

AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN QUEST FOR INFORMATION SOVEREIGNTY: PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of information and cultural sovereignty and to the attempts of African countries to acquire and maintain it. The legacy of colonialism and neo-colonial practices of the former metropolises did not allow African countries to achieve information independence, without which the independence and sovereignty of the state as a whole are impossible. The newly independent states saw the role of the media primarily in creation, strengthening, and maintaining national unity, in the formation of a national cultural identity, and in combating colonialism. The article analyzes the peculiarities of media formation in Africa, the main focus of media activities after independence, the influence of Western countries and trans-national corporations on the cultural and informational sphere of African countries. Special attention is paid to the attempts of African countries to achieve a new fair information order. The era of liberalization in Africa led to contradictory results: the struggle for freedom of information continued as a struggle against internal authoritarianism, while the problem of domination of transnational information corporations and their products was obscured and faded into the background. Particularly in that period, the transformation of neocolonialism manifested itself: not only did the new neocolonialism become global, with a defined center of influence—it also denied states the right to implement sovereign information policies. The dominance of Western narratives persists in the African information space, often operating such terms as development, progress, modernization, international cooperation, human potential, and “strengthening the institutions of democracy,” but in reality, propagating the interests of the dominant powers, thus maintaining the new neocolonial agenda, cementing inequality and power imbalance.

Keywords: Africa, mass media, information sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, informational new colonialism, imperialism, the New World Information and Communication Order, anti-colonial struggle, decolonization

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Sovereignty is usually defined as the independent policy of the state's authorities in external and internal affairs. The ability of a state to defend its own territory and to ensure the functioning of the social and political system are attributes of sovereignty. The sphere of culture and information used to fall out of the classical definition of sovereignty. The realities of the modern world, information globalization, information flows, and media platforms, for which state borders are irrelevant, push states to ensure not only the physical security of their borders but also the security of information and cultural national space. Attempts to undermine the sovereignty of states today are no longer associated only with a direct military threat but also with the lack of control by a particular state—although indirectly—over the information and cultural spheres of society, including education.

There is no universally accepted concept of “information sovereignty” in science yet. Legal scholars, political scientists, sociologists argue about what it includes. A.A. Efremov suggests that “the key to the realization of sovereignty is the definition of the ability to regulate information relations within the framework of the relevant information space” [Efremov 2017]. In general, the concept of “information sovereignty” is characterized by at least two aspects: technical and ideological. The technical aspect includes the presence of national media, software, social networks, search engines, and so on. The ideological aspect includes such components as the presence of an official ideology or national idea, a high level of popular mass culture, a state propaganda system, and developed legislation in the field of information [Zorina 2017].

Since independence, African countries have been fighting against colonialism and for their national sovereignty, including the spheres of information and culture. Unless Africa's control over its own media is comprehensive and unchallenged, the battle for independence cannot be won—one of the first books on media in Africa, written by Rosalind Ainslie in the 1960s, begins with this statement [Ainslie 1967].

Even then, it was obvious that whoever controls the information sphere also controls something more than the mere dissemination of information. Control over the media guarantees possession of a powerful weapon: the ability to create in the audience an idea of the world and of themselves in this world, which was vital for the new states. Information flows comprise not only media (print, radio, television, news agencies) but also educational and cultural programs, educational projects, and explanations of the world we live in and our place in it [Degterev 2022: 357]. Whoever, in whatever way, by whichever narratives and ideological constructs explains the surrounding reality, is the one who has almost unlimited power.

Since independence, African states have started to dismantle the colonial system and establish national mass media, seeing them as one of the most important factors for spiritual and cultural decolonization [Abramova 2023]. The role of the mass media was primarily seen in creation, strengthening, and maintaining national unity. For this purpose, in African countries with their borders drawn by the colonizers, it was necessary to create and maintain a national cultural identity and, with the help of the media, to cultivate and develop a sense of belonging to a certain community, which, as a rule, was broader than ethnic and even linguistic affiliation.

It is important to recall another mass media mission in post-independence Africa: the anti-colonial struggle, especially for the more radically Pan-Africanist politicians. As the

President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah (in power 1960–1966) once said, “Our revolutionary African press must carry out revolutionary purposes. This is to establish a progressive political and economic system upon our continent that will free men from want and every form of social injustice and enable them to work out their social and cultural destinies in peace and at ease. (In this respect) the African newspaper is a collective educator—a weapon, first and foremost to overthrow colonialism and imperialism, and to assist total African independence and unity.”¹

DECOLONIZING OF INFORMATIONAL SPHERE: AN ENDLESS ROAD

The main challenge for the newly independent states in the information and cultural sphere, including not only the media itself but also educational systems and cultural policy, is the question of *whether it is possible to decolonize what was created by colonizers and for the colonizer’s needs, and if it is, how to go about it.*

