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Kaarle Nordenstreng

The New World Information and Communication Order: Testimony of an Actor

This photo shows me greeting President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia at a reception he gave in his palace at Carthage for the participants of the Non-Aligned Symposium on Information in March 1976. Next to the President is Mustapha Masmoudi, Minister of Information – the effective host of the Symposium and later a member of UNESCO’s International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (MacBride et al. 1980).¹



President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia
and Kaarle Nordenstreng (1976)

I was there as a 35-year-old academic representing Finland, which had the status of an invited guest at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs had mandated me to attend – as an observer making no presentation.² And there was indeed

1 This chapter is mainly based on the author’s presentation at the international colloquium “30 years of communication geopolitics: actors and flows, structures and divides” in Paris on 19 November 2010 (http://www.uta.fi/jour/english/contact/nordenstreng_eng/publications/Paris.pdf). The final section borrows from Nordenstreng (1995).

2 Actually I had already provided substantive input to the Symposium by sending the organizers in advance research materials, notably the UNESCO report “Television Traffic – A One-Way Street?” (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974). This report contains the empirical results of a worldwide study on TV programme flows as well as the proceedings of a symposium held on the basis of that study in Tampere in May 1973, including a speech by President Urho Kekkonen of Finland, where he questions

much to observe as it was on this occasion that the phrase and concept of NWICO was born, in the form of “a new international order in information” as laid down in the Symposium proceedings. The idea had certainly been in the air from the beginning of the 1970s, both among NAM politicians and progressive media professionals and academics around the world – especially in Latin America but also in Scandinavia. However, it was the Tunis Symposium in March 1976 that finally provided the platform for its articulation.

In the history of ideas – and the real world developments out of which the ideas emerge – this was a period which can be called “decolonization offensive” (1970-76). It was followed by other historical stages which I have named “Western counterattack” (1976-78), “Truce” (1978-80), “Corporate offensive” (1981-90) and “Globalization” (1991-). These stages are documented and discussed in my recent publication (Nordenstreng 2010), but that review does not cover in detail the decolonization offensive during the first part of the 1970s – the birthplace of NWICO. Therefore a more detailed account is given the next section (reproduced from my earlier books Nordenstreng 1984a, 8-11; Nordenstreng et al. 1986, 14-16).

History of the 1970s

By the early 1970s, the developing countries had accumulated a great deal of political power and economic potential, with the assistance of such organizations as the Movement of Non-Aligned countries and OPEC. All this created a new relation of forces in the world arena, already under pressure from the socialist part of the world, leading to such manifestations as the oil crisis and the UN declaration on the New International Economic Order – all of which worked against the vested interests of the Western world order. Another corollary to this offensive of the “underdog” against the West was a polarization of the Arab-Israeli conflict, reflected not only in a war between the parties, but also in the UN resolution by which the majority of the international community defined Zionism as a form of racism.

In this situation, it appeared that a new chapter in world history was in the making, and it was no coincidence that the phrase “new order” became popular. After all, it implies a radical analysis of the world; the concept of “order” points at a global structure not far from Lenin’s theory of imperialism. Beyond this, it suggests a radical programme to change the world; the notion of “new” may well be interpreted as a call to arms against the “old order”.

the conventional Western free flow doctrine and refers to the prevailing situation in the international arena as “communication imperialism” (Ibid., 44).

Consequently, the basic pattern was that the West was on the defensive and the developing countries, aided and abetted by the socialist countries, were on the offensive.

As a political programme and an intellectual concept, decolonization was well established by the early seventies. But before 1973, the idea of decolonization had not been applied in an articulated and authoritative manner to the sphere of information and culture. This occurred at the Fourth Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Countries in Algiers (Algeria), attended by 75 members of the Non-Aligned Movement. The political declaration of the Conference made the point that “the activities of imperialism are not confined solely to the political and economic fields, but also cover cultural and social fields”, and demanded “concerted action in the fields of mass communication” as a part of the Action Programme for Economic Cooperation.

The initiative launched in Algiers was carried forward in 1975 at the Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries in Lima (Peru), where the 81 Foreign Ministers attending adopted a special resolution on “Cooperation in the Field of Diffusion of Information and Mass Communications Media”. The same year, a Pool of Press Agencies of the Non-Aligned Countries started its operation under the coordination of the Yugoslavian news agency Tanjug.

