

The Churches and the New World Information and Communication Order: Did Their Statements Miss the 'Hidden Agenda'?

von Larry Jorgensen

For some years now, there has been a call for a new information order, a new international information order (NIIO), or a new world information and communication order (NWICO). Although the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) has served as a forum for NWICO demands, it has not been the only one. Several organizations, including church-sponsored organizations, now work on NWICO issues.¹ Many people have gotten to know about the NWICO through western media that warn of „UNESCO's protection racket“ and „free press curbs“; few know about the translation of NWICO demands into programs of action by, among others, church groups.

The piles of paper devoted to the NWICO discussion illustrate the contemporary information explosion. We can put our hands on reams of primary sources, since UNESCO runs true to international form by printing quantities of declarations, reports and other documents. We can find reams of secondary sources, too - uncoordinated accounts of the NWICO ranging from the serious to the silly. This addition to that corpus does not summarize the development of the NWICO debate; many summaries are already available. Nor does it deal with the considerable efforts on the part of church groups „to make NWICO real“ through their own programs.² Rather, it looks at recent church statements that refer to the debate and at the manner in which they speak to it.

1. The Churches Learn of the Debate

Church people took notice of what was then called the NIIO toward the end of the 1970s. A search for earlier interest reveals virtually nothing. Even Cees Hamelink, who has been at the vanguard of church thinking on the new order, made almost no mention of UNESCO-sponsored work in his 1975 thesis.³ When, in 1978, Hamelink actually did publish a paper on the NIIO, Leopoldo Niilus of the World Council of Churches (WCC) introduced it by expressing his surprise that no major church-oriented communication organization had spoken out „loudly and clearly in defense of a New International Communication Order“.⁴ In 1980 Neville Jayaweera of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) chided the churches for their lack of interest in the NIIO, noting that „amidst all (the) exchanges one looks in vain for a single definitive pronouncement from the churches“.⁵ The next year John Bluck, then director of the WCC's communication department, observed that „despite their track record on other international issues of development and peace, the churches have been late entrants into this forum“.⁶

A „will to declare“ would seem to have taken hold of some church people; thus possessed they were not content to let actions speak louder than words, through programs promoting a just information flow. They wanted statements. No matter that the churches already had documents on file that could have been dusted off and applied to the NIIO and later the NWICO debate. People like Niilus, Jayaweera and Bluck expected new statements - bold new statements. Those hoping to see the Vatican's 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et*

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Progressio brought into the discussion⁷ must have looked a little odd to the proponents of bold new statements.

But the proponents probably dismissed the available statements too easily. Four older documents - including *Communio et Progressio* - had been singled out for criticism in Hamelink's thesis for what he considered their inadequate conceptual framework. Hamelink of course had his own idea as to what an adequate conceptual framework would look like, one that others might not accept. In order to pass judgment on the four statements, however, Hamelink provided handy - and selective - summaries of them. His thesis has certainly had its influence;⁸ it further appears that many people replaced a reading of primary sources like *Communio et Progressio* with a reading of Hamelink's summaries. *Communio et Progressio* took years to write and expressed some matters of principle that the international discussion had not dated. Hamelink's few paragraphs, unfortunately, came to substitute for the document itself; along with his summary came the opinion that the document was totally inept.

Besides the tendency to see earlier efforts as inadequate, there seems to have been little cross-pollination when the time came to speak to the debate. John Paul II has now talked about the NWICO on several occasions - one of them having been his visit to UNESCO headquarters in 1980.⁹ There are at least half a dozen other statements that testify to the churches' acquaintance with the NWICO: the study paper of the Asian Catholic Bishops (1982); the statement of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF, 1982); the staff paper on the NWICO endorsed by the WACC's central committee (1982); the Sao Paulo document, produced by the Catholic media agency UNDA/Latin America in cooperation with regional church leaders and other organizations (1982); the sixteen propositions of the Swiss churches on the evolution of the media (1983); and the WCC's statement on „communicating credibly“, received by the Vancouver general assembly (1983).¹⁰ Taking the WCC's product as an example, although it comes toward the end of the burst of statements it gives no hint of other work on the issue.