African countries entered the period of independence with an extremely underdeveloped information sphere. On average, there were one or two newspaper copies and two radio receivers per 100 people, with illiteracy rates approaching 90–95% [Andrianov 1964: 25]. Telephone connection between the capitals of African states was made via Paris, London, or Brussels [Moko-Mokoyo 1995]. According to UNESCO, there were 1.9 television sets per thousand people in Africa in 1965, but if we look at data for Africa excluding the Arab States, the figure drops to 0.4. In 1977, the number of television receivers in sub-Saharan Africa rose to 6.5. But these were extremely small numbers compared to Europe (254 TV sets) and North America (604) [Mytton 1983: 21].

The press industry was dominated by foreign or European capital controlling large-circulation publications. Not every African country even had its own media owners, and often they were owning small-circulation newspapers that nevertheless wielded enormous influence as a political organ of agitation and propaganda [Barratt, Berger 2007]. A striking example of an influential African newspaper is the *West African Pilot* (circulation of about 25,000 copies), published from 1937 to 1967. From 1937 to 1947, it was personally edited by Nnamdi Azikiwe, who later became the first president of independent Nigeria (1963–1966). The main aim of the newspaper was to fight for independence from British rule with the motto: “Show the Light and the People Will Find the Way”².

The motto demonstrates the enlightening role that the press was intended by many editors to play in various spheres of African life: to develop and unify languages, to demonstrate standards of living, to promote reforms [Peterson, Hunter, Newell 2016: 24]. Azikiwe created his own corporation, *Zik’s Press Limited*, which published a number of newspapers that were repeatedly banned by the colonial administration for “misrepresentation of facts,” but they continued to fight until victory in 1960. His goal, as

¹ The Booklet of President K. Nkrumah’s speech to the Second Conference of Pan-African Journalists in Accra in November 1963, as cited by [Domatob 1988: 82].

² A similar motto (a paraphrase from Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, “Give light, and people will find the way”) was, and still is, actively used by the movement for the rights of African Americans in the United States. The authorship is attributed to Ella Baker (1903–1986), a public figure and activist of the black movement in the United States.

he wrote in his biography, was to “revolutionize journalism as it had been practiced in Nigeria <...> and demonstrate that journalism can be successful business enterprise” [Azikiwe 1970: 291].

The development of the press on the African continent was varied and depended on the region and the colonial authorities [Monfils 1985: 293]. Print media were created by colonial authorities, European settlers, Christian missionaries, and African intellectuals. The ownership structure of the newspaper and publishing business remained broadly the same as during the colonial era. The press industry in East and Southern Africa was dominated by large companies owned by European settlers.

The historical chronology of the newspaper business was different in West and East Africa because of the specifics of the public spheres at the two sides of the continent. In West Africa, the anglicized elite, many of whom were descendants of liberated slaves, used newspapers to defend their membership in the English-speaking *civitas* [Zachernuk 2000]. This is why editorials of “*A Banker*,” a newspaper published in the British colony of the Gold Coast, could be widely circulated in other English-speaking colonies. They were written by authors who claimed to belong to a universal civilization. The same can be said of the francophone press, for African writers who published in French newspapers claimed to belong to the wider francophone world.

Media scholars point out that in East Africa, by contrast, there was no African elite to whom the colonial authorities had a “civilizational debt.” In the mid-19th century, Christian missionaries established settlements of liberated slaves in Bagamoyo and elsewhere on the East African coast. While in West Africa the anglicized elite could claim to be defending Britain’s historic commitment to the civilizing mission, East Africans were simply colonial subjects. They did not possess the moral capital to claim membership in the public sphere of the metropolis [Peterson, Hunter, Newell 2016].

While newspapers in Africa had different origins, broadcasting media were directly inherited from colonialism. In most cases, broadcasting was a direct political and ideological tool of the colonial state. Broadcasting systems were everywhere a state monopoly by the time of independence. Colonial administrations established broadcasting structures as an extension of imperial (imperialist, according to many) policy and ideological control or as a means of direct propaganda [Usacheva 2018].

In practice, in the early years of independence, broadcasting was a kind of public service for the development of the new states. Radio literacy courses, distance learning, and other educational programs were introduced in almost all countries. Media participation in promoting immunization programs and fighting epidemics was essential. Nigerian educational television programs have received special attention in the scientific literature as highly effective. The transition from colonial to post-colonial media structures was not straightforward. The created and reformatted media, in their turn, proved to be propagandistic, elitist, lacking in content diversity, and only marginally more democratic than they had been under colonial regimes [Paterson 2013].

