

## 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

A former Managing Editor of the Bangkok Post and the Chief Executive of the Press Foundation of Asia, the writer is the UNESCO Regional Communication Adviser for Asia and the Pacific, based in Kuala Lumpur. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the UNESCO Secretariat.

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.

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.

Asia Pacific region and try to guess—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 applica-

tion 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 in Thailand and Pakistan 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 mechanisms?

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