

RETHINKING THE NEW WORLD INFORMATION COMMUNICATION ORDER DEBATE

ODICHA' UDE
Department of Mass Communication
Ebonyi State University
Abakaliki

Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at the call by the third world or developing countries for a new world information and communication order and concludes that the call was unnecessary in the first place. The contention of this paper is that the definition of news in the developed countries of the world is clearly different from the definition of news in developing or under developing countries of the world. The paper argues that one cannot sell a bad product no matter how good one advertizes it. This implies that until the developing countries show themselves any commitment to the ideals of democracy, to providing basic social amenities for her people, make conscientious efforts to tackle the problem of corruption, poverty and have in place educational and health institution that are vibrant and catering to the need of the masses, and reduce cases of violent crimes and anti-socio behaviour, there will be no balanced reporting in the media of the developed countries of the world about third world.

Introduction

Communication is central to all social interactions. The type of society or the nature of the relationship determines the kind of communication that will exist. The effectiveness of communication will result in greater cohesion of the people in the relationship of the society.

A great deal of changes has occurred in the field of communication in the last few years. The amazing developments in the field of information and communication technology have shown that the world has indeed become a virtual village. The speed at which information is disseminated these days across the globe show that nobody or country or region can live in isolation. We are now interdependent, closely knit together. But in spite of this closeness and interdependence, some countries still complain of inequality and imbalances and sundry grievances against the world media especially from developed countries. This situation promoted UNESCO which has been concerned and worked for "unrestricted pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, and increase the means of communication among peoples" to pay some serious attention to the complaints of the developing nations. The organization in pursuance of this objective of giving deeper consideration of the agitation and strengthening its agencies to ensure a more balanced flow of information worldwide and within individual state set up at its 19th general conference in 1976, in Nairobi, Kenya, the Sean MacBride Commission to review all problems of communication in contemporary society. Seen against the background of technological advancement and recent developments in international relations at the end of the study, the commission saw some merits in the complaints of the newly independent nations, they also noted that the challenge we have to face today and ways of reacting to them are diverse and they cannot be tackled overnight.

Put succinctly, the developing nations in the 1970's were complaining loudly against the dominant flow of news from the developed nations and utter neglect of events in the developing nations. Whenever the third world was reported at all, it was usually in the negative; news of coup d'etat, corruption, starvation, hunger, riots, and communal clashes, nothing positive is ever said about the third world by the media of the developed nations. Looking at it from the surface, it would appear that the third world countries have a sound and watertight case, this is moreso when the MacBride report (1980) had observed that:

Communication maintains and animates life. It is also the motor expression of social activity and civilization; it leads people from instinct to inspiration through varied processes and systems of enquiry, command and control, it creates a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feelings of togetherness through exchange of messages and translates thoughts into action, reflecting every emotion and from the humblest tasks of human survival to supreme manifestations of creativity or destruction. Communication integrates knowledge, organization and power and runs as a thread linking the earliest memory of man to his noblest aspirations through constant striving for a better life. As the world has advanced, the task of communication has become ever more complex and subtle to contribute to the liberation of mankind from want, oppression and fear and to unite in community and communion, solidarity and understanding. However, unless some basic structural changes are introduced, the potential benefits of technological and communication development will hardly be put at the disposal of the majority of mankind.

Macbride's argument would appear unassailable. We know that throughout history, mankind have sought to enhance the ability to receive and assimilate information about their surroundings and at the same time, increase the speed, clarity and variety of their own methods for transmission of information. This, they need to do to create awareness about possible dangers and the possibilities of meeting or preventing those dangers. From the simplest vocal or gestural signal rooted in the physical structure, human beings have developed a whole range of non-verbal means of conveying messages. This ranges from signs to drawings and other forms of graphic symbols, including the pictogram, ideogram, etc, and have learned to associate these with meanings and ideas.

However, what has set human communication apart and extremely powerful and distinguishes mankind from animals is language. This gives depth and scope to the content of communication as well as precision and detail of expression that comes with it. All these ways of communication are simultaneously in use and indispensable to the survival of the individual in society; to have meaningful relationship, they need both interpersonal and inter-communal methods for exchanging information. At the moment it seems there is no limit to the variety and ingenuity of the modes of communication employed by human beings. The forms and content of communication developed vary continuously. There are differences, it must be admitted among natives of the world, our languages are different, our cultures and values are different and this singular factor can render communication difficult, if not impossible. It therefore does not stand to reason agitation of the third world countries that they are being under-reported by the western media.