Closer to the 1970s, the promises of independence, freedom, justice, and social progress—the foundations of the struggle against colonialism—have been everywhere undermined by political and socio-economic upheavals. Constructing the post-colonial state on the foundations laid by colonialism seemed an impossible task [Karikari 2007: 16]. Nearly every African country lacked professional journalists. At the same time, training programs for journalists were usually organized by former metropolises.

In addition, most of the media in Africa still use European languages, thus supporting and enforcing, willingly or unwillingly, the cultural dominance of the former metropolises. The situation varies from country to country, but English, French, and Portuguese have not diminished their positions on the African continent. In Nigeria, for example, English is the main language in the media [Adams et al. 2024]. French is the prevalent language in the media in francophone Africa. In Angola, where Portuguese is the official language used by the majority of the population (71.2%³), the media also use Portuguese. In South Africa, most popular newspapers are published in English (see the list of South African newspapers⁴).

According to Beawogi Boimassa, a researcher of African media, "... the vocabulary of local languages falls far behind the realities of socio-political life. This is because widely used in the media vocabulary has no corresponding equivalents in local languages, thus resulting in significant distortion of the messages broadcast on national radio and television. There are two solutions to this problem: further improvement of local languages to overcome lexico-semantic barriers or switching to the languages of former colonizers. Many countries in Tropical Africa have chosen the second way" [Beawogi 2012: 69].

Almost immediately after independence, it became apparent that colonial institutions continued to set the tone and that colonialism itself was changing form but not content. As early as 1965, Kwame Nkrumah wrote: "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State, which is subject to it, is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" [Nkrumah 1965: ix].

The term "neocolonialism" is mostly used to refer to economic relations aimed at exploiting former colonies after they have gained political independence [Sirotkina, Alpidovska 2020]. Although neocolonialism is metaphorically called "soft-paw colonialism," political, economic, and military instruments are used to implement neocolonial policies. Neocolonialism must also be acknowledged in the fields of ideology, culture, science, education, and information. It achieves the same goals but by other, softer methods (the concept of *soft power*⁵) or a combination of them with traditional economic, financial, and military pressures (which is closer to the concept of *smart power*⁶).

The same processes have been taking place in the information sphere that Professor Ali Mazrui aptly characterized in a well-known quote that has been spread in posters and slogans: «Africa produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not

³ Angola. Demographic Atlas. *The CIA World Factbook 2023–2024*. Simon and Schuster, 2023.

⁴ List of South African newspapers. *W3 newspapers*. <https://www.w3newspapers.com/south-africa/> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

⁵ According to the concept of the American political scientist Joseph Nye, *soft power* is the ability to achieve desired results in relations with other states through the appeal of one's own culture, values, and diplomacy, much more successfully than through direct pressure and financial resources. [Nye 2004].

⁶ The concept of "soft power" has transformed over time into the concept of "smart power": the ability to combine elements of *hard power*, such as military threats, economic pressure, and sanctions, with elements of soft power to form a winning strategy. For more information, see: Nye J. In Mideast, the Goal is "Smart Power". *The Boston Globe*. 19.08.2006. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/mideast-goal-smart-power> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

produce» [Mazrui 1973]. And this is one of the most obvious markers of neocolonialism.

The struggle for sovereignty, which cannot be fully realized without an independent cultural and information policy, took the form of a struggle against neocolonialism, driven not only by former metropolises but also by transnational and then global information corporations.

PAN-AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY FOR DECOLONIZATION?

One of the ways to overcome the information dependence of African countries was to create their own information agencies. African states had difficulties in receiving, disseminating, creating information products on domestic, foreign, and international issues. This was due to the fact that African countries inherited a social infrastructure unilaterally oriented to the former metropolises, which is especially noticeable in the example of the mass media.

In 1963, only 11 countries on the African continent had their own national news agencies. In the same year, 29 African countries established the Union of African News Agencies and developed a project to create an All-African Press Agency, but it was not until the 1970s that African countries began the process of establishing their own agencies. In the first decades of independence, the number of news agencies grew despite economic difficulties, and by the early 1980s, press and information agencies were operating in 26 countries on the continent.

The official launch of PANA (*Pan-African News Agency, PanaPress*) took place in the early 1980s, but it started functioning much later. Moreover, a number of researchers believe that the agency has never been fully operational [Moko-Mokoyo 1995], due to numerous difficulties caused primarily by insufficient funding, poor technical infrastructure, a lack of local specialists, a lack of experience in organizing information gathering systems and, in general, in training of high-skilled national journalists in different African countries.

The history of PANA deserves a separate study, including the period of democratic reforms, which meant getting rid of any control from the African states' structures, attempts at restructuring and the creation of a "truly independent agency" as a triumph of liberalism in the media. But at the time of its creation, the main goals of the agency's functioning were to establish cooperation between African countries, to produce and exchange information between them, to create a system of selