2 Conceptual Issues in the Information Debate

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with conceptual aspects of debates on information and the press within the UN system, including the different ways in which the policy implications of UNESCO's mandate to 'educate for peace' have been construed.

We shall set out the broad positions of the West, the Soviet bloc and the Third World on these questions as expressed in debate or in major published statements. First, we shall briefly sketch liberal democratic theory with respect to information and the press, as the controlling framework to which the various positions tend all to refer in one way or another.

1. INFORMATION AND LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The liberal model of democracy as classically expounded by J. S. Mill is based on a developmental concept of increasing rationality; it applies equally to the individual, to the group and to society as a whole. Democracy is seen as self-government through reasoned choice, as opposed to guidance by authority or custom. It is also essentially dynamic, in that it builds in the potential of a minority to become a majority by virtue of rational persuasion.

Truth in this model is a self-righting process based on competition between facts and viewpoints. The need for comment and interpretation of facts, and in that sense 'bias', is assumed. The central requirements in this method of approaching truth are continuing entry of new information with which to correct prevailing misconceptions; and roughly equal competition or 'fair play to all sides of the truth'. Further conditions are the need for each interest to speak on its own behalf so that a case may be heard 'in its most plausible and persuasive form'; and especial tolerance of minority views as representing 'the neglected interests, the side of human well-being which is in danger of obtaining less than its share'.

The liberal model of reasoned self-guidance may thus be said to
assume not only bias, but also effectively competing bias. Monopoly of information by any single set of interests is considered to act as a restriction on rational choice and thus on both individual and social development. As such, it is seen as inefficient and damaging to the general interest of the community.

The role of the press in this model is that of a public intelligence service fulfilling three principal functions. First, it fulfils an information function, keeping the citizenry fully supplied with information on matters of public relevance and identifying the range of options available at any given time. Second, it performs a 'watch dog' function, monitoring the activities of the State (understood as autocratic ruler) and checking against abuse of power by any group. Third, it fulfils a liaison function, ensuring a two-way flow of information between State and citizens. The traditional claim for special status of the press before the law is based on this quasi-constitutional or 'fourth-estate' role.

It may be noted that the classical liberal model of the press has been revised since Mill's day to take account of such changes as the rise of a mass press and the trend to concentration of ownership. Of relevance in this context is the work of Wilbur Schramm, an American scholar who acted as a leading consultant to UNESCO on mass communications in the 1960s and whose study on mass media and national development was to serve as a framework for UNESCO communications policy at the time.

Schramm identifies what he sees as two particularly significant and positive developments since the time of Mill's writings. The first is the conscious distinction which came to be drawn between news and comment, 'objective news' — as distinct from comment — being held to provide only the raw facts of the day's events.

The second is the development around the turn of the century, parallel with the trend to 'one-newspaper cities' in the USA, of what Schramm terms a 'social responsibility theory of communications'. This is understood as the conscious attempt, in a context of press concentration if not monopoly, to provide full and fair representation of different groups in society, as well as to set news items in a context which gives them meaning. In this connection, Schramm notes the 'astonishing steps towards responsible action and responsible thinking', the adoption of codes (including the right of reply), and the contribution of journalism schools to producing professionally-minded employees.

Let us turn now to the formal positions advanced by the three major groups of States in the UN system with respect to information policy.