

THE MASS MEDIA DECLARATION IN THE AMERICAN PRESS

Prepared for presentation at the International
Symposium on the Mass Media Declaration of Unesco
Tampere, Finland, June 26-28, 1987

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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 chair congratulated Unesco Director-General Amadou Mahtar M'Bow for resolving a conflict that for a time threatened to tear the organization apart. The chief American delegate called it "a triumph of the spirit of goodwill and international cooperation." He lauded "all those who participated in the deliberations that produced it, and especially the Director-General, whose patience and perseverance encouraged those of us who felt at one point that a document satisfactory to all might be too much to expect." The Washington Post cited the views of many that 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. This study of the coverage of the 1978 Mass Media Declaration in the American press sheds some light on that striking turnabout, if that is indeed what it was.

The Mass Media Declaration was a compromise document, controversial before and after its passage. Several meetings of experts struggled with ways of interpreting and implementing it. Unesco's 1985 General Conference approved a call for another meeting to assess its effects. That meeting is the International Symposium for which this report has been prepared.

Invitations to the Symposium called for "a factual and analytical enquiry." They were extended by Professor Kaarle Nordenstreng of the University of Tampere, Finland, on behalf of the International Organization of Journalists of which he is the President, and of journalists' federations in Western Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Press associations, broadcasters, news agencies and educational and research institutions were invited to send representatives. The invitations went to 14 organizations in Western Europe and Canada, 6 in Latin America, 5 in the United States, 5 in Africa, 4 in socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the USSR, and Cuba, and 4 in Asia. The responsibility for coordinating the preparation and assembly of working papers for the Symposium was assumed by the International Communication section of the International

Association for Mass Communication Research whose main office is at the University of Leicester, England. Nordenstreng and the present author are both Vice Presidents of IAMCR.

The task of this paper was to synthesize research on the coverage of the Mass Media Declaration in the American press. The paucity of research -- and of coverage -- bearing directly on that topic made the task seem easy, if not superfluous. But research on other aspects of the Declaration and of Unesco's treatment in the press (cited in the Bibliography) helped illuminate the significance of the scant press attention given to the Mass Media Declaration. The broader context also explains something about the role of the press in charting the course of U.S.- Unesco relationships.

The failure of the Declaration to smooth that troubled course created problems for this study. The controversy that has dogged every meeting and report dealing with the Declaration threatens to involve this study in the very discourse it set out to examine.

Even before it began, the Symposium evoked a negative reaction. An Associated Press dispatch from Paris on May 4, 1987, stated that this Symposium "could reopen many controversial issues in the decade-old debate on the press and global communications." The report said that "the Prague-based International Organization of Journalists" has co-sponsored other conferences that "free press groups" found objectionable. An informal memorandum by U.S. Department of State Communications Consultant William Harley in February 1987 charged that "The Soviets are at it again! They are resurrecting an old issue. For years they have been chafing under the Western emasculation of their Declaration at the 1978 Unesco

General Conference. . . . So this hotly-debated document, which the West thought had been laid to rest in 1978, is going to rise again -- with the potential, as before, for creating immense mischief." Claiming that "Invited are some 50 organization and institutions, mostly from Eastern bloc countries," the memorandum went on to list the "alarming scenarios" that might come out of this Symposium to erode "the concept of free flow."

The purpose of this report is to contribute a factual account to what is a highly and certainly prematurely charged situation, and to spell out some basic assumptions underlying its conclusions.

Foreign news in the American press

The institutional structure and resource base of any press system -- not its rhetoric -- defines the orientation from which it views the world. From 65 to 75 percent of the content of the American daily press (and most large-circulation periodicals) is devoted to paid service for the principal clients and sponsors, the advertisers.

Dependence of mostly localized marketing and other private interests may help account for the fact that the American press is probably the bulkiest and one of the most parochial in the world. Less than 10 percent of total space in the average daily paper is devoted to general news, and a small proportion of that, even in elite papers, to news of the world. A comparative study of foreign news coverage ranked the American press first in the length of foreign news items but last in the number of stories and

percentage of news space devoted to world news, behind, in that order, representative Eastern European, Western European, Third World, and Soviet daily papers. (3)

Within that sparse coverage, international organizational affairs are among the least reported. A comprehensive study found U.N. press coverage to be sporadic, crisis-oriented, dealing mostly with issues of domestic economic interest, increasing in fractiousness and decreasing in volume through the 1960's and early 1970's.(12) Press coverage of Unesco shares some of these characteristics.

