

STRUGGLE AROUND "NEW INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION ORDER"*

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Reviews of international communication policy debates (such as the summary provided by Gunter in the Autumn 1978 issue of Journal of Communication or those contained by the Reader National Sovereignty and International Communication, edited by Nordenstreng and Schiller, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1979) remind us of the almost explosive attention which over the past few years has been turned into matters of international communication. The frequency and intensity of activities--professional, scientific as well as diplomatic--around issues of communication has indeed reached an entirely new level in 1970s, hardly comparable to even the period of designing and administering the "cold war" some thirty years ago.

Why such a sudden outburst of activities? After all, has there not always been an imbalance between the Western industrialized countries and the developing nations of the "third world"? (The latter phrase, incidentally, is so vague that the present author prefers avoiding it in a scientific text.) And furthermore, are not the present accusations by the representatives of the developing countries concerning a biased coverage of world affairs in the Western media and the monopoly-capitalistic ownership conditions of these media more or less a repetition of Soviet argumentation back in the late 1940s (as Gunter reminds)? Indeed, the problem is not that the state of affairs in world communications would have drastically changed during the present decade, although communications technology is now to some extent "forcing the world to re-evaluate the balance of power and policy" (see editorial

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remarks in the Autumn 1978 issue of Journal of Communication, p. 140)--but just to some extent. Rather the problem is, why a historically relatively old state of affairs has been discovered just now; or as the factual situation has certainly been known to a number of experts already for a long time, why such a politically motivated attention is being focused on these issues just now.

A key to this question can hardly be found in examining merely the communications policy developments within UNESCO, ITU, Non-aligned Movement, etc., but rather by approaching these particular communication-related issues through an overall analysis of international relations and placing these issues within a perspective of historically operating global forces--social, economic and political. The case is a typical example of the methodological dilemma of communication research: a scientifically adequate explanation to communication phenomena may seldom be found by just limiting the analysis to these phenomena as such, and thus one is led to a general sociological analysis as well as to question the "identity" of communication research as an independent field of study. Consequently, when the problem is being placed into the perspective of basic developments on the international arena, it seems that a struggle around the "new international information order" is but a reflection of historical tendencies between conflicting socio-economic-political forces.

The following scenario is far from a comprehensive challenge to this effect. An attempt is made to give just an outline for such a holistic approach, in terms of instant theses rather than through all-embracing argumentation. The latter may only be achieved by means of a long-term research program which is one of the most urgent tasks of our field. Failing that, matters of international communication continue to be more of ideological manipulation than of scientific understanding.

Three stages can be discovered in the development of global relation of forces along the 1970s--in the field of communication policies as well as in the grand designs of world political strategies.

How to characterize the "broader transitions now underway in the world" (to use an apt phrasing which concludes Gunter's above-mentioned Introduction, p. 155)? The present author has found it best to suggest that at least three distinct although partly overlapping "strategic designs" are needed to explain and understand the developments of the 1970s. The first, occupying the early 1970s until around 1976, is dominated by an offensive of the developing countries against the industrialized West. The second stage might be characterized as a Western "counteroffensive of a self-defensive nature," to borrow a phrasing from recent happenings in South-East Asia, and the peak of this set-up of forces appears around 1976-77. The third strategic situation emerged soon after the second and was highlighted on a number of occasions in 1978; this might be described as a stage of mutual accommodation in a spirit of compromise.

Such an outline of stages cannot naturally do justice to all aspects of reality. In particular one should not forget that history does not begin and end with these stages but that they constitute just small cycles in "broader transitions" of a long-term process. Indeed, world politics during the first two months of 1979--not least in Iran and South-East Asia--gives us spectacular evidence of the fact that the stage of accommodation may not be long-lasting, let alone final, and that in any case it is quite fragile, as a composite of conflicting forces.