2. The Churches Speak to the Debate

Different, yet similar steps were taken toward what some hoped would become brave declarations on the NWICO. When John Paul II visited UNESCO in 1980 he followed papal practice, begun with John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, by stressing resemblances between church teaching and efforts by the international movement. For his part Jayaweera found that the churches and the NIIO advocates shared values like concern for truth and concern for the dignity of the human person. Bluck noted „the overlapping agendas (sic) of the new order and the ecumenical movement“ and listed WCC programs on solidarity with the poor, sharing of resources, ensuring people's participation, and standing up for the integrity of culture. But we should observe, here, the shift of emphasis that already took place in these early efforts. Jayaweera and Bluck, especially, started out by calling for a contribution to the international debate, and then indicated connections between church priorities and NWICO principles. They set up the project - and to a certain extent the resulting statements - in such a way that church priorities were discussed at some length; then the NWICO discussion was summoned as an illustration of general interest in such matters.

Those who initiated the movement toward statements did well to note the possible liaisons between the churches' priorities and the NWICO demands for democratic communication. Their flirtation with the NWICO was at the risk of bad press in the USA.¹¹ And within the churches themselves the call for a new order was often interpreted as undue criticism of the old order. When, for example, the WCC's general assembly discussed that statement in plenary session, Walter Arnold of the German Evangelical Church thought the document too negative and led a movement to have it revised. Hans-Wolfgang Hessler, the director of

the same church's press service, later expressed these reservations about the ratified document.¹² Despite the criticism, however, the connections between church priorities and NWICO ideals are easy enough to make. Since the 1920s notions of communication have actually developed in parallel to notions of love; thus, Jacques Ellul sees Martin Buber's dialogic, I-Thou relationship as the best account of Christian love available.¹³ The expressions of ideal communication - which occasionally peak through during NWICO discussions - should look at least vaguely familiar to groups that try to promote Christian love. In some ways, then, recognizing the links between church teaching/Christian values/ecumenical agenda and the NWICO vision of communication may have been courageous. In other ways it was short of being remarkable.

For reasons that will become apparent below, we now look briefly at what the resulting statements have had to say about technology. They talk about it all right, but they often begin with their own problems - like the North American electronic church and the Western European deregularization of the media. They question technology and see too much of the message trimmed away in order to fit it into the media. The Asian bishops, for example, call for critical though on technology and more discriminating use. So do the LWF report, the Swiss churches' propositions and the WCC's statement. Once „on board“ the discussion those church people criticize media technology in general: the LWF sees the need to reform technology and to remove it from current patterns of dominance; the Swiss churches warn of persistent imbalances in technology; and the WCC asks questions about uneven distribution. When technology and the NWICO are mentioned in (more or less) the same breath, the imbalance of technology appears as a grievance shared by NWICO advocates. For the Asian bishops the NWICO process is political in the noblest sense; it attempts to arrive at a more just world without recourse to violence. For the LWF the NWICO addressed the problem of dominance but has, unfortunately, broken down into niggling and nagging. The Swiss churches offer a proposition on the NWICO, where it is seen as a movement to end unilateral dependencies. The WCC, meanwhile, lists technology among a number of dilemmas and says those dilemmas have led the South to make NWICO demands that have been ignored.¹⁴

These statements begin with their own problems vis à vis technology and find fellow travelers in the NWICO movement. In an age where technology has become sacred, even this modest apostasy deserves some recognition. But despite the often avowed intention to say something to the international debate, it can be asked whether they really do that. Only the WACC paper and the Sao Paulo document actually question the NWICO movement itself. The Sao Paulo group, in fact, unmasks a „hidden agenda“. Alone, it refers to „false interpretations of the NWICO“; it goes on to say that „technological modernization benefits the TNCs, impairs the national economies and undermines political sovereignty“; it identifies an „unjust situation, aggravated by the aid strategies and the pseudo-transfer of technology“. The Sao Paulo group, then, went from the noble principles where other groups stayed, to the grubby world of political/commercial policy where things are harder. It is there, precisely, that more creative skepticism on the part of churches could have made some difference to the NWICO discussion.