Except for periods of high tension, international political and organizational affairs are noted mainly, if at all, in the elite press. The New York Times is the most prominent of these because of its political influence and role as a "newspaper of record." Its Index provides a useful indicator of the attention the Times pays to different topics over time.

More than half (56 percent) of all listings of stories and articles in the Times 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; the third, news of the U.S. withdrawal from Unesco. 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 the listings, was one of the lowest. Its significance can best be assessed in light of what preceded and followed it.

Coverage before the Declaration

The Times' coverage of Unesco in the 1960's was scant and bland, reflecting the Organization's educational, scientific, and cultural work. Political controversies at the General Assembly typically dominated U.N. news coverage. The 1960 "summit" session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York took the limelight from the biennial Unesco General Conference meeting in Paris. A comparative study of Assembly coverage in the Times (2) found that it emphasized procedural wrangling more than substance, focusing on winners, losers, and the score. Much attention was paid to the fact that at one point toward the end of the session Premier Khurshev banged his shoe on a table. Little note was taken of the reason for the uproar, the issue that received a larger share of emphasis in the socialist press: Khrushchev protested a parliamentary maneuver to delay or derail the Soviet-sponsored anti-colonial resolution, approved by acclamation the next day.

No press 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 the mass media resolution. The debate gave no warning of the storm this would

eventually raise. (1) The Times, which had editorially hailed Unesco's 25th anniversary a year before, paid no attention. But the conflict of perspectives simmering under the surface stemmed from fundamental differences.

The experience of fascism and World War II impressed the victorious allies with the power and perils of information. The United States took the initiative in Unesco and elsewhere to make its media's freedom to gather, transmit, and sell information throughout the world a principal international policy objective. In the early years this was mostly at the expense of the British who vigorously but unsuccessfully objected to the loss of privilege. As Unesco's membership changed, the perspective of the Third World and the socialist countries rose to oppose unrestricted freedom for the dominant information systems. The newly emerging perspectives demanded better balance and urged that media serve the cause of peace and national development, and combat colonialism, racism, and incitement to war.

Underlying these different reactions to historical experience were of course different social structures, philosophies, and concepts of freedom and responsibility in information. American social authority is divided between public and private spheres. Private owners jealously guard their turf. Their freedom to permit a range of competitive views is insulated from government's responsibilities for acting on them. They are constrained, when at all, by their own interests and those of investors, advertisers and sponsors.

Social authority in socialist and many Third World countries is in the hands of public investors and organizations led by party

and government. Media in public hands are constrained by being related to the responsibility for implementing policy, not only reporting or commenting on it. Those constraints are balanced, in the socialist view, by the ability to advance policy and action. Conflicting constructions of responsibility and freedom in information figure prominently in Unesco mass media debates and press coverage.

In addition to different interpretations of historical experience and of freedom and responsibility, different strategic and power positions would also surface in the press coverage. An information system always seems freer to those who run it. They don't usually issue declarations; challengers do. It was apparent from the comparative study of the 1960 General Assembly coverage that those who hold the upper hand define their situation as freedom and emphasize the technique, the procedure, and the rules of the game they can control. Those in the ascendancy are more likely to stress widely approved and appealing issues and to challenge the rules they did not make and the game they could not control.

The long-simmering dispute erupted briefly and obliquely at the 18th General Conference in 1974 where the crisis created by the so-called anti-Zionist resolutions overshadowed and confused the mass media issues and fundamentally altered the tenor and scope of the press coverage.

The 1974 Index accounted for 17 percent and the 1975 Index 21 percent of its 15-year Unesco listings. Most of that was devoted to the issue of Israeli excavations "altering the historical features" of occupied Jerusalem and of Israel's consequent

exclusion from some regional conferences. The 1975 Index listings, longest of the 15-year period, also included stories on the introduction of an Arab resolution condemning Zionism as a form of racism.

While the committee of experts was debating the 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 18, 1975, that the 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 propoganda." The rest of the 82-line story dealt with the Isreali affair. The next day an even longer story about the same session gave three lines to the substance of the resolution, noting only that it aimed to define "what the role of the news media should be in combating racism, war propoganda, and apartheid."

