

## **ABSTRACT**

The domination of the western world at the global news scene which is about the imbalance in the flow of news internationally has continued to generate interest because of the rapid growth of several countries. This is because the issues that gave birth to the debate in the first instance have remained fluid, notwithstanding the impact of social media on the unidirectional flow of news and information due to the liberalization and proliferation of the newsgathering and dissemination processes at the grassroots level. This study analyses the content of U.S. media coverage to determine the impact of social media on the content and flow of news in the United States. In other words, this study hopes to find if traditional media organizations in the U.S. are still setting public agenda in the era of social media networks popularity.

# INTRODUCTION

The debate on the reason western world dominate global flow of news has remained fluid with the emergence of social media, which have contributed to the liberalization of sourcing, disseminating, and gatekeeping of news via online and digital platforms. The News Flow Debate (NFD) is a conceptual framework whereby developing nations demanded for a change in the present pattern of news flow between them and the Western industrialised nations. This debate was a core issue in the now stalled discourse on the New World Information and Communication Order. The debate was basically about “Free Flow” or “Free and Balanced Flow” of information between the western developed nations and the underdeveloped or mildly put, the developing societies in the South part of the world.

This study therefore analyses the global news flow debate in the light of social media networks to determine whether some of the issues of “free flow” and “free and balanced flow” still reverberate even with the emergence of social media networks and their tendencies towards news liberalization. This study is also expected to determine the impact of social media networks on the media agenda setting theory. The importance of this study cannot be overemphasized. The emergence of social media networks has encouraged mass participation of the ordinary public, news liberalization, citizens/individual’s engagement in news production and dissemination business, as well as news democratization. This is the current situation that was not envisaged during the introductory stages of the news flow debate. It is important therefore to study the impact of this new phenomenon on the news flow debate. Second, recent happenings especially the mobilisation of the people for mass revolts in the Muslim Arab States (The Arab Spring) suggests that the social media networks have been accepted and therefore cannot be wished away. How this plays up in the context of the current analysis of news flow debate is worth studying.

The two questions that drive this study are:

1. Is the news flow debate still relevant with the emergence of social media networks in the news production and distribution business?
2. Is the traditional media still setting public agenda in this era of social media network popularity?

## **Global News Flow**

Global news flow (also referred to as international news flow) is a field of study that deals with the news coverage of events in foreign countries. It describes and explains the flow of news from one country to another.

Studies on global news flow typically attempt to understand why certain countries are more newsworthy than others. Along the years it has been found that the economic power of countries plays a particularly crucial role in their news prominence as well as the presence of international news agencies. Thus, the US has been found to be very prominent in news mentions around the world (18%), followed by China, Western European and Middle Eastern countries (about 3-5% each).

The unequal representation of the world and the under-representation of developing countries have been already of a great concern at least since the 1950s, since they influence the way people perceive the world and the image of countries. This problem was later addressed in the MacBride report, and his set of recommendations for a New World Information and Communication Order. The unequal representation of the world has been also linked to the World System Theory, and the unequal economic structure of the world.

Recent empirical studies show that among online news websites and news aggregators the unequal representation of the world has been perpetuated and even further intensified. Economically powerful countries, as well as their opponent countries (mainly in the Middle East and Asia) get the most news coverage around the world.

## **Background to the News Flow Debate**

The antecedent to the call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) centres on the view by the developing nations that the existing order is unfavourable and unacceptable to them. This is supported by the findings of the MacBride Commission which investigated the claims and released its findings which indicted the west in its handling of global flow of news.