The real breakthrough of the ideas of “information decolonization” came in 1976. In March, the Non-Aligned Symposium of Information in Tunis (Tunisia), attended by 38 Member States and 13 observers, laid down a political framework for the “emancipation” of the developing countries from the “structures of imperialist power”. The phrase “new international order” was first applied to information there; to be precise, in the report of Committee I. The rapporteur of this Committee, German Carnero Roque from Peru, expressed the spirit of the time in this classic paragraph:

“Since information in the world shows a disequilibrium favouring some and ignoring others, it is the duty of the non-aligned countries and the other developing countries to change this situation and obtain the decolonization of information and initiate a new international order in information.”

In July 1976, the Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Countries on Decolonization of Information met in New Delhi (India). Ministers from 59 Non-Aligned countries prepared the Constitution for the Pool and issued a landmark statement, the New Delhi Declaration. This document not only advocated political pressure against the “imperialist forces” dominating the “free world” information structures and flows but also implied a fundamental philosophical challenge. The New Delhi Declaration rejected the traditional “libertarian theory of the press” on at least three counts. First, it implied that laissez-faire would lead

to monopolization and create neocolonial dependence. Second, it noted how insufficient it was merely to guarantee abstractly the right to freedom of information without ensuring the material means to make that right a reality. Third, there were explicit requirements regarding the content of information being disseminated through the media: it should be objective and accurate.

This declaration was endorsed by the highest authority of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Fifth Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Countries, which met in Colombo (Sri Lanka) in August 1976, attended by 87 members of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Colombo summit legitimized the demands for a new order in these celebrated words: “A new international order in the fields of information and mass communication is as vital as a new international economic order.”

Contradictions since the 1970s

The rest of history beyond the turn of the millennium until the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003-05 and the most recent NAM summits in 2006-09 is covered in Nordenstreng (2010). Let me just emphasize what is written there about the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO in 1984: the main reason was not NWICO, the MacBride Report or UNESCO’s Director-General Amadou Mahtar M’Bow, but a strategic reorientation of U.S. foreign policy while the balance of global forces changed with a relative weakening of the USSR and the NAM. This was a reorientation away from multilateralism in international relations towards bilateral relations between the USA and individual countries – particularly the developing countries with their weaker economies.³

Let me also point out that there was a significant movement of non-governmental organizations in the 1980s in support of NWICO, although their voice was hardly audible above the campaigns of the World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC) and other well-financed Western lobbies. Yet, important footnotes in history were left by the Consultative Club of international and regional organizations of journalists as well as the MacBride Round Table on Communication (see Nordenstreng 2010).

3 I have a testimony of this from the former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who in private discussion described the unprecedented and blunt approach of the Reagan administration towards the NAM countries in the North-South meeting in Cancun in 1981.

Reminders of the broad-based but hardly visible pro-NWICO movement are books such as a study on the history of U.S.-UNESCO relations and the media coverage of the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO (Preston et al. 1989)⁴; a documentation of the 1986-87 NAM proceedings on NWICO (NAM & NIICO 1988)⁵; and a collection of essays on the media reform movement (Traber and Nordenstreng 1992)⁶.

The next photo shows me with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India in her office at the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in October 1983 (a year before she was assassinated). Behind us is her Press Secretary Prasad, whom I had got to know earlier as director of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication. I am here no longer as a Finnish academic but rather as a global political actor – President of the International Organization of Journalists (IOJ), the then world’s largest body of media professionals mainly from the socialist East and the



Kaarle Nordenstreng and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India (1983)

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- 4 The preface to this book was written by Sean MacBride in 1987, but he died before it was published in 1989. The delay in its publication was caused by obstacles thrown in its way by UNESCO, which found its critical approach embarrassing to the new Director-General Federico Mayor.
 - 5 This publication contained documents during Zimbabwe’s presidency of NAM, including the Harare summit of 1986. It was dedicated to two prominent figures in the history of the new order movement who had recently passed away: Sean MacBride and D.R. Mankekar. The title of this booklet – like the Sourcebook (Nordenstreng et al. 1986) – used the term New International Information and Communication Order and the acronym NIICO, instead of NWICO based on the word World. This corresponds to the terminology used by NAM, which considered NWICO to be somewhat diluted from the original NIO with its one-to-one correspondence to NIEO, the New International Economic Order (see Nordenstreng 1984b, 34-35).
 - 6 This was published by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), which, with its journal *Media Development*, was an outspoken supporter of NWICO throughout the 1980s, leading it to criticize the UNESCO withdrawal from the movement.

