

Post-NWICO debate: Image of Africa in the Western Media
By Tokunbo Ojo¹

Abstract

Developing countries, under the banner of the UNESCO, moved a motion for the New World Information Order (NWICO) to address the issue of global inequality. However, in some circles, the call for the NWICO is seen as an attack on the freedom of expression and Western values. Situated within the paradigm of information flow controversy, this paper shall focus on the image of Africa as constructed by the Western media in the emerging Communication Order after the intensive NWICO debate of the 70s and early 80s. The paper begins with a brief review of the rise and the fall of the NWICO debate. It then examines Africa's media image in the post-NWICO era, and it concludes there has not been much positive change to the Western media's coverage of Africa since the NWICO debate.

The question of bias in the media coverage had been an important starting point in many of the deliberations concerning the national and international flow of culture and news because the deployment of world communication technology and the management of world information resources are clearly in the favour of the developed countries, which quantitatively account for less of the world population (Eapen, 1996: XV and Okigbo, 1996: 285).

Most studies indicated that about 80 percent of the international news that flow through the newsrooms across the globe come from the four major news agencies- Reuters, Agence France-Presse, United Press International and the Associated Press- and international cable news networks- CNN and BBC. Of this, about 20 percent is devoted to developing countries, which count for almost three-quarters of world population. Bear

¹ *About the author: Tokunbo Ojo is an awarding journalist and writer whose work has appeared in the Montreal Gazette, several African publications and Web sites, as well as the Journal of Cultural Studies, and Voices - the Wisconsin Review of African Literatures. Ojo is an executive member of the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), Montreal Chapter, and a member of the Canadian Science Writers' Association, the Canadian Association of Black Journalists and Investigative Reporters and Editors.*

in mind, these agencies and news networks belong to the three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council- Britain, France and the United States of America.

Rising from its meeting in Montreal in 1969, the UNESCO group of experts on mass communication and society noted in its disturbing but revealing report that: “What has come to be known as the free flow of information at the present time is often in fact a ‘one way’ rather than a true exchange of information” (UNESCO, 1970).

This one-way flow inevitably reflects the point of view, mentality, values and interests of these developed nations (Ochs, 1986: 29)—France, USA, Britain and Japan—that are the major players in the global politics. The major western media treat the cultures of the industrialized nations as superior and place them at the top of this imaginary hierarchy, while the cultures of the developing nations are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy (Ostgaard, 1965). For instance, 53 nations of African continent are often lumped together as one while continent is often portrayed as “a crocodile-infested dark continent where jungle life has perpetually eluded civilization” (Ebo, 1992: 15). Excerpts from “novels, screenplays, movie reviews, and screen advertising demonstrate the vast propaganda our society has witnessed during the past fifty years about Africa as a “savage” place in need of conquest, “colonization”, and Christianity” (Maynard, 1974: IV).

Though to Roger Tatarian, former vice-president of United Press International (UPI), the imbalance in news flows between America and developing countries, African countries in particular, is due to the military, economic and political power distribution in the world. This assertion indirectly explained the reason why the news editors, policy makers and world business interest considered Africa as less important. The continent is

“viewed as a vast black hole fringed by Libya and South Africa. With the exception of these two countries, both propelled by extreme convictions, it is not a player in the great global power game. In short, Africa is not deemed to be newsworthy” (Fitzgerald, 1987: 24).

These gross misrepresentations and imbalance in the international news flow gave birth to one of the greatest debates in the field of international communication in the 1970s and the 1980s---New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate.

The NWICO debate paid greater attention to objectivity in transnational flow of information, inequality in information resources, cultural and commercial values of information and fairness in the news distribution. As it was documented by German scholar, Wolfgang Kleinwachter, in his essay “Three Waves of The Debate,” The NWICO resolution adopted by consensus at the 19th General Conference of UNESCO in Nairobi in 1976 and at the 31st United Nations General Assembly was aimed to meet following challenges:

- The promotion of the development of national communication systems in the developing countries.
- The elaboration of guiding principles concerning the role of mass media in the international sphere.
- The development of a concept for a democratic restructuring of the international information system. (Kleinwachter, 1993: 15).

