

THE GLOBAL MEDIA DEBATE: ITS RISE, FALL, AND RENEWAL

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Unesco In The U.S. Press

George Gerbner

The only official statement on mass media that Unesco ever adopted was a consensus declaration supporting freedom of press and approved by the U.S. delegation and other Western countries in 1978. Nevertheless, American newspapers' depiction of Unesco as an enemy of press freedom persisted and became increasingly strident through the withdrawal from Unesco, and continues to be invoked in discussions of future relationships with the world organization. Unesco coverage can thus be seen as an especially sensitive and problematic indicator of U.S. press coverage of global realities, especially in areas affecting the media's own interests.

This chapter presents two case studies exploring such coverage at strategically important points in time. The first deals with press performance before, during, and after the adoption of the Mass Media Declaration in 1978, based mostly on reporting in *The New York Times*. The second concerns general U.S. press coverage of the 1982 Unesco conference that developed policies and programs (the "Fourth Medium-Term Plan") for the period before the U.S. withdrawal.

These studies should be read against the background of general paucity and selectivity in foreign news reporting. About 10 percent of total space in the average U.S. daily paper is devoted to general news, and a small proportion of that to news of the world. A comparative study of foreign news coverage ranked the American press last in the percentage of news space devoted to world news.¹

A 1972 study already found U.S. press coverage highly selective, crisis-oriented, and increasing in fractitiousness while decreasing in volume.² The media consolidation and bottom-line concentration of the 1980s resulted in further declines in both the amount and sources of foreign news. Within that sparse coverage, international organizational news is the most likely to be dominated by a handful of usually like-minded agencies and correspondents. Press coverage of Unesco bears the additional burden of special relevance to the interests of the press itself.

THE MASS MEDIA DECLARATION

On November 22, 1978, the 146 member states attending Unesco's 20th

General Conference in Paris approved by acclamation a "Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid, and Incitement to War." The Declaration was the first and only comprehensive official statement of principles regarding the mass media ever adopted by a Unesco General Conference.

Contemporary accounts recorded a standing ovation and "thunderous applause" upon its passage. The chief American delegate called it "a triumph of the spirit of goodwill and international cooperation." A Washington Post story cited "the views of many" that Unesco Director-General M'Bow's "role in today's unanimity opens the road for the former education minister of Senegal to make a serious bid to succeed U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim."

The euphoria turned out to be short-lived. Five years later M'Bow would be discredited in the American press and decide not to run for a third term. The U.S. would pull out of Unesco, charging attacks on the free press as an important reason.

How did this striking turnabout (if that's what it was) come about?

The New York Times Index provides an indication of general trends in that "newspaper of record." More than half (56 percent) of all listings of articles on Unesco from 1960 through 1985 were in the three peak years of 1974, 1975, and 1984. The first two reflected the crisis over Unesco condemnations of Israeli occupation policies and Zionism as a form of racism. In the third year, 1984, news of the U.S. withdrawal from Unesco dominated the coverage. Most other years' listings occupied no more than 2 percent of the 15-year total.

The year the Declaration was approved, 1978, with barely 1 percent of 15 years of listings, was one of the least newsworthy in the Times. The reasons can best be assessed in light of what preceded and followed it.

Coverage before the Declaration

The Times' coverage of Unesco in the 1960s was scant and bland, reflecting the Organization's educational, scientific, and cultural work. No attention was paid to a resolution by the Byelorussian delegate to Unesco's 16th General Conference in 1970. The resolution encouraged the use of information in the fight "against propaganda on behalf of war, racialism and hatred among nations." The 17th General Conference, two years later, passed a motion, opposed by the U.S., to instruct the Director-General to draft a declaration embodying the principles of that resolution. The debate gave no warning of the storm this would eventually raise.³

The dispute first erupted briefly and obliquely at the 18th General Conference in 1974 where the crisis created by the anti-Zionist resolutions overshadowed and confused the mass media issues. While a committee of experts

debated the mass media draft declaration, a resolution equating Zionism with racism was inserted into its preamble. The Western delegates left the meeting in protest. In their absence, the draft was approved and forwarded to the Director-General for submission to the 19th General Conference.

