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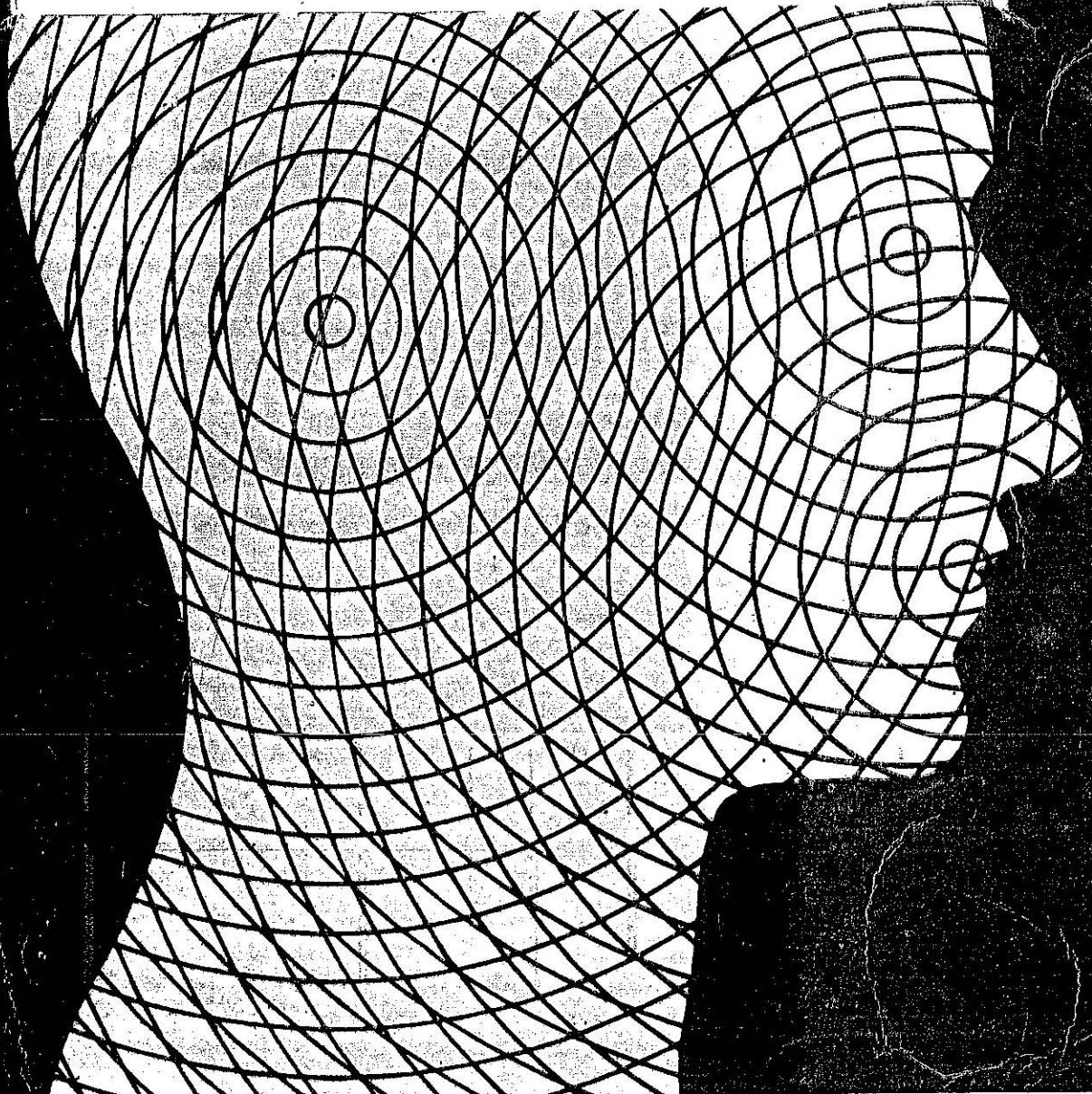
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9.

ASPECTS OF THE MASS MEDIA DECLARATION OF UNESCO

Edited by Hamid Mowlana



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III. Media Coverage of the Declaration

George Gerbner

Note: Originally, it was hoped that a full-scale review of the media coverage given to the Declaration could be provided to the Symposium. However, given the time constraints (and the relative paucity of the coverage, especially since its adoption) the paper by George Gerbner covers only the US press, as a single case study, and the bulk of his contribution is necessarily concerned with press treatment in the course of the Declaration's preparation and negotiation.