Adding to the problem of language and its associated difficulties is the fact that in the western news media, there is a consensus that news is something unusual, which departs from everyday life and is quantifiable. For example, the outbreak of war is news: the world media will keep bringing updates of the war: the casualties, the humanitarian catastrophe. The immediate and remote causes of the war will become subject of special reports and expert discussion: the source of weapons, the proportionate or disproportionate use of force by the aggressor or the other party, relief efforts and possible measures that can end the war. If, as in the case between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas in Palestine, the media would continuously scream that they were not allowed in to the war front to bring to the listening and viewing public the graphic details of the war.

The United Nations would find it difficult to intervene. Now, there is absolutely no way the third world countries can justifiably expect balanced reportage when they provide the world media inexhaustible and inexhaustible avenues for their so-called negative reports. For instance, in the continent of Africa, there are so many intractable wars that have been festering over the years. In Ethiopia, the civil war with Eritrea lasted nearly 30 years. In Uganda, the war with the Lord's Resistance Army has been going on for nearly 15 years. In Congo, millions have been displaced and millions have been killed in that country's civil war. In Rwanda, millions have been massacred by the Hutus. In Kenya recently, the world watched as they used machetes to cut people from the minority tribes down in the streets.

On the one hand, several years after independence many African countries are still grappling with the challenge of building a nation, the basic social amenities are not provided for the masses: no good schools, no good hospitals, no power supply, no good roads, no means of transportation, and, third world leaders want the world media to turn a blind eye to these unacceptable failures. It is only in third world countries that we have cases of "sit-tight" leaders who on getting to power will seize all the state resources and go ahead to personalize power, putting their children, brothers, sisters and cronies in charge of strategic government departments or agencies. They deny the people their basic freedoms and ensure that the rule of law is killed and buried. These so-called leaders institutionalize corruption and make it a way of life. Little wonder Transparency International rated Nigeria as the second most corrupt nation in the world. It is wishful thinking for the third world countries to imagine that the world media will not report this and proceed to show; even using hidden cameras how Nigerians demand and receive bribes.

The new world information and communication order debate must have been instigated by corrupt leaders of the third world countries who were uncomfortable with the negative reports and coverage they were receiving by the western media. There is no merit whatsoever in their agitation. This view is buttressed by the type of coverage given to Zimbabwe's post independence president in the 1980s. At that time, President Robert Mugabe was doing extremely well. He had in place excellent policies to build a model state. In no time, the Zimbabwean economy was booming. Zimbabwe was exporting, among other things wheat to Europe and Asia. The western media celebrated him and his officials. Sadly, this was not for long as the bug that usually bite African leaders did not spare him. He started plotting perpetuating himself in the office. He tampered with the constitution and became a tyrant, despot; and a brazen dictator. He would not tolerate any dissenting views nor would the opposition dare come near. He believed that he had to cling to power for life. Again, we see there is no way the world media will be seeing Mugabe's actions from Mugabe's perspective. They are duty bound to provide the world the true picture of things as they are on ground. Recently, cholera has ravaged that southern African country but the government continued to insist that they had curtailed it. The Zimbabwean dollar is now worthless; recently Zimbabwean Central Bank issued 100 billion Zimbabwean dollars, as if that is the magic wand needed to fix the economy. At this point, it might be necessary to put the controversy in context.

The Impasse

The global information flow controversy according to Nwosu (1992:324) has been described as:

Demand by third world nations and their sympathizers for a radical philosophical and practical change in the current pattern of information flow between and among nations and the correspondingly vocal rejection of this demand by Western nations and their sympathizers.

This imbroglio has become known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate. The global information flow impasse is therefore, the demand by the third world nations for a new order in the information and communication field that is opposed by the United States of America, Great Britain and other Western countries that believe the demand would interfere with their ideology of free flow of information and freedom of the press. This resulted in a "cold war" between the third world countries on

the one hand and the developed nations on the other. The impasse has also affected the relationship between the developed countries and third world countries.

The Face-Off

The face off is between the United States of America at one end of the pole and the third world countries at the other end. In the days of the cold war between USA and the defunct USSR, they were almost matched, they had some degree of equal resources and power; each truly independent, with veto power at the United Nations and supporters and sympathizers. That is not the case in this face-off with the third world countries. There is no power parity, or resources equality, no technological equality. It is, therefore, an uneven war, a futile information war, between the third world and the United States and their allies.

