

11

Media Inequity for Developing Nations?

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The present-day information system enshrines a form of political, economic and cultural colonialism which is reflected in the often tendentious interpretation of news concerning the developing countries. This consists in highlighting events whose significance, in certain cases, is limited or even non-existent; in collecting isolated facts and presenting them as a 'whole'; in setting out facts in such a way that the conclusion to be drawn from them is necessarily favorable to the interests of the transnational system; in amplifying small-scale events so as to arouse justified fears; in keeping silent on situations unfavorable to the interests of the countries of origin of these media.

~ Mustapha Masmoudi, 1979

The tragedy of September 11, 2001, reminded us of several facts. The first issue, as many scholars quickly pointed out, concerned how few American readers were aware of the Al Qaeda network and its rooted hatred and worldwide operation against the United States. A significant part of the blame has been placed on the news media for failing to better inform the public about Al Qaeda and extreme Muslim fundamentalist movements. But this lack of coverage may be just the tip of the iceberg.

For several decades, media scholars have criticized the thin international coverage in American media. Some pointed to the alarming trend of scaling back foreign news bureaus and the subsequent shrinkage of the international newshole; others suggested a tendency toward biased, sensationalized event-driven coverage about foreign countries. With increasing globalization in the

21st century, one would expect to see stronger efforts to improve international coverage. But the insufficient and incomplete information disseminated about other parts of the world appears to suggest problems resembling the ones discussed in the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) decades ago. By revisiting these unsolved issues of NWICO in the new context, this chapter aims to shed some light on the problems the world's media are facing and, subsequently, to offer some remedies to resolve the impasse.

ORIGINS OF THE ISSUE

Anyone familiar with modern world history knows that a great number of countries gained their independence from the European powers during the 1960s and 1970s. These newly formed countries, long exploited by Western imperialism, had to build new nations from scratch, and one tool they desperately needed for development was a communication infrastructure — nationwide telecommunication networks, mass media, news-gathering and news-distribution systems.

The effort facing each of these developing countries has been daunting, because communication systems built before independence were designed purely for the Western powers to capitalize on each country's natural and human resources. The existing communication systems in these former colonies, therefore, were mostly vertical instead of horizontal. In other words, it was far more technically possible for these developing nations to receive information from the former colonial centers, such as France or the United Kingdom, than from their adjacent neighbors. For many years, it was common for a phone call between Lagos, Nigeria, to Nairobi, Kenya, to meander through London before reaching the intended recipient.

After gaining political recognition on the world stage, these newly independent nations started to fight for additional resources from major international organizations — including communication resources.

Two noteworthy organizations that emerged from the NWICO declaration were the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Lobbying UNESCO, the representatives of these nations contended that the state of transnational communication was fundamentally imbalanced — more information was flowing from the centers to the peripherals than the

other way around. They also argued that most international news was dominated by a few Western news agencies, such as Reuters, the Associated Press (AP) and Agence France-Presse (AFP), whose news products not only failed to meet their needs but also created a biased view of the world that these nations' leaders believed to be another form of imperialism. The world they have seen over the last two decades has inevitably been determined by Western preferences and filtered by Western views.

Above all, the representatives of these developing nations maintained that the scanty news about them, if any, provided by the Western news agencies was predominantly negative. The topics often centered on natural disaster, accident, or political instability. Hardly news from the developing nations was positive or encouraging. Mort Rosenblum, an experienced foreign correspondent, echoed this point with his first-hand observation that for developing countries only news about "coups and earthquakes" could pass through the Western gatekeepers.

Apart from the Western domination of the news menu, the developing nations did not have the kind of communication infrastructure or human resources that were available in most Western nations, which created a large gap between the advanced "North" and the backward "South." They hoped to employ NWCIO for their countries' advancement in communication development.

The heated and ideology-laden UNESCO debates did not result in any fruitful and constructive blueprint to resolve the pointed problems. The delegates from developing nations that represented the majority of UNESCO membership called for NWICO to advocate more balanced international news flow and news resources. The resulting official report of the lengthy debates was a philosophical document that can be open to multiple interpretations, and it bluntly unveiled the conflicting views and entrenched interests in the issues between the blocs. Frustrated with the unwavering viewpoints, the United States, the United Kingdom and Singapore left UNESCO in 1985, which symbolically ended the emotional and polemic debates and financially disabled the organization.

