

Four

Defining the New International Information Order

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Several works have documented the developments, events, and debates that have brought us the notion of the New International Information Order from various points of view (2, 5, 7). Along with the discussions of a new order has emerged a new brand of quasi-scientific writing in which events throughout the world diplomatic arena are reported rather than analyzed as a coherent, sociologically and historically meaningful picture. I would like to raise two fundamental points that may assist such an analysis.

First, the call for the New International Information Order was articulated within the movement of nonaligned countries as a *particular reflection of the movement's general anti-imperialist effort to achieve decolonization*. This was evident in the first statements on information endorsed by the fourth summit of the movement in Algiers (1973) (see 2, pp. 46–47) and there could be no doubt about such an orientation in the documents on information endorsed by the fifth summit in Colombo (1976). Let us recall a few paragraphs of one of these documents, the New Delhi Declaration.

1. The present global information flows are marked by a serious inadequacy and imbalance. The means of communicating information are concentrated in a few countries. The great majority of countries are reduced to being passive recipients of information which is disseminated from a few centers.
2. This situation perpetuates the colonial era of dependence and domination. It confines judgments and decisions on what should be known, and how it should be made known, into the hands of a few. . . .
4. Just as political and economic dependence are legacies of the era of colonialism, so is the case of dependence in the field of information which in turn retards the achievement of political and economic growth.

5. In a situation where the means of information are dominated and monopolized by a few, freedom of information really comes to mean the freedom of these few to propagate information in the manner of their choosing and the virtual denial to the rest of the right to inform and be informed objectively and accurately.

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” in at least three different respects. First, it implied that laissez-faire will lead to monopolization and create neocolonial dependence. Second, it noted how insufficient it is merely to guarantee abstractly the right to freedom of information without insuring the material means to put that right into practice. Third, the information being moved through the media was given explicit content qualifications: it should be objective and accurate.

The second fundamental point I want to make in putting the New International Information Order into perspective is that *little in this new order is genuinely new*. Just as the overall process of decolonization is a well-established and indeed a traditional concept, most of what has been included under the umbrella of the New International Information Order can in fact be found in earlier political, professional, and academic exercises. Take, for example, the problem of news values and distorted coverage of the developing countries in the Western media. Most of the criticism, analytical conceptualizations, and guidelines for change voiced over the past few years were articulated in the 1960s by Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (1).

Consider also the overall problem of global imbalance and assistance to developing countries in the field of information and mass media. The U.N. General Assembly expressed concern more than twenty years ago over the fact that “70 percent of the population of the world lack adequate information facilities and are thus denied effective enjoyment of the right to information” and invited the governments of developed countries “to cooperate with less developed countries with a view to meeting the urgent needs of the less developed countries in connexion with this programme for the development of independent national information media, with due regard for the culture of each country” (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1778, December 7, 1962). The same kind of U.N. resolutions were issued in the 1950s, inviting UNESCO, for example, “to formulate concrete proposals to assist in meeting the needs of less developed countries in building up adequate media of information” (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1313, December 12, 1958). In fact, as early as 1952 a General Assembly resolution declared “it is essential for a proper development of public opinion in under-developed countries that inde-

pendent domestic information enterprises should be given facilities and assistance in order that they may be enabled to contribute to the spread of information, to the development of national culture and to international understanding," adding that "the time has arrived for the elaboration of a concrete programme and plan of action in this respect" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 633, December 16, 1952).

Nevertheless, it took nearly thirty years for the U.N. system, notably UNESCO, to react to this diplomatic lip service by launching a major program for the development of communications (such a program was outlined by an intergovernmental conference at UNESCO in April 1980). Why the delay? And, more significant to this discussion, why did the phrase "New International Information Order" galvanize the world community? A proper reply to these questions cannot be found by looking exclusively at the field of information and communications; we must look also at changes in the relations of broader socioeconomic and political forces (see 5).

We are back to my first point: the call for a New International Information Order is a reflection of the decolonization process. And by the early seventies this process had reached a critical stage wherein national liberation from colonial and neocolonial domination was supported by such instruments as the U.N. Declaration on the New International Economic Order. This situation had put the system of Western domination, including the transnational corporations, sharply on the defensive. Consequently, the new order became an issue not because of the introduction of dramatically new phenomena (such as new technology) into the field of information but fundamentally because a sufficiently strong coalition of social forces had accumulated to enforce a new order, at least as a political program if not as an immediate reality.

The same pattern marked the history of the Mass Media Declaration of UNESCO. This instrument only appeared to place qualitatively new elements on the agenda of international communications and politics; in fact, it was only a collection of norms and principles, most of which already had been enunciated in U.N. documents and indeed in international law. The only major innovation to the credit of UNESCO was that the declaration brought together the various standards scattered throughout earlier instruments. Thus, the battle over the declaration was largely symbolic.