The task of this paper was to synthesize research on the coverage of the Mass Media Declaration in the American press. The paucity of research — and of coverage — bearing directly on that topic made the task seem easy, if not superfluous. But research on other aspects of the Declaration and of Unesco's treatment in the press (cited in the footnotes) helped illuminate the significance of the scant press attention given to the Mass Media Declaration.

The institutional structure and resource base of any press system — not its rhetoric — defines the orientation from which it views the world. From 65 to 75 per cent of the content of the American daily press (and most large-circulation periodicals) is devoted to paid service for the principal clients and sponsors, the advertisers.

Dependence of mostly localized marketing and the private interests may help account for the fact that the American press is probably the bulkiest and one of the most parochial in the world. Less than 10 per cent of total space in the average daily paper is devoted to general news, and a small proportion of that, even in elite papers, to news of the world. A comparative study of foreign news coverage ranked the American press first in the length of foreign news items but last in the number of stories and percentage of news space devoted to world news, behind, in that order, representative Eastern European, Western European, Third World, and Soviet daily papers.¹

Within that sparse coverage, international organizational affairs are among the least reported. A comprehensive study found U. N. press coverage to be sporadic, crisis oriented, dealing mostly with issues of domestic economic interest, increasing in fractiousness and decreasing in volume through the 1960's and early 1970's.² Press coverage of Unesco shares some of these characteristics.

Except for periods of high tension, international political and organizational affairs are noted mainly, if at all, in the elite press. *The New York Times* is the most prominent of these because of its political influence and role as a "newspaper of record". Its *Index* provides a useful indicator of the attention the *Times* pays to different topics over time.

More than half (56 per cent) of all listings of stories and articles in the *Times* from 1960 through 1985 were in the three peak years of 1974, 1975 and 1984. The first two reflected the crisis over Unesco condemnations of Israeli occupation policies; the third, news of the U. S. withdrawal from Unesco. Most other years' listings occupied no more than 2 per cent of the 15-year total. The year the Declaration was approved, 1978, with barely 1 per cent of the listings, was one of the lowest. Its significance can best be assessed in light of what preceded and followed it.

Coverage before the Declaration

The *Times*' coverage of Unesco in the 1960's was scant and bland, reflecting the Organization's educational, scientific and cultural work. Political controversies at the General Assembly typically dominated U. N. news coverage. The 1960 "summit" session of the U. N. General Assembly in New York took the limelight from the biennial Unesco General Conference meeting in Paris.

No press attention was paid to a resolution by the Byelorussian delegate to Unesco's 16th General Conference in 1970. The resolution encouraged the use of information in the fight "against propaganda on behalf of war, racism and hatred among nations..."

The 17th General Conference, two years later, passed a motion, opposed by the U. S., to instruct the Director-General to draft a declaration embodying the principles of the mass media resolution. The debate gave no warning of the storm this would eventually raise.³ The *Times*, which had editorially hailed Unesco's 25th anniversary a year before, paid no attention.

¹ George Gerbner and George Marvanyi, "The Many Worlds of the World's Press", *Journal of Communication*, Winter, 1977

² Alexander Szalai, *The United Nations and the News Media*. New York: Uniter, 1972

³ Gunnar Garbo, *A World of Difference*. Paris: Unesco Documents on Communication and Society, 1985

The 1974 *Index* accounted for 17 per cent and the 1975 *Index* 21 per cent of its 15-year Unesco listings. Most of that was devoted to the issue of Israeli excavations "altering the historical features" of occupied Jerusalem and of Israel's consequent exclusion from some regional conferences. The 1975 *Index* listings, longest of the 15-year period, also included stories on the introduction of an Arab resolution condemning Zionism as a form of racism.

While the committee of experts was debating the draft declaration, a resolution equating Zionism with racism was inserted into its preamble. The Western delegates left the meeting in protest. In their absence, the draft was approved and forwarded to the Director-General for submission to the 19th General Conference.