It does not seem plausible that any kind of balance can be achieved in the global information flow controversy. The reason is simple as long as the two gladiators at the end of the pole are unevenly matched in resources, in technological know-how, it will be delusion to think of any balance or equilibrium. The third world countries cannot say they are making any concerted effort at squaring up to the United States or any of the developed countries for that matter. In fact, most of the third world countries are effectively under-developing instead of developing. They have effectively engaged the reverse gear and are steadily moving backwards while the developed countries are moving steadily ahead, moving from one stage of development to another and revolutionizing their information and communication machinery.

Nwosu (1992) posits that UNESCO indicates that 80 percent of world news emanate from the five transnational news agencies- UPI, AP, Reuters, AFP and TASS. These agencies own about 500 bureaux worldwide and have 4,500 correspondents spread in more than 120 countries of the world. The UNESCO figures can be disputed presently because with the revolution in the information and communication industry-the Internet, the CNN effect, the figures are no longer realistic. The international news traffic is almost, now a monologue of the North to the South. A few countries have made feeble attempts to launch information satellite into orbit in recent times. Nigeria is a case in point. We shamelessly went to China to beg a private company to build and launch into space our first information and communication satellite.

In this kind of disgraceful situation, should Nigeria, a third world country richer in natural endowments than most of the so-called developed nations reasonably complain of unfair reportage? It is not only in our lack of technological know-how, a major cause for concern is our criminal and unconscionable failure of leadership. For instance, it is only in Nigeria that an Abacha can be head of state. It is only in Nigeria that political opponents are assassinated and no boy is brought to book. It is only in Nigeria that a private citizen simply because he is linked to the presidency can have better security details and have the effrontery to force the governor of his state out of the road. It is only in Nigeria that the person fingered in the murder of a serving Federal Minister will be rewarded with a seat in the Senate. It is only in Nigeria that people who did not contest elections are declared winners. It is only in Nigeria that results of elections are written two or more clear days before election day. It is only in Nigeria that there is no clear demarcation between the personal resources of a state governor or president and that of the state. It is only in Nigeria that a corporation like NNPC will not have an audited account for more than 40 years. It is only in Nigeria that a crime and corruption fighting agency like EFCC and ICPC are used to haunt perceived political opponents. It is only in Nigeria that a governor will spend N18 billion in one day and go scot free. It is only in Nigeria that a government that is expected to statutorily provide security for the people can order soldiers to kill defenceless citizens like Odii massacre and the Zaki Ibiam massacre. It is only in Nigeria that you have looting from the Federal to State to the Local Councils. It is only in Nigeria that corruption has been accepted as a normal way of life, there is no way the foreign media will acquiesce and turn a blind eye and pretend that nothing "unusual" is happening.

The foregoing fits the accepted definition of news. These are unusual strange events. The argument by third world countries that the modest efforts they are making should also be reported begs the point. They expect that when a governor commissions electricity project for a community, a bridge, a cottage hospital, a school whether primary or tertiary, a road project they expect the world media to report it. They fail to realize

that these are essential social amenities, basic social amenities government is expected to provide for the people. These are normal things, they are not news because news is abnormal or unusual occurrences.

In sum, the third world countries are lagging behind in the provision of good governance for the people. They are lagging behind in the possession of communication and technological hardwares and channels. The problem of the third world countries is compounded by the fact that they are not united or integrated as the developed countries. In fact, most of the third world countries making this call depend on the U.S.A. and Britain for almost all their needs. There is no co-operation in the area of information among the third world countries. The acute developmental problems bedeviling third world countries make information and communication one of their least problems. Many third world countries apart from serious political problems have severe economic problems. Even the news agencies owned by these third world countries are afflicted by the problems that these countries are bogged down with. The Pan African News Agency (PANA) and the News Agency of Nigeria (NANS) are as good as moribund. They are suffering from poor funding, management and organizational problems, infrastructural problems, non-acquisition of the latest technology and lack of manpower, internal wrangling and undue interference by politicians and over politicization of appointment to the highest echelon of these establishments. In these sort of quagmire, can the protest of the third world countries be said to be tenable?

Our country, Nigeria takes the cake in this issue of negative portrayal by the world media. Any objective assessment will admit that we deserve what we get. Apart from the horrible atrocities that happen here in Nigeria committed especially by government and those desperate to get rich quick, Nigerians all over the world perpetrate unbelievable crimes in all countries of the world where they are. We are involved in human trafficking which is modern day's slavery, our young ladies are on the streets of Europe as prostitutes, our young men are involved in credit card scams, armed robbery, obtaining by trick popularly called OBT or 419. So many foreigners have fallen victims, parted with millions of dollars to some Smart Alecs in Nigeria. These things must be reported by the world media.

