The Globalization Reader

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First published 2000
Reprinted 2000 (twice)
Blackwell Publishers Inc.
350 Main Street
Malden, Massachusetts 02148
USA

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF
UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The globalization reader / edited by Frank J. Lechner and John Boli.
. p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10% on 12 pt Sabon
By Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd
www.biddles.co.uk

This book is printed on acid-free paper
40 The New International Information Order

Sean MacBride and Colleen Roach

Resolutions, meetings, and manifestos calling for a “new order” in international information structures and policies became a feature of the world scene in the early 1970s and often generated intense dispute. The original impulse came from the nonaligned nations, many of which had gained independence in the postwar years. To many, the euphoria of independence was turning to a sense of disillusionment. In spite of international assistance programs, the economic situation in many developing countries had not improved, and in some it had actually deteriorated. For certain countries foreign trade earnings could not cover interest due on foreign loans. These same years witnessed the rapid development of new communications media, and the era was constantly characterized as the Information Age—one in which information would be a key to power and affluence. To the developing countries it was increasingly clear that the “flow of information” (a term that seemed to subsume ideas and attitudes and followed a one-way direction from rich to poor countries) was dominated by multinational entities based in the most powerful nations. The resulting disparities tended to set the framework for discussion even within developing countries. Clearly political independence was not matched by independence in the economic and sociocultural spheres. A number of nonaligned countries saw themselves as victims of “cultural colonialism.” The imbalances it involved, and what might be done about them, became the focus of debate for the nonaligned countries.

Evolution of the Debate

The nonaligned nations movement took form in 1955 at a meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, that brought together world leaders from Asia and Africa. Subsequent meetings—in some cases, summit meetings of nonaligned leaders—were held in Bangkok, Algiers, Tunis, Havana, and elsewhere. During the 1970s the membership grew to more than 90 countries plus several regional groups and represented a majority in various United Nations bodies, with strong influence over their agendas. These UN agencies embraced a “development ideology,” meaning that high priority would be given to the development needs of the Third World.

A nonaligned summit held in Algiers in 1973 adopted a resolution calling for a “new international economic order,” which was endorsed the following year by the UN General Assembly. This served as precedent and model for a similar resolution focusing on information, which was articulated at a 1976 nonaligned news symposium in Tunis. A leading figure at this meeting was Mustapha Masmoudi, Tunisian secretary of state for information, who demanded a “reorganization of existing communication channels that are a legacy of the colonial past.” This “decolonization” of information, he said, must lead to a “new order in information matters.” In subsequent meetings this phrase evolved into a new international information order and, at a later stage, into a new world information and communication order.

That same year UNESCO’s General Conference in Nairobi also discussed information issues, in a context that produced sharp confrontation between the interests of developed and developing countries. The focus was on the free-flow-of-information doctrine. UNESCO’s mandate in the area of communications is explicit in its constitution, adopted in 1946, which enjoined the agency to “collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend the free flow of ideas by word and image.” The free-flow doctrine was developed by the United States and other Western nations after World War II. As viewed by supporters, the unhindered flow of information would be a means of promoting peace and understanding and spreading technical advances. The doctrine had ties with other Western libertarian principles such as freedom of the press. However, critics of the doctrine came to view it as part of a global strategy for domination of communication markets and for ideological control by the industrialized nations. They saw it as serving the interests of the most powerful countries and transnational corporations and helping them secure economic and cultural domination of less powerful nations.

A rewording of the doctrine was urged by nonaligned spokespersons calling for a free and balanced flow of information. The suggestion stirred deep suspicion in developed countries. If it meant that Third World nations would ordain a proper balance, and control or limit the flow, this would be—according to Western spokespersons—the very antithesis of a free flow. “Free and balanced flow” and “free flow” seemed at this meeting to be irreconcilable concepts.

