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Abstract

Inger Österdahl, Freedom of Information in Question. Freedom of information in international law and the calls for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) Iustus Förlag 303 pp. Uppsala 1992 ISBN 91-7678-225-5. ISSN 0348-4718.

The human right to freedom of information consists of the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any media and regardless of frontiers. It is considered an indispensable element of a democratic society. This thesis opens with an analysis of the import of freedom of information under various international legal instruments, universal and regional. The second part of the the thesis shows how the developing countries, supported by the former Soviet bloc, began in the 1970s to freedom of information, particularly on the international level. The kind of information in focus was principally news. It was claimed that the free international flow of news led to an unbalanced situation. The big Western news agencies dominating the international news flow were reporting more about the North than the South and their reports about the South were biased. To remedy the imbalances the developing countries, headed by the Movement of No- Aligned Countries, proposed a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). This concept is closely related to the New International Economic Order (NIEO). The proposed NWICO included both normative and practical components. The normative part of the NWICO claims included such elements as guidelines for the content of international news reporting and far-reaching state responsibility for internationally distributed news. The practical part implied the strengthening of the developing countries' own mass media. The idea of a NWICO caused a sharp reaction among the Western countries. The ensuing debate took place in Unesco and later also in the Committee on Information of the UN General Assembly. The

debate turned on the issues of freedom of information, state responsibility for the activities of the mass media, state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Opinions also differed concerning the role of the media in society.

The third and final part of the thesis deals with the outcome of the demands for a NWICO. The normative efforts of the NWICO proponents resulted in the Mass Media Declaration are analyzed in detail. A resolution spelling out the basis of a NWICO was also adopted by Unesco in 1980. The practical demands made in the name of a NWICO resulted in the creation of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) under the aegis of Unesco.

Owing to its controversial nature the actual concept of a NWICO eventually disappeared from the agenda of Unesco by the end of the 1980s. A similar development can be seen in the debates and resolutions of the UN Committee on Information. The international debate on freedom of information will surely continue, however, but henceforth in different terms than a New World Information and Communication Order.

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