

The News flow Controversy: Evaluation of Imbalances, Inadequacies, distortions in International news flow and how it affects African development and democracy.

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Introduction

Information is power and the most critically sought commodity in today's world. Those that control the information are usually seemed to be the most powerful in our contemporary society. Therefore, for the past thirty years, there has been a controversy resulting from accusation and counter accusation of imbalance flow of information from the west to south. The purported victims which are the developing nations have been raging bitterly over the news coverage of events in their continent and have denounced western newspapers, journals, and television outlets for their alleged sensationalism and anti-development bias (Legum & Cornwell, 1978). Due to this controversy, on several accounts, developing nations have attempted to engage the western nations through different channels to address the issue of global information inequality. One that may readily come to mind is the UNESCO meetings in 1969 (Sean , Elie, Sergei , & Somavia, 1980), 1974 (Mowlana, 1985), 1976 (Bandopadhyay, 2006) and 1980 (Tokunbo, 2000) consecutively, where the UNESCO group of experts on mass communication and society noted in its disturbing but revealing report that: What has come to be known as the free flow of information at the present time is often in fact a one way rather than a true exchange of information.

In retaliation, western world has equally charged the developing world of seeking to obstruct the free flow of information and insist to make no change in the information flow which they regard as a threat to the freedom to report, to print, and to broadcast news (Legum & Cornwell, 1978). This charge and counter-charge is far from abating and in fact is gathering momentum as it persists in many developing countries as they are well aware of the value of information in speeding material development and in maintaining power. In this paper however, the author will be discussing the developing world perception of new world information order, seeking to find what changes they expect from it. The essay will also attempt to identify the positions taken by these disputants by closely looking at the exchange of charges and counter-charges between those demanding balance in the news and those demanding journalistic freedom. And finally we will explore the issues underlying the dispute and attempt to proffer solutions where necessary.

A Historical Perspective: News flow before World War II

The concept of imbalance in the media coverage and controversy over the international flow of news had been an important starting point in many of the deliberations concerning the national and international flow of information, culture and news. However, the significance of this controversy can be understood only by grasping the extent of the revolutionary changes that have been eroding the international system for the last thirty years.

Taking cognizance of the fact that in recent days, the world communication technology and the management of world information resources are clearly in the favor of the industrialized countries.

(Legum & Cornwell, 1978), in their compiled report argues that western domination was actually the cause of disparity in both the economic and information order which they believed started after the World War II as described as the post imperial era. It was during this period that new ideas and forces took shape and power shift decisively to the west. They recounted that before the World War II, that western nations has no political power to impose their will on the non-western world and that the great power struggles of the European imperial era were all fought among the western nations themselves making it impossible for the west to dominate (Legum & Cornwell, 1978).

However, they believed that the industrial revolution had given the west a head start over the rest of the world in creating new wealth and accumulating great military power, which in turn resulted both in the expansion of European imperialism and in the rise of the United states, but one thing that stood very obvious within those period was also subsequent rapid growth of emerging powers like Soviet Union and China. These duos also become players in the center stage making the technological advances of the industrial revolution not remain exclusive to western possession.

News Flow after World War II

After the World War II, more events continue to unfold, developing countries began gradually to assume role in the central stage as major factor in world affairs. Suffice to note that the developing nation's first encounter in dealing with the western world was recorded to be hostile, as they experienced the western domination on almost every international affairs which Roger Tatarian, former vice-president of United Press International (UPI), acknowledged then by stating that the imbalance in economic and information order is due to the military, economic and political power distribution in the western world. (Tokunbo, 2000). As things unfold, It becomes more clearer to the developing world that the western domination and control of information is not beneficial but later unhealthy to their growth given that this one- way flow of information inevitably reflects only the point of view, mentality, values and interests of these developed nations (Ochs, 1986).

Most importantly, they saw also repressive act of the western world where the major western media tend to treat the cultures of the industrialized nations as superior and place them at the top of this imaginary hierarchy, while the cultures of the developing nations are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy (Einer, 1965). For instance, we always see the journalist lump together the 54 nations of African continent as one while the continent is often portrayed as a crocodile-infested dark continent where jungle life has perpetually eluded civilization (Tokunbo, 2000). These gross misrepresentations and imbalance in the inter-national news flow was a big concern to the developing countries, therefore there was a burning desire for a radical overhaul of the present international information system to a new information order where free flow of information will be equitable and balanced. They wanted the world communication system to reflect the diversity and equality of all human races more just and more beneficial to the whole community of mankind. It was on this background that the New World Information and communication order (NWICO) debate was born. It was the greatest debates in the field of international communication in the 1970s and 1980s (Tokunbo, 2000).

NWICO debate: Objective of NWICO debate

From documented report of several media experts, they all noted that the fundamental objective of NWICO debate was to seek for transnational flow of information, to resolve inequality in information resources, to promote cultural and commercial values of information and maintain fairness in the news distribution (Tokunbo, 2000). It was indeed a hot debate as summed up by different sources.

According to one document compiled by one German scholar on this NWICO debate, He wrote that there was a consensus from the participants resulting in adopting the resolution at the 19th General Conference of UNESCO in Nairobi in 1976 and at the 31st United Nations General Assembly which was aimed in promotion of the development of national communication systems in the developing countries (Kleinwachter, Nordenstreng, Gerbner, & Mowlana, 1993).