The Niger Delta crisis had been smoldering over the years and instead of redressing the issues raised by the people, the Abacha government decided to brutally hang their leaders and that automatically attracted the attention of the world media who immediately cast their lots with the NigerDelta people. For the atrocities the government and its agencies meted out to the Niger Delta people, human rights organizations all over the world were as a result of the negative publicity being given by Nigeria and the oil companies, able to mobilize protests in several countries of the world against the oil companies operating in Nigeria.

The complaints of the third world countries will pale into insignificance when examined in the light of the scriptures. In Genesis Chapter 4:3-7:

...it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering. But he did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain "why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.

The passage is self explanatory. If we do well, we shall receive positive reaction in the world media. For instance, the Obasanjo regime appointed a University Don, Professor Dora Akunyili as the Director-General of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration (NAFDAC). For the number of years she held sway at the agency, it was positive mention all the way. It was internationally acclaimed all over the world. It was one award after another to the point that one room in her house is taken up by plaques she received from the world. What was the magic? She simply did her job the way it should be done. She shunned corruption

and cutting corners, she understood the sensitive nature of her assignment, she knew that fake drugs kill more than HIV/AIDS and she went about trying to do it right and the world media were behind her all the way, confirming what God told Cain "if you do well, will you not be received?" It is just that our leaders have failed to provide leadership. There is nothing wrong with us as a people or our land or our weather. Like Chinua Achebe (1983) observes in his little but epochal book: **Trouble with Nigeria:**

It is totally false to suggest as we are apt to do, that Nigerians are fundamentally different from any other people in the world. Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable; they will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient... the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problems are the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmarks of true leadership... I am saying that Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision.

Conclusion

We have tried to argue that developing nations of the world have nothing to complain about because they give occasion for the negative reportage they receive from the media. They provide the cannon fodder for the world media to feed on – bad government, corruption, wars, riots, Boko Haram, atrocities of different sorts and acute lack of basic amenities. We also believe that this can change if we too change and begin to tackle corruption, provide good governance, employment, basic amenities. If we strengthen our information and communication apparatus, if we can tell our own story ourselves, we would also become self-reliant and self-dependent and even have something to contribute to global communication.

Recommendations

There are certain steps the third world countries need to take to bridge the perceived gap in world media coverage of their countries. The provision of good and democratic government by third world leaders will result in positive mention. The world is now a global village and if any positive light is showing off somewhere, no matter how remote, the world media will congregate there and showcase them to the world. It is not always true that greater global co-operation will solve this problem. Attwood (1982) some other scholars have argued that "From the standpoint of free press notion, we see it as a potential global co-operative effort to help journalists in developing countries obtain expertise and technology and to use it professionally". That begs the point even if every journalist in the third world is a computer buff, it does not rule out the fact that you cannot sell bad product.

Additionally, third world countries should strengthen their information and communication apparatus. That way they will be able to tell their own story. If you depend on what the bible calls "hireling" to look after your sheep, at the slightest threat of danger, he runs away for his dear life, but a good shepherd will stake his life.

Developing countries should see the imbalance as an affront, a big challenge and consequently rise to the occasion. The advancement in the field of information and communication technology is not restricted to people from developed countries. It is common knowledge that people from third world countries can and do hold their own if given the opportunity. Even if it means sending their people to the developed countries,

they should do so to become self reliant and not dependent on foreign media. If we are self-reliant, self-dependent, we will relate with the developed countries on equal footing and may even have something to contribute to global communication.

References

- Achebe, C. (1983). *Trouble with Nigeria*, Ibadan: Macmillian.
- Attwood, W. (1982). "The politics of information" in *Political Communication* Vol. 1.
- Okigbo, C. and Abubakar, Y. (1992). *New Perspectives in international News flow*, Lagos: Solasprint Nigeria Limited.
- UNESCO (1980). *Many voices, one world*, UNESCO London.
- Nwosu, I. (1982). "Depolarising the bipolarism in global information flow", in Okigbo C. edited *New perspectives in international news flow*, Lagos, Nigeria: Solarsprint.
- Nwuneli O. (1985) *Mass communication in Nigeria: A book of reading*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension publishers.
- Uwakwe, O. (2003). *Communication and national development*. Onitsha: Afrika-Link Books.