Even though the discussion and ensuing scholarly research interest about the NWICO issues have significantly waned since the late 1980s, the questions raised by the debates have not been adequately addressed by the United Nations or any other international or national entities. Nor have the degree and scope of the problems been abated. For one thing, the gap of communication logistics between the developed and the developing nations has been wider

than ever. Tokyo's telecommunication system is bigger than the entire African continent. A substantial percentage of households in sub-Saharan African nations do not even have television or a telephone, much less personal computer or access to the Internet. The media-related human resources in developing nations are no comparison to those of the developed world. Meanwhile, media markets in the West have been restructured to such an extent that the nationality of media ownership has become almost indistinguishable and market demands have become the dominant — if not the only — force in providing or changing media content. International news — a news category that proves to be more expensive than others — seems to be hit the hardest. As media conglomerates struggle to please Wall Street, the operation and coverage of foreign news have been reduced. All of these above recurring phenomena, plus the return of the United States into the UNESCO in September 2002 after an 18-year absence, may offer a compelling reason to revisit the dispute and the relevant issues of the New World Information and Communication Order.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE DEVELOPING NATIONS

As expressed by many participants in the UNESCO debates, one of the fundamental problems faced by the developing nations was a lack of communication resources, in terms of both hardware and software. Many Third World nations suffered from various political, economic and societal problems that were closely intertwined with the communication counterpart. Even after several decades of trying to improve living conditions, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa — almost all were former colonies of European powers — still achieve a dismal level of GDP per capita, less than \$1,000 for most countries. Therefore, building a technology-heavy mass media or communication infrastructure may not necessarily be each nation's first priority. With the advent of the Internet and the ensuing information revolution, the developing nations will have a harder time catching up with e-commerce and the information super-highway that has emerged in their First World counterparts. Communication scholars and international organizations are deeply concerned with this further digital divide between the haves and the have-nots, fearing that the Third World countries may not ever be able to benefit from the advanced technologies.

Representatives from the developing nations in the UNESCO debates

also argued that the kind of news that comes from the Western news agencies is not what the developing nations need. They received a lot of news about the Western nations; yet the news about the regions they were interested in was scarce, and if available, often distorted and biased. The news provided by these Western news agencies, in their view, served as an agent of imperialism, shaping the worldviews of their hapless Third World audiences.

The proposed alternative to this system was development journalism, which was ostensibly homegrown journalism designed to highlight the positive side of a nation and elevate citizens and thus fuel their aspirations to help their country succeed. Development journalism was supposed to counterbalance the Western news and serve the goal of national development. But it never actually panned out. Over the years, many exchange news programs designed for the developing nations — such as Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP) — have ceased to be popular primarily because these exchange pools contain defective news copy and “protocol news,” which often features only diplomatic activities and itineraries of governmental officials. Consequently, alternative news still doesn’t travel as far as traditional news copy provided by the Western news organizations.

Although the concept of development communication, which would use information and entertainment-oriented content to facilitate national development, was extremely popular between the 1960s and the 1980s, research that investigated the *effects* of such media since then has been mixed. Many factors, known and unknown, contributed to the failure. As indicated above, development journalism often results in propagandistic or protocol journalism. Additionally, blunt governmental intervention in journalistic practice is still common in many developing nations, which was the last thing desired by those who espoused development journalism.

Since the 1980s CNN and large media conglomerates have begun dominating many news markets in the developing world. Virtually everywhere on earth — from Beijing to Bogotá, from Cairo to Cape Town — Anglo-American media channels and English-speaking content are ubiquitous. In a way, their presence is seen as an even more influential force than the old colonial counterparts. It is simply impossible for any media corporation in developing nations to compete with giants like Time Warner or News Corporation, two of the biggest media conglomerates in the world. This is probably why Oliver Boyd-Barrett argued in “National and International Agencies” that the Euro-American dominance of global news flow will only be strengthened as time progresses, while the idea of building national news agencies will probably be

doomed: One path to achieve self-reliance of foreign news copy, according to a Nigerian study done by Festus Eribo in 1999, is to focus on regional coverage. That way, news media can afford the cost of sending their own correspondents to cover adjacent locales.

There appears to be more bad news for developing nations in the beginning of this new century. William Hachten pointed out in his book *The World News Prism* that some developing nations since the NWICO have developed new problems that are harming their already inferior information environment. Racism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism create more barriers to reaching and presenting the truth in the mass media of many nations. Governmental control and intervention of the news media seem to be on the rise as well. On the positive side, Scott Shane, in *Dismantling Utopia*, argued that it is information — delivered by media — that destroyed the Soviet Union. Since the 1990s, the media systems in Eastern Europe seem to mirror their counterparts in Western Europe, and many have been integrated into major media conglomerates. Further examination of this region's changing media landscape and its effects on post-totalitarian societies should be worthwhile.