The *Times* reported on December 18, 1975, that the anti-Zionist resolution was included in "an official document at a conference on how the world news media should treat subjects such as racism and war propaganda". The next day an even longer story about the same session gave three lines to the substance of the resolution, noting only that it aimed to define "what the role of the news media should be in combating racism, war propaganda, and apartheid".

Not reported in the otherwise extensive coverage were key provisions that were to figure prominently in later attacks on the Mass Media Declaration — from which by then they had been deleted. These provisions included Article 12: "States are responsible for the activities in the international sphere of all mass media under their jurisdiction;" reference to U. N. declarations of human, civil, and economic rights; to free and balanced interchange of information, to the training and protection of journalists, to the development of an international code of journalistic ethics, and to the right of reply if "the circulation of erroneous news reports has seriously impaired" efforts to strengthen "peace and international understanding and to combat war propaganda, racism and, apartheid...".

The 19th General Conference met in Nairobi in 1976. Western pressure and withholding American contributions helped to calm the anti-Zionist furor. The *Times Index* listings fell from 21 per cent the year before to 7 per cent of the 15-year total, most of it still devoted to Israel. However, wire services gave the draft declaration more attention, and devoted 40 per cent of coverage to mass media issues in general, which now also included the Tunisian-initiated demand for a "new international information order" of more balanced flow of news.⁴ Promises of American help for Third World media development and acknowledgment of a global information imbalance helped to defuse what the *Times* called "the potentially explosive issue of press freedom". A group of "wise men" was to be commissioned to study mass media issues. The draft declaration was referred to more experts for further consultation, negotiation, compromise, and submission to the next General Conference.

Coverage of the Declaration

The divisions and tactics of Nairobi were still in evidence as the 20th General Conference opened in Paris. Far from agreeing on a draft, Western, Socialist, Third World, and other factions submitted widely diverging versions and amendments of their own. On the eve of the conference, Leonard Sussman, executive director of Freedom House, warned in *Newsweek* (Oct. 2, 1978) that "international forums increasingly threaten to make governmental control of the news media the model for a New World Information Order," and advised American delegates to line up with the "moderates" to "undercut Marxist efforts to exploit Third World dissatisfaction".

The New York Times was uncompromising, and ultimately prophetic. "If it turns out to be impossible to reject this attempt to tamper with our basic principles," a *Times* editorial declared on November 8, "there is always the alternative of rejecting Unesco itself".

While feverish diplomacy and further U. S. assurances of technical help to Third World media sought to defuse another potential explosion, *Time* magazine ran a story of the controversy on November 20 and concluded: "The heart of the conflict is a fundamental, perhaps irreconcilable disagreement over the role of the press."

Two days later, however, it seemed that the disagreement had been reconciled. Most objectionable features had been deleted and Western-oriented provisions inserted into the final draft. The Associated Press from Paris hailed the "unanimous consensus... endorsing the freedom of the press". It noted that the "consensus, given in thunderous applause... represented... a significant diplomatic reversal in favor of the West and the moderate developing nations".

⁴ Phil. Harris, "News Dependence: the Case for a New World Information Order". Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 1977

The Washington Post cited Ambassador Reinhardt saying "We see no lingering hint or state control" in the Declaration. "In any case, he noted, 'this declaration is unenforceable in the usual legal sense'." But the *Post* also observed that "Some Western editors and publishers say it was a mistake for the West to take part in any Unesco media negotiations at all".

Most initial news stories were positive, and editorials cautiously optimistic. "A long-festering threat to world press freedom was diverted in Paris" said the *Christian Science Monitor*. CAUTIOUS VICTORY declared the *Portland Oregonian*, noting that "The adopted declaration eliminated all Soviet-sponsored language that would have sanctioned government restriction of the news media both inside and outside a nation's borders. It rejected fully the 'right' of governments to reply to news accounts they deemed objectionable, a clear imposition of governmental views on the media. It urges, rather than binds journalists to be concerned about the promotion of human rights and Unesco's stated goal of combatting warmongering, racism and apartheid."

The New York Times dispatch from Paris, carried under the full text of the Declaration, led with reporting approval of a "compromise declaration on world news coverage that eliminates all mention of government control of the news". It noted that "The declaration is not binding on any country. However, the United States and other nations advocating a free press feared that a draft condoning government control of the press would have given moral support and encouragement to any countries wishing to impose restrictions on press coverage."