An important outcome of this 1976 UNESCO meeting was the appointment by Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, Director-General of UNESCO, of a 16-person commission—broadly representative of the world’s economic and geographic spectrum and headed by Sean MacBride of Ireland—to study “the totality of communication problems in modern societies.” Its members held different opinions about what sort of new order was needed, but all were in agreement that the existing information order was far from satisfactory. They began their work late in 1977 and, after two years of fact-gathering, committee hearings, and debate, submitted their final report—known as the MacBride Report—to the 1980 UNESCO General Conference in Belgrade. Published in English as Many Voices, One World, it has been translated into many languages. Along with a resolution adopted at the same conference confirming UNESCO’s support for a new information and communication order (see table 40.1), the report became the focus of debate during the following years—a rallying point as well as a target for attack.

Themes

The debate had at first centered on the news-flow question. The major Western international news services—AP and UPI of the United States, the French Agence France-
Table 40.1 Resolution 4/19 adopted by the Twenty-first Session of the UNESCO General Conference, Belgrade, 1980

The General Conference considers that
(a) this new world information and communication order could be based, among other considerations, on:
   (i) elimination of the imbalances and inequalities which characterize the present situation;
   (ii) elimination of the negative effects of certain monopolies, public or private, and excessive concentrations;
   (iii) removal of the internal and external obstacles to a free flow and wider and better balanced dissemination of information and ideas;
   (iv) plurality of sources and channels of information;
   (v) freedom of the press and of information;
   (vi) the freedom of journalists and all professionals in the communication media, a freedom inseparable from responsibility;
   (vii) the capacity of developing countries to achieve improvement of their own situations, notably by providing their own equipment, by training their personnel, by improving their infrastructures and making their information and communication media suitable to their needs and aspirations;
   (viii) the sincere will of developed countries to help them attain these objectives;
   (ix) respect for each people’s cultural identity and for the right of each nation to inform the world about its interests, its aspirations and its social and cultural values;
   (x) respect for the right of all peoples to participate in international exchanges of information on the basis of equality, justice and mutual benefits;
   (xi) respect for the right of the public, of ethnic and social groups and of individuals to have access to information sources and to participate actively in the communication process;
(b) this new world information and communication order should be based on the fundamental principles of international law, as laid down in the Charter of the United Nations;
(c) diverse solutions to information and communication problems are required because social, political, cultural and economic problems differ from one country to another and, within a given country, from one group to another.

Presse, and Reuters of the United Kingdom – were consistently described as having monopoly control over the flow of news to and from developing countries, and exercising it from a limited perspective reflecting the economic and cultural interests of the industrialized nations. Expressions such as “coup and earthquakes” were frequently used to describe reporting of Third World events. In 1976 Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, expressed the prevailing view: “We want to hear Africans on events in Africa. You should similarly be able to get an Indian explanation of events in India. It is astonishing that we know so little about leading poets, novelists, historians, and editors of various Asian, African, and Latin American countries while we are familiar with minor authors and columnists of Europe and America.” The need for policies and structures to develop communications between developing nations (sometimes referred to as “South–South dialogue”) was constantly stressed.

The flow of television programming, including entertainment programming, was soon incorporated into the debate, in large measure owing to a study conducted by two Finnish researchers, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Valis, and published by UNESCO in 1974. The study demonstrated that a few Western nations controlled the international flow of television programs, with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany accounting for the largest shares. The implications of this domination, in both financial and ideological terms, received increasing attention.

The integration of television with new technologies such as the communications satellite – including direct broadcast satellites – and telecommunications networks that were channels for an increasing volume of transborder data flow difficult or impossible to control, extended the range of topics covered in the debate. Here the questions also included imbalances in the assignment of spectrum frequencies and of orbital slots for future satellites.

The international flow of advertising, under similar multinational controls, was another issue that entered the debate. It was described by many as furthering not only products and services but also a way of life, generally centered on the acquisition of consumer goods. Some saw this as diverting attention from necessities to luxuries, and others saw it as a serious threat to indigenous culture.

