

AN INTERNATIONAL EFFORT TOWARD A DEMOCRATIZATION IN CURRENT
AFFAIRS INFORMATION (NEWS) PROCESSING: A
CRITIQUE OF THE NEW WORLD INFORMATION ORDER

UN EFFORT INTERNATIONAL POUR LA DEMOCRATISATION DU TRAITEMENT
DE L'INFORMATION (NOUVELLES) SUR LES AFFAIRES PUBLIQUES: UNE
CRITIQUE D'UN NOUVEL ORDRE MONDIAL DE L'INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The world is on the brink of major social change. Thirty years of concerted efforts at developing the lesser developed countries (LDCs) have failed. The 1970's brought demands from the LDCs for a New International Economic Order. Emanating from this concern are demands for a more equitable arrangement in the information handling fields, a New World Information Order. The primary spokes-person of the NWIO is Mustapha Masmoudi of Tunisia. In a presentation to the Unesco International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (the MacBride Commission), Masmoudi outlined seven major problems which must be overcome and eight areas in need of investigation, research and understanding. These problems and research areas are discussed and critiqued.

RESUME

Le monde est au seuil de changements sociaux importants. Les trentes années d'effort concerté au développement des pays en voie de développement (PVD) ont été une faillite. Au cours des années 70, les PVD ont formulé des demandes pour un Nouvel Ordre Economique International. De celles-ci émanent des revendications pour une structure plus équitable dans les domaines de la manipulation de l'Information, un Nouvel Ordre Mondial de l'information. Le principal porte-parole pour le **NOMI** est Mustapha Masmoudi de la Tunisie. Dans son adresse à la Commission internationale sur l'étude des problèmes de communication de l'UNESCO (la Commission MacBride), Masmoudi énumère sept problèmes majeurs qui doivent être surmontés et huit secteurs là où il existe un besoin d'enquête, de recherche et d'entente. Ces problèmes et ces secteurs de recherche sont ici débattus et analysés.

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INTRODUCTION

A specter has engulfed the world. Scientific, technical and managerial expertise and knowledge have confluenced with wealth to produce a world-wide telecommunications network which dominates the international traffic in data and information. This dominance yields power. Control is exercised over the processes acting upon information; its transmission and communication, its selection and acquisition, and its analysis and utilization. This control is power, the power of information (Diener, 1980).

In the realms of current affairs information (news) and recreational information (entertainment), control over the processes acting upon information resides in the hands of the very few, yet influences most of the world. Five transnational agencies, United Press International and Associated Press in the United States, Agence-Press France in France, Reuters in the United Kingdom and Tass in the Soviet Union, dominate the international flow of news. The top twelve United States advertising agencies dominate world-wide advertising (Smith, 1980). Until recently, Western firms dominated the international market in cinema films, and still dominate the television market.

In a world demanding equity and just treatment by and to all sovereign nations, this specter is an abomination to most of the world's population, to humanity. A cry has gone out for the establishment of a more equitable set of international norms, a New World Information Order. Its primary spokesperson is the permanent delegate to Unesco from Tunisia, and former Minister of Information for Tunisia, Mustapha Masmoudi.

NEW WORLD INFORMATION ORDER: A PRECIS OF THE PROBLEMS

Masmoudi (1979), in a presentation to the Unesco International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, of which Masmoudi was a member, outlined his interpretation of a New World Information Order. In this presentation, he cited seven major problem areas. The focus of Masmoudi's discussion was the handling of international current affairs information by the transnational agencies which control the news. Seen by Masmoudi as the most significant problems, are:

1. A flagrant imbalance between North and South in the volume of international news flow.
2. An inequality in information resources such as broadcasting stations, radio frequencies, communication channels, etc., or access to any of the above.
3. A de facto hegemony and a will to dominate is evidenced by a marked indifference of the media of

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- developed countries, particularly in the West, to the problems, concerns, and aspirations of the developing countries. (Masmoudi, 1979:173)
4. A lack of information on developing countries available on the international wire services, thus failing to meet the needs of these third world clients.
 5. Survival of the colonial era in the information systems, their structure, their content, their interests and the intentions.
 6. An alienating influence in the economic, social, and cultural spheres is evidenced by the world information systems for news and entertainment. The transnational agencies own the property and control the contents of the messages, including the advertising. These images distort the recipient's culture, often conflicting with the recipient's values.
 7. Messages ill-suited to the areas in which they are disseminated, having been prepared for an audience in a developed country.

These seven problems can be aggregated into three groups. The first group, the Balance group, is concerned with the content and volume of information flows, and includes problems 1, 4 and 7: North-South imbalances, lack of news items about lesser developed countries and lack of relevance in news items available. The second group, the Technology Control group, is concerned with control over local and national information facilities and services, and includes problems 2 and 6: access to information resources and control over local and national media. The third group, the Interaction group, is concerned with the impact of these messages on the recipient culture, and includes problems 3 and 5: de facto hegemony, a dominating will and colonial attitudes.

The Balance group is the simplest to deal with intellectually. The desire is for more news items disseminating from the lesser developed countries which other lesser developed countries might consider more relevant. Editorial selection processes are generally insensitive to the concerns, problems and aspirations of audiences in lesser developed countries. If the western editors and journalists are incapable of fulfilling this function, hiring foreign editors and journalists would be an option. One limiting aspect is the lack of profitability of international news services (only UPI seems to be for-profit). More lesser developed countries are establishing national news agencies and cooperating with one another in the exchange of news, thus circumventing the Western channels. But these efforts tend to be uneconomical in societies without a complex social infrastructure and politized in societies with domineering or repressive governments.