The Times reported on December 8, 1975, that an anti-Zionist resolution was included in "an official document" at "a conference on how the world news media should treat subjects such as racism and war propaganda." The rest of the story dealt only with attacks on the Israeli occupation. The next day an even longer story about the same session gave only three lines to the substance of the mass media resolution, noting only that it aimed to define "what the role of the news media should be in combating racism, war propaganda, and apartheid."

Not reported in the coverage focusing on the anti-Zionist passages were key provisions that were to figure prominently in later attacks on the Mass Media Declaration—even after they had been deleted from the document. These included Article 12 making "States... responsible for the activities in the international sphere of all mass media under their jurisdiction," and references to the U.N. declarations of human, civil, and economic rights, to free and balanced interchange of information, to the training and protection of journalists, to the development of an international code of journalistic ethics, and to the right of reply if "the circulation of erroneous news reports has seriously impaired" efforts to strengthen "peace and international understanding and to combat war propaganda, racism, and apartheid."

The 19th General Conference met in Nairobi in 1976. Western pressure and withholding American contributions helped calm the anti-Zionist furor. The Times Index listings fell from 21 percent the year before to 7 percent of the 15-year total, most of it still devoted to Israel.

Wire services reported a Tunisian-initiated demand for a "new international information order" of more balanced flow of news.⁴ Promises of American help for Third World media development and acknowledgement of a global information imbalance helped defuse what the Times called "the potentially explosive issue of press freedom."

A group of "wise men" [sic.] was commissioned to study mass media issues. The draft declaration on mass media was referred to yet another group of experts for further consultation and submission to the next General Conference.

Coverage of the Declaration

The division and tactics of Nairobi were still in evidence when the 20th General Conference opened in Paris. Far from agreeing on a draft, Western, Socialist, Third World, and other factions submitted widely diverging versions and amendments of their own.

The New York Times published an editorial on November 8 which may

have been the starting gun toward eventual withdrawal. "If it turns out to be impossible to reject this attempt to tamper with our basic principles," the Times declared in a bitter and prophetic blast, "there is always the alternative of rejecting Unesco itself."

Two weeks later, however, it seemed that the disagreements had been reconciled. Most objectionable features had been deleted and Western-oriented provisions inserted into the final draft. The Associated Press hailed the "unanimous consensus...endorsing the freedom of the press." It noted that the "consensus given in thunderous applause...represented...a significant diplomatic reversal in favor of the West and the moderate developing nations."

The Washington Post cited U.S. Representative Reinhardt saying, "We see no lingering hint of state control" in the Declaration. "In any case," he noted, "this declaration is unenforceable in the usual legal sense." Nevertheless, the Post story foreshadowed the eventual turnaround, observing that "Some Western editors and publishers say it was a mistake for the West to take part in any Unesco media negotiations at all." No mention was made of any virtues or moral, if not legal, obligations implicit in a document U.S. representatives fought hard and successfully to alter to their liking, and officially approved.

The New York Times carried the full text of the Declaration. Under it was its story from Paris reporting approval of a "compromise declaration on world news coverage that eliminates all mention of government control of the news."

The facade of cautious optimism was shattered on November 27. On that day, by curious coincidence, both The New York Times and the Washington Post ran lengthy editorials on the Mass Media Declaration. Mocking Ambassador Reinhardt, The Times called the Declaration "a triumph of obfuscation," and "an affront to the very idea of communication." It observed that "Western diplomats are congratulating themselves on having turned a dangerous international declaration into an incomprehensible hodgepodge of slogans and prescriptions." And it declared that the American representatives who signed it "were not speaking for the free press of the United States...."

The Washington Post editorial of the same day was equally critical. It said: "We don't wish to seem ungracious for official efforts undertaken in our, that is to say, the Western media's behalf. It is evident, however, that by helping to write and by approving even a moderate declaration like this one, the Western delegations condoned the idea that it is within the proper province of governments to call the media tune...."