The MacBride Commission, however, noted that part of this imbalance is often branded the logical consequence of the developed gap between the industrialized nations and the third world. In their counter claims, some of the western nations on the opposing side of the debate at the UNESCO forum argued that the world is a free marketplace of ideas where information/news flow should be free and unhindered. Okigbo (1996) was, however, worried that even though the world is a free marketplace of ideas where information flow should not be hindered; he observed that the west's refusal to recognize anything insidious in the virtual saturation of the underdeveloped African nations with news reports and cultural artefacts originating from the West at the detriment of African political, economic, and cultural stability should be of global concern. Third World journalists and scholars, on their part, counter-charged that what the West call global "free flow" of information and news is, in fact, a euphemism for the economic, political and cultural domination of developing nations by the West with the aid of its powerful transnational news agencies. The major focus of the developing nations' grievance is that there is a deliberate attempt by the developed countries, especially the western world, to exploit the advantages of their industrial and economic superiority to establish and perpetuate domination in mass media systems over the developing nations both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative imbalance is about the amount of news flowing from industrialized nations to the un-industrialized nations and vice versa. For instance, if a content analysis of CNN, BBC etc. is carried out, it is likely that out of 100 news stories, maybe only 10 will be about the un-industrialized nations put together. Ekeanyanwu (2005) also noted that out of the paltry 10 news stories about the un-industrialized nations, nine maybe all negatives. This is qualitative imbalance. Ekeanyanwu (2007) further argues that South nations never get a mention in the media of the western world unless the bizarre or disaster/crisis oriented event occurs. The implication for this is that news about poverty, hunger, political struggles, diseases, wars, coup d'états, disasters and other forms of crises are reported in the Western media. These same types of unfavourable news are relayed back to the developing countries. Egwu (2001:20) highlighted

the South's situation in 2001 by juxtaposing its situation to the media saturation in the United States: The United States has over 25,000 periodicals [By 2001]; over 1,200 book publishers; over 10,000 radio stations (AM & FM); over 1,000 television stations; and some 26million other types of (e.g. citizens band) Radios. There is therefore a situation of media monopoly by the North, not only in hardware, but also in software. News Agencies also abound in the North... to the annoying neglect and marginalization of the South, especially Africa.

A comparative content analysis of four British and American newspaper's coverage showed that only 0.1% of the entire news space was dedicated to African news over a period of four months (Nwosu, 1987). This revealed serious under-reporting of Africa. The study also supported earlier findings that much of the Western reporting on Africa is characterized by "bush fire" journalism where crises predominate to the vital exclusion of development-oriented news.

The developed nations also dominated the international flow of news well into the 1990s due to their domination of the world communication systems and resources, which include news agencies, satellite broadcast facilities, newspapers and magazines (Okunna, 1993). World news had always been dominated by the "Big Four" international news agencies: Reuters headquartered in the United Kingdom, the Associated Press, which is based in the U.S., United Press International, also based in the U.S., and Agence France Presse, which is based in France (Okunna, 1993). Third World countries have made good progress in reducing their dependence on other types of imported western media programs and reduced their total reliance on the "Big Four" for world news. Despite the establishment of national and regional news agencies, this situation has not changed in the last two decades as much as it necessary to democratize communication in the world. In Africa, for instance, there is still increasing concern among African countries that the news coverage of their affairs by foreign news agencies is grossly inadequate (Ochogwu, 1987: 7; Golan, 2008; de Beer, 2010). While most media houses in Africa have regular slots and spaces for news originating from the developed world, African countries are either not being covered at all in the media of the western world (quantitative) or endure malicious negative news reports about events in these countries (qualitative).

The MacBride Commission, which was set up in December 1977 by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to study communication problems globally states in her final report that News flows tend towards a North-South

direction and inhibit development of exchanges between developing countries themselves. While there is a flood of news on the East/West axis between North America and Europe, as well as, although on a lower level, between socialist and western countries, the much lesser one-way flow between North and South can hardly be called an exchange due to the excessive imbalance. There are, obviously, various reasons, both inside developing countries and on the international scene, which prevent media from counteracting the blanketing effect of the one-way flow. This belief has been reinforced by the Tinbergen report to the “Club of Rome” on information flow in 1977. The report states: “It must also be recognized that international dissemination has long formed the subject of discriminatory practices ... the monopolistic and discriminatory practices inherent in current international information dissemination must be deemed as one of the worst”. The argument here is that communication according to MacBride ET. al (1981); has become an “exchange between two unequal protagonists without necessarily having to compete, but instead allows the predominance of the more powerful, the richer and the better equipped to continue to monopolize the flow of news”. Momoh (1988:7) strengthens this view, when he states thus: “It is common knowledge that news from Third World countries usually make their appearance in the media of developed countries only when they are sensational and border on drama strong enough to arouse their sensibilities and sense of Okigbo (1990) also points out “despite the fact that the developing countries account for about 75 percent of the world population, less than 30 percent of world news coverage is devoted to them”. Okigbo argues further that this leads to a perpetual under- covering of the regions, the ultimate result of which is lack of adequate information about these areas”. He goes on to say that the flow of world news is mostly unidirectional. Thus, according to him, the average South citizen is more likely to know more about the western world than the Third World. This paucity of news flow from the Third World to the western world also means that the average westerner is likely to know very little about the Third World. This inadequate and biased flow of international news around the globe has led to the perpetuation of some prejudices and the holding of certain attitudes that do not support global co-operation based on fairness, equity and just treatment. Okigbo (1990:6) also points out “despite the fact that the developing countries account for about 75 percent of the world population, less than 30 percent of world news.