The first of the above-listed three stages is a logical continuation of the decolonization process which accelerated particularly in the 1960s. Herbert I. Schiller (University of California, San Diego) has characterized the emergence of this situation in an unpublished paper "Cultural domination adjusts to the growing demand for a new international information order" (prepared for an ILET seminar in Amsterdam, September 1977) in these fitting words:

The idyllic picture of a world coming together culturally and economically under the benign auspices of American capitalism, began to blister and crack in the late 1960s. A combination of developments focused attention on what the conditions actually were behind the glossy images that were circulated by the powerful Western communications machinery. Many new nations found that their economies remained as feeble and dependent as ever. The victorious but devastating wars of national liberation by the peoples of Korea, Algeria, Cuba, Indochina, Angola and Mozambique revealed the extent to which imperialists would go to hold on to their privileged positions.

Finally, the appearance of a new, powerful communications technology, satellite, communications, provided instantaneous, worldwide transmission. This potential, taken together with the experience that had been accumulated from twenty-five years' exposure to United States media outputs, set off an alarm signal across the oceans. What might be expected from an American, corporate-controlled communications satellite system, free to beam its transmissions into any spot or home across the globe?

By the early 1970s the developing countries had accumulated a great deal of political power and economic potential, not least due to such organizations as the Movement of Non-aligned countries and OPEC. All this created a new relation of forces on the world arena, already under pressure towards fundamental changes by the consolidated socialist part of the world, leading to such manifestations as the oil crisis and the UN declaration on the New International Economic Order--all against the fundamental interests of the "Western world order". Another corollary of this "offensive of the underdog" against the West was a polarization of the Arab-Israeli conflict, reflected not only in a war between the parties but also in a UN resolution where the majority of international community defined Zionism as a form of racism.

Nothing less than a new chapter was under making to the world history, and it was not by chance that the phrase "new order" became popular at this stage--after all it implies both a radical analysis of the world (the concept of "order" points at a global structure not far from Lenin's theory of imperialism) and a radical program to change to the world (the notion of "new" may well be interpreted as a call for war against the "old order"). First this emerging new chapter seemed to escape the attention of Western public opinion, perhaps partly because

of another parrallel development occuring along the East-West level: steps towards détente which obviously invited for an optimistic view of the future world where people and nations live peacefully together. However, over time--and with a closer look at the socio-political nature of détente (see e.g. the article by Nordenstreng and Schiller in the above-mentioned Reader)--it has been more and more widely recognized that social developments within societies are not completely determined by the regulation of relations between states and that in a historical perspective détente indeed may be seen as a subtle strategy favoring the cause of the socialist and developing parts of the world at the expense of Western interests.

Consequently, the basic design was that the West was on the defensive and the developing countries, supported by the socialist countries, were on the offensive. It was in such an overall situation that the "free flow" doctrine became increasingly challenged and the principle of national sovereignty, free from dependence and domination, became increasingly accepted. And it was in such a situation that the by now famous Draft Declaration was introduced on UNESCO's agenda (1972).

The UNESCO Draft Declaration on the mass media came to serve as a symbol and catalyst for the forces of the "new order" and its adversaries.

No wonder, then, that this document became controversial: it did not only stand for the substance matter written in its text but it came to symbolize the ongoing struggle between different forces on the world arena. In December 1975, when the so-called Nairobi version, including the legendary Acticle XII on "State responsibility", was prepared in an intergovernmental meeting in Paris, the offensive of the "progressive forces" was at its peak, manifested by a fairly united front of developing and socialist countries which virtually isolated the Western positions and e.g. voted into the text a reference

to the above-mentioned UN "Zionism-racism resolution" (causing a walk-out of the Western bloc).