The Aftermath

The report of the commission of "wise men," headed by Irish statesman Sean MacBride, compromised as it was,⁵ touched off more explosions in the U.S.

press.⁶ The American member of the MacBride Commission, veteran journalist Elie Abel, was moved to comment that "the American press does not understand the Unesco communication decisions of recent years." His point was that the media construction of the issues, frozen in a cold-war "freedom vs. censorship" context, missed the historic shift of forces in global communications reflected in these documents.

Concerned about these developments, the National News Council, an independent organization dedicated to advancing the freedom and responsibility of the American press, undertook an examination of the U.S. press coverage of the 21st Belgrade General Conference, the session that received the MacBride report. The News Council found the coverage so selective as to indicate "a strong correspondence between the judgment of editors on what constitutes news about Unesco and the fears that their papers express so unanimously on their editorial pages... The imbalance that characterized most of the Belgrade news coverage in the U.S. provided an inadequate foundation for independent judgment by U.S. readers of the correctness of the editorial positions their newspapers were taking on the Unesco communications issue."⁷

The report of the National Council attracted no press attention. Not long thereafter, the Council itself was disbanded for lack of media support.

THE FOURTH MEDIUM-TERM PLAN

Unesco's general policies are set forth in 6-year "Medium-Term Plans." They are developed by extraordinary sessions of the General Conference, to provide guidelines for specific programs to be voted on by the General Conference.

The Fourth Medium-Term Plan was debated at the extraordinary session held in Paris in the fall of 1982. Preliminary drafts had elicited 105 replies from member states, 19 from intergovernmental organizations, and 83 from nongovernmental organizations. Further consultations helped reduce the over 3,000-page document to a draft report of 256 pages which, as approved by the Paris conference, was to be the basis for Unesco policy through the critical years of 1984-89.

Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow presented the draft Medium-Term Plan in two parts. The first part focused on the general tasks that world problems impose on the organization. The second part proposed 14 major programs and budgets to support them.

The world problems M'Bow emphasized were the increasing "globalization" of human activities making nations vulnerable and dependant; the widening "fault lines criss-crossing the world" and "threatening to reduce vast numbers to despair;" massive violation of human rights; and the arms race draining resources while threatening total destruction.

Five tasks defined the substance of the 14 major programs of the Medium-

Term Plan. The first, tracking of world problems, was discussed in the first major program entitled "Reflection on world problems and future-oriented studies." The second task, achieving full participation in society, was addressed in the second major program on "Education for all" and in the third, entitled "Communication in the service of man."

The third task was the development of capabilities to use knowledge and the development of knowledge itself, giving rise to four major programs: "The formulation and application of education policies," "Education, training, and society," "The sciences and their application to development," and "Information systems and access to knowledge."

The fourth task before UNESCO was to facilitate change and transitions necessary in different societies. The three major programs addressing that need were "Principles, methods, and strategies of action for development," "Science, technology, and society," and "The human environment and terrestrial and marine resources."

The fifth task, the goals of understanding, peace, and mutual respect, was central to major programs on "Culture and the future," "The elimination of prejudice, intolerance, racism, and apartheid," and "Peace, international understanding, human rights and the rights of peoples." The last major program, entitled "The status of women," was defined as an area relevant to all tasks.

Delegates took the better part of two weeks to reach consensus on the 14 major programs. Commenting on the debate, M'Bow stressed the complexity of the issues and urged moderation and conciliation. With regard to communication issues, M'Bow spoke of the wishes and aspirations of "many delegates, from all the regional groupings" for redressing the imbalance in world communication, but felt that "it was too soon for the General Conference to take a decision at the present session on the preparation of a declaration concerning the principles of a New World Information and Communication Order." Nevertheless, as we shall see, press coverage continued to focus on the NWICO.

