From Past to Present:
The Issue of Communication in a Polarized World

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Abstract

Resulting from persistent complaints by the developing countries in the 1970's, of imbalance in information-flow between the developing and developed countries of the world, the UNESCO, in 1976, constituted a commission headed by Sean Mac Bride of Ireland, to look into information and communication between the two divides of the world. The committee went to work and submitted its report to UNESCO in 1978. The report of the committee confirmed the existing gap in information flow between the developed and the developing countries. Also established in the report was the fact that ownership and control of information and communication technologies were solely in the hands of the developed countries. There was therefore, the need for New World Information and Communication Order. Thirty years after, this paper has examined the information and communication relationship between the two divides of the world and the gap rather seems to be widening on. The developing countries are challenged to be insightful in searching for ways of bridging the gap. Solutions from international agencies to this widening gap may continue to remain a mirage.

Background

Over three decades ago the UNESCO constituted a commission of sixteen (16) outstanding personalities from the different zones of the world, and of various backgrounds headed by Sean MacBride, to study the lapses in the prevalent world information and communication order. The commissioning of these personalities resulted from persistent complaints by the Third World Countries of the imbalance in the information flow between the developed and the developing countries (UNESCO, 1980).

According to MacBride (1980), in the 1970s, international debates on communication issues had stridently reached points of confrontation in many areas. He observed that the Third World protests against dominant flow of news from industrialized countries were often construed as attacks on the free flow of information. Varying concepts of news values and the role, rights and responsibilities of journalists were widely contended, just as was the potential contribution of the mass media to the solution of major world problems.

When the commission was constituted in Nairobi in 1976, the Director-General of UNESCO Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow gave the following as terms of reference: "to review all the problems of communication in contemporary society seen against the background of technological progress and developments in international relations with due regard to complexity and magnitude". In 1978, the commission turned in its report with 81 recommendations out which 38 directly addressed the developmental

needs of the developing countries. The remaining 48 also impliedly addressed issues of development in the developing countries, in relation to their developed counterparts (UNESCO 1980:254-272).

McQuail (1990:119-121) states that Development Media theory was the product of this commission's work. He summarizes the objectives of the theory as follows: to support and advance the policies of the government in power and to service the state; replace ethnic loyalty with national consciousness; mobilize the people toward self discovery; use media for development. (cf UNESCO 1980:203-207; Folarin 1998)

MacBride's commission also proposed New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Although the commission said that this concept was not definitive, one would have thought that New World Information and Communication Order would not only redress imbalance in news flow but also in communication technology. The 71st recommendation of the commission stipulates as follows:

> With respect to co-operation in the field of technical information, the establishment of regional and sub-regional data banks and information processing centres and specialized documentation centres should be given a high priority. They should be conceived and organized, both in terms of software and management, according to the particular needs of co-operating countries. Choices of technology and selection of foreign enterprises should be made so as not to increase dependence in this field.

The big question is does this provision seek to address co-operation in the evolving communication development between the industrialized and developing countries?

Thirty Years After
Since after the submission of the report by the commission to UNESCO, thirty years ago, a lot have taken place in the field of information and communication. How far are the recommendations of the commission used to redress the imbalance in world communication? Can one boldly say that the present has been disentangled from the pre-commission era (1970s) in respect of complaints of imbalance between the polarized communication world?

After the thirty years, concepts such as globalization and information and communication technology (ICT) have become features of global communication. Have these innovations helped to bridge the gap which existed decades ago in information flow and communication technology between developed and developing countries of the world?

Globalization and ICTS
Tomlinson (1996) sees globalization as: "A rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world-wide. It is a social process which involves a compression of time and space, shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in the time taken – either physically or

representally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in certain sense bringing human beings "closer to one another"

Friedman (1996) defines it as "the loose combination of free – trade agreements, the Internet and the integration of financial markets that is erasing and uniting the world into a single lucrative, but brutally competitive market place".

Globalization is made possible by the prevalent technologies in information and communication. Ya'U (2002) observes that ever since Marshall McLuhan used the phrase 'global village' in the 1960s to refer to this contracting world, the concept of global electronic village (GEV) has gained increasing currency and apparent objectivity reality" The concept of globalization has brought the entire world and recontracted its social, cultural, political, economic educational and even religious affairs closer to those concerned. At the engine room of globalization are information and communication technologies (ICTs) that have had the capacity of shrinking the world and making every part of the world reachable within the shortest possible time, removing distance as a barrier to transactions. Technologies such as Internet and Global Mobile System (GSM), have repositioned the world and mediated it so critically that globalization process with Internet at the centre, helps to describe the world as the Global Electronic Village (GEV) (Ya'U, 2000).

Apart from the electronic mass media – radio and television which have helped to link up one section of the world with another, Internet has facilitated participation of people in the different sections of the world in what takes place in other sections of the world. Example of this, is the electronic operation of the various sectors of human and societal development, such as e–commerce, e–banking, e–government, e-medicine etc.