Another major issue that relates more to the developed world than its developing counterparts is the oligopoly of global media, which has caused increasing concern. Thanks to deregulation in the United States during the 1990s, more and more media companies merged and became both vertically and horizontally integrated. Time Warner and the Walt Disney group (which owns Capitol City-ABC, Walt Disney and ESPN) are two examples. European media companies have also flexed their muscles in the U.S. market. For example, Germany's publishing giant Bertelsmann and the French water company Vivendi-Universal both own U.S. media outlets. Although Vivendi began selling off its U.S. properties in 2003, the larger trend will probably remain, with nationality of media ownership becoming increasingly difficult to define. Transnational media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, for example, has had a tremendous impact on news and entertainment menu around the world. Sensational, market-driven, yet conservative media fare enables him to dominate various markets on many continents, which certainly deserves scholarly examination and policymaking scrutiny.

Other empirical studies finished in the two decades following the NWICO revealed interesting results as well. Chin-Chuan Lee and his colleagues examined news about China's 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and found that the coverage was framed to reflect foreign policy and national interests, a finding that indirectly challenges the doctrine of objectivity embraced by Western

media practitioners. After the Cold War, H. Denis Wu found that economic interaction had the largest impact on the level of international news flow across national borders, which suggested that developing countries, with their traditionally frail economies, are less likely to get coverage in the Western media than countries that do more business with the West. On the other side, it seems that Western news about entertainment and pop culture travels farther and faster in developing nations — and easily passes the strictest censorship — than news about politics. The deaths of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy, Jr., and various paparazzi scoops about Hollywood stars that have drawn worldwide media attention seem to demonstrate that the power of stardom (usually from the West) sometimes overshadows hard news.

Another issue that surfaced after NWICO was the impact of a nation's public relations tactics on American media coverage. In *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy*, Jarol Manheim documented a large number of countries that invested heavily — often with an annual budget of millions of dollars — in varied programs of "strategic public diplomacy" in the United States, trying to influence public or elite opinion in order to turn American foreign policy to their advantage. Although a major goal of public diplomacy is often just to provide people with information about a given country or region, this kind of transnational public relations can be problematic in that the public may be misled by the specially tailored messages and subsequently make mistaken political decisions that affect international relations. Additionally, because strategic public diplomacy is expensive, nations with no resources to spare in this area inevitably have less clout to compete, exacerbating the already uneven coverage of the haves and have-nots.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE DEVELOPED NATIONS

The first argument from the U.S.-led group against the NWICO was that the news media should be independent of governmental control or intervention. The representatives of the developed nations strongly defended the concept and practice of a free flow of information across national borders. To Western nations, the press — at least theoretically — should deliver objective, impartial news to the audience to help them make informed decisions and monitor their governments in order to reveal corruption and ultimately mitigate the level of wrongdoing in national governments. Therefore, they categorically

argued *against* the NWICO because they believed it threatened the chances of nurturing an independent press in developing nations. Not surprisingly, the United States led this charge, pushing the ideals of the First Amendment, which provides strong legal protection for the American press.

The West also rebuffed the NWICO's demand for greater and more positive news coverage about the developing world. In addition to its belief in the necessity of a free press, Western journalism embraces other traditional news values that are at odds with the concept of development journalism. Anyone familiar with Western news values knows that conflict sells and that bad news is good news for the news media. Therefore, it would be hard for the Western media to stop covering natural catastrophes, corruption, scandals and wars. To them, the tendency to be interested in these topics is simply part of human nature and must be considered when deciding what stories to cover.

One foundation of an independent press in many Western nations is that such a press must be privately owned. The public media system is fairly weak, particularly in the United States, and many Western governments are reluctant to intervene directly in the media's functions. Facing media industry lobbyists, Western politicians hesitate to commit to certain policies and regulations that would make media lose markets overseas and suffer financially. At issue here is an important economic interest that is at stake for Western nations, which see information as a commodity while many other cultures see information as a vehicle for social good. Based on the rationale from the developed nations, foreign news production and transnational news flow ought to be determined by editorial choices and market demand. So the amount of news about certain nations or regions and the nature of the content should be determined solely by the needs of the audience or the advertisers rather than by the requirements made by the government or any organization of the United Nations.

