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CODES, CARDS AND CONTROLS WON'T HELP JOURNALISTS

DANA BULLEN*

The issues involved in the debate over a New World Information Order have been present for some time now and, unfortunately, will not be resolved today. What is important to an initial understanding of the problem, though, are some of the underlying facts.

First, there are more than just four news agencies in the world. There are between 95 and 105 by various counts.¹ Although a great many of these are government-run, their numbers are growing.

Second, there is no monopoly on the news that is available. In the Cameroon, for instance, UNESCO figures reportedly show that ACAP, the Cameroon national news agency, receives AFP, DPA, UPI, AP, TASS, ATP (Chad), AZAP (Zaire) and ACI (Congo).² It is up to each country to choose the agency it uses. If either AP or UPI is chosen, I assume it is because such a country finds that agency worthwhile.

There is far more news available from many, varied sources than anybody can use. The director of ANSA, the Italian agency, reportedly has said that his agency receives, *daily*, 220,000 words from the socialist countries, 110,000 from the Third World and 250,000 from the international agencies.³ I would point out that this flow to ANSA is in no way dominated by the so-called "Big Four" agencies.

According to research conducted by Robert L. Stevenson and others at the University of North Carolina, the assertion that the Western news agencies ignore the Third World in regional service is "simply not true." On the average, from 40% to 50% of the foreign news provided to the Third World comes from that immediate area. Also, according to Stevenson, news around the world is primarily focused on politics, both domestic and international. Says Stevenson, "We have found *no* evidence either that any part of the world is held up to an unusually unfavorable light or, more important, that the Third World is singled out for any special negative coverage."⁴

You have been presented with various problems and proposals at

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1. Stevenson, *The Western News Agencies Do Not Ignore the Third World*, EDITOR & PUBLISHER, July 5, 1980, at 11.

2. *World Network of News*, EDITOR & PUBLISHER, July 5, 1980, at 32.

3. *Id.*

4. Stevenson, *supra* note 1, at 15.

this symposium. These include an allegedly flawed "free flow" of news, a need for "democratization" of the media, "protection" of journalists and codes of ethics. I strongly support "many voices" in the world, including those that already exist. Certainly, more news is better than less news. I wish that the many countries that limit what their people can read or hear, many of them the same countries that call for a New World Information Order, would agree. I think their calls for "pluralism" would be more meaningful if they did.

I am convinced that independent media, with its "many voices," promote development more than controlled media. The best programs flow from a robust debate of alternatives, not merely from behind the closed doors of ministries. I am concerned that the vague words used in describing a "new order" tend to conceal the threat to a free press contained in some of these proposals.

The record is not terribly encouraging on the sources of some of these proposals and on what they might mean. According to Freedom House, governments either control or significantly influence the media in two-thirds to three-quarters of the countries of the world.⁵ It is the representatives of these countries, the ministers of information, for example, who participate in the international meetings where a New World Information Order is debated.

The idea of a "democratization" of the media is much like the slogan of "active social participation" in media operations. "Active social participation" was the justification used by a former regime in Peru to seize all privately owned Lima dailies. With a change of government in Peru, these papers have now been returned to their owners.

A need to "protect" journalists has been mentioned. Lord knows they face hazards. In my twenty-one years with the Washington Star, I have seen colleagues expelled, jailed and, in one case, murdered. But these newsmen were not expelled, jailed or murdered because the authorities did not know they were reporters. They received this treatment precisely because they *were* reporters. No ID card or journalist's arm-band is going to change that.

The freedom of journalists is not safeguarded by schemes to license them in the name of "protection." Such a proposal was made by a Professor Gaborit at the last meeting on this at UNESCO.⁶ Any confusion about how this document was commissioned is clarified by reading the first sentence of his report which says: "This project has been

5. R.D. GASTIL, *FREEDOM IN THE WORLD* 111 (1982).

6. P. Gaborit, Project for the Establishment of an International Commission and a Periodical International Conference for the Protection of Journalists (Paris, February 16-17, 1981).

prepared in accordance with the provisions of a contract concluded by UNESCO as part of its programme for 1979-1980 under the programme action entitled 'Improvement of professional standards and status and protection of journalists.'"⁷

I would welcome action that would help journalists in peril. This, however, is not it. The proposal, which was not adopted, called for the establishment of an international commission which would "ensure a smooth procedure for the phasing in of states, at the appropriate moment." The commission would seek a "convergence" on the "ethical rules and regulations governing the journalistic profession" and "might subsequently urge" states to adopt these rules and regulations as part of their national law. The commission would devise standards for the issuance of journalistic identity cards, including a determination of whether the journalists were acting in the "legitimate exercise of their profession." In addition, it would have to draw up standards for suspending or withdrawing its identity cards. If the commission were at all effective, its decision to withdraw an identity card could deny a journalist the opportunity to work.

Concerning the proposal for codes of ethics, it is difficult to know which system one might follow. For example, in some countries, it is considered responsible to follow a story wherever it leads. In others, it is responsible to drop a story if it is leading in the wrong direction. South Africa is considering a commission's proposal for both licensing and a code of conduct. The code would provide criminal penalties for reporting "matters that *may* detrimentally affect the peace and good order, the safety and defence of the Republic and the country's international position."⁸ These criteria could be used to censor almost anything, including reporting on South Africa's most serious problems.

The debate over a New World Information Order is just reaching the stage of specificity that will finally reveal the meaning of some of these proposals. Not all of the proposals are bad. The World Press Freedom Committee, along with other groups, supports steps to improve media capabilities. We have already spent several hundred thousand dollars in cooperative programs to improve media professionalism and transfer needed equipment. Our approach is embodied in the landmark Declaration of Talloires,⁹ which charts a line between proposals that threaten a free press and those that help it. UNESCO, es-

7. *Id.* at 1.

8. Proposed South African Code of Conduct § 14, para. 4(a)(ii) (1982).

9. The Declaration of Talloires, adopted at Voices of Freedom Conference of Independent News Media, in Talloires France, May 15-17 (1981), reprinted in WORLD PRESS FREEDOM COMMITTEE, A CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH TO A GLOBAL INFORMATION ORDER (1981).

pecially, should be commended for those steps it has taken to help the media in practical directions, and away from more ideological proposals.

Some people contend, most unfairly I think, that the wire services focus on news about corruption in high office, bungling in development programs and crop failures. To remedy this deficiency, some urge a New World Information Order, including, I fear, a licensing of journalists, a code of conduct and even outright censorship so that only "good news" will appear in the international media. When this occurs, they seem to believe we all will live in a better world. With respect, I disagree.

I believe that we should support a press that is free to write about development and nation-building in all its aspects—a press that can make up its own mind about what it will write or broadcast.