Following adoption of the major program on "Communication in the Service of Man" M'Bow made some pointed comments about press coverage. He complained of the "tendentious character" of information in some member states. "I will go further," he said. "When the Director-General himself has sought to point out this tendentious nature and to give explanations, the newspapers or the media presenting Unesco cannot remain indifferent to the content of information about its own activities.... I intend... to have a study made of the way in which this General Conference has been covered by the information media.... If the information media have the liberty to say what they like, then others have the right to judge what they say...." (Those remarks eventually led to the case study summarized here. For the full report, see 4.)

Press Coverage

Only one in about 15 daily newspapers printed anything at all about the conference. The coverage was controlled by a few central organizations and sources, and was spread thinly across the country.

Wire service coverage began on November 20 with a comprehensive preview by Harry Dunphy of the Associated Press that no paper printed in full. Dunphy cited a "Western delegate" saying that "In paying attention to controversial areas such as communications and human rights, it's important not to overlook the important work Unesco does in many areas." Only one paper, the San Diego Union, carried that sentence.

The United Press International preview story went directly for the media angle. It began:

Paris (UPI)—The tone was set Monday for a two-week special session on the future of Unesco with a senior official levelling harsh criticism at journalists who sensationalize the Unesco debate on establishment of a new information order."

The New York Times' preview story on November 22 began: "The Western press is preparing for another confrontation with the developing countries and the Soviet Bloc over questions of press freedom."

On November 26, the AP reported:

"The United States clashed with developing nations Friday in a Unesco debate over a program that the Third World says will provide more balanced news coverage of their concerns and the U.S. government contends will foster state control of the press." Guyana delegate Christopher A. Nascimento was cited as spearheading the move "to promote a proposed 'world information and communication order.' Among other things, it would establish systems for sharing technical facilities, create more regional news agencies and draft a code of ethics for journalists."

The UPI filed a similar account:

Paris (UPI)—The United States and Britain Friday opposed adoption of an international agreement on world communications they say would endanger freedom of the press. Sharp debate opened between industrialized and developed countries on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations plan for a "new world information and communication order."

Typical headlines were "US, THIRD WORLD FEUD OVER PRESS PLAN," or "UNESCO STRATEGY FOR THE '80s CRITICIZED." An editorial in the Baltimore News-American, entitled "HIT 'EM WHERE IT HURTS," declared that "It's time to get tough" and cut off U.S. funds "if any freedom of press threat remains at the end of the Paris session."

By the time the session ran its course, the communications section, one out of the 14 major programs of the Medium-Term Plan, emerged as the main if not the only issue of interest to the press. AP's final wrap-up story on December 3 led off with M'Bow's charge that "reporting by the Western media of the organization's activities amounted to a 'tendentious campaign' that he said he would challenge." The UPI story conceded that the final compromise resolution was satisfactory to and approved by the U.S. and Western delegations, but concluded: "Based on past experience with Unesco bureaucracy, some officials said they felt there could be cause for discouragement."

All 21 post-conference stories carried in the American press focused on communications. All editorials and columns focused on communications. No news story or editorial feature stressed any of the other 13 major programs that occupied most of the time and over 94 percent of the space in the final report of the conference.

Editorials

Twenty-six editorials provided the raw material for commentary printed in 54 different newspapers. All but one were negative.

Fifteen newspapers printed an editorial distributed by the Copley News Service. "By subtle rhetoric," it related, "the plan promulgated the doctrine long prevalent in Unesco that the press is an arm of government.... It appeared that the West would be defeated in the censorship wrangle until the very end of the conference.... For this unexpected victory, we must thank a little-noticed action by Congress. The so-called Beard Amendment warned the American funding of Unesco would cease if it took steps to control the news media."

Six newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times and the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, printed a feature by Xan Smiley (identified as "An editorial writer for the Times of London"). It concluded that although improving non-Western news services is commendable, "Unfortunately, the Third World nabobs who dominate the policy-forming vote at Unesco (while eight Western nations pick up nearly three-quarters of the check) have been demanding much more. Many of them want to keep out Western reporters altogether unless 'licensed' by the country in which they operate." (There was no such requirement in the resolution.)