Primarily the nations of the South, which included all countries of African continent, wanted a radical overhaul of the present international communication system. They wanted the world communication system to reflect the diversity and equality of all

human races. The need to establish a new world order for information was highlighted. “This situation of imbalance has naturally prompted the wish for a radical overhaul of the present international information system.... While representing one of the many aspects of the required transformation of the world situation, its primary purpose must be to initiate further reforms and to establish other new communication orders, more just and more beneficial to the whole community of mankind,” argued Tunisian born Mustapha Masmoudi at the UNESCO (Nordensteng, 1978: 23-24).

Although the case was well presented, the realization of the demands was a tall dream. First, the implementation process of the NWICO was not well defined. Secondly, the censorship and media accountability clauses of the NWICO were too ambiguous. Furthermore, in many circles, the NWICO demands were seen as purely the sole views of South’s elites. That is, the NWICO does not reflect the views and concerns of the masses in the South.

Granted these are legitimate concerns, but these concerns could be dealt with or resolved through a grassroots educative initiative and democratic process if there was true commitment on the parts of all parties involved in the debate. Rather than negotiating these loopholes, the industrialized North quickly capitalized on it and trivialized the NWICO debate.

“We cannot permit attempts to control the media and promote censorship under the ruse of a so-called ‘New World Information Order,’” President Ronald Reagan was quoted in the New York Times of September 22, 1987.

It was a perfect excuse for the US and others of the industrialized North that already have the fear that their “hegemonic and monopolistic ownership and control of

international communication systems and patterns of information flow were about to be destabilized and disestablished” (Uche, 1996: 2) with the NWICO. Britain and the United States revoked their membership of the UNESCO and then walked out of the NWICO debate. Since both countries are the largest financiers of the UNESCO, the withdrawal weakens the political and financial strength of the organization².

As Colleen Roach observed “the critique of U.S. domination of information flow and Madison Avenue brought home to the West that in many ways the NWICO movement was an attack on capitalism: it was not only the news and entertainment values which were felt to be “alien” to many non-Western societies, but also the transnationalized economy represented by American communication industries” (Roach, 1990: 283). To Atwood and Murphy (1982), there is more to the question of information flow:

First, it is not the content of the world’s news channels that gives rise to the controversy. More important than news stories, be it development news or coups and earthquakes, is the economic data transmitted daily across the borders.... Second, in the long run neither journalists nor scholars can direct fundamental changes that eventually will be made in the international communication system...(and third) too much faith has been placed in increasing information and information flow as a solution to problems...[as] information, by itself, guarantees no solutions and may, indeed, create new problems.

Arguably, this imbalance in the international communication is primarily an economical and political issue, which undermines the essence of journalism and

² Therefore, the NWICO debate suffered a big blow. As at the time of writing, the US has not returned back to the UNESCO while Britain rejoined the organization about four years ago.

intercultural communications. It breeds cultural hegemony and “us and them” identity within the spectrum of world order and international communications.

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In a practical sense, the NWICO debate was a failure. But on paper, it was a success. The MacBride Commission Report—*Many Voices, One World*—which is produced from the debate and widely accepted by the UNESCO, vindicated the South’s position.

According to the report:

Distortion of news...occurs when inaccuracies or untruths replace authentic facts; or when a slanted interpretation is woven into the news report...through the use of pejorative adjectives and stereotypes.... This occurs where events of no importance are given prominence and when the superficial or the irrelevant are interwoven with facts of real significance (MacBride Report, 1980: 157-158).

In spite of this glaring fact/evidence, the Western media have not deviated from their distortion of news and “use of the pejorative adjectives and stereotypes” two decades after MacBride report was published. In its May 13th-19th 2000 edition, the UK based influential magazine, the Economist, went as far as referring to Africa as “the hopeless continent” in its main front-cover story.