In 1978 a new element was added to the debates with the passage of a UNESCO Declaration on the Mass Media. It was the result of six years of negotiation to achieve a consensus text, which finally carried the title The Declaration of 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. Regarded by the nonaligned nations as furthering the new order movement, it was the first international instrument referring directly to moral, social, and professional responsibilities of mass media in the context of “the universally recognized principles of freedom of expression, information, and opinion.” Hovering over the debate once again was the issue of the role of government. The final version of the resolution did not include – because of Western demands – proposals to make national governments responsible for the actions of communications companies working within their jurisdictions.

Collision Course

In the early 1980s the nature of the debate underwent decisive changes. Nonaligned nations were no longer as unified as they had been; amid a widespread economic recession some leaned toward a more militant, others toward a more conciliatory, stance. Differences in political systems came more sharply into focus. In the developed nations a trend toward deregulation of information media and privatization of public-sector enterprises was gaining momentum. The industrialized nations were increasingly attentive to information markets, including those in the Third World. Because the continued growth of the private sector seemed vital to this strategy, “government-controlled media” were viewed as particularly ominous.

The importance of this issue was evident at a 1981 UNESCO-sponsored meeting on the protection of journalists. For two decades attempts had been made by
international organizations of journalists and publishers — such as the International Federation of Journalists, the International Federation of Newspaper Editors, and the International Press Institute — to draft and have adopted an international convention for the protection of journalists. At the UNESCO meeting the concerns of the journalists’ organizations were quickly obscured by the recurring issue of the role of governments, this time revolving around licensing. Most governments were prepared to recognize the importance of safeguarding journalists, even though few seemed to cherish the activities of “investigative reporters.” The status of journalists and the special protections proposed for them would presumably be based on professional credentials — but issued by whom? In raising this issue, Third World leaders were accused of wishing to license journalists, an idea that was anathema to Western nations.

Nonetheless, attempts were made during the early 1980s to steer the new order debates away from such divisive issues. This was especially evident in the creation of a new organization based on an earlier initiative of the United States: the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The IPDC was designed to be a key instrument for organizing international technical cooperation, helping in the creation and implementation of operational projects, and mobilizing the resources needed for those purposes. Although officially launched in 1980, its first meeting was not held until June 1981. It soon became apparent, however, that contributions from donor countries were much more limited than had been expected. The IPDC was faced with the same dilemma confronting a number of international development agencies: a necessary curtailment of expectations and plans.

The 1982 and 1983 UNESCO General Conferences, held in Paris, did not witness the heated polemics of similar meetings held in 1978 and 1980. At the 1983 conference the call for a new information and communication order was formally designated as “an evolving and continuous process” — a concession to Western interests intent on ensuring that the new order should not be viewed as requiring a sudden and radical transformation of existing communication structures.

A 1983 United Nations-UNESCO Round Table on a New World Information and Communication Order held in Innsbruck, Austria, was another promising sign of dialogue. At the first official United Nations-UNESCO meeting on the issue, the Austrian round table was noteworthy for the absence of political rhetoric and the determination of participants to establish specific mechanisms for assisting the developing countries. Communications technology, rather than news flow alone, was now the primary concern of developing countries.

The year 1983 was to end with two paradoxical but not unrelated events. In early December the nonaligned nations movement held in New Delhi its first Media Conference. It opened with a call to intensify efforts to promote the proposed new order. Two weeks later, as December came to a close, Secretary of State George P. Schultz of the United States sent a letter to the director-general of UNESCO informing him that, after the required one-year notification period, in December 1984 the United States would withdraw from UNESCO. An indirect reference to the new order campaign was evident in a passage referring to the necessity of maintaining “such goals as individual human rights and the free flow of information.” The US decision to withdraw from UNESCO surprised observers who had taken note of the apparent absence of conflict in 1982 and 1983. However, it was clear that throughout the early 1980s there was significant bipartisan congressional opposition to UNESCO, not only because of its efforts to promote a new information order but also because

of disputes relating to Israel, UNESCO’s examination of the issues of peace and disarmament, and a new generation of “people’s rights,” as well as various financial and organizational reasons. This opposition was widely backed by the US press and other groups.