OLD ELEMENTS OF THE NEW ORDER: INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MASS MEDIA

This section summarizes a study made at the University of Tampere concerning the moral and, in some cases, legal obligations of the mass media as prescribed by conventions and similar instruments of international law, as well as other less legally binding instruments such as declarations and

resolutions of the United Nations and its agencies (above all UNESCO, which has a particular mandate in the field of culture and communications). Forty-four documents, comprising twelve conventions, fourteen declarations, and eighteen resolutions, were analyzed. Each document was coded for the presence or absence of seven themes: (1) peace and security, (2) war propaganda, (3) friendship and mutual understanding among nations, (4) objectivity and truthfulness, (5) racial equality, (6) other standards on contents of reporting, and (7) free flow of information.¹ We coded each mention according to whether it was a direct reference to "mass media," or an indirect reference to "public opinion," etc. Table 4.1 summarizes the results.

International law sets significant standards for the performance of the mass media, especially in matters directly concerning international relations, for example, the promotion of friendly relations between states and peoples and the prevention of war propaganda (categories 1-4). A similarly significant set of standards focuses on matters concerning primarily the national context, above all, prevention of propaganda for racial or other discrimination (categories 5-6). Free flow of information (7) has not been defined in international law to be more central than standards relating to the six preceding content categories. More specifically, in the view of international law, the principle of freedom of information must be subordinated to such obligations as the promotion of peace and security and the prevention of propaganda for war or racism. Finally, five conventions out of twelve not only provide standards for the performance of the mass media but also touch upon such fundamental issues of the journalistic profession as truthfulness and objectivity, honesty, and freedom from prejudice.

The instruments studied make direct references in all of the content categories under consideration to the mass media at the level of both conventions and less binding declarations and resolutions. Also, whereas these documents indicate that states have an *obligation* to promote the standards concerning peaceful and friendly relations among nations, in matters of primarily national concern they usually have just a *right* (but not a binding commitment) to place standards on the performance of the mass media.

Clearly, the UNESCO Mass Media Declaration and other manifestations of the New International Information Order contain little beyond the rich material provided by earlier instruments of international law and diplomacy. Indeed, one of the first tasks for anyone interested in the substance of the new order is to get acquainted with international law on communications. It is noteworthy that the United Nations machinery has produced so many laudable documents that have to be repackaged as the fashionable New International Information Order before receiving serious attention from media professionals and political leaders.²

Table 4.1 Themes Referred to in International Documents by Type of Reference

Type of Reference in	Content Categories					Reporting Standards	Free Flow
	Peace and Security	War Propaganda	Friendship	Objectivity	Racial Equality		
Conventions (N = 12)							
Direct	3	3	5	5	1	5	5
Indirect	1	5	1	0	7	3	3
None	8	4	6	7	4	4	4
Declarations (N = 14)							
Direct	7	1	6	6	5	9	7
Indirect	4	6	4	2	1	0	2
None	3	7	4	6	8	5	5
Resolutions (N = 18)							
Direct	9	1	10	6	3	12	8
Indirect	4	2	5	0	0	2	0
None	5	15	3	12	15	4	10
Total references (N = 44) (direct + indirect)	28	18	31	19	17	31	25

RADICAL AND CONSERVATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW ORDER

Although the New International Information Order represents a renaissance of old ideas, some qualitatively new elements have entered the field of information only in the seventies, such as problems of informatics (transborder data flows, computer-telecommunication systems, etc.) and to some extent problems of access and participation, as well as problems concerning the contribution of the mass media to international conflict resolution and disarmament.

It would be very misleading, however, to understand the New International Information Order as a package of mainly old and some new ammunition to be automatically directed against the existing order. On the contrary, the old struggle among different socioeconomic and political forces simply has been raised to a new level using new semantics (5). Making the same point, Cees Hamelink warned in his contribution to the MacBride Commission (Document 34, p. 9) that unless the concepts and principles of the New International Economic Order are used to determine the shape and substance of the new information order, the latter may become "yet another mechanism to subtly integrate the dependent countries in an international order which perpetuates their dependence." Therefore, special care is needed when approaching this topic. Clearly, a scientifically satisfactory definition of the parameters, principles, and indeed terminology of the new order would require a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of a variety of problems, from the structure of the international economic system to the nature of information. My ambition here is only to identify some crucial points.