Not reported in the otherwise extensive coverage were key provisions that were to figure prominently in later attacks on the Mass Media Declaration -- from which by then they had been deleted. These provisions included Article 12: "States are responsible for the activities in the international sphere of all mass media under their jurisdiction;" reference to 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. However, wire services gave the draft declaration more attention, and devoted 40 percent of coverage to mass media issues in general, which now also included the Tunisian-initiated demand for a "new international information order" of more balanced flow of news. (5) Promises of American help for Third World media development and acknowledgment of a global information imbalance helped defuse what the Times called "the potentially explosive issue of press freedom." A group of "wise men" was to be commissioned to study mass media issues. The draft declaration was referred to more experts for further consultation, negotiation, compromise, and submission to the next General Conference.

Coverage of the Declaration

The divisions 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. On the eve of the conference, Leonard Sussman,

executive director of Freedom House, warned in Newsweek (Oct. 2, 1978) that "international forums increasingly threaten to make governmental control of the news media the model for a New World Information Order," and advised American delegates to line up with the "moderates" to "undercut Marxist efforts to exploit Third World dissatisfaction."

The New York Times was uncompromising, and ultimately prophetic. "If it turns out to be impossible to reject this attempt to tamper with our basic principles," a Times editorial declared on November 8, "there is always the alternative of rejecting Unesco itself."

While feverish diplomacy and further U.S. assurances of technical help to Third World media sought to defuse another potential explosion, Time magazine ran a story of the controversy on November 20 and concluded: "The heart of the conflict is a fundamental, perhaps irreconcilable disagreement over the role of the press."

Two days later, however, it seemed that the disagreement had been reconciled. Most objectionable features had been deleted and Western-oriented provisions inserted into the final draft. The Associated Press from Paris 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 Ambassador Reinhardt saying "We see no lingering hint or state control" in the Declaration. "In any case, he noted, 'this declaration is unenforceable in the usual

legal sense.'" But the Post also observed that "Some Western editors and publishers say it was a mistake for the West to take part in any Unesco media negotiations at all."

Most initial news stories were positive, and editorials cautiously optimistic. "A long-festering threat to world press freedom was diverted in Paris" said the Christian Science Monitor. "CAUTIOUS VICTORY" declared the Portland Oregonian, noting that "The adopted declaration eliminated all Soviet-sponsored language that would have sanctioned government restriction of the news media both inside and outside a nation's borders. It rejected fully the 'right' of governments to reply to news accounts they deemed objectionable, a clear imposition of governmental views on the media. It urges, rather than binds journalists to be concerned about the promotion of human rights and UNESCO's stated goal of combatting warmongering, racism and apartheid."

The New York Times dispatch from Paris, carried under the full text of the Declaration, led with reporting approval of a "compromise declaration on world news coverage that eliminates all mention of government control of the news." It noted that "The declaration is not binding on any country. However, the United States and other nations advocating a free press feared that a draft condoning government control of the press would have given moral support and encouragement to any countries wishing to impose restrictions on press coverage."

The facade of euphoria, or even cautious optimism, was shattered on November 27 when both The New York Times and the Washington Post ran lengthy editorials on the Declaration. Mocking Reinhardt, the Times called it "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..."

"Only censors of this world need any such declaration and they will not heed the hypocritical provisions that champion freedom of expression and free access to information. As we have noted before, the sin of war propaganda in the Soviet Union can be no more than a discussion of military contingencies; the sin of racism, in the eyes of a U.N. majority, includes anything favorable to Zionism.

"At the risk of giving Pravda a brand new case of ammunition against the depravities of American society, let us put the matter bluntly, as our diplomats should have: to Americans, there can be no free speech or 'balanced' news unless those who advocate racism and apartheid and, yes, war are also free to speak. We do not negotiate codes of press behavior with our government and should not be negotiating them with any other. . . ."

The Washington Post editorial of the same day was equally firm. After expressing the opinion that the outcome of the lengthy mass media debate "has to trouble deeply all those truly interested in. . . the 'free flow' of information and ideas," the editorial went on to comment:

"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. That this particular tune--this time around--is less dirge than walk-on music is nice but essentially irrelevant. Why else, after all, would it be supported by all the totalitarian states, both the communist ones, which practice media control systematically as a matter of ideology, and the Third World states, which practice it more casually as a matter of political convenience.

"Indeed, in a field so contentious, how can something acceptable to, let us say, the Soviet Union or Nigeria, be also acceptable to the West? . . .

Time magazine reflected on December 5 that "Though U.S. delegates would have preferred no declaration, they found the weakened version acceptable. Observed Newsday President William Attwood, a U.S. media representative on the American delegation: 'If there is a reptile in the house, far better to have it a garter snake than a rattlesnake.'"