## **News Flow Debate and Social Media Networks**

The entrance of social media networks into the NFD added a unique twist into the global News Flow Controversy (NFC). They have helped to deconstruct the structure of news gathering and dissemination. De Beer (2010) regards them as informal news institutions which serve as “pervasive agents of globalization as well as democratization”. Social networking sites support the human need for social interaction, using internet and web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one too many) into social media dialogues (many to many). Facebook, one of the most popular of the social networks, has been reported to be the most trafficked social networking site with more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views each day. The site is tightly integrated into the daily media practices of its users. According to Cassidy (2006), the typical user spends about 20 minutes a day on the site and two-thirds of users log in at least once a day.

The online or virtual community created by the social networking sites is one of a kind. It is an active community and well informed about issues around them. It thrives on interactivity, open conversations and mass participation. This is where the NFD becomes relevant. Before their emergence, traditional or formal media channels seemed to have been weighed down by economic, political and other non-professional considerations in the coverage of world news. The social networks thrive on citizens’ or civic journalism whereby news democratization has made more and more information available to more persons at a marginal cost. However, a recent study by the Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) attempted to compare information flows between social media networks and mainstream media in the United State to argue that global news flow has not really changed much in the era of social media emergence and participation in the news flow process. The study found out that social media and the traditional media usually share the same agenda to some extent: They tend to be blockbuster events, and they cut across a wide variety of topic areas - the economy, health pandemics, and the deaths of well-known figures. In the 49 weeks studied, blogs and the mainstream press shared the top story just 13times. The storyline shared most was the U.S. economic crisis. Other storylines that drove attention on both platforms included the initial H1N1 flu outbreak in late spring, the June protests in Iran, the death of Senator Edward Kennedy in late August and the shooting at Ford Hood in early November (Pew Research Centre’s PEJ, 2010). The Pew Research Centre study also found out traces of differences in coverage between social media networks and mainstream traditional media in the United States. The results as presented in the tables below show that the social media are

beginning to cast shadows on mainstream traditional media claims to setting public and media agenda.

## **Where is the Centre of Global News Flow?**

The United States media industry before the emergence of social media networks (which is supported by improvements in New Communication Technologies (NCTs)), was arguably the world's new leader in terms of the traffic of news that emanated from the industry about the world. Then, no major happening in the world (in terms of what the West defines as news) escapes the lens of the U.S. media industry. However, following the economics of decline in the industry, international news coverage and reportage have declined in the United States thus questioning the notion that the United States media industry is the world's news leader. Livingston and Asmolov (2010) agree that the industry's bleak financial condition and the erosion of its basic structural elements, such as overseas bureaus were partly the major causes of this decline. Robinson (2007) also observes that media organizations can no longer afford to maintain expensive foreign bureaus "to report developments that seem of little concern to most readers and viewers in the United States". To further push forward the thesis of economic downturn as the root cause of the decline in international news coverage in the United States, Livingston and Asmolov (2010: 746-747) argue thus: Indeed, public indifference to foreign affairs news and its cost are among the chief causes of its decline in recent years. In 2007, advertising revenue for newspapers and their websites dropped 7.9 percent, followed by another 16.6 percent drop in 2008 (Newspaper Association of American, 2010). But the real financial blow came with the 2009 economic crisis when ad revenue for some newspapers dropped 30 percent for the first quarter, a figure made even more worrisome by an accelerating rate of decline.