First, the new order is primarily a matter of international relations. This point was made by the context in which the new order was discussed in various U.N. resolutions and other multinational statements. In December 1978 (right after the adoption in UNESCO of the Mass Media Declaration) the order was mentioned under the title "International Relations in the Sphere of Information and Mass Communications" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 33/115B, December 1978); in the next General Assembly in 1979 it appeared in a resolution on "Implementation of the Declaration on the Strengthening of International Security" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/100, 1979). In a subchapter on "The Co-operation in the Field of Information and Mass Communication Media," the final declaration of the sixth summit of nonaligned nations pointed out: "The Conference takes note with gratification of the fact that non-aligned and other developing countries have made notable progress along the path of emancipation and development of national information media and stresses that the co-operation in the field of information is an integral part of the struggle of non-aligned and other developing countries

for the creation of new international relations in general, and a new international information order in particular" (4).

Note that the documents of the nonaligned movement regularly refer to "international order" whereas the United Nations and UNESCO resolutions mostly use the phrase "world order." Evidently, this departure from the formulation of the nonaligned movement does not represent a significant strategic move. However, the theory of international relations and established diplomatic phraseology teaches that in this connection the word "international" should be used although "world" may sound more elegant. Furthermore, the phrase "world order" may be used as a device to dissociate the concept of New International Information Order from the concept of New International Economic Order (see 5). "World order" also implies the theory of an interdependent world, which in many instances has become a conceptual tool in co-opting the interests of the developing countries so that they collaborate with, rather than challenge, the Western "transnational-corporate order." Faced with the expression "increasingly interdependent world" we may ask whether developments such as the liberation of Vietnam, the abolishing of the Portuguese colonial system, and the overthrow of Somoza have brought about a higher level of interdependence or whether the opposite is true. As suggested by Hamelink, we might better use the word "interdependence"; in any case, there are no reasons faithful to the cause of developing countries to substitute "world" for "international" in speaking about the new order.

Second, the new order has a national dimension. It is impossible totally to separate national and international levels in social theory any more than in political practice. Let me quote what was said about the New International Information Order in this respect in the final statement issued by an international seminar meeting in Tashkent under the auspices of UNESCO (September 1979).

On the national plane a new information order presupposes the establishment of democratic social structures on the basis of which an independent and endogenous national system of mass media can be built, which will enable developing countries effectively to participate in international exchange of information as equal members of the world community (3).

Third, the cornerstones of the New International Information Order are decolonization and democratization. A third "D" might be added to this list with a view of the concentration of national and international capital: demonopolization. Development could be identified as a fourth cornerstone.

The idea of democratization applies not only to the national level but also to the nature of international relations (in the field of information as well as in general). In fact, the essence of the New International Infor-

mation Order is contained by the idea of democratization of the system of international relations in the field of information. Another way to characterize the same kind of objective is the well-known concept of peaceful coexistence, enunciated by Lenin and incorporated in the fundamental principles of the nonaligned movement as well as in U.N. philosophy.

It is vital to recognize that all these dimensions of the information order refer to both the structure and the contents of communication; at the same time, they refer to the underlying principles that determine the overall terms of operation of communication systems.

As to "information" and "communication," vagueness and confusion surround their meanings and implications in general as well as vis-à-vis the New International Information Order. The original sponsor of the new order, the nonaligned movement, uses the term "information," sometimes accompanied by "mass media" or "mass communications." Similarly, the language of international politics and diplomacy favors "information" as a generic term referring to all kinds of media and their uses, all types of messages, etc. (the term is used in this sense in the Helsinki Final Act, for example). On the other hand, there are those—especially from the Spanish-speaking hemisphere—who consider "information" both very limited and opposed to the democratic idea of participatory, two-way communication. Finally, it can be argued that the word "communication" diverts attention from the message communicated to the technical means of communicating and thus dilutes the objectives of changing the performance of the mass media. A tentative solution has been to use both terms: "new international information and communication order" or, as in the sixth summit document, "new international order in the field of information and mass media."

Fourth, the phrasing of the new order that was inserted first in the preamble of the UNESCO declaration and thereafter in a number of U.N. resolutions provides a classic example of how substance is maneuvered by means of language. This compromise formulation (strongly influenced by U.S. diplomacy) reads as follows: "a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order."

Little in this formulation would bluntly contradict the line determined by the four cornerstones of the order, identified earlier—if only there were a solid theoretical and political basis to determine the conceptualization in keeping with the original principles and objectives of the nonaligned movement. But today we do not have such a basis, and especially in the United Nations and UNESCO the formulations are virtually hanging in air or, to be more specific, floating in the ether of diplomatic-political tactics. Thus, there is an urgent need for scientifically based contributions to the continual building of the New International Information Order. Absence of conceptual and theoretical understanding of the issues will be functional

to those who are interested in maintaining the old order under a smoke-screen of new rhetoric.

NOTES

1. These categories were further divided into 8 to 10 subcategories each, which will not be reported here (for details, see 6).
2. The journalistic community has seriously started to do its homework in this area, as indicated by the Mexican Declaration, adopted in 1980 by the meeting of international and regional organizations of professional journalists (for details, see 6).

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