In the words of Richard Dowden, the author of this controversial story, “ I am not an Afro-pessimist but journalists in particular, [I] have a duty to reflect the reality. Africa is in bad way. The sensitive issue is why? I am also skeptical of those “success stories” in Africa proclaimed by the World Bank and the IMF and help up as models by the Western donors: Ghana, Uganda and Mozambique. They are relatively successful but

they also happen to be the countries which hit rock bottom in the mid-1980s and had no alternative but to follow Western prescriptions and were, therefore, given amounts of aid- which fulfil the prophecy of success” (New African magazine, 2000: 31).

One wonders where objectivity and fairness, which are the hallmark of journalism, come into play? And what reality is being reflected? A reality based on a journalist’s “skeptical” view and assumption? Furthermore, how can a whole continent be labeled “hopeless continent” because some of the 53 nations that made up the continent are experiencing bad economies? May be Europe too should be labeled “Lost Paradise” as a result of the bad economy being experienced by Albania and many other European countries?

Like anthropologists and explorers of the colonial era, the western media “are empowered to paint an image of Africa by listing its deficiencies with respect to Western norms” (ibid, 1992: 9). For Africa to be part of ‘all the news that’s fit to print,’ as the motto of The New York Times says, it seems that news stories must include three elements: events, crisis, and superpower conflict” (Fair, 1992: 111).

A critical look at the African related stories that appeared in both The New York Times and The Washington Post from the end of March to mid-August of 2000 remarkably showed that all 89 published articles on Africa lacked sufficient context. Seventeen-five of these stories were negative in content. The news were presented as tribal conflicts with strong metaphors and imagery of “savages” and “beasts” in which people with the “hearts of darkness” are killing themselves for no reason or dying from AIDS.

The stories “are not given historical context to avoid linking the West to the problem. After all, much of the political strife in Africa results from the collision of distinct cultural groups arbitrarily thrown into political entities by colonizers in their scramble for Africa” (Ebo, 1992: 18). Hence, the news was presented as tribal conflicts with strong metaphors and imagery of “savages” and “beasts” in which people with the “hearts of darkness” are killing themselves for no reason.

According to the Washington based TransAfrica Forum, which did content audit of these newspapers, there are “no reports on regional economic or political cooperation in Africa. There was no in-depth look at any of the African political economies. The private sector was totally ignored, while all articles related to development were centered on the public sector” (TransAfrica Forum, 2000: 5). The tabulation of articles in specific categories is as follow:

	New York Times	Washington Post
AIDS ³	4	8
Conflict ⁴	25	38
Development ⁵	4	4
Other ⁶	4	2
Total stories published	37	52

Table Source: TransAfrica Forum – www.transafricaforum.org – See the footnote for more details.

These findings are not different from the previous study that was done by Hassan M. El Zein and Anne Cooper over a decade ago. El Zein and Copper looked at the New York Times coverage of Africa from 1976-1990. “Of the many arguments and assertions of the NWICO debate, two lend themselves well to this research: (1) that news of the Third World is infrequently reported and (2) when reported, it is laden with conflict and crisis” (El Zein and Copper, 1992:136). Results of their research are as follows:

³ AIDS---Any story on HIV/AIDS or other health issues related to the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was placed under the category “AIDS.” Of the 89 articles, 12 fit into this category. While a handful of these articles dealt with stories about Africans living with the disease, the majority were general reports dealing with medical treatments for AIDS, international assistance to Africa for AIDS and the likely socio-economic effects of HIV/AIDS.

⁴ Conflict---We placed all stories dealing with the inter-and intra-country wars, military uprisings, or civilian rebellions under the category of “conflict.” We found that 63 of the total 89 articles fit into this category. The majority of these articles reported on conflicts in Sierra Leone and Democratic Republic of Congo, the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Egypt’s role in the conflict in the Middle East. There were also a handful of stories regarding UN peacekeeping missions in African conflicts.

⁵ Development ---We placed all stories about economic or political progress in Africa under the broad category of development. In this study, we found only 4 articles in each newspaper dealing with development as defined above. All 4 articles [sic] either had to do with international aid for Africa or talks between Africa and the United States on economic development. We found no reports on individual country developmental policies or regional economic developments in Africa. In addition, no stories were found dealing with private sector development in any of the African countries.