3. The NWICO Hidden Agenda

Today it is the fashion to look for conspiracies or, at least, „hidden agenda“. The abundance of conspiracy theories or hidden agenda suspicions might seem like rampant paranoia. But the conspiracy and hidden agenda are occasionally real.

For some time people have been especially careful about material on aid and development - investigating it for conspiracy and hidden agenda.¹⁵ Since part of the NWICO corpus falls in that literary genre, it was only natural for it to be scrutinized. While people might criticize their analyses, Herbert Schiller and Cees Hamelink deserve some credit for having investigated the NWICO material.¹⁶ Schiller and Hamelink see the NWICO as devolving into a sort

of Marshall Plan for communication technology. The NWICO demands, to a certain extent, have been animated by good intentions. But their concrete realization has often found rich countries preparing trade/aid packages of transnational corporation (TNC) hardware and software for the poor ones. Like the original Marshall Plan, this set-up could help donors more than recipients - by creating markets and, therefore, employment at home. Such trade/aid schemes actually reinforce the TNC's domination of the present communication order; rather than create a new order we give the old order a face lift. Or so the Schiller/Hamelink thesis goes. Like all good stories, this one has a twist in its plot: despite the anti-NWICO position of the United States' press and politicians, American-based TNCs stand to gain a lot from the NWICO initiatives.

Recent developments might cause some to question that plot line. In a new book on the churches and communications, Bluck suggests that the NWICO debate so upset the USA that in December 1983 it announced its withdrawal from UNESCO.¹⁷ He implies that NWICO advocates nosed around the sacrosanct principle of press freedom too much, and that the USA responded by leaving the chief NWICO forum. He relates the two developments as cause and effect. This could have been what Leonard Sussman, director of the media-monitoring Freedom House had in mind when he told Inter Press Service reporters that the nebulous „ongoing discussion at UNESCO“ on protecting journalists had moved the American Congress to consider cutting off its contributions to the organization.¹⁸ But when the break was made it happened differently from what Bluck and Sussman suggest.

The events of 1983 do seem to run in accordance with the Bluck/Sussman interpretation and against the Schiller/Hamelink analyses. A fact sheet circulated by the US embassy in Paris, in February 1984, certainly listed UNESCO discussions on press freedom as one reason for the withdrawal. But the closer we look at those events, the more press freedom seems a pretext rather than a central reason for the withdrawal. For one thing, if the press issue had been central we would have seen more consensus on the move. A (leaked) confidential review of the problem, sent from Assistant Secretary of State George Newell to Secretary of State George Shultz on 16 December 1983, shows there was no consensus at all. And some people who read that leaked document conclude that the impetus came not from congressional leaders - as Sussman would have it - but from a small group of Reagan appointees in the State Department itself.¹⁹

Also revealing in this connection is the attitude of other western countries. Last November Ambassador Ernesto Thalmann, head of the Swiss delegation to UNESCO's twenty-second general conference, said that his country did not wish to see the organization deal with the free press issue. But in January Switzerland's national commission for UNESCO expressed regret at the US decision to withdraw, and cited among the disastrous consequences a reduced international cooperation in the field of communication. It should also be observed that other countries with a strong free press tradition - like Britain, Canada, Australia, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Nordic countries - have distanced themselves from the US move and have tried to persuade the USA to remain in UNESCO. If other countries had perceived the threat to press freedom as central, they might have followed the USA out of the organization. Instead they have decided to stay.

If the free press served as a pretext, for what was it a pretext? As everyone has had ample opportunity to observe, US politicians want to see the UN on what they consider the right track; they frequently play to crowd prejudices by attacking the UN system. Some highlights in that have been the USA's 1977-1980 absence from the International Labor Organization, and the 1983 exchange in New York when one US official offered to wave good-bye to the UN as it inexplicably sailed eastward into the sunset. And shortly after the announcement of the UNESCO pull-out rumors circulated in Geneva to the effect that the USA also planned to downgrade and reduce its participation in the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Taken in this context, dissociation from UNESCO would deliver a message to the UN system as a whole. UNESCO - because of the bad press it had gotten on the NWICO

debate - presented an ideal opportunity for an attack that would be especially popular in the run-up to a presidential election. Obviously, Bluck takes no note of this broader context.