At this time a counterattack was mobilized in the West, with the aid of old and new mass media lobbies and the publicity provided by the international news agencies and the commercial media themselves. The UNESCO Draft Declaration served as an early warning device (as the UN and UNESCO resolutions on direct broadcasting satellites had done already a couple of years before) but the main counteroffensive took place around the rapid developments of communication activities within the Non-aligned Movement (setting-up of new agency pool, formulating radical principles and action plans with the blessing of Colombo summit in August 1976). Related to these were Western attacks against UNESCO, in particular its Intergovernmental Conference on Communications Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean (Costa Rica, July 1976) and finally its General Conference in Nairobi (October-November 1976) where according to Western media coverage the life or death of press freedom was to be determined--through the Draft Declaration.

This counteroffensive of the West, like the previous strategic stage when the West was generally on the defensive, was by no means a matter of communication politics only but fundamentally a question of overall international politics. At this stage the Western line became harder also in a number of other issues where its interests were at stake--from world economy (UNCTAD, so-called North-South negotiations, etc.) to ideology (human rights). Détente was confronted by more and more obstacles in the West. It may also be significant in this respect that President Carter brought with him the strategy of trilateralism whereby the Western world is being mobilized to be stronger and more coherent in defending its interests.

The seriousness of this counteroffensive in the mass media field is indicated by the fact that it was not only a campaign waged through the daily press coverage and with the support of regular positions by committed lobby organizations. Also

more serious articles, more or less scientific studies and even books began to appear in this line (see e.g. Sussman: Mass News Media and the Third World Challenge, 1977; Righter: Whose News?, 1978). What more, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations prepared special reports and organized hearings on the topic (see in particular "The Role and Control of International Communications and Information", June 1977, and "The New World Information Order" by Kroloff and Cohen, November 1977).

To be precise, the latter do no more clearly represent the second counteroffensive stage: while certainly motivated by the same fundamental concern of the Western interests, they already advocate a new and more flexible strategy--a strategy of selective accommodation and active partnership with the forces confronting the West. Especially outspoken in this respect is the Kroloff-Cohen Report which begins by observing: "Whether we like it or not, there will be a 'New World Information Order'". But it raises optimism in continuing: "Worldwide the 'New World Information Order' could be good or bad. As the situation now stands, the United States has more to lose than any other nation as the 'order' becomes a fact. It should be noted, however, that the United States need not be a loser of appropriate actions are taken." (p. 1)

Indeed, the third stage of strategic designs of the 1970s was created very soon after the second one, but for some time it was largely masked by the loud propaganda of the second stage. In fact, already before and during the UNESCO conference in Nairobi--while the Western press and private broadcasting interests kept campaigning against UNESCO--Western diplomats were busy suggesting deals to the developing countries in order to play down the Draft Declaration which had begun to stand for a consideration on principles and contents of the mass media within an anti-Western context. Instead, the Western governments offered material "help" for the mass media infrastructures in the developing countries; the political purpose was simply to buy an anti-Western line out of them (offering a few hundred thousands dollars). Or in

other rough terms, the new strategy followed the old formula: "If you cannot destroy the enemy, join it!" Also another old formula--"Divide et impera!"--was employed, since it had been precisely the united front of the developing countries, backed by the socialist countries, that had brought about the political defeats for the West during the first stage.

To quote again Schiller (in the above-mentioned paper of September 1977):

With every indication of a show-down meeting over communications domination in the offing, Nairobi instead witnessed an accommodation between the United States and a good part of the Third World constituency. The free flow doctrine, the basis of American cultural hegemony, was preserved while, at the same time, the general claims for information assistance for the developing countries received some recognition. Thus, to prevent the approval of the resolution aimed at establishing criteria for the content of international information flows--a recommendation viewed by U.S. media and government officials as an international move to censorship, and, more menacing still, as a direct and dangerous thrust against the system of private ownership of the media--the U.S. delegation supported a compromise proposal which called for a study on ways to rectify imbalances in the flow of news. Indirectly this gave endorsement to the recently-organized Third World News Pool as well as legitimizing the concept of "Balance" in the flow of news. Up to this time, both of these conceptions/structures had been adamantly opposed by the United States...