It may be, as Sussman (11) argued, that "Despite the bland nature of the Declaration... the memory of the bitter debates far surpassed the understanding of the text of the final document. Unesco was believed to seek control of the independent press, notwithstanding the fact Unesco rejected the press-control draft of the Declaration." This belief was strengthened when meetings were arranged under Unesco auspices (much as the one for which this paper is prepared) to consider the implementation and effects of the Declaration.

Former United Press International executive Roger Tatarian

wrote an article in the Washington Post of February 24, 1979, about such a meeting. Without being very specific about the nature or purpose of the meeting, Tatarian wrote that a committee of experts assembled to discuss the implementation of the Declaration "made it clear that, in the area of personal expression, there are inevitable irreconcilables between the disciples of Jefferson and Lenin."

"It is now abundantly clear," wrote Tatarian, "that many member states, largely from the communist bloc and the developing world, do not regard the declaration as an end in itself--as Western journalists had hoped--but rather as the beachhead for another thrust toward regulation of news. From that newly won base, they will try again for goals that had to be abandoned at the Paris conference to make the declaration palatable to the United States and other countries committed to free expression."

The aftermath

A succession of forums and conferences involving, sometimes only marginally, the "new international information order," inextricably confused in the American press with the Mass Media Declaration, continued to inflame the coverage. While American policy attempted to avoid isolation and political defeat by cooperating with M'Bow and aspects of the "new order" movement that could be contained, such as technical aid to media and other development in Third World countries, the drumbeat of press opposition continued.

The report of the study group of "wise men" established as

part of the compromise leading to the Declaration, headed by Irish statesman Sean MacBride, "touched off explosions in the U.S. press," observed Unesco's Chief of Public Information for the U.S. and Canada. (6) The American member of the study group, 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 monolithic media construction of the issues in a cold-war "freedom vs. censorship" context missed the the historic shift in global communications reflected in these documents.

An independent American organization devoted to advancing freedom and responsibility of the press, the National News Council, 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." (8) The report of the National Council, published in the Columbia Journalism Review, attracted no press attention. Not long thereafter the Council itself was disbanded for lack of media support.

An analysis of the coverage of another meeting, the Fourth Extraordinary Session of Unesco's General Conference in 1982 (4),

concluded: "The press constructed a picture of the meetings more from selected speeches and prior information than from the actual resolutions and official actions of the conference. That construction showed a preoccupation with real and imagined threats to private control of the press to the virtual exclusion of other issues...

"As if in response to the press image of the meeting, a defensive, belligerent and often paranoid tone pervaded most editorials published about the conference. There was little recognition of American points of view other than that of the press and its trade associations and public relations spokespersons..."

In 1983, the New York Times began to increase its coverage of Unesco. One-third of the 15-year total of listings in its Index were in 1983-85. On April 23, 1983, the Times carried story about a Unesco sponsored symposium in Nairobi, a name still ringing a bell with some editors, calling on journalists to increase their coverage of disarmament issues. On December 15, a news story noted that the U.S. cast the only vote against the Unesco budget, explaining that America has vigorously opposed Soviet and Third World efforts "to impose regulations that would restrict press freedom." An editorial the next day claimed the Communist nations along with Third World countries have subverted Unesco's constructive purposes. The heavy news and editorial coverage that followed provided details and mostly supportive commentaries on the official American notice of withdrawal from Unesco.

Except for the brief flurry of items on its approval, what

little attention was paid to the Mass Media Declaration and subsequent developments was one-dimensional. Leonard Sussman (11) observed that the journalists who featured speeches and intentions they considered inimical "seldom reported with equal fervor or as prominently the defeat in Unesco of all proposals for censorship, licensing of journalists and similar press-control measures." No other aspect of Unesco management or policy received such hostile treatment.

It is unlikely that readers of the American press, perhaps any press, could gain a realistic understanding of the positions and conflicts involved (and reconciled) in the Mass Media Declaration. A study of the French press found it equally sparse and simplistic, and almost as monolithic. (9)

An apparent conflict with its own institutional interests seems to have prevented the American press from using its constitutionally protected independence to report a reasonable diversity of American and international perspectives. The inability of the free press to free itself from its own institutional blinders does not augur well for any greater understanding and effectiveness of the Mass Media Declaration in the future than has been achieved in the past. Yet to abandon the quest is also self-defeating. The historic international adjustments of media perspectives reflected in the Declaration, however imperfect, cannot be indefinitely ignored, obscured, or denied. The search for new and creative approaches to this dilemma is a worthy task for this Symposium.

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