The operation of international trade among nations of the world is made easier through information and communication technologies. Through ICTs, developing countries have become lucrative markets to multinational corporations as these firms flood markets in the developing countries with their products through ICTs.

The closer we are the wider apart
It would be reckless to measure the New World Information and Communication Order with just not an index. The New World Information and Communication Order advocated by MacBride and his team should not be seen based on information flow only. It needs to be given a holistic measuring approach, with all the components of information and communication. The right approach should incorporate both the contents and the technologies in information and communication industry. The imbalance in information and communication order which necessitated the setting up of MacBride Commission is far from being redressed (Kur and Melladu 2007:109-115). Reasons for this standpoint abound. Ya'U (2002) sees knowledge dependence as one of the factors which widen the gap between developing and the industrialized countries. He argues that what emerges from the assessment of globalization and ICTs is a gloomy picture of some developing countries, poorly positioned in the cyberspace as to benefit from globalization but that the reality is that some developing countries face the challenges of imperialism anew, this time, represented by knowledge dependence (cf Nwanwene 2005:166-167).

A very significant issue in the imbalance in the information and communication, at the front burner in today's world is the technologies themselves. Just as it was over thirty years ago when there was a need for UNESCO to set up the Commission to study the imbalance debate and offer suggestions for a possible balance, the invention of communication technologies still resides with the developed countries while the developing ones are still at the receiving end. This situation renders the developing countries incapacitated since one can only control what one has. Ya'U (2002) states that "Africa's share for example, ICTs production is virtually zero, thus making the continent a mere consumer of ICTs". He avers that Africa for example, accounts for almost zero percent of global ICT production and its consumption is equally low. The continent also ranks the last in terms of per capital spending in ICTs. Other than a few assembly plants and at local production in some of these countries, most developing countries, especially those in Africa, import all their ICTs needs.

Related to lack of contribution to the production of these technologies is the high cost of using ICTs in developing countries. Ya'U (2002) says that cost is also a factor in the low use of ICTs in developing countries. In some developing countries, for example, he says that the cost of PCs is beyond the reach of many in addition to the cost for access to Internet and payment for staying online. He states that the cost per minute use of Internet is more costly in Africa for instance, than anywhere else.

Developing countries do not possess their bandwidth to operate ICTs. Such bandwidth is rented from international bandwidth providers (Olusola, 2007:171). All submarine cables and the satellite transponders belong to American and European companies. Developing countries, especially, those in Africa pay heavily for the use of this bandwidth. For example, about $1 billion is paid per annum by Africans for connectivity to American and European bandwidth providers (Bell, 2002).

ICT linkage among developing countries hardly exists. As a result, traffic has to be routed through a third party country, usually either through Europe or the United States of America. The capacities of these routes are very low compared to others (Ya'U, 2002). Disproportionate representation in international regulatory ICT bodies broadens the gap between the developing and developed countries. Ya'U (2002) argues that on the non-statistical aspects of the divide are ownership and control of the major players in the ICT sector. These include multinational corporations involved in the production and marketing of ICTs, the bandwidth and the channel providers and other related agencies. These bodies are dominated by the USA, Europe and Japan. In addition to the UN bodies, such as International Telecommunication Union (ITU), many bodies in the sector exist to regulate one aspect or another of the Internet. For instance, domain, name administration and protocol issuance are handled by Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). This body which initially started as an American agency, in spite of its global field of operation, remains dominated by Americans. International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) took over these functions from Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), set by the US Federal Network Council (Hamelink 1999:18). Developing countries have only insignificant representation on the council. Africa as a continent, for example, has only one representative.

Another factor in the broadening of the gap between developing and developed

countries in globalization and ICTs is the low content in the Internet from the developing countries. In what Ya'U (2002) calls digital divides, using Africa as an example, he says that Africa content is minimal. He further states that in addition, very few African languages have made it to Internet, with so far very few websites. According to him, a related issue is the use of the Internet by some developing countries. At the level of governance, few governments of the developing countries and their agencies have set up websites to facilitate the exchange and sharing of public information (Ya'U, 2002).

Only very few homes in developing countries can boast of literacy level and possession of the new information and communication technologies while there are some offices where manual typewriters are still in use.   After three decades of the move to check imbalance in the World Information and Communication Order, it is thus obvious that instead of the gap between the two divides of the world to close, it widens on. The fact that developing countries and their citizens make use of the emerging technologies in information and communication does not make them equal with the developed countries where these technologies are invented and where the buck stops. Therefore, the euphoria of ICTs and globalization should be celebrated with caution but more of what to contribute to inventing information and communication technologies should be the thinking of the developing countries.

If the trend is allowed, it therefore means that the imbalance in the information and communication in the world is till far away from being addressed. Some observers have reported that the gap between the developed and developing countries would hardly ever be bridged (Howkins and Robert, 1997; Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Cogburn and Adeya, 1999). Mansell and Wehn (1998:25), for example observe that it would take African countries 100 years to reach the 1995 ICT level of Ireland. This also questions the setting up of MacBride Commission by the UNESCO. Does the world need another MacBride Commission to find out what to do to close the widening gap between the polarized world? This is a matter of the closer we are, the wider apart. In other words, the present Information and Communication order and the concept of globalization do not give answer to the questions asked over thirty years ago. Rather, the same question continues to be asked today (Izuogu, 2007:53-63).