In the heat of these crises, thousands of journalists have lost their jobs. In 2008 alone, Massine (2009) reports that newspapers (Journalists) lost 15, 974 jobs, followed by another 10,000 in the first six months of 2009. International news coverage, no doubt, got caught up in the web of this worst economic crisis to hit the U.S. media industry since the new century began. Livingston and Asmolov (2010) were, however, quick to point out that "not all of the news about the news is bad." According to their findings, the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and the Los Angeles Times still maintain a strong international presence in the core and strategic peripheral centres of the world news structure. Within this



economic crisis, new sources of international news for the United States audience also emerged. Global Post was founded in 2009 and has about 65 correspondents in 50 countries of the world (Allen, 2009). Livingston and Asmolov (2010) also note that World Focus is a new television station managed by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States which concentrates on global news coverage. Are these latest trends a sign of hope? Livingston and Asmolov (2010) attempt an answer: Though it is impossible to say with certainty, it seems reasonable to conclude that a handful of traditional news organizations will continue to devote the resource needed to cover global news responsibly. The wire and video services also must be factored into the equation. They, too, in some configuration, will continue to provide images and copy to domestic services unable or unwilling to post correspondents overseas. In short, a core element of traditional news services will remain, though perhaps leaner than they were during much of the twentieth century. A closer examination of Livingston and Asmolov (2010) arguments above suggests that their opinion is based on “technological, sociological and political trends that call for a remapping of our conceptual landscape and to a retooling of the vocabulary used for describing journalism and international affairs.” This seems to be in the mind of de Beer (2010) when he argues that the definitions of global vis-à-vis international, transnational, national or foreign are now mired in controversy. Supporting his arguments with works of such scholars as De Vereaux and Griffin (2006), Reese (2001) and Berglez (2008, 2009), de Beer (2010) notes that such terms assume the nation-state as the basis of analysis of what is national news or international news. Continuing, de Beer (2010) observes that, “it is not a question of foreign news (media reporting about news elsewhere in the world) as such becoming more global in scope, but rather that local (domestic/national) news, also when reported by foreign journalists, are expanding into a new form of global journalism.” The argument so far is that the terms national and international are now debatable as they relate to news flow on a globalized world. However, whichever way one considers these concepts the questions of whether the United States media system still qualifies as the world’s news leader or whether the centre of global news flow has shifted remains apt. With the current economic recession going on right now in the United States media industry, especially the Newspaper arm of it; the rise of citizens journalism and the inevitable dominance of social media networks in opening up the journalism space for greater mass participation and democratization of the news business; the United States has no option than to re-evaluate her reclining role in the global news flow scene or at least acknowledge the emergence of other “powers” in the NFD. Again, the issues being argued necessitate a re-conceptualization of the terms “journalism” and

“journalist”. Tables 1 to 4 as presented earlier in the previous section show that social media channels are already neck deep in setting agendas for public discourse. These results also show that there are similarities in daily or weekly issues for discourse between the social media networks and the traditional media organizations. Where they differ, it is even observed that the public line up behind the social media networks because of its participatory, interactive and free of obvious charges (cost) nature. Do these mean that social media participants now qualify to be called journalists? Is the interactive and mass participatory nature of social media journalism or the “new journalism”? It may be difficult to answer all of these questions in this single paper or in one swoop argument. The authors’ major concern is that the news liberalization processes should worry the world acclaimed “News Leader” of the globe – United States. Is this worry substantiated empirically or are we just making conjectures from a few observed happenings?

The Pew Research Centre’s project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) carried out series of surveys and studies using different scenarios and still reached similar conclusions on the News Flow Debate. Some of the relevant findings are presented below. These were from field studies carried from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010.

## **REASONS FOR WESTERN DOMINATION OF GLOBAL NEWS**

As elucidated earlier, the news flow of events globally is dominated by the Western World, majorly as an aftermath of colonization. The less advanced countries are still dependent on their colonial masters for vital information and communication structures amongst many other things.

The basics of the dispute in global news reporting and dissemination, boils down to the essence of journalism and reporting. Media organisations report news and events that is of most interest to their audience. They take into consideration, audience preferences in selection and consumption of both local and international news. McQuail (2005:262) explains the situation thus:

In the first place they result from the organization of news flow by way of agencies and each news medium’s own gatekeeping. The ultimate arbiter is the average suburban news consumer who is usually thought of as not very interested in in distance events. Agencies collect news ‘abroad’ with a view to what will interest the ultimate ‘home’ audience, and the

foreign news editors of home media apply an even more precise set of criteria of a similar kind. The result is to largely emanate news of distant places that is not dramatic or directly relevant to the receiving nation.

To understand the principles of media news reporting the criteria for news selection must be understood. According to Moemeka (2000:55):

Every mass media organisation is, each day, faced with the task of selecting from among many competing stories, those items that it is convinced will meet the expectations its audience. Events occurring in society come in their tens or hundreds; but media space or time is limited.