Should one accept the Schiller/Hamelink analyses, however, this message would have been delivered at a price: the loss of an opportunity to create markets for US technology. Since their books predate the US announcement to withdraw, Schiller and Hamelink have no chance to fit these pieces into the puzzle. But, in point of fact, they do fit: Newell's December 1983 memorandum to Shultz acknowledges that US standards and technological expertise frequently influenced UNESCO programs and created markets for US products and scientific equipment. But perhaps official participation had ceased to be as profitable as it once had been. People active in the UNESCO-sponsored International Program for Communication Development (IPCD) have linked the withdrawal to the USA's inability to control that program. According to IPCD chairman Gunnar Garbo, speaking at the recent non-aligned movement media conference at New Delhi, the agency may have gone too far for some tastes.²⁰ Garbo admitted that the USA and other western nations were willing enough to coordinate bilateral arrangements on communication technology, which we called trade/aid schemes above. But they wanted to do this „without reducing the decisive power of the providers of resources“. Quite likely those bilateral agreements could continue more efficiently on the outside and possibly represent what the USA called „other means of cooperation in education, science, culture and communication“ in its announcement of withdrawal. To summarize: although UNESCO had offered a means of selling US technology in the past, those possibilities were decreasing and no longer enough to forestall US departure. The Americans could just as well proceed via bilateral agreements where they would have their way, and not via UNESCO programs that had become difficult to control.

This has taken us far afield. But the verification of the Schiller-Hamelink thesis surely calls recent church remarks on the NWICO into question. Did the proponents of statements on the NWICO - like Bluck, for instance - like the sound of the new order but miss the hidden agenda? It looks as though this was generally the case.

4. *Where from Here?*

It is not yet time to write the *post mortem* on the churches and the NWICO. Work on NWICO issues continues, and there are still possibilities for contribution. But what, if anything, can the churches bring to the international discussion in its present state?

At the outset this paper mentioned the importance of action. In their various programs churches experience first hand the difference between NWICO ideals and political/commercial reality. Their attempts to make ideals real are eloquent in their own right, and would lend credibility to what they had to say later. Referring to the NWICO Robert White of the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture warns of a „strong tendency for this issue to be a debate of words, a discussion among elites“. ²¹ He goes on to say that „we must see the NWICO in concrete terms and encourage self-criticism ... so that what we are doing doesn't defeat the words we speak about democratic communication“. The churches first should apply their teaching/values/priorities - or their perception of the NWICO - to their own communication activities. And there are various indications that they are trying to do just that.

A second contribution might come from the two thousand years worth of statements the churches have made on communication - not just from the sudden illuminations produced by those with a „will to declare“. Statements have their place, but must be understood in an ecclesiological context where not only speaking but also hearing is essential.²² Earlier this paper mentioned the rather facile handling of *Communio et Progressio* in the rush toward bold new statements. That document obviously could never have pleased everyone: media practitioners and communication savants were bound to register discontent, if only because

their professions demanded that of them. But given the laborious process through which *Communio et Progressio* came into being, we might say that it has at least earned a reading. With respect to the newer documents, they need a reading as well. Recently Paul Soukup lamented the fact that very little exchange goes on between those presently at work on the churches and communication;²³ there seems to have been even less exchange between people drafting statements.

Further formal contributions, on the other hand, might be more wary of hidden agenda in the various international machinations. The complexity of international problems has led many to question whether the churches have any competency in those areas at all. One could also ask whether the desire to find „signs of the times“ or a fellowship among nations leads the churches to suspend their critical faculties when the time comes to address global issues. The way in which TNCs have profited from the NWICO discussion should serve as ample illustration of malaise in the so-called international community. And the pressure exerted by the USA on the UN system - first UNESCO and now UNCTAD - could do with some (church) criticism.