The admission at Nairobi that poor nations have legitimate grievances in the information sector is an acknowledgement, long overdue, of reality. But it would be delusionary to regard this admission as evidence of a new United States international information policy. The accommodation at Nairobi represented a tactical shift. It prevented an immediate and damaging thrust against the vitals of American global communications power. It also afforded a breathing space for U.S. decision-makers to work out effective policies to frustrate future attacks.

And the time proved to be opportune for this Western initiative--again in the particular field of communication as well as in general. Due to a number of reasons the developing countries were no more prepared to defend their earlier militant stand--at least not at a high price or against lucrative offers for "help" and "cooperation". Consequently, the initiative was largely shifted to the Western side which generated various formula for accommodation, particularly with the so-called moderate developing countries. It is worth recalling what

President Carter said in his Notre Dame address in May 1977: "We will cooperate more closely with the newly influential countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. We need their friendship and cooperation in a common effort as the structure of the world power changes."

Again the new strategic design was reflected in the "history" of the UNESCO Draft Declaration. First, in Nairobi it was not dictated by any coalition of forces to be totally accepted or rejected, but it was mildly left on the negotiation table (finally in a unanimous resolution asking the Director-General to hold further consultations in view of broadest possible agreement). At the same time a number of other resolutions were passed, fulfilling both Western, Eastern and developing countries' interests--but carefully avoiding to violate any vital Western interests. Furthermore, after Nairobi Western diplomats and media advocates did their best to play down the Draft Declaration--but not to play a frontal attack against it--and to mask its substance by discussing and offering practical assistance to infrastructures, training, etc. material and personnel needs of the developing countries.

The final outcome was a political compromise text adopted by consensus. It is much milder a Declaration than that drafted under the momentum of the "offensive strategy" of the developing countries, and in the last negotiations it was brought somewhat closer to the Western position than had been those drafts prepared at the level of professional experts representing all hemispheres. This shows that the final Declaration clearly bears the mark of the newest stage in international communication politics. But on the other hand, it should be noted that the whole idea of such a Declaration and its central substance still corresponds to the fundamental interests of those who dominated the first offensive stage.

Politically, legally and even philosophically it is indeed significant that the Declaration is the first document authorized by the UN system which not only touches upon a particular aspect of communication but which broadly defines the tasks, rights and responsibilities of the mass media, linking them into a composite whole--including duties and

responsibilities. What more, it does not only lay down general and abstract principles for the mass media activities (although the text may appear for a professional expert as unnecessarily vague, written in "Unescese") but it also sets standards for media contents--something that has been almost a tabu within the Western libertarian tradition but which is central to the demands of the developing and socialist countries. Similarly vital aspect of the Declaration is the fact that it places the mass media--their contents, rights and responsibilities--within a general framework of interstate relations and international law (in this respect the preambular paragraphs preceding the Articles are of crucial importance).

Consequently, for the developing countries and the socialist countries the Declaration was a political victory, a step forward --although a small step compared to what was once intended. Correspondingly, for the Western world it means a withdrawal--although just a small step backward. Thus the Declaration indicates that the last two strategic stages have not stopped the initial offensive but have mainly served as tactical means to moderate the forces challenging the existing order. Indeed, the three stages should not be viewed as similar kind of grand designs following each other; the first must be seen as the basis upon which the other two were founded in order to help preserving the status quo, or at least to minimize changes running against fundamental interests of the West.

Behind consensus emerges a new debate and struggle around the substance and even wording of the "new international information order."

The UNESCO Declaration may be taken as an outline for what the emerging "new order" entails (although explicit reference to this order appears only in a single preambular paragraph). In fact, a separate resolution passed in the 1978 General Conference upon the initiative of the developing countries (without an active support of the Western bloc which abstained) states that "this new order" should be established "in

accordance with the principles embodied in the above-mentioned Declaration". A recent official occasion of the Non-aligned Movement, the first meeting of journalists' organizations of the Non-aligned countries held in Baghdad in January 1979, even called in its final statement the UNESCO Declaration as "the Declaration on a New International Information Order" and confirmed the Movement's stand concerning the decolonization of information as well as "a new international information order which would eliminate the imbalance in this field, thus ending the domination and control of the imperialists".