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The Technology Control group have an equally simple intellectual solution, gaining control over national media and access to the international channels of communication. The operational difficulties in this plan cripple it from the start. To maintain a national information system requires the coordinated efforts of knowledgeable experts and technicians and the capital investment to sustain it. Both of which are lacking in the lesser developed world. Assistance from Unesco may be forthcoming if the recommendations of the MacBride Commission are heeded (MacBride, 1980). This will be a long-term effort and continued political and economic support are essential. Unfortunately, political and economic stability have a low probability in the volatile third world.

The Interaction group may be the most difficult to tackle. It involves attitude and knowledge changes on the part of Western and Soviet editors and journalists. The value of information about the lesser developed countries has to be increased in the minds of those who select news and entertainment items for distribution throughout the world-wide information network. For those who are fully members of the Information Age, with a consciousness geared toward change and innovation, this change in attitude and knowledge about lesser developed countries may be relatively serene. For those who cling tenaciously to an imperialistic or colonialistic attitude structure, this change may be impossible.

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE: ITS CONSTRAINTS

Masmoudi (1979:175) stated that the "present international legal framework is defective and even non-existent in certain fields. Moreover, the application of present-day legislation is arbitrary." A small number of developed and powerful countries are favored at the expense of the weaker, developing countries. Ownership of the communications facilities is often commingled with control over the means of production. Masmoudi highlighted eight specific areas which are in need of investigation and possible correction to achieve equity among nations and peoples.

The rights of individuals and communities to communicate with one another, the freedoms of information and to inform, must be established. The freedom of information, encompassing the freedoms of expression and opinion, is "in fact conceived as the 'freedom of the informing agent'" (Masmoudi, 1979:175). Similarly, individuals and communities should have equal rights of access to information sources and their means of communication. Their differential access to economic resources have "allowed the major transnational corporations to turn this right into a prerogative, and enable the wealthy powers to establish their domination over the information channels" (Masmoudi, 1979:175). The New International Economic Order,

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should it ever come into complete being, might compensate for the economic differentials to some degree.

The ineffectiveness of the right of correction of information entered into the world-wide information network limits the abilities of less powerful individuals and nations to assure the accuracy of information presented about them. The existence of differing views of human societies make arbitration or determination of the truth or accuracy of information a problem. As suggested recently (Diener, 1981), four types of messages can exist depending upon the relative perceptions of the truth or falsity (irrelevance) of a message by both the sender and the receiver. Type 1 (Information) is perceived to be true by both sender and receiver. Type 2 (Misinformation) is perceived to be true (or relevant) by the sender but is perceived to be false (or irrelevant) by the receiver. Type 3 (Disinformation) is perceived to be false by the sender (a lie) but is accepted as true by the receiver (a believed lie). Type 4 (Noninformation) is perceived to be false by both sender and receiver. Types 2 and 3 (Misinformation and Disinformation) are troublesome. The limited ability to coordinate relevances between vastly different countries can fill the communication channels with misinformation (irrelevant information) and disinformation (deceitful information). Debunked disinformation, converting it to noninformation, taints the source (as a liar). To many third worlders, Western sources of information are primarily sources of noninformation. The sources have been irrelevant and/or deceitful too often to be trusted.

The absence of a common, international code of ethics, despite the efforts of Unesco and the United Nations to formulate such a code, governing or regulating information professionals (journalists and editors, at this point in time) places the weaker countries at a marked disadvantage in international information exchanges. Some of the delegates to the 1980 Unesco General Conference in Budapest wanted the right to licence and regulate international or foreign journalists. These efforts were forestalled through the efforts of Western delegates.

Imbalances between the developed and the developing countries in the area of copyright protection also require consideration. The costs of information carriers, i.e., books, reports and journals, are often exorbitant in lesser developed countries when production, transportation and tariff expenses and the economies of lesser developed countries are considered. Copyright is by nature a protectionist action. The Berne Convention (1886) was highly protectionist. The Unesco administered Universal Copyright Convention (1952, revised 1971) is somewhat less protectionist but not to the degree necessary to meet the needs of the third world.

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The lesser developed countries are discriminated against in the distribution of radio frequencies and in access to telecommunication facilities such as satellites. In an absence of an ability to effectively utilize radio frequencies, and in the absence of satellites, the lesser developed countries have sought to reserve certain radio frequencies and geostationary satellite orbits, to be used when the countries have developed the necessary resources and infrastructures. This would prevent the Western and Soviet-bloc countries from utilizing these frequencies and orbits in the interim.

CONCLUSION

The turmoil presently brewing in the international handling of current affairs information (news) and recreational information (entertainment) may well spill over into other information domains, band-wagon style. Scientific, technical and business information are, singularly or in aggregate, near and dear to many of our hearts and pocketbooks. Are scientific, technical and business information immune from similar attacks? I hardly think so. Most scientific, technical and business information emanates from the developed countries, over western-controlled media, with relative disregard for their relevance to the lesser developed countries into which they are disseminated. ST&B1 are sold in the lesser developed countries as a commodity to only those who can pay the fare, therefore discriminating by economic ability and often by social status.

I concur with Masmoudi and others that "questions need to be raised on many issues" relating to the rights of individuals and communities, questions of informational freedoms, the accuracy and timeliness of disseminated information, equal access to the means of communication, the absence of an international deontology and the like. These and other questions must be addressed and answered before serious steps can be taken toward a New equitable World Information Order. In the spirit of cooperation and international peace, we must start to consider our roles in the world information order and how we can be more equitable among ourselves, the developed nations, and toward the lesser developed world.

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