Outcomes of NWICO debate

From the documents emanating from the debate, we assume that the case of the developing world was well presented, noting that some major powers were complacent but not completely satisfied of the decision made in the meeting which we believe was among the reasons that made the realization of the demands a tall dream. Aside this unsatisfactorily disposition of the west, some other issues cast doubt on the realization of the decision for example, within the framework of the resolution, there were some questions unanswered. Firstly, there was no proper definition of how the implementation process of the NWICO debate was to be carried. Secondly, the censorship and media accountability clauses of the NWICO were too ambiguous. (Tokunbo, 2000), (Fore, 1982).

Furthermore, there was underground quibbles and grumbling among the attendants from the west that, the NWICO demands were seen as purely the sole views of Souths elites. Immediately after the release of the resolution to the public, U.S. press reacted with rage, panic and considerable bias. Even the U.S. newspapers accused UNESCO of encouraging censorship, state control of the press, licensing of journalists by the state, and, in general, of being the arch-enemy of freedom of the press. (Fore, 1982).

This confusion reinvigorates the western nations suppressive desire to lead, who are already fearing that the hegemonic and monopolistic ownership and control of international communication systems and patterns of information flow were about to be destabilized and disestablished (Okigbo C. C., 1996). This fear prompted the infamous speech by Ronald Reagan the President of United States who spoke as quoted in the New York Times of September 22, 1987 saying that we cannot permit attempts to control the media and promote censorship under the ruse of a so-called new World Information Order, therefore confusion broke and Britain and the United States revoked their membership of the UNESCO and then walked out of the NWICO debate. Their withdrawal immediately weaken the organization political and financial strength as both countries are the largest financiers of the UNESCO.

On this account, the NWICO debate then suffered a big blow. Although UK later joined back to UNESCO in 1996 while US rejoined the organization in 2003, in a practical sense, some media expert claimed that the NWICO debate was a failure. But on paper, it was a success. Owing to the fact that all media outlets restored to status quo. Seeing this development, it was clear that it will not be acceptable by the developing countries. Therefore, the debate was far from over, considering the crystal evidence/facts that the Western media never deviated from their distortion of news and use of the pejorative adjectives and stereotypes when reporting news from developing world. (Fore, 1982).

Post NWICO debate

With the heat and attention generated by the NWICO debate, one may think that the western mass media may surrender to the pressure to at least engage the developing countries in a more acceptable standard, but on the contrary the Western media made no concrete effort to present the developing countries in its full flower. For example, we observed that the news of the Africa is still being infected

with the prevailing wisdom of the 19th century. As re-cried by Tojo in his essay he opined that, it is quite disheartening to still see that at the dawn of the 21st century, the North and South are still living in Many Worlds, One Voice. The one voice is the one the industrially rich North has imposed through its claim to economic and technological superiority and hegemony. Thus, the new world order does not seem to guarantee economic rights, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, cultural pluralism, autonomy and sovereignty of the nations of the South. It is perhaps a new world order of military intimidation and bashing of the weaker nation states of the South (Sean , Elie, Sergei , & Somavia, 1980), (Fore, 1982).

Contemporary Perspective: What Next?

Is the demand for free flow of information by the developing world a legitimate one? Before rushing to a conclusion that the western mass media have indeed been above reproach in their handling of sensitive international issues, we would like to seek for more justification of the claim and know exactly what is meant when we talk about improving the free flow of information and what impact it could make in the developing world. Therefore it will be more logical to argue in the line of the importance of balance and free flow of information. On this ground, we should bear in mind that media has enormous influence in shaping the public perception and imagination of the situation in or around the world. So ignoring these facts will always cause a serious impediment to the international cooperation.

From many materials we have seen, we noticed that developing countries are not seeking for patronizing information to be disseminated about them but rather they seek for a balance and free flow of information where both good and bad sides of their stories are reflected in the information shared to the public. Since we have establish these fact, then it may be damaging to continue marrying developing nation with stories of economic degradation and political unrest which we believe will only continue to exacerbate the current mistrust and undermine the essence of professional journalism and inter-cultural communication that supposed to exist in professional journalism (Kleinwachter, Nordenstreng, Gerbner, & Mowlana, 1993).

Conclusion & Recommendation

It is a fact that the world's communications system is dominated by western institutions. The reason for this imbalance as mentioned above is partly because those with greater power tend to exercise greater influence. Today, developing worlds are attempting to redress the balance in the flow of information. And the stronger the developing world grows, the greater will be its ability to achieve essential changes in the international communication system. But it is not enough to say the third world must wait patiently until it is strong enough to compel change. More serious attempt must be made to improve the situation without waiting for the balance in world power to change. Therefore, a more renewed effort should be in place to help redress the balance in the flow of information because the present system is unjust, and those who are champion of freedom must equally be champion of justice and therefore it becomes a necessity that they should lead in helping to reduce manifest inequalities in information flow.

Furthermore, it is obvious that we cannot afford to continue to ignore the fact that the present imbalance in the flow of information is a serious impediment to international harmony and cooperation so every effort must be made to see that these dispute is resolved in a manner that will be helpful to both participants.

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