UNESCO and ICT Challenges
The Director-General of UNESCO Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow in his foreword (UNESCO, 1980) state as follows:

> It was with this in view that the General Conference, at its nineteenth session, held in Nairobi in 1976, instructed me to undertake a review of all the problems of communication in contemporary society seen against the background of technological progress and recent developments in international relations with due regard to their complexity and magnitude. I therefore deemed it advisable, in undertaking this task to set up a "brain trust" composed of highly competent prominent figures from various backgrounds and I

> accordingly established the International Commission for the study of Communication problems, under the presidency of Mr Sean MacBride …

According to M'Bow, the MacBride Commisison was constituted and given the responsibility of looking at imbalance in the world information and communication in a holistic way with regard to technological development. One issue that stood out clear in the commission's report is the imbalance in technological development which indeed is the key to imbalance in information flow. However, the world is characterized by rapid growth in information and communication technologies. Technologies continue to replace others in very quick successions but the developing countries, especially, African countries are in the contrary, too slow to catch up with the invention in information and technological development of any kind. Just as they were in the 1960s, most developing countries still crawl far at the rear, receiving the outputs of the information and communication technologies (ICTs). The operation of ICTs is not subjected to UNESCO but that of WTO which is more of profitability to the developed countries than consideration for bridging the gap between the two divides (Ya'U, 2002).

The present situation, thus, challenges the UNESCO just as it was over thirty years ago to sincerely encourage the developing countries to work towards production of information and communication technologies which, subsequently would give them control over what they have and would be able to make them originate their information and communicate same with the aim of developing their countries better (Nwosu, 2007:1-17).

Developing Countries and ICT Challenges

More than any other stakeholders, the world over, the developing countries, especially African countries, are indeed so much challenged by Information and Communication Technologies. The irony, however, is that some of these developing countries are so complaisant that once institutions and some individuals have procured the ICT facilities, they claim to have been linked to the global village and it is all over.

Governments in some developing countries, especially, African countries remain so dependent on industrialized countries and international agencies that any major steps they wish to take in the development of their countries must be dictated to them by either the industrialized countries or the world bodies. If the developing countries continue to depend on the developed countries or the international agencies, it means that the trend would continue indefinitely. This is so because the industrialized countries in their wisdom, make use of the Third World countries as markets for their finished technologies. At best, some of these countries are strategically used as assembly markets for technologies from industrialized countries (Ya'U, 2002). This is a way of perpetuating their technological superiority over the developing countries.

Similarly, the composition of world agencies always favours the industrialized nations in major decision making affecting both the developed and the developing countries. Often, the developed countries ally with one another in taking key decisions relating to their countries and the developing countries. Such decisions, one would

agree, must always favour the interest of the industrialized countries.

Developing countries, especially, African countries are, indeed, challenged by the current trend of ICT in the globalized world. It is no longer any time for these countries to wait to be told when they have to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but it is time developing countries knew what special Millennium Development Goals they want to achieve and why such goals are necessary. The Millennium Development Goals which must include production of ICTs by the developing countries should not be a concept of an international agency, heralded by developing countries. This kind of practice for long is seen as self-deceit, at best, a lip-service by the developing countries.

Unless, the developing countries of the world get back to the drawing board and assess themselves to really identify their peculiar needs which lead to their goal attainment, they would ever remain markets for the industrialized nations while information and communication gap continues to widen on. Until developing countries start to blame themselves for their economic woes and lapses, the imperialism caused by ICTs would remain growing (Onwe, 2007:145-160). Many developing countries, especially in Africa, do not know what goals they want to achieve. A study of the history of Chinese technologies may be of great help to the developing countries in their march towards closing the information and communication technological gap. Expectations that industrialized nations or world agencies are the ones to bridge this gap has since become a mirage and should be allowed to fade away.

Conclusion

Often, international agencies have been proposing various programmes and concepts thought to be in the interest of the developing countries of the world. Sometimes these programmes are proposed based on complaints made by the developing countries. Unfortunately, many of these programmes fail to meet the goal for which they were initiated.

UNESCO in the 1970s constituted a commission headed by Sean MacBride from Ireland to study the imbalance in information and communication between developed and developing countries. The constitution of this commission was a result of persistent complaints of imbalance in information-flow by the developing countries.

This paper, in assessing the present information and communication order in the world, has stated that after thirty years, instead of the gap to be closed, it widens on. This is mainly due to ownership and control of information and communication technologies solely in the hands of the developed countries. The developing countries continue to remain consumers of the products of these technologies. The current gap between the developed and the developing countries in information and communication seems to be wider than what it was thirty years ago. Thus, the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in respect of closing the widening gap is still far away from being achieved.

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