can bring about massive changes in repressive systems of power. People everywhere, including the Soviet Union and the developing world, no doubt held ideas and committed actions that challenged the status quo long before, and even without, the new means of communication. The new means of communication, perhaps, can be best seen as amplifying, extending and coordinating these already nascent potentials for change. Second, while the above examples of the potential of communication technology for social change are illustrative, it is important to recall that in most countries people are still barred from participating in the public communication process by a lack of formalized communication rights. It is also important to think about how NWICO efforts to expand the envelope of citizens' right to communicate were vehemently opposed by many interests, including those in the Parliamentary democracies of the West. Finally, recent history has demonstrated that the repression that many seek to overcome in the developing world through the use of new communication technologies is often underpinned not only by domestic power elites, but also through external ties to Western powers. When we think about the many years of support the US gave to the Shah of Iran, Hussein, Marcos, Duarte, Noriega, among many others, it should become obvious that all of the communications technology in the world, while potentially helpful, are insufficient for changing the real conditions standing between people and democracy. While the benefits of the new communication media for democracy and political change appear ambiguous, the benefits of the international move toward market and regulatory liberalization for the US economy are clear. With respect to the Information Super Highway, John Sculley, President of Apple Computer, Inc. estimates that the development of a system of integrated networks could create a US$ 3.5 trillion market. Coupled with the dominant position the US already enjoys in the international distribution of news, television programming and films, and in the telecommunications and emerging network services market, it is understandable why Washington politicians and numerous business leaders are singing the praises of Information Super Highway and market liberalization.

Presently, of the top 15 international telecommunication network operators, 9 are US based. Similarly, in the telecommunications equipment market, three of the top 10 firms are from North-America (AT&T, Northern Telecom, and GTE), five are from Europe (Alcatel (France), Siemens (Germany), Ericsson (Sweden), Bosch (Netherlands), and Philips (Netherlands)), and two are Japanese (NEC and Fujitsu) . When it comes to computers, most developing countries are heavily dependent on imports. During the mid 1980s, for example, some 70 % of the computer market in Chile was in the hands of five trans-nationals: IBM, Digital, NCR, Burroughs and Wang. Even when communication technology, such as radio and video equipment is manufactured in developing countries, it is usually produced by affiliates of the transnational firms such as Sony,

Sanyo, Philips, ITT, GTE, Hitachi, Toshiba, Panasonic, Cable and Wireless, etc. Transnational firms also dominate much of the communication software and programming markets.

This framework for international trade stands in stark contrast to the conditions that prevailed from the 1950s to the 1970s which contributed to the emergence of the newly industrialized economies of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore and Japan. All of these countries were allowed to exercise measures to protect "infant industries" while at the same time obtaining relatively unrestrained access to the more developed markets of the Western countries. This is no longer the case as the US and a few other Western countries seek new arrangements to shore up their faltering dominance in the multi-lateral system of the global political economy. It appears that one of the greatest victims of this process is the loss of any interest in the goals for achieving justice in the global community.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

NFD-The News Flow Debate

NWICO-The New World Information and Communication Order

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation

U.S.-United States

N.A.M- Non-Aligned Movement

N.I.E.O- New International Economic Order

.I.T.U-International Telecommunication Union

TNNA-transnational wire services

.GTE- General Telephone and Electronic Corporation

ITT- International Telephone & Telegraph

NEC- Nippon Electric Company

AT&T-American Telephone and Telegraph Company

IBM-The International Business Machines Corporation

NCR-National Cash Register