

Leveraging the New World Information and Communication Order: A Roadmap to Proper Communication in the Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Abstract

The constant struggle for a better means of information communication has remained an issue of major concern. This is due to the bottlenecks often experienced when it comes to information generation and dissemination in developed and under-developed or developing nations. As a result of this, the processes of news gathering and reporting have remained imbalanced and controversial. As part of the solution to this controversy and imbalanced news flow, the 1970s witnessed an intense debate in international fora, which gave birth to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) phenomenon. This concept was seriously faulted by some nations, such as the United States of America. However, due to major controversies that erupted during the series of meetings organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the order has remained a mirage. In light of this, the paper critically x-rayed the opportunities of the new world information and communication order in improving communication, from the Nigerian communication viewpoint. It looked at the historical development and the content of the order. It also revealed the perceived failure of the order which led to the exit of the US from UNESCO. The paper went further to look at issues surrounding the order, and its future expectation. It, therefore, concludes that the principles of NWICO align with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as quality education, reduced inequalities, industry, innovation, and infrastructure, and should be highly promoted by all.

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Introduction

Nigeria as a nation, has been largely faced with the issue of fake news, and media propaganda owing to restrictions and unprofessionalism in information generation and dissemination. Down the lane, this could be largely attributed to the imbalance in global communication and access to information and communication technology. According to Carlson (2017), the imbalance in global communication has occupied global discourse since the late 19th century. With the attainment of independence by several countries, it is widely anticipated that colonialism, which is one of the promoters of communication inequalities, would be out of the way. To this end, Nordenstreng (2012) noted that NWICO was hoped, would reverse, or at least balance, the one-way flow of information generation and dissemination that ran from the North to the South. This implication of this one-way flow or imbalance in information flow,

could be seen as the change in the dynamics of news media. However, such change was largely ignored, as the less affluent nations continued experiencing negligence. One of the contributing factors to this negligence in the opinion of Chien, et al. (2021) is the absence of political freedom and not envisaging the future of information sharing, which failed largely to guarantee communication or economic independence. In this scenario, the newly independent nations relied on their colonial masters for either survival or growth. The resultant effect of this, in the submission of Giannone (2014) is that few developed nations intimidated the less developed ones. Not only did the former sell their products in the international market, but they also fixed the prices of goods (mainly raw materials) from the newly independent countries. According to Padovani and Pavan (2011); and Hobday (2023), this unfair scenario is also reflected in the areas of intellectual, cultural and social activities. What then is the fate of the developing nations if care is not taken?

Nonetheless, the discrepancies in power and wealth between the developed and developing nations manifested more in the fields of information and communication as the developed countries were better equipped technologically and financially, thereby giving them dominance over the developing ones in the global information and communication flow. As dangerous as it may be, the large presence of famine, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, overpopulation, destruction of the environment, and poor or negative media coverage made the developing nations ignorant of international relations. Against this, in 1973 at Algiers, the developing countries, under the aegis of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), raised concerns about the issues of imbalance in communication. This was followed by deliberation in another meeting held in Tunis in 1976 and a ministerial conference in Delhi later in 1976. Carlsson (2017) noted that the call by NAM was the establishment of a new arrangement to address the imbalance in news flows and global communication patterns. In a clearer term, the NAM's call was based on the notion that communication is an essential factor of human and international relations and should be based on the principle of equality and independence of choice for all nations and peoples. However, this did not go well with some countries, thereby, leading to several issues and bone of contention. Because of this, this paper seeks to revisit the NWICO by considering it as an end to the crisis in information generation and dissemination.

Historical Background of New World Information and Communication Order

Historically, the New World Information and Communication Order is seen by scholars as a precondition for the success of the New World Economic Order. This is based on the premise that communication is at the centre of all economic activities. According to the report of Nordenstreng, from 1976-1978, the structure of NWICO is hinged on the idea of free flow or free and balanced flow of

information between the Western industrialised developed nations and the underdeveloped or developing societies in the Southern part of the world. History holds it that, as part of the efforts to redefine the terms of participation in the world system, developing countries have established formal alliances to lobby for their mutual interests in the world community and to avoid slavish alignments with either of the superpowers. The most important of such alliances has been the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (also known as the Group of 77), formed in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 (Carlson, 2017). While many meetings of NAM occurred in between, perhaps one of the most important meetings influencing international relations between developed and developing countries was held in Algiers in 1973. During this conference, the members of NAM put forth their concerns about information flow and cultural imperialism.