Challenges

Two decades of debates and resolutions had done little to solve underlying problems of the international flow of information, although they had made the world community more aware of the issues involved. Those issues would be a continuing presence, posing a diversity of challenges, many of which had been spelled out in the MacBride Commission’s report. A notable aspect of the report was that it went beyond immediate needs and brought to the fore the overall significance of communications in modern society and the implications of media policies for the world’s future.

Meanings of technology

The commission noted that technological needs had been a central concern at many meetings but urged that they not be allowed to overshadow the social, political, and economic implications. The importance of the new communications technologies was seen to lie to a large extent in the fundamental transformations they impose on society. Governments and private companies alike have long been inclined to think of technology as a means available to serve their particular needs without consideration of the impact on humanity at large. Use of technical developments cannot and should not be slowed, in the view of the commission, but their implications should be constantly assessed. Technology “is seldom neutral — its use is even less so” — for use is influenced by political, financial, and other considerations. Therefore, decisions about communications policies and priorities should not be made solely by technocrats but should involve wide public participation and discussion. “We must beware of the temptation to regard technology as an all-purpose tool capable of superseding social action.” The commission noticed a widespread feeling that “technological progress is running ahead of man’s capacity to interpret its implications and direct it into the most desirable channels,” and cited the fear expressed by Albert Schweitzer that humankind has “lost the capacity to foresee and forestall the consequences” of its actions.

Ways of freedom

The commission noted the perilous status of freedom of expression around the world. The fact “that there is said to be freedom of expression in a country does not guarantee its existence in practice.” The commission further noted that “even where freedom is not openly attacked by authority, it may be limited by self-censorship on the part of communicators themselves. Journalists may fail to publish facts which have come into their possession for several reasons: sheer timidity, an excessive respect for the power structure or in some instances lest they give offence to officialdom and thus risk losing access to their sources of information.” Self-
censorship, like censorship itself, was seen by the commission as a constantly distorting factor in the flow of communication.

The commission emphasized its view that the exercise of freedom in the communications field involves responsibilities. "We need to ask, moreover, on what grounds a claim for freedom is being made. The freedom of a citizen or social group to have access to communication, both as recipients and contributors, cannot be compared to the freedom of an investor to derive profits from the media. One protects a fundamental human right, the other permits the commercialization of a social need."

The report observed that because of the overwhelming importance of communication today, the state imposes some degree of regulation in virtually all societies. It can intervene in many diverse ways — through the allocation of broadcast licenses and newsprint and through visa policies, import restriction, and many other procedures. "Some governments find it natural to assume total control over the content of information, justifying themselves by the ideology in which they believe. Even on purely pragmatic standards, it is doubtful if this system can be called realistic."

**Democratization of communication**

Surveying the "spectrum of communication in modern society," the commission found that it almost defies description because of its immense variety. Barriers could readily be seen: monopolistic controls, technical disparities, restrictive media practices, exclusion of disadvantaged groups, blacklist, censorship. Nevertheless, a tendency toward democratization seemed to be taking place — for example, in the growing role of public opinion. Governments throughout the world were becoming increasingly aware that they must take into account not only national opinion but "world public opinion," because today's media are capable of diffusing "information on international questions to every part of the world." Occasionally opinion crystallizes on some issue with enough force to compel action. This happened, as the commission saw it, on the issues of colonialism, apartheid, and nuclear proliferation. But a meaningful process of opinion formation will in the long run require richer media fare, development of widespread "critical awareness," assertion of the "right to reply," the establishment of "alternative channels of communication," and public participation in decision making on media policies. The goal, the commission felt, should be that everyone would be both "producer and consumer of communication." [...]