An editorial in five newspapers, including the San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, warned: "How permanent the victory will be, no one knows, for Third Worlders and the Soviets have been persistent in their fight for managed news. They have made a temporary concession as a stalling tactic."

Another editorial in three newspapers sounded this (false) alarm:

It may come as a surprise to some American taxpayers to discover that they're paying for elaborate plans for a new world information and communication order.... Congress has threatened to cut off United States support for Unesco if that organization tries to limit press freedoms.... Congress should most assuredly take this action.

An editorial in another three papers implied (erroneously) that the McBride Commission report on communications was the basic "plan" of the Paris conference. It attacked the American delegation for conceding "that the Western 'monopoly' on news resources be balanced out. From this it follows that the West should not be allowed to report what isn't permitted to be known publicly in South Tsetse Fly or the Peoples Republic of Glorious Bloodshed."

Individually written editorial features follow many of the same themes. Several papers advocated cutoff of funds to Unesco. Typical headlines were: "WHY GIVE OUR SUPPORT TO PRESS SUPPRESSORS?," "U.N. UNDERSTANDS MONEY," "HALT UNESCO POWER PLAY." A few worried about the threat of UNESCO broadcasting television programs through satellites. The New York Post of December 6 warned that "M'Bow's obsession with restricting freedom of the press—especially of Western news services—is only part of his much larger goal...to redistribute the West's industrial wealth to 100 underdeveloped countries."

Only one daily newspaper, the black-oriented 31,000 circulation Chicago Defender, viewed that prospect with equanimity. Its editorial of December 29 said:

"...Right now the people of the Third World learn most about themselves—often incorrect information—from the highly technologized West. Multi-national corporations, owners of many Third World papers now control much of the information and thinking of the Third World people.... So Unesco is encouraging the Third World to set up its own news agencies, improve its own telex and communications generally. There should be more fairness in learning the truth of the world than now obtains, with the means of communication almost wholly centered in the self-interested West.

These case studies need little interpretation. The editorials about Unesco only made what M'Bow called the "tendentious character" of the news coverage more explicit. A defensive, belligerent and often paranoid tone pervaded most commentaries. There was little recognition of the actual consensus and compromise characterizing Unesco's positions, of the views of the U.S. delegation, or of any points of view other than that of the commercial press.

When some of the handful of journalists reporting Unesco tried to broaden the coverage, they were ignored. One correspondent (who asked to remain anonymous) wrote the author of the case studies that he was "trying to...show

that there were other issues besides communications...However, the desk felt that...that was the only reason editors would pay attention to a story about Unesco.”

A few media sources, preempting the field of international information, paved the way for U.S. withdrawal from Unesco, and prevented informed public discussion or even full awareness of the circumstances and consequences of the withdrawal.

One of the most strident of these voices, The Wall Street Journal, used the occasion of the 1989 General Conference to shed editorial “No Tears for Unesco.” It lashed out at “the claptrap that passes for ‘consensus’” at Unesco, “one of the world’s most corrupt organizations” and “a dreadful group,” from which the U.S. has been “liberated.” The editorial warned that “Unesco apologists are lobbying... to renege on... [the] decision to depart.” It again conjured up visions of “ridiculous projects” such as “The Orwellian ‘New World Information Order’ [that] would give government officials rights against the press...”, and found, predictably, “plenty of reasons to stay out and none to rejoin Unesco.”⁸

The U.S. media coverage of Unesco is constructed more from selected bits and pieces to support prior assumptions than from actual resolutions and official actions. A speech, speculation, or even corridor talk that raises media hackles is real news, but a patiently hammered-out consensus statement is “hodgepodge” and “claptrap.” That construction of facts shows a preoccupation with real and imagined threats to untrammelled private control of the press (interpreted as “freedom”) to the virtual exclusion of other urgent world problems. It calls for a reexamination of the ability of media to deal with global information issues on terms other than their own self-interest.

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