Consequently, the concerns about the inequalities in communication and one-way or imbalanced flow of information, which is the centre of the NAM's meetings, made UNESCO create the International Commission to carry out studies on all communication problems and proffer solutions. Sadly, the American Scholar Wilbur Schramm noted in 1964 the unfair dominance of news flow by the developed countries and the distortedness in presentation. This was followed by the observation of another communication scholar, Herbert Schiller in 1969, which revealed that developing countries had little input in the allocation of radio frequencies for satellites. This presentation was made in a meeting held in Geneva. Herbert Schiller explained that side-stepping the developing countries on an issue as crucial as the allocation of radio frequency allowed for the dominance of the United States and a few other developed countries, citing the example of Intelsat, set up for international cooperation in satellite communication, which was dominated by the United States, especially for their military purposes. To this end, the Algiers meeting of the NAM had earlier introduced the idea of a Third World news agency, a notion that was taken up later by UNESCO-sanctioned symposia held in Lima, Tunis, and Mexico City, as a part of the solution. After much deliberation, the NAM's proposal was turned into reality by its Ministerial Conference of NAM in Delhi, India in 1976 (Non-Aligned Countries, 1976). As a result, a self-financing, news pool was created, with none of the participants having a dominant role. This was followed by the approval of operational guidelines at the Fifth Summit Meeting of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. However, with the organization of the news pool, developing nations had finally created a mechanism they hoped would effectively compete against the major Western agencies and would provide a vehicle for a more balanced international news flow.

While this was occurring, efforts were also taking place to create a set of non-binding principles to guide the operations of the international media and journalists, which according to Aruleba and Jere (2022) is to better communication in certain regions, especially, in rural Africa. As if it failed, the efforts

to provide an operational guide for international media and journalists later came to be known as the Mass Media Declaration, with the presentation of the first draft in 1974. This was accompanied by the reinstatement of the ideas of freedom of speech and the press in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UNESCO 1988). An attempt was made through the Declaration to stretch the conceptual boundaries of freedom of expression beyond merely the rights of those who owned and controlled the international media. The emphasis was to ensure that the public had an effective "right to seek, receive and transmit information. (UNESCO, 1974, Articles II and III). This attempt immediately raised resistance in the West. Two years later, at the Nineteenth session of UNESCO's General Conference in Nairobi in November 1976), efforts to push the concept of NWICO forward were made by the Secretary-General, M'Bow. During the same conference, it was reported that the Soviet Union also floated proposals for strong government control of mass media. This proposal was never adopted and met the resistance of many First and Third World journalists who strongly supported the concept of a free press, the critiques being levelled against the Western media and the Soviet proposal brought forth a back-lash from Western countries, especially from the US, which lead to the US's backlash of UNESCO.

According to Carlson (2017), the US threatened to withdraw from UNESCO, should the organization continue to deal with NWICO-related concerns in an unsatisfactory manner. Recognizing the severity of the US threat to any work that UNESCO might pursue, it was reported that a negotiating group was organized by M'Bow to serve as a face-saving format for those backing the Soviet resolution, leading to the complete abandonment of the matter. Additionally, there was a decision to establish an International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (later known as the MacBride Commission), as part of the resolution. The commission was saddled with the responsibility of studying world communication, specifically the free and balanced flow of information. It was expected that the final report of the Commission would be presented at UNESCO's next General Conference in 1980. This is the beginning of the journey towards the enactment of the order, to enable countries like Nigeria to be freed from certain communication bottlenecks.

The MacBride Commission and their Report

We are still concerned about the state of information communication in Nigeria and ways of improving it, with much emphasis on the NWICO. The MacBride Commission was headed by the Irish Ambassador, who was also the Director of Amnesty International and a Nobel Peace laureate, Sean MacBride. This Commission, with 16 members was charged with the sole responsibility of studying the existing state of affairs in international communication and to make recommendations that might form the basis of a new communication order. However, in 1978, the Commission submitted an intensely debated

interim report to the 20th General Assembly. The interim report focused on the nature and organization of the Western press, especially the transnational wire services (TNNAs). Sadly, key proposals concerning communication policies and the protection of journalists, an idea that was personally promoted by MacBride, were received very poorly by Western media organizations and governments (MacBride Commission, 2004). Nonetheless, there was enough common ground in the report that a compromise declaration could be issued by the Conference participants. Two years later the Commission's final report was presented to the 21st General Conference in Belgrade.

