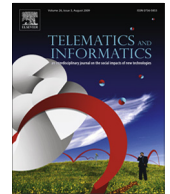




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Revisiting the UNESCO debate on a New World Information and Communication Order: Has the NWICO been achieved by other means?



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ABSTRACT

At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970s and 1980s, the central debate concerned the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). While the NWICO movement died stillborn in the mid-1980s, this paper examines whether the world has achieved, by alternative means, at least part of what was envisioned. The widespread availability of cellular telephones, the rise of the internet, and the new phenomenon of citizen journalism have changed the communication landscape significantly since the 1980s. So have the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have taken on the cause, moving the campaign from the intergovernmental realm to civil society. Further, the “one-way flow” of news and media that existed in those days has been balanced somewhat by the introduction of new media, cultural products, and news sources arising from the South. The battle for the Right to Communicate—an offshoot of the NWICO that may prove of greater fundamental importance—is ongoing in civil society, with the aim of achieving recognition and enforcement of this fundamental right throughout the world. Thus, this paper argues, it is time to herald the arrival of a new world order in communication—one that is far from perfect, but does incorporate many of the demands of the original NWICO movement.

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1. Introduction

At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970s and 1980s, the defining debate concerned the New World Information and Communication Order, otherwise known as NWICO. A group of representatives from 55 developing nations, known as the Non-Aligned Movement, called for major changes in communications media, and the way they were produced and distributed. Labeling the existing order both “neo-colonial” and characterized by “cultural imperialism,” the reformers pointed out that control over media technologies, including the capacity to produce cultural products ranging from movies to music to news, was almost entirely in the hands of corporations based in the world’s most affluent nations. The NWICO, it was hoped, would reverse, or at least balance, the one-way flow of information that ran, in those days, from North to South, and change the dynamic of news media that largely ignored the less affluent world, apart from its disasters, famines and wars (Carlsson, 2003; Dakrouy, 2009b; Dakrouy et al., 2009a).

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Nations outside the core, as the United States and Western Europe are called in world-systems theory,¹ also complained, in the UNESCO debates and elsewhere, that their cultural sovereignty was threatened by the deluge of Western media products such as movies, television shows, and popular music (Carlsson, 2003; McPhail, 2010). This occurred not just in nations deemed “peripheral” by world-systems theory, but also in “semi-peripheral” nations such as Canada, where it was nearly impossible to get a Canadian-made film into movie theatres or Canadian popular music onto the radio without government intervention, such as the controversial “Canadian content” rules (Edwardson, 2008). This had to change, the Non-Aligned Movement insisted back in 1976, and many of those involved in the UNESCO debate agreed. The big question was how.

The dream of a New World Information and Communication Order reached its fullest expression in the report of the MacBride Commission (1980), which put forward 82 recommendations designed to bring about a transformation in the world’s communication patterns, flows and infrastructure, to benefit the developing world and the “free flow of information.” In the end, most of those recommendations were not carried out (Carlsson, 2003; Dakrouy et al., 2009b). Indeed, the whole approach—which involved governments making policies to control the media and the way they operate—alienated countries with a long tradition of freedom of expression,² to the point where the United States and United Kingdom withdrew from UNESCO for almost two decades (Ghattas, 2002). The International Programme for Communication Development, established as a result of the MacBride recommendations, resulted in some “technology transfer,” which meant that companies located, for the most part, in core nations were paid handsomely to supply the developing world with technological innovations that left peripheral nations dependent on those same companies because, in many cases, they lacked the skilled labor force and/or parts to maintain them. In other cases, recipients were disillusioned because the technology transferred was ill-suited to the conditions in their country and/or the intended purpose (Haug, 1992).

However, despite the perceived failure of the NWICO movement, some important changes have happened over the past three decades. People became less reliant on big media as small, mobile media became widely available, even to those in less developed countries (Castells, 2012; Farivar, 2011; International Telecommunication Union, 2013b; World Bank, 2013). These new devices delivered a power that ordinary citizens had never before possessed, not just to receive mass media messages, but also to send them to a wide audience. It has been an interesting lesson in one of Schumacher’s (1973) basic premises in *Small is Beautiful*: that big money and grandiose projects are not necessary to bring about significant improvements in people’s lives.

Nor did the movement to establish full communication rights die. Far from it. The torch was passed to non-governmental organizations working in civil society. A new respect for NGOs, on the part of governments and intergovernmental bodies, meant they were invited to participate in the policy process and, better yet, actually listened to. These changes gave the Right to Communicate movement new impetus and arguably, greater effectiveness (Movius, 2009). Many individuals and groups have been working internationally to establish the Right to Communicate as a basic human right (Dakrouy, 2009b; Dakrouy et al., 2009b).

Thus, progress has happened on several major fronts for those who sought, and in the late 1980s despaired about, the prospects for a new world communication order. Today, even in the most repressive regimes, social media users are working to get the news out, as they did following the Iranian election of 2009, when voters were convinced the results had been rigged (Farivar, 2011; Kamalipour, 2010); in Egypt in 2011, when Facebook and Twitter mobilized millions in Tahrir Square to call for the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, and international media picked up and amplified their tweets and blog posts during the revolution (Carvin, 2011; Castells, 2012; Idle and Nunn, 2011); in China, where activists use Weibo—a microblogging service like Twitter—to spread news and messages, removing their posts quickly to avoid the censors (Xu, 2011); in Egypt in 2013, when a second series of massive demonstrations demanded the ouster of President Mohammed Morsi (El Rashidi, 2013).

This ability to send information to the broader public, in addition to receiving it, is a fundamental attribute of the “Right to Communicate,” first enunciated by French aristocrat Jean d’Arcy in 1969 (Dakrouy, 2009a, 2009b), and asserted in the MacBride Commission’s report:

Our conclusions are founded on the firm conviction that communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information—and, more specifically, the right to seek, receive and impart information—is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others (MacBride Commission, 1980: 253).

This paper will examine how these three elements of the Right to Communicate—to seek, to receive, and to impart information—have undergone significant changes over the 30-plus years since the release of the MacBride report.

2. The right to seek information

Citizens of most democratic countries have long held the right to seek information from government, though access to many government documents is restricted. But even in those countries where citizens have laws guaranteeing access to a range of government documents, McPhail (2010) notes that it is a new experience for the average citizen to be able to read reports for themselves *at the same time* as government officials, due to their timely release on the internet.

¹ For more on World Systems Theory, see Wallerstein (1974).

² Which in this case really meant “free-market” expression, meaning those who owned the media had the right to decide what was expressed in it.

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