developing South. I had just addressed the NAMEDIA conference in Delhi – next to Prime Minister Gandhi, Director-General M’Bow and Ambassador Masmoudi.

India was at that time President of NAM and Mrs. Gandhi as its chairperson was clearly concerned about the imminent danger of a U.S. military intervention in the Nicaragua of the Sandinistas. The world situation and the U.S. role had clearly radicalized the leader of a middle-of-the-road NAM country. These were indeed times of political polarization.

But these were also times of serious studies on media and journalism in international spheres – not least the ethics and responsibility of journalists in the international community. UNESCO was an important initiator of academic and professional work in this area, both through its regular secretariat and through the MacBride Commission, which issued nearly one hundred papers as background references to its work.⁷ Questions of the freedom and responsibility of journalists as well as the safety of journalists were addressed in both agendas. An example of regular UNESCO activity in those years is a consultation with relevant organizations on the “improvement of professional standards and status and protection of journalists” in December 1979.⁸ This meeting led to a publication documenting various initiatives from the 1950s until 1980 to establish practical means for protecting journalists on hazardous missions. It also reproduced comprehensive viewpoints on the topic commissioned by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the IOJ – the latter prepared by me in collaboration with consultants from IOJ and the International Association of Democratic Lawyers.⁹

It is truly amazing how much academic and professional work was accomplished in the 1970s and 80s within the NWICO framework – more than was accomplished later within the WSIS framework. Much of this has been forgotten, although most has retained its relevance in recent decades. The world has undeniably changed, with the Internet as a completely new continent in the global information landscape, but we should not fall into the ahistorical trap of only counting developments after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

7 Half a dozen of these background documents dealt explicitly with NWICO, with authors such as Mustapha Masmoudi, Cees Hamelink, Breda Pavlic and Bodgan Osolnik.

8 The consultation, which I attended as representative of the IOJ, was based on the Mass Media Declaration and a resolution also adopted in the 1978 General Conference inviting “to pay particular attention to the need for the effective protection of journalists and information specialists, so that they can perform their duties in the best possible conditions of accuracy and objectivity”. After this meeting the WPFC and other Western proprietor-based lobbies launched a campaign against the UNESCO-led project for the protection of journalists.

9 The 142-page publication “Protection of Journalists” (1980) was issued in the UNESCO series *New Communication Order* published in the 1980s.



Jörg Becker with the Nobel Peace Prize
Laureate Seán MacBride (1982)

Moreover, media scholars – including the present author – should look in the mirror and ask if we have done enough to encourage the younger generation to research international communication. In this respect Jörg Becker is one of those few colleagues who can face the mirror with no recriminations – he stands as an exemplary case, resembling us of Seán MacBride’s uncompromising character as described in Becker and Nordenstreng (1992).

The scholar between science and politics

Jörg and I are children of the intellectual climate of the 1960s. We grew up in the belief that everything is political and that the power struggle persists throughout society – not least in media, culture and science. The mainstream tradition of logical positivism was typically seen as a brand of bourgeois – i.e. erroneous – scholarship conjuring up an illusion of objective reality around a bastion of class-based forces. Countering this was the progressive and critical scholarship based on an anti-hegemonic approach to power structures and insisting that science and politics are interconnected – indeed, part and parcel of a single social process, as taught by dialectical and historical materialism.

In such a climate we entered the field of communication research. The American-dominated mass communication research was not only something to be learned and applied but also to be criticized, as in my first international journal contribution (Nordenstreng 1968). My own national environment was particularly conducive to a critical approach exceptionally highly favoured in 1970s Finland (see Pietilä, Malmberg and Nordenstreng 1990). Jörg, for his part, stood against an American-driven positivism which dominated Germany throughout these decades – despite the legacy of the Frankfurt School (see Koivisto and Thomas 2010).