Nonetheless, the report also included the tempering of the original anti-Western rhetoric and a series of recommendations for action that could contribute to the accomplishments of a NWICO. Additionally, the areas and sections that had to do with technological exchange between countries and alterations in the call for a free and balanced flow to the goal of a free flow and a wider and better-balanced dissemination of information, were also moderated in the recommendations. This is what Rodrik and Stiglitz (2024) considered a relief to developing nations in terms of information generation and communication. Consequently, it was reported that the 82 recommendations by the Commission included proposals related to;

- a) telecommunications tariffs,
- b) administration procedures,
- c) technological implementation and uses, and
- d) training and research in the media.

It was also observed from UNESCO (1980, pp. 253-275) that the report also resolved to deal with "professional integrity and standards including a concern for professional ethics" although it eliminated any suggestions about the licensing of journalists. However, this proposal resurfaced later as a major rationale for the US's decision to withdraw from UNESCO and underpinned much of the anti-UNESCO campaign conducted by the Western media. To this end, UNESCO had earlier distanced itself from the report of the Commission. This situation led to the questioning of the fate of equitable communication in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing nations, and the issue of the digital divide as reported by Jamil (2021).

NWICO and its Content

It is important to note that UNESCO, which initially distanced itself from the report of the MacBride Commission because of the pressure from the United States, later adopted it as resolution 4/19 in its 21st session in Belgrade, in 1980. The content of the resolution provided as follows:

- i. The elimination of the communication imbalances and inequalities;
- ii. the elimination of the negative effects of certain monopolies, public or private, and excessive concentrations on the North or developed nations;
- iii. the removal of the internal and external obstacles to a free flow and wider and better-balanced dissemination of information and ideas across all countries;
- iv. the plurality of sources and channels of information;
- v. the freedom of the press and information;
- vi. the freedom of journalists and all professionals in the communication media, a freedom inseparable from responsibility;
- vii. the capacity of developing countries to achieve improvement of their situations, notably by providing their equipment by training their personnel, improving their infrastructure, and making their information and communication media suitable to their needs and aspirations;
- viii. the sincere will of developed countries to help them attain these objectives;
- ix. the respect for each people's cultural identity and for the right of each nation to inform the world public about its interests, its aspirations, and its social and cultural values;
- x. the respect for the right of all peoples to participate in international exchanges of information based on equality, justice, and mutual benefit; respect for the right of the public; of ethnic and social groups and individuals to have access to information sources and to participate actively in the communication process.
- xi. This New World Information and Communication Order should be based on the fundamental principles of international law, as laid down in the charter of the United Nations;
- xii. diverse solutions to information and communication problems are required because social, political, cultural, and economic problems differ from one country to another, from one group to another (Carlson, 2017).

A clear study of the content of this NWICO brings into the bearing, the consideration of Mourtzis, et al. (2022) on the challenges and opportunities of the Transition from Industry 4.0 to Society 5.0. According to Mourtzis et al. (2022), Society 5.0, which sees several countries orchestrating initiatives towards the design and development of the human-centric aspect of technologies, systems, and services, has become necessary in this NWICO content. This is to pave the way for societal transformation, especially, in developing and under-developed nations, which eventually leads to the generation of a new society, characterized by a balanced and free flow of information. However, this move did not receive the support it should have, leading to the exit of the United States from UNESCO.

Perceived Failure of the Order and US's Decision to Exit UNESCO

Research revealed that despite the conciliatory approach adopted in the final report, the document submitted by the MacBride Commission was still largely criticized by certain developed nations. Many faulted it for being too philosophical and for trying to seek consensus where the divisions were simply too deep to overcome. Others were bothered by its generalities and lack of a solid implementation program. To some, the report failed to adequately address issues of telecommunication infrastructure and the socio-cultural effects of technology, existing tariff structures, and the distribution of spectrum resources (Goddard-Power, 1984). Although many of the recommendations were, in fact, not all that philosophically removed from practical concerns or that difficult to implement, they were left unenacted by the Belgrade General Conference. However, certain concerns of Haldorai et al. (2021) on the need for balanced intelligent ICT education were still far-fetched, as the digital divide remained the order of the day. Still, one significant outcome of the Belgrade Conference was the creation of the International Program for Development Communication (IPDC), which was designed to implement many of the objectives of the NWICO, practically.