This *laissez faire* policy toward media operations in the West, argue some researchers, has led to the recent trend of downsizing foreign correspondents. A recent study by H. Denis Wu and John Maxwell Hamilton indicated that U.S. foreign correspondents were unsatisfied with their working environments and editorial supports. Moreover, scholars from Daniel Riffe to Michael Emery have confirmed that newspaper space and broadcast time devoted to international news has shrunk steadily and substantially during the past few decades, making international news an "endangered species." As a fundamental business doctrine, corporations minimize expenses and maximize revenue. Given that gathering good, solid information from abroad is costly, it may not be surprising to see news media, now run by MBAs, abandon their social responsibility

role and reduce overseas correspondents to boost corporate earnings.

Many attribute decreasing international news coverage to lack of interest among Western audiences, which is still the primary source of revenue for the major international news services. The end of the Cold War may have contributed to the abatement of people's interest in foreign affairs. Without the constant threat of nuclear war and daunting rhetoric from the formidable Soviet bloc, Americans are sometimes criticized for becoming complacent and paying more attention to such backyard issues as education, social security and health care.

There has also been a dramatic shift in international news coverage. The Cold War frame that dominated international news for decades ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. That Cold War framework, as mentioned earlier, has been replaced by the level of economic relations between countries. The extensive coverage of the 1998 Asian stock-market collapse and the ensuing recession in some countries provided vivid examples of the focus on the economy. After the 9-11 terrorist attacks, however, there are signs of a rekindled interest in international news coverage, particularly news from the Middle East, even though the news operation overall has not changed significantly.

RESOLUTION

A reconsideration of the issues generated from both sides of the New World Information and Communication Order is more relevant in the post-9-11 world than ever before. It is probably fair to say that the issues raised in those UNESCO debates still haunt us. Some of the issues have changed in shape over the years, but most remain unresolved. One of the most important of these is the indisputable discrepancy of media-related resources between the advanced northern and the indigent southern hemispheres. The advent of the Internet may not benefit developing nations as much as it has the Western world, but there is hope for the developing nations to make the technological leap. Moving down the rung, one can find that international news flow is still predominantly vertical, but most developing nations seem ready to abandon development journalism and let the Western media enter their markets. Whether Western news providers can actually meet the needs of developing nations remains to be seen, but it appears that in the beginning of the 21st century, developing nations have more leeway in deciding their news menu for their audiences.

Given the alarming trend of decreasing international correspondents and shrinking international news coverage, it is important to ponder the ramifications of this scenario and consider ways to increase and improve international news coverage for the audience all over the world. International organizations and not-for-profit agents may invest resources in this arena to ensure the world is well connected and informed. Since history indicates that governmental intervention would be unlikely to work in an increasingly globalized world, making sure that alternative channels for access in foreign news and creating incentives for media to cover international news should be promising pathways. Another solution is to elevate reader interest and demand in this news category. Education and additional exposure to foreign nations and international affairs may be the key to boost the audience's interest in international news.

Another factor that must receive serious consideration regarding the future of international news is the Internet. This newcomer may continue to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is far more convenient for people to tap into the Internet to search and access foreign news than via other traditional media. Digitalization and the information superhighway make it easy to publish and download information instantaneously. The Internet makes it possible for developing nations to receive alternative and independent providers of news. On the other hand, the Internet could exacerbate the already vast digital divide. After all, poor countries simply cannot afford the advanced technologies and costly infrastructure needed to join the cyber world. The U.S. Congress International Relations Subcommittee held one hearing in 2001 focusing on this very issue. More research on this area is desperately needed.

It is saddening that most of the problems pointed out decades ago in debates on the issue of media inequity remain unresolved. Moreover, William Hachten reported in 1999 that some of the developing nations have even retrogressed and gotten caught up with new problems. The advanced nations have the moral responsibility to provide aid to those needy nations, especially in terms of technical transfusion and human resource training. Furthermore, improvements of other aspects of life in developing nations — such as economy, education, environment, and health care — may also be essential before their citizens can really get to enjoy news from every corner of the world.

The NWICO might have attracted more attention from academics than from the authorities, media industries and world organizations that actually can initiate changes. Since the end of the debates, there is no lack of normative models proposed by communication scholars. Forming a *theoretical framework* for international communication is undoubtedly important. An alternative

route that is less often taken, however, is to engender sound and more practical *blueprints* that can get organizations involved in solving the problems. Only through realistic assessment, systematic planning and close cooperation can the current state of international news flow and coverage of developing countries be improved. Perhaps the return of the United States to the UNESCO is a good start.