On the other hand, it is not beyond dispute that the Declaration represents a new order. First, the compromise text is by far less outspoken than the authentic demands of the forces advocating radical change. In this sense, equaling the new order with the declaration would considerably reduce the original demands of the developing and socialist countries. And secondly, the Western countries are reluctant to admit that the new order should be understood in the broad terms of the declaration--with all its serious political, legal and philosophical implications. Instead, the Western (particularly U.S.) diplomacy started before the 1978 UNESCO General Conference a major manouvre, along the lines of the "third strategic design", to define the new order in more limited terms which would compromise less of the vested interests.

The latter approach was well described in the general policy statement at the General Conference by the U.S. Ambassador John E. Reinhardt who contrasted "restrictive declarations" against "positive cooperation" and made a call for "a more effective program of action" including "American assistance, both public and private, to suitably identified centres of professional education and training in broadcasting and journalism in the developing world" as well as "a major effort to apply the benefits of advanced communications technology--specifically communications satellites--to economic and social needs in the rural areas of developing nations".

Such an approach whereby the new order is reduced into relatively simple transfer of know-how and technology (within

an overall free flow context) can also be read in the official proceedings of the General Conference: another resolution, prepared jointly by Australia, France, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, USA and Venezuela, and adopted by consensus, among other things

Requests the Director-General to intensify the encouragement of communications development and to hold consultations designed to lead to the provision to developing countries of technological and other means for promoting a free flow and a wider and better balanced exchange of information of all kinds;

Invites the Director-General for this purpose, to convene as early as possible after the conclusion of this twentieth session of the General Conference a planning meeting of representatives of governments, to develop a proposal for institutional arrangements to systematize collaborative consultation on communications development activities, needs and plans.

Naturally such a resolution does not necessarily mean that the developing countries would have sold short their principles; rather it indicates that the "have-nots" welcome as much as possible material support for the setting-up and maintenance of their media infrastructures. As Bogdan Osolnik (member of the Yugoslavia delegation to the UNESCO General Conference) puts it, those advocating the new order "feel that various types of assistance are not enough and that what is needed is a fundamental restructuring of relationships, the elimination of all forms of inequality and foreign domination through the powerful media of contemporary communications" (see his article "UNESCO: The mass media Declaration", Review of International Affairs, No. 690, January 5, 1979, p. 26). Or to quote the general policy statement by the Finnish Minister of Culture, Dr. Kalevi Kivistö, at the General Conference of UNESCO:

And we want to stress the fact that this particular "new order" is not only an action programme for correcting imbalances of technical nature but also and above all a programme of principal nature aiming at such mass media structures and policies which would provide the public with accurate information about objective reality--both national and international.

However, despite such evidence of grasping the various dimensions of the problem, the tactical compromising involved may still be seen quite serious--risky from the viewpoint of the developing countries and promising from the Western angle --considering the following:

First, the essence of the above-quoted resolution was repeated in a resolution adopted (by consensus) in the UN General Assembly (Special Political Committee) immediately after the UNESCO General Conference, December 1978. Accordingly, what became to be called in UNESCO as the "Washington meeting" resolution (the U.S. delegation volunteered to arrange and finance the meeting in question in Washington) was now ratified even with the authority of the UN--without giving equal weight to the principles carried by the Declaration.

Second, significant compromise was made in the formulation of references to the new order throughout the texts passed by the UNESCO General Conference. The basic formula can be read in the Preamble of the Declaration:

Conscious of the aspirations of the developing countries for the establishment of a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order.