The Belgrade Conference also saw the adoption of the so-called Venezuelan resolution which called for a study of elements to be included in a NWICO, attempted to create a universal definition of "responsible" journalism, and sought assistance for the Palestine Liberation Organization. This further raised the ire of the US, who saw in such resolutions as the continuance of MacBride Commission-style rhetoric resources (Goddard-Power, 1984). Following Belgrade, the anti-UNESCO sentiments continued to rise. The United States, understandably, was against some of the issues raised in NWICO. They believed these issues were not in the interest of the American transnational media corporations and particularly condemned the issues and efforts to redress them as barriers to the free flow of communication. One such was that journalists should be licensed before they do their job. This, the US said, would put its journalists in a disadvantaged position. Based on this, the US not only attacked UNESCO; it withdrew its membership of the body in 1984.

Throughout the NWICO debates, perhaps the most defensive position regarding alterations to international communication has been held by the US. Despite the possibility of the developing countries' actual use of the resources being, for most, in the distant future, and the consistency of these proposals with international law, the US only offered to relinquish a much smaller range of expansion bands. Although most countries were dissatisfied with the outcome of the conference, the US delegation was able to leave Geneva in a very positive mood. In late December 1983, Secretary of State George Schultz sent a letter to UNESCO Director-General M'Bow, informing him of the US intent to withdraw its membership

at the end of 1984. In the letter, Schultz further charged that UNESCO had drifted from "the original principles of its Constitution," leading to a situation that now "served the political purposes of member states" (Carlsson, 2017).

According to Carlson (2017), the consequence of the US departure was an immediate loss of \$43 million from its general budget. The subsequent withdrawal of the UK and Singapore in 1985 reduced the agency's budget even further. In the end, UNESCO was left operating with two-thirds of its original budget and without the participation of key actors in the field of international communication. During the period that the United States withdrew its membership from and withheld its funding for UNESCO, some OPEC countries and a few socialist countries filled up the financial gap, thereby making her withdrawal of no consequence (Nordenstreng, 2012).

Issues in New World Information and Communication Order

Issues raised in NWICO broadly concerned the unbalanced flow of communication between the developed and developing countries, distortions to the cultures of developing countries, and marginalization of developing countries in the application and use of satellites, and computer technologies (Padovani & Pavan, 2012; Giannone, 2014; Carlson, 2017). The issues can be itemized specifically as follows:

- News reports on developing countries by news agencies such as AP and Reuters reflect the position of developed countries. They would always focus on disasters, crimes, and military coups and not the realities of survival regarding children, women, farming, and population growth. It was noted that only four major news agencies, including Reuters and AP, control 80% of news flow in the world (Giannone, 2014)
- Advertising agencies in developed countries control advertisements in developing countries in the form of affiliates or branches. Published adverts were found to distort the culture of the developing countries while introducing and propagating foreign cultures and habits.
- Unbalanced and unrestricted flow of cultural materials concerning the dominance of American films television documentaries, and video cassettes in developing countries.
- Unfair allocation of parking spots in space (geostationary orbit) in favour of the developed countries. Also, there is an unfair distribution of radio spectrum. Records say a few developed countries control almost 90% of the radio spectrum, much of which is for military use.
- Unrestricted satellite broadcasting of television signals in developing countries by developed countries without their permission. The United Nations was said to have voted against this in 1970.

- Collection of information and data on agriculture and weather in developing countries through satellites without permission.
- Restriction on the use of databases in computers by developed countries and their denial of the spread of computer knowledge to developing countries.
- The protection of journalists was also raised for discussion because many journalists suffered incarceration and violence from military regimes in developing countries at the time. This hampered news flows.

The Future of NWICO: Enhancing Better Communication in Contemporary Nigeria Society

It is clear that while UNESCO has become less central to NWICO, the debate is certainly far from finished as the unbalanced flow of information, is largely felt in the Nigeria nation, for example, and in other underdeveloped and developing nations. On the other hand, other parties are providing leadership, and proving to be effective hosts for the continuing dialogue. Examples of the alternative channels for this dialogue have been the National Lawyers Guild, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), the Institute for Latin America (IPAL), and the Union for Democratic Communication (UDC). Today, the debates on NWICO or the need to replace the unbalanced flow in global communication with a “free, but balanced flow of communication” continue, but with less attention, as nothing seems to be improving.