But the final point here has to do with technology. As would be expected, church work on the NWICO started with communication and not technology. Starting with communication, however, puts us in the mesmeric hold of the media. It gives us no help when we confront the real issue: TNC technology. Instead of taking a color television set as a means of communication, we have to learn to take it as the product of a firm interested in technological rationalization and not in communication at all. Instead of applauding that television as another neuron in the universal nervous system, we should examine it for its appropriateness - technologically - to the recipient country as well as its sustainability. Among other groups, the ecumenical movement has a long history of work on the technology issue; it had explored questions like political and commercial control of technology long before the WCC took an interest in the NWICO.²⁴ But when Bluck set out in 1981 to list overlapping agenda he made no mention of WCC work on technology. This sort of oversight seems prevalent.

Notes

- 1 Seventy-four organizations are listed by Research Institutes, Documentation Centres and Non-governmental Organizations Working on Issues of the New World Information and Communication Order, Rome, IDOC, 1983.
- 2 Cf. „Making NWICO Real“, in: Action World Association for Christian Communication Newsletter, (1982), no. 71, p. 5.
- 3 C.J. Hamelink: Perspectives for Public Communication. A Study of the Churches Participation in Public Communication, Baarn 1975.
- 4 Idem, Towards a New International Information Order (CCIA/WCC Background Information 1978/7), Geneva 1978.
- 5 N. Jayaweera: „The Churches (Lack of) Contribution to the NIIO“, in: Media Development, 27 (1980), no. 4, 15-21.
- 6 J. Bluck: „Whose News Do We Use?“, in: One World, (1981), no. 67, 8-9.
- 7 An interesting example of the application of *Communio et Progressio* to the NWICO was found in the Inter Press Service Coverage of 8 July 1982: V. Zecchetto: „Communications. A Catholic Perspective on a New Order“.
- 8 Jayaweera: op. cit., relies on Hamelink's summaries; so does M. Reuver: „The Church and Communication“, in: Ecumenical Review, 34 (1982) 35-47.
- 9 cf. Franz-Josef Eilers: On the „New World Information and Communication Order“, in: Communicatio Socialis Yearbook, Journal of Christian Communication in the Third World. Indore (India) Vol. 1, 1981-82, p. 193-199, here p. 198 f.
- 10 Most of these statements appear in Media Development, 31 (1984) no. 1.
- 11 Cf. J. Castelli: „World Council Missing Point on Press Issue“, in: The Washington Star, 4 July 1981.

- 12 *H.-W. Hessler*: „Kommunikation im Dienst einer humanen Gesellschaft“, in: *K. Raiser*, Oekumenische Impressionen Vancouver 1983, Frankfurt: Lembeck 1983.
- 13 *J. Ellul*: *Ethique de la liberté*, vol. 1, Geneva, 1973, pp. 238-239, 302.
- 14 Technology was never a strong point of the WCC effort. The only traces of WCC technology studies in the WCC communication corpus are in two photocopied outlines prepared in April 1982, and a background paper distributed - but not presented: - at the Vancouver assembly. We return to this shortcoming below.
- 15 *D. Goulet and M. Hudson*: *The Myth of Aid. The Hidden Agenda of the Development Reports*, Maryknoll 1971; *D. Goulet*: *The Uncertain Promise. Value Conflict in Technological Transfer*, New York 1977.
- 16 *H.I. Schiller*: *Who Knows? Information in the Age of the Fortune 500*, Norwood, Ablex, 1981; *C.J. Hamelink*, *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communication. Planning National Information Policy*, New York: Longman 1983.
- 17 *J. Bluck*: *Beyond Technology. Contexts for Christian Communication*, Geneva WCC 1984, p. 43. Bluck relies heavily on the WCC communication study; given that study's weakness on technology it is surprising that he chose „Beyond Technology“ as a title.
- 18 *M. Blacque Belair*: „UNESCO. Assistant Director General Assails Critics“, in: *Inter Press Service coverage of 10 November 1983*.
- 19 Cf. *The Guardian*, 23 January 1984; also: „Leaked Review Reveals US Split on UNESCO“, in: *Reuter coverage of 23 January 1984*.
- 20 *V. Rao*: „UNESCO. US Withdrawal from UNESCO Linked with IPDC“, in: *Inter Press Service coverage of 11 January 1984*.
- 21 „Making NWICO Real“ ... (see note 2, above).
- 22 *L. Jorgenson*: „Church Statements on Communication. Their Place in a Process“, in: *Media Development*, 31 (1984), no. 1, 30-33.
- 23 *P.A. Soukup*: *Communication and Theology. Introduction and Review of the Literature*, London: WACC 1983.
- 24 *R.L. Shinn et al. (eds.)*: *Faith and Science in an Unjust World. Report of the World Council of Churches' Conference on Faith, Science and the Future*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Cambridge, USA, 12-24 July 1979. Geneva: WCC 1980.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Anliegen dieses Beitrages ist es, die Bemühungen kirchlicher Kreise um die Verwirklichung einer neuen weltweiten Informations- und Kommunikationsordnung, ursprünglich eine Forderung der UNESCO, zu würdigen.