A departure from the customary phrase "new international information order" (officially adopted by the Non-aligned Movement) is significant in several respects. The revised formulation can no more be conveniently compared with the "New International Economic Order" and it thus softens the political substance involved. Furthermore, the qualifiers "just" and "effective" are not only toothless but the latter even may be seen to imply an American trap for the developing countries--after all, is not unfettered efficiency one of the reasons for present imbalances! In fact, "effective" was replaced by "balanced" in the other UNESCO resolution which was passed without Western participation. As to "world", it obviously implies a theory of "an interdependent world" which like McLuhan's "global village" invites to disregard national sovereignty as well as class-based division between socialist and capitalist countries. Finally "information and communication" (or sometimes just the latter) is problematic since at least in the Anglo-American linguistic context it may be seen to emphasize the technical and formal aspects of communication at the expense of the media contents which are being typically referred to by the term "information".

That all this is not only academic semantics but rather hard facts of international politics, can be proved by those who have been involved in drafting this phrasing. And what makes it particularly significant is the fact that also this compromise was forwarded to be ratified by the UN General Assembly, as is indicated by the following paragraphs in the unanimously adopted resolution (submitted by Tunisia):

Taking into account the widespread hopes that the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies, notably Unesco, will help to establish a new, more just and better-balanced world information and communication order,

1. Affirms the need to establish a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order, intended to strengthen international peace and understanding and based on free circulation and wider and better-balanced dissemination of information;

On the other hand, there is little grounds to think--hope or fear, depending on one's position--that the compromises around the new order would be final and static. Rather they are readings of relation of forces on each particular occasion. Thus essentially different tone of the new order was captured quite recently at the Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Asia and Oceania (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, February 1979) where a central political document was adopted by consensus, defining the new order under making as "an integral part of the efforts to achieve a new international economic order" (linkage borrowed from official Non-aligned documents).

Although the "Kuala Lumpur Declaration" refers to the new order using the 1978 compromise phraseology (something insisted by the few Western voices present at that regional conference), the overall substance of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration is clearly more radical than that of the earlier UNESCO Declaration. For example, imbalance and dependence are not left as usual undefined abstract notions but the problem is theoretically specified in terms of colonialism and neo-colonialism: "... the developing countries of our region are still suffering from a dependence upon colonial legacies which have resulted in imbalances in communication structures and information flows."

It is also significant that whereas the UNESCO Declaration begins with spelling out the freedom of information, the Kuala

Lumpur Declaration carefully places freedom into a broader context of international relations and social responsibility:

In the world of today the maintenance of world peace and security, the strengthening of international co-operation, the assurance of social progress, the raising of living and educational standards, the promotion of human rights and freedom of thought, and the establishment of a new economic order are among the prerequisites for effective communication.

At the same time, within the national communication systems freedom of expression and freedom of information are also prerequisites for effective communication between peoples and individuals.

What more, this latest formulation of the constituents of the new order begins with the following sentence:

People and individuals have the right to acquire an objective picture of reality by means of accurate and comprehensive information through a diversity of sources and means of information available to them, as well as to express themselves through various means of culture and communication.

This may be seen as a philosophically significant departure from the way in which human communication has been traditionally conceived. The human right in question is not just freedom from obstacles (particularly those hampering private enterprise) but a call for fulfilling the human potential by rationally grasping reality and by creatively participating in social and cultural life. Philosophically speaking, the latest Declaration stands quite firmly against value pluralism (which makes no difference between true and false information) and other forms of idealism --positions which are still fairly visible in the Articles of the earlier Declaration.

Certainly such implications, corresponding expressions and even the wordings related to the new order will be debated further. Despite a prevailing willingness in all quarters to avoid confrontation, and even the actively accommodating strategy of the West, the controversies involved will remain. Also the historical "march" of the anti-Western forces against established order will continue. The next notable step to be taken will be the summit meeting of the Non-aligned Movement in Havana, August-September this year.