RECOMMENDED READINGS

Boyd-Barrett, Oliver, and Daya Kishan Thussu. *Contra-Flow in Global News*. London: John Libbey & Company, 1992. This book documents the various efforts of non-Western countries to develop alternative news agencies.

Davis, Allison. "Bridging the digital divide: Leading the disenfranchised into the information age," 185-91 in *Global News*, Tony Silvia, ed. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001. This chapter examines the issue of the digital divide between the economic haves and have-nots in various nations.

Emery, Michael. "An endangered species: The international newshole." *Gannett Center Journal* 3:4 (1989): 151-64. The article discloses the shrunken newshole for international news across U.S. media.

Eribo, Festus. "Global news flow in Africa: Nigerian media coverage of international news, 1979-1995." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 23:3 (1999): 154-60. This article provides a case study of Nigerian media coverage of international news after the NWICO debates.

Galtung, Johan, and Richard C. Vincent. *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order?* Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1992. This book provides a theoretically oriented and normative model about international news coverage.

Hoge, James F., Jr. "Foreign news: Who gives a damn?" *Columbia Journalism Review* 36:4 (1997): 48-52. This article discusses the value and appeal of foreign news in the U.S. market.

Contemporary Media Issues

Lee, Chin-Chuan, and Junghye Yang. "Foreign news and national interest: Comparing U.S. and Japanese coverage of a Chinese student movement." *Gazette* 56 (1997): 1-18. This article compares the coverage of the same event across the nations and unveils the role national interest plays in shaping news coverage.

Lee, Chin-Chuan, Zhongdang Pan, Joseph Man Chan, and Clement Y. K. So. "Through the eyes of U.S. media: banging the democracy drum in Hong Kong." *Journal of Communication* 51 (2001): 345-65. This article considers the impact of ideology on news presentation with a case study.

MacBride, Sean. *Many Voices, One World*. New York: Unipub, 1980. This landmark book documents the discussion of the debates between the developed and the developing worlds.

McPhail, Thomas L. *Electronic Colonialism: The Future of International Broadcasting and Communication*, 2d ed. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987. This book discusses the issues of international broadcasting and their implications and ramifications in world communication.

Overholser, Geneva. "Media failed to keep us informed of foreign affairs." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 20 September 2001. This article argues that the U.S. media have failed to live up to their obligation to inform Americans about foreign affairs.

Pew International Journalism Program. "America and the World: The Impact of September 11 on US Coverage of International News," 2002. Accessed on September 30, 2002. <http://www.pewfellowships.org/conferences/impact911/PewSurvey2002.pdf>. This report analyzes the findings of a survey on the quality of international news, readers' interest, and the status of it as a news category.

Riffe, Daniel, Charles F. Aust, Ted C. Jones, Barbara Shoemake and Shyam Sundar. "The Shrinking Foreign Newshole of the *New York Times*." *Newspaper Research Journal* 15:3 (1994): 74-88. The authors provide an empirical study about the newshole in the *New York Times*.

Roach, Colleen. "The Movement for a New World Information and Communication Order: A Second Wave?" *Media, Culture and Society* 12 (1990): 283-307. This article discusses the issues related to the New World Information and Communication Order and how the United States sees the issues.

Rosenblum, Mort. *Coups and Earthquakes*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979. By pointing out the selective coverage of the third-world countries in Western news media, the author latently supports the idea of the NWICO.

Schramm, Wilbur. *Mass Media and National Development*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964. Schramm's classic book argues that there is a positive relationship between mass media and national development, resulting in a new category of scholarship: development communication.

Shane, Scott. *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994. Coming out right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this book extrapolates the role of information in the former Soviet block.

Stevenson, Robert L., and Donald Lewis Shaw, eds. *Foreign News and the New World Information Order*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984. This book collects various empirical investigations of international news coverage in response to the NWICO.

Stevenson, Robert L. *Communication, Development, and the Third World: The Global Politics of Information*. New York: University Press of America, 1988. This book synthesizes the arguments of the NWICO primarily from the Western perspective.

Wu, H. Denis. "Homogeneity Around the World?: Comparing the Systemic Determinants of International News Flow Between Developed and Developing Countries." *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies* 65:1 (2003): 9-24. This article compares the impact of systemic determinants on international news flow between developed and developing nations.