5 The Contemporary Information Debate

INTRODUCTION

Clear majorities within the UN system in favour of international regulation of communication did not emerge until the mid-1970s, discussions in full-membership arenas of the UN and UNESCO during the 1960s and early 1970s issuing,\(^1\) with a few notable exceptions,\(^2\) in stalemate.

But by the mid-1970s, under the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Third World was advancing calls for a ‘new information order’ – later renamed ‘new world information and communication order’ (NWICO) – seen as integrally linked with achievement of a New International Economic Order and addressing questions of both form and content.

In the meantime, the Third World had increased its majority in full-membership organs to over two-thirds and had also secured enlarged shares of representation on restricted-membership bodies. In addition, for those aspects of their policy limited to reducing Western ‘information dominance’, and thus overlapping with Soviet bloc interests, the Third World could generally count upon the latter’s support. Where united, the new majority had thus come to account for some four-fifths of the membership.

This chapter examines the outcomes of contemporary UNESCO information debates and, in particular, the ways in which Western States and media have responded to the altered political structure of the UN system. In so doing, it will confine itself to the most salient debates, namely: the regional Conference in Latin America in 1976 where press interest in UNESCO involvement in mass communications policy was first aroused; the Media Declaration of 1978 (a Soviet-bloc initiative treated by Western media as a test-case of UNESCO involvement in this field); and debates on Third World proposals for a NWICO.

The above texts have neither binding legal force nor global backing. Their significance lies in the fact that the San José Conference was the first intergovernmental meeting in the field of communications policy to be organised by UNESCO; that the participants were not the newer or more radical régimes of Africa and Asia, but Latin American countries comprising a preponderance of right-wing governments and located in the ‘Monroe’ area; and that it marked the start of widespread Western media concern with UNESCO activities in the mass communications field. (Subsequent regional ministerial conferences on communications policies in Asia (Kuala Lumpur, 1978) and Africa (Yaoundé, 1980) are less significant in these respects, and will therefore not be discussed here.)

Two small-scale expert meetings were held to prepare for the ministerial conference, one in Bogotá in 1974, the other in Quito in 1975. For an account of these two meetings, it proved necessary to turn to secondary sources, specifically a study by Sunday Times journalist Rosemary Righter, funded by the Ford Foundation; and a less well known work based on class analysis by Roger Heacock. Indeed, as Righter records, the reports of both meetings have since been removed from UNESCO files. This fact is itself not without significance for our argument, as we hope to make clear below.

According to Heacock, organisations representing owners of private media in the region, notably the Inter-American Association of Broadcasters (IAAB) and the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), were alerted to the proceedings of the Bogotá meeting by a Western staff member of UNESCO. From that point onward, intensive coverage emanating mostly from these two bodies was to be devoted to the preparatory meetings and to the ministerial conference. American media, and especially UPI (as the news agency with most extensive interests in the area), were soon to follow suit.

Neither Righter nor Heacock judged the content of reporting to have been especially favourable. Righter, although not unsympathetic to the response of the media, referred to a ‘campaign’ against UNESCO’s policies and the San José meeting, and noted that ‘contrary to some Western press reports’ the conclusions of the Quito meeting had been ‘surprisingly moderate’.7