The facade of euphoria, or even cautious optimism, was shattered on November 27 when both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran lengthy editorials on the Declaration. Mocking Reinhardt, the *Times* called it "a triumph of obfuscation, and "an affront to the very idea of communication". It observed that "Western diplomats are congratulating themselves on having turned a dangerous international declaration into an incomprehensible hogpodge of slogans and prescriptions." And it declared that the American representatives who signed it "were not speaking for the free press of the United States..."

"Only censors of this world need any such declaration and they will not heed the hypocritical provisions that champion freedom of expression and free access to information. As we have noted before, the sin of war propaganda in the Soviet Union can be no more than a discussion of military contingencies; the sin of racism, in the eyes of a U. N. majority, includes anything favorable to Zionism."

"At the risk of giving Pravda a brand new case of ammunition against the depravities of American society, let us put the matter bluntly, as our diplomats should have: to Americans, there can be no free speech or 'balanced' news unless those who advocate racism and apartheid and, yes, war are also free to speak. We do not negotiate codes of press behavior with our government and should not be negotiating them with any other..."

The *Washington Post* editorial of the same day was equally firm. After expressing the opinion that the outcome of the lengthy mass media debate "has to trouble deeply all those truly interested in... the 'free flow' of information and ideas," the editorial went on to comment:

"We don't wish to seem ungracious for official efforts undertaken in our, that is to say, the Western media's behalf. It is evident, however, that by helping to write and by approving even a moderate declaration like this one, the Western delegations condoned the idea that it is whithin the proper province of governments to call the media tune. That this particular tune — this time around — is less dirge than walk-on music is nice but essentially irrelevant. Why else, after all, would it be supported by all the totalitarian states, both the communist ones, which practice media control systematically as a matter of ideology, and the Third World states, which practice it more casually as a matter of political convenience.

"Indeed, in a field so contentious, how can something acceptable to, let us say, the Soviet Union or Nigeria, be also acceptable to the West?..."

Time magazine reflected on December 5 that "Though U. S. delegates would have preferred no declaration, they found the weakened version acceptable. Observed *Newsday* President William Attwood, a U. S. media representative on the American delegation: 'If there is a reptile in the house, far better to have it a garter snake than a rattlesnake.'

It may be, as Sussman⁵ argued, that "Despite the bland nature of the Declaration... the memory of the bitter debates far surpassed the understanding of the text of the final document. Unesco was believed to seek control of the independent press, notwithstanding the fact Unesco rejected the press-control draft of the Declaration."

⁵ Leonard Sussman and David W. Sussman, "Mass News Media and International Law", *International Political Science Review*, July, 1986

The aftermath

A succession of forums and conferences involving, sometimes only marginally, the "new international information order", inextricably confused in the American press with the Mass Media Declaration, continued to inflame the coverage.

Except for a brief flurry of news of its approval, what little attention was paid to the Mass Media Declaration and subsequent developments was one-dimensional. Leonard Sussman observed that the journalists who featured speeches and intentions they considered inimical "seldom reported with equal fervor or as prominently the defeat in Unesco of *all* proposals for censorship, licensing of journalists and similar press-control measures". No other aspect of Unesco management or policy received such hostile treatment.

It is unlikely that readers of the press, perhaps any press, could gain a realistic understanding of the positions and conflicts involved (and reconciled) in the Mass Media Declaration. A study of the French press found it equally sparse and simplistic, and almost as monolithic.⁶

An apparent conflict with its own institutional interests seems to have prevented the American press from using its unique constitutionally protected independence to report a reasonable diversity of American and international perspectives. The inability of the free press to free itself from its own institutional blinders does not augur well for any greater understanding and effectiveness of the Mass Media Declaration in the future than has been achieved in the past. Yet to abandon the quest is also self-defeating. The historic international adjustments of media perspectives reflected in the Declaration, however imperfect, cannot be indefinitely ignored, obscured, or denied. The search for new and creative approaches to this dilemma is a worthy task for this Symposium.

⁶ Colleen Roach, "The Reaction of the French Press to the Unesco Mass Media Declaration", Unpublished report, Paris, 1979