In light of this, it is expected that the media do a form of selection news stories through some benchmarks. These yardsticks for selection as relates with the discus on international news dissemination include relevance, proximity, and human interest.

Firstly, the stories that most interest the media audience are human interest stories. These stories appeal to their senses and emotional interests. Unfortunately, the most viewed media stories are those that have to do with negative events. As quoted earlier, Banerjee (1981) asserts that “the people of the developing countries make news in Europe and the USA only when they die of starvation or kill each other”.

Any selected story must also be relevant and of proximity to the audience of the media. Whatever is most important to the consumers are considered first before any other addition. Stories that directly affect the consumers of media content are mostly considered first for publication before other stories. The factor of proximity which has to do with distance - geographical or emotional - of the news events occurrence is also very important media audience patronage as stories would most probably read if they have an emotional or geographical attachment to them. For instance, Nigerians would rather consume information of news about a new policy of Nigeria (geographic), or a news story about a Nigerian that won an award in China (emotional).

If these yardsticks are not considered when packaging and distribution news, the probability of getting media patronage from the audience would be quite slim. The audience would rather prefer to consume information that pass the news criteria test before optionally delving into any other news story. Media organisations are businesses that ultimately survive from the

patronage of its consumers. They also have a responsibility to provide news that is relevant to their audience.

It is only unrealistic for Third World nations to expect the more developed nation to focus on publishing news about their economic development.

### **Power and control**

Developed nations own and control the technology and infrastructure of global mass media. They have the control over new packaging and distribution over less developed nations. This allows them the power and control for perpetual media control and influence.

Ekeanyanwu (2008) notes that, 'They own the media, the technology, the software as well as the experts and professional knowledge to run the media.' These, they are not prepared to trade on a platter of gold'. Ownership and domination of the necessary resources for the running of transnational mass media gives the first world countries the advantage in international communication. This power comes with benefits to the advantaged nations, who can control global news flow to avoid international image blemishing, create and maintain international image, political and socio-economic benefits, etc. Harris, (1981:357-8) as quoted by Thussu, (2000) opines that 'Western domination, international information system, with its origins in the international news media network, is geared to western economic and political interest and projecting their version of reality through these global networks to the rest of the world'

## CONCLUSION

News Flow studies have remained a valid area of scholarship since the early 80s. Scholars have continued to ask questions on what influences coverage and why some are favoured and others are not. These questions are not rhetorical but the answers maybe farfetched. However, the United States has continued to maintain her dominance on the global flow of information not until recent happenings in the Information Technology world as well as the economic recession threatening the traditional media systems in that country. How will all of these play out? Is the U.S. still able to exact her dominance on the news flow issue in her current economic crisis? These are valid questions still waiting for answers. This paper, however, using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010), concludes that the United States coverage of the world has shifted focus in terms of the quantity of news about non-U.S. that you can find in the U.S. media. Whether this is cost situated or that there are other predictive factors causing this is still an area to research into. Our major submission here is that if the trend continues unabated in the next five years, United States will cease to be the world news leader in terms of being the eyes and ears of the globe.

The fact that the Western World dominates the transnational news flow, despite the mutual misrepresentation, must not be forgotten. It is quite disturbing that after many years of national independence, countries, especially in Africa, still depend on their mother nations for vital resources

A point that must be noted is that the imbalance in news flow started as a result of colonialism, but has persisted because of a complacent dependence on the foreign nations for technological and industrial infrastructure. The pitiful image of the Third World nations cannot be wholly blamed on the First World. As explained earlier, news that will be published and news that will be discarded depends on the audience preference. The First World will not publish what the audience are not interested in concerning the Third World nations. Either through news, movies, music, etc., the task of image creation and maintenance falls to the developing nations. Note that there is not enough space to contain every news item that gets into the media, and only those that are most important will be published or broadcast.

Another issue is that there is form of preference for foreign products in developing nations. This mind set is not only seen in the media but also in the general economic sphere. People in

developing countries often prefer to patronize products that are from more developed nations, regardless of the actual quality of the product. In the media system, people enjoy consuming information that is reported about the more developed nations. This, in conjunction with the complacency for development and actual independence would only lead to a worse transnational imbalance and one – way flow of global information.

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