Nachdem die Kirche zunächst in den 70er Jahren die Thematik nicht in den Blick nahm, erschwert durch eine verunglimpfende Zusammenfassung der Pastoralkonstitution „*Communio et Progressio*“ (1971) durch Cees Hamelink (1975), wurde spätestens durch die Stellungnahme Johannes Pauls II. vor der UNESCO die Bedeutung einer neuen Weltinformationsordnung als kirchliches Anliegen hervorgehoben.

Ähnlichkeiten in den Forderungen der NWICO und denen einiger Kirchen bestanden zum Teil in einer Kritik am privatwirtschaftlich organisierten Mediensystem und führten zu Widerspruch auf amerikanischer Seite. Kirchliche Medienexperten, besonders aus der Dritten Welt, beklagten die mangelnde technische Ausrüstung ihrer Länder für eine effektive Änderung der Informationspolitik. - Die inhaltlichen Forderungen blieben weitgehend unberücksichtigt.

Für ihren Rückzug aus der UNESCO führten die Amerikaner - im Zusammenhang mit der kirchenpolitischen Mediendiskussion - mangelnden Respekt gegenüber der Pressefreiheit an, während andere westliche Länder diese Meinung nicht teilten. Weitere Indizien erhärten den Verdacht, daß die verdeckten Gründe für den amerikanischen Rückzug eher wirtschaftlicher Art waren: die USA hatten einen bilateralen Handel an Informationstechnologie in die Dritte Welt aufgebaut, der ein Verbleiben in der UNESCO überflüssig machte. Die Kirchen scheinen diese Hintergründe nicht erkannt zu haben. Der Verfasser sieht nur dann eine Chance für die Kirche, eine kompetente Medienpolitik zu betreiben, wenn sie in Zukunft auch versteckte politische und wirtschaftliche Motive ihrer Partner berücksichtigt.

RESUME

L'auteur en visage de présenter les efforts faits par l'Eglise pour réaliser un nouveau système d'information et de communication tel que l'UNESCO l'a proposé.

L'Eglise qui, au début, ne s'est pas prononcée sur ce sujet, a ensuite adopté une attitude comparable à celle de NWICO, pourtant, elle n'a pas bien compris les raisons qui ont incité les Etats-Unis à quitter l'UNESCO. Tandis que les Etats-Unis expliquaient cela par le fait que le NWICO portait atteinte à la liberté de la presse, l'auteur pense plutôt à des raisons politiques et économiques.

RESUMEN

El deseo de esta presentación es el de demarcar los esfuerzos de círculos eclesiásticos, como respuesta a una iniciativa de UNESCO, sobre la realización de un nuevo orden en información y comunicación con sus posibilidades y limitaciones.

La iglesia, luego de un silencio inicial, propugnó una interpretación similar a la de NWICO; así por ejemplo, no entrevió los motivos de USA por abandonar la UNESCO. Según el autor, antes que una violación de la libertad de prensa por parte de NWICO, los motivos de USA fueron políticos y económicos.