

The Western Media And UNESCO

A Credibility Test For The U.S. Press

- S.M. Ali

At a recent press conference in Bangkok, a Thai journalist asked why shouldn't UNESCO give up its demand for a New World Information and Communication Order since, as he put it, "it has become something like a red cloth to a raging bull". He didn't have to explain who, in this particular case, was the "raging bull".

The question did not take UNESCO officials, attending the press briefing, by surprise. It had been asked before and often suggested by a section of the Western press as a basis for possible "reconciliation" between the government of the United States and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The question underlines a grave misconception that the entire programme of UNESCO, including that of the Communication Sector, is nothing more and nothing less than a brain-child of the UNESCO Secretariat. So, as the assumption goes, the Director-General of UNESCO, Amadou Mahtar M' Bow—and the Secretariat—can change, modify and even discard any part of the organization's programme as they think fit, for the sake of expediency or any ideological considerations.

It is a misconception, because the programme of UNESCO, drafted by the Secretariat and scrutinized by the 51-member Executive Council, must be approved by the General Conference before it is put into effect. Since all decisions relating to UNESCO's programme have always been passed by consensus by the 161-member General Conference, a consensus in which all Western powers have joined, one cannot question the democratic basis of the working of UNESCO.

Now, to call upon the Director-General of UNESCO or the Secretariat to change the course of the organization's activities is to demonstrate utter disregard of the authority of the General Conference. To suggest that UNESCO should push the demand for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) under the

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carpet is to deny the mandate passed on to the UNESCO Secretariat by the organization's highest policy-making body, the General Conference.

There is just no other way to deal with the question posed by a Thai journalist at the Press conference in Bangkok.

If any member of UNESCO big or small, disregards or questions the mandate as an after-thought, challenges decisions already approved by consensus and finally serves notice to withdraw from the organization, it triggers off a crisis not so much with the Secretariat as with 160 other members of the General Conference.

This is why while several senior members of the Executive Council, like Jean-Pierre Cot of France, Karl Moersch of West Germany and T.N. Kaul of India, have criticised the United States for its notice to withdraw from UNESCO members of the Secretariat have been extremely reticent in their comments on Washington's move. The same reticence has shown by the Director-General himself. At the moment, it is left to the Executive Council, scheduled to meet in May, to study the situation.

On the other hand, UNESCO officials cannot remain silent in the face of a systematic relentless campaign unleashed against UNESCO by a section of the Western press, whether or not it is "manipulated" by the US State Department as suggested in a recent report by the Guardian (London), quoting a secret US official document leaked in Washington.

The current press campaign, especially in the US media, is essentially directed against the activities of UNESCO's Communication Sector. It is, in effect, a continuation of the tirade that started in the late 1970s, first against the Media Declaration and then against

the MacBride Commission's Report. But, in some ways, it is more virulent now than in the past. And, paradoxically enough, it is also specific, less well-focused and more ambiguous than in the late 1970s.

This ambiguity in the charges levelled against the Communication Sector can perhaps be attributed to the fact that UNESCO's Media Declaration was adopted in 1978 by consensus, in which the United States and other Western powers joined, and that many of the essential recommendations of the MacBride Commission's Report were incorporated in the Resolution No. 4.19, also adopted by consensus, at the General Conference in 1980. Therefore, one cannot criticise these documents, the Media Declaration and the MacBride Commission's Report, without questioning the consensus or the position taken by the United States on these issues.

Nevertheless, a section of US media which directs its attack against NWICO has conveniently overlooked that it is the Resolution No. 4.19 approved by consensus at the 1980 General Conference in Belgrade that called upon UNESCO to "demonstrate its willingness in its short-term and medium-term activities to contribute to the Clarification, Elaboration And Application of the concept of a new world information and communication order".

One might detect a certain lack of logic in the reasoning of a section of the US media. One could also argue that it has not done its homework on the subject under discussion. Yet another impression is, it is being deliberately ambiguous and/or selective in its choice of facts, thus putting its own credibility and professionalism to a severe test.

Let us look at the major activities of UNESCO in the communication field in the

Asia Pacific region and try to guess—we can do no more than that—what is it that bothers or worries the US media.

UNESCO's main concern here, as in other parts of the Third World, is to upgrade the communication capabilities of developing nations. This is a broad objective, whose application varies from country to country. The organization is involved in strengthening national new agencies (as in Nepal, Bangladesh or China) and in setting up new ones (as in the Maldives and Bhutan). There are also projects designed to assist in the expansion of broadcasting networks (as in Fiji and Sri Lanka) and in providing extensive training to Radio/TV personnel, through such organizations as the Kuala Lumpur-based Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) and the National Broadcasting Academy in Bangladesh. In the related field—training for print media personnel—UNESCO works closely with press institutes in Malaysia and Bangladesh, with the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia and the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) of Singapore. It is also the declared policy of UNESCO to help in the setting up of more training institutions of this kind. Press institutes in Thailand and Pak's are two possibilities.

In most of these projects the initiative taken by UNESCO has been backed by the funding support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which has its own procedure for establishing the justification of a project. In a few cases, the support has come from individual donor countries, like West Germany in the case of assistance to Xinhua News Agency of China or Holland for the setting up of Mahavalli Radio Station in Sri Lanka.

It is hard to think that any of these projects could be seen by any section of the US media as an attempt to "muzzle" the free press or to deny access to Western news agencies to the Asian market.

Is it possible that the US media are uncomfortable about two major exchange mechan-

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isms which have been set up in this region to increase the flow of information among neighbouring countries?

One is the Asia-Pacific News Network (ANN) which, launched by the Organization of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) in 1982, provides for daily exchange of news among several national news agencies. Still a modest venture, ANN hardly poses a threat to transnational news agencies operating in this region. (Speaking for myself, I would welcome some competition between the Network and transnational agencies, but such a possibility is still rather remote.)

The other mechanism, launched on 16 January, is the

ASIAVISION which provides for a daily exchange of TV news, by satellite transmission, among television networks of some seven countries in this region. With Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) assisting with its infrastructural facilities and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) providing the organizational umbrella, ASIAVISION is already linked to EUROVISION for an intercontinental exchange of television news.

It is a declared policy of UNESCO to work with its member states and media organizations in the search for a viable "third alternative" under the mandate from its 1980 General Conference "to contribute to the clarification, elaboration and application of the concept of a new world information and communication order".

This may well be another issue that bothers a section of the US media. And the outcome of the BBC debate probably came to it as a shock.

The problem is, we have no choice but to be largely speculative about the intentions and motivations, secret fears and doubts of a section of the Western press that has declared a kind of war on UNESCO.

At the end of the recent press conference in Bangkok, a journalist said, "We had a lot of questions for UNESCO, which have been answered. It is time we put a few questions to the US media and get some answers."