As an excursion into the history of ideas in the field, I conducted soul-searching around the relationship between NWICO and critical scholarship – two tracks of a historical movement, political and intellectual – in the *Festschrift* for Dallas W. Smythe (Nordenstreng 1993). I traced four aspects common to both sides:

- Holistic view of the world with communication as an integral part of it, whereby communication and power are inseparable and media are seen as an omnipotent factor in society – for good and bad.
- Equality as a predominant value both within society and between nations, whereby imbalance and domination should be countered and pluralism and equal opportunity guaranteed – not just in principle (as libertarians do) but also in practice (as social liberals do).
- Objective truth as the mission of mass communication, based on epistemological realism (common to both bourgeois and Marxist traditions), whereby it is justified to speak about right and false consciousness and about manipulation by the media.
- Normative approach to reality, where at issue are not only supposedly value-free empirical observations but also ethical and ideological positions.

With such components central to both the political and intellectual tracks of the movement, each growing out of its own roots, it was natural that the two tracks at some point met and blended in a mix where it is difficult to tell where science ends and politics begins. The above testimony of my participation in the political NWICO movement, while simultaneously active as a scholar of international communication, serves as a lesson that such a mix may promote both science and politics.

But the history of ideas provides us with another lesson, which is more intriguing: the paradox that politicization beyond a certain level turns from a creative ferment into a repressive paralyzer. An instructive case is UNESCO's approach to communication research and policies, examined in my contribution to the *Festschrift* for James D. Halloran (Nordenstreng 1994). First, from the late 1960s on, UNESCO approached communication research and policies with a critical paradigm, calling for social relevance rather than methodological sophistication, i.e. politicization. Then, just when such a policy orientation had gained momentum and the message of critical scholars was taken up by crucial forces in the international community, politics became so pervasive that science was left with no proper breathing space – it became a hostage of over-politicization.

In my reflections on the delicate relationship between the political and intellectual tracks of international communication, I first concede that all social phenomena are political in nature

and that it is therefore misguided to suggest that a truly scientific study of social communication could ever be free of political implications. Then I point out that high politics may exert a restrictive influence upon the intellectual sphere in two respects: (1) the political forces interfere directly in intellectual inquiry by institutional moves such as allocating resources in accordance with the prevailing political balance, typically muzzling anti-hegemonic progressive scholarship; and (2) the political atmosphere indirectly influences scholarship through political conflicts and controversies, dominating the intellectual sphere so that the analytical arsenal may become a mere copy of political power configurations.

The latter syndrome was commonly associated with the Cold War, whereby the East-West conflict was so dominant that it left hardly any intellectual space for other considerations beyond the perpetuation of controversies such as freedom vs. censorship. In both camps the end of the Cold War gave hope for the release of much intellectual potential repressed by political expediency. However, the experience has been otherwise, beginning with the vindictive attitude – even persecution mentality – towards those associated with the old socialist regimes, including the very reformers instrumental in bringing them down, and ending up with the sale of mediocre neo-libertarianism to the new free market in Eastern Europe.

My conclusion in the 1993 and 1994 articles was that over-politicization may indeed imperil a sound and creative intellectual movement. In the 1995 article I went on to warn that the media scholar operating in the contiguous no man's land between science and politics, should keep a safe distance from both. In other words, I saw the ideal media scholar as a dialogical partner in relation to social practice – in a similar way that an anthropologist approaches his/her object. And I elaborated: if we are to follow the good advice of Karl Marx by not merely philosophizing about the world but by going and changing it, the way to do so today is not to get too much involved in dirty politics.

Such an unorthodox position for a son of the 1960s was based on the historical experience – of the struggles around NWICO and beyond – that media scholars cannot after all make much difference on the barricades of the day, but that their contribution can make a great deal of difference by guiding the intellectual orientation of the real political forces and operations in society. In other words, I had become convinced that it is better to focus on a long-term and indirect influence on the paradigms prevailing in society than on a direct intervention in the policy process.

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Frank Deppe, Wolfgang Meixner, Günther Pallaver (Hg.)

Widerworte

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Festschrift für Jörg Becker**

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