Evidentially, one of the benefits derivable is the fact that official UNESCO policy concerning NWICO does not support state control or censorship and licensing of journalists, partly in tandem with the wish of the United States. To this end, upholding the freedom of the press. Aside from this freedom, the following are the future benefits of the NWICO considering communication in contemporary Nigerian society, as articulated by Carlson (2017), Jamil (2021) Aruleba, and Jere (2022); Hobday (2023); and Rodrik, and Stiglitz (2024) are as follows:

1. **Global Information Equity:** The NWICO highlights the need for balanced information flows. As digital media and internet access continue to expand, ensuring that all regions have equitable access to information and communication technology (ICT) remains crucial. This is important not only for fostering global understanding but also for empowering marginalized communities, such as the Nigerian nation.
2. **Cultural Diversity:** NWICO emphasized the importance of preserving and promoting cultural diversity in the face of overwhelming dominance by a few major media corporations. In a globalized world where media consolidation continues, supporting diverse voices and perspectives is vital for maintaining cultural richness and preventing homogenization.

3. **Digital Divide:** The principles of NWICO are highly relevant to addressing the digital divide—the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not. Bridging this divide involves not just providing access to technology, but also ensuring that people have the skills and resources to use it effectively. This according to Jamil (2021), is very essential in a discourse of effective and efficient communication.
4. **Media Literacy:** As misinformation and disinformation become more prevalent, media literacy becomes increasingly important. NWICO's call for improved information dissemination aligns with efforts to enhance media literacy globally, helping individuals critically assess and navigate the vast array of information available to them. When fully adopted, Mourtzis et al. (2022) observed that the result will be promising.
5. **Regulation and Governance:** NWICO's advocacy for fairer global communication structures can inform current debates about the regulation and governance of digital platforms. Balancing corporate interests with public good, ensuring transparency, and protecting user rights are key areas where NWICO's principles can guide policy-making. Contemporary Nigerian society sees it as a good avenue to further strengthen the communication sector and ensure that the right thing is done.
6. **Global Collaboration:** According to Rodrik, and Stiglitz (2024), addressing global challenges like climate change, pandemics, and socio-economic inequality, effective communication and collaboration are essential. To this end, the NWICO's emphasis on international cooperation and equitable communication networks can help facilitate better global responses to these issues, especially, in Nigeria.
7. **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The principles of NWICO align with several SDGs, such as Quality Education, Reduced Inequalities, and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. Promoting fair communication practices supports broader goals of sustainable development and global progress (Chien et al., 2021).

Summary and Conclusion

Nigeria, as a developing nation, is seriously faced with issues in information dissemination and communication, which was part of the issues of concern in the NWICO. Consequently, it is very clear from this paper that the imbalance in global communication has been a topic of discussion since the 19th century. However, in the late 20th century, many countries gained independence, with Nigeria, in 1960, hoping to balance the one-way flow of information and change the dynamics of news media. However,

political freedom failed to guarantee communication or economic independence, leading to a power imbalance between developed and developing nations, as most of these nations still feel the wave of colonialism. This has largely contributed to the persistent lack of intellectual and cultural development, as well as the dominance of developed countries in global communication, leading to the upsurge of fake news, and media propaganda in the Nigerian nation.

The paper also revealed that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) raised concerns about this imbalance and proposed a new arrangement to address it. The New Order plan, based on the principle of equality and independence of choice for all nations and peoples, gave birth to NWICO. The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) is a pre-condition for the success of the New World Economic Order, focusing on communication as the centre of all economic activities. UNESCO created the International Commission to address communication problems, and scholars like Wilbur Schramm and Herbert Schiller noted the unfair dominance of developed countries in news flow and distorted presentation. The order grew out of the New International Economic Order of 1974 and aimed for a "Free and Balanced Flow" of information between Western industrialized developed nations and underdeveloped societies in the South.

Going further, developing countries formed alliances to lobby for their mutual interests and avoid slavish alignments with superpowers. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was one of the most important alliances, and the idea of a Third World news agency was introduced in 1973. This led to the creation of a self-financing news pool, which developing nations hoped would compete against major Western agencies and provide a more balanced international news flow. Efforts to create non-binding principles to guide international media and journalists, known as the Mass Media Declaration, raised resistance in the West. The US threatened to withdraw from UNESCO if the organization continued to deal with NWICO-related concerns in an unsatisfactory manner. Today, the struggle is still ongoing. However, for better communication and media in contemporary Nigeria, revisiting the NWICO has become a necessity and should not be allowed to stop. This is aimed at bringing about global information equity, cultural diversity, a solution to the digital Divide, increased media literacy, improved communication regulation and governance, global collaboration and the actualization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in contemporary Nigerian society.

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