⁶ Other---Any article that did not fit into the above categories was placed under “Other.” These 6 articles were varied in their contents, typically consisting of specific news events of the day in question. Although most of these 6 articles included components of all the categories discussed above, they were deemed sufficiently different to be placed in their own section.

Proportion of African news in the 12 issues of *The New York Times* from each year

Year	Total number of stories
1976 ⁷	52
1981 ⁸	41
1985 ⁹	57

Distribution of Crisis and Non-crisis Themes of African news in *The New York Times*

	1976	1981	1985
Crisis Themes			
Unrest & Dissent	20	20	37
War, Terrorism, Crime	4	9	10
Coups & Assassinations	-	-	-
Disasters	4	1	3
Total	28	30	50
Non-Crisis Themes			
Political-Military	20	11	5
Economics	2	-	-
Environment	1	-	-
Technology-Science	-	-	-
Human Interest	1	-	2
Miscellaneous	-	-	-
Total	24	11	7

⁷ 1976 was chosen “because Africa’s prominence in the NWICO debate grew especially strong that year” (El Zein and Copper, 1992: 138) with the election of Amadou Mahtar M’Bow of Senegal as UNESCO’s director-general.

⁸ 1981 was the time “when the Western backlash against Third World (including African) demands regarding media coverage gained the strength of a movement” (El Zein and Copper, 1992: 138).

⁹ “The year 1985 was chosen as the depth of the chasm between the First and Third Worlds. On the heels of Ronald Reagan’s reelection in November 1984, the United States withdrew from UNESCO. The United Kingdom and Singapore did likewise in 1985” (El Zein and Copper, 1992: 138).

Note: All these numbers and figures came from El Zein and Cooper.

It is highly problematic when reputable magazines and newspapers such as *Economists* and *The New York Times* start dragging the credibility and legitimacy of international journalism/communication in mud with stereotypical and half-baked stories on Africa. Bantering the image of Africa for the political hegemonic and economic reason is a great dishonour to humanity.

The media has enormous influence in shaping public perception and imagination of the situations around the world. Couching the African stories on economic degradation and political unrest only are arbitrary violations of all news conventions and standards. It undermines the essence of journalism and intercultural communication. As the world becomes “globalized,” it is the primary responsibility of mass news media as a source of information for the world to give an accurate, balanced, and realistic picture of the world. “By reporting those aspects of African life deemed to be important to the Western readers, the media select stories according to the Western Values. As a result, African successes measured according to African values are never reported. Although a water pump in a rural area may transform a community and its economy, it hardly makes good copy. Coups and wars make better copy and can be succinctly communicated to a reader. Press coverage of Africa in the context of the world events marginalizes things uniquely African” (Hawak, 1992: 7).

George Alagiah, an Asian born BBC African correspondent, wrote in *The Guardian* in 1999: “My job is to give a fuller picture. [But] I have a gnawing regret that, as a foreign correspondent, I have done Africa a disservice, too often showing the continent at its worst and too rarely showing it in full flower. There is an awful lot of historical baggage to cut through when reporting Africa: the 20th century view of the continent is,

even now, infected with the prevailing wisdom of the 19th century” (New African magazine, 2000: 17). Africa is a continent of colour, of life, of “joie de vivre” (apology to Afif Ben Yedder) and it must be presented in its full flower.

But sadly enough, with the heat and attention generated by the NWICO debate, the Western media have not made any concrete effort to present Africa in its full flower. The news of the Africa is still being “infected with the prevailing wisdom of the 19th century.” It is quite disheartening to see that at the dawn of the 21st century, the North and South are still living in ‘*Many Worlds, One Voice.*’ “The *one voice* is the one the industrially rich North has imposed through its claim to economic and technological superiority and hegemony. Thus, the new world order does not seem to guarantee economic rights, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, cultural pluralism, autonomy and sovereignty of the nations of the South. It is perhaps a new world order of military intimidation and bashing of the weaker nation states of the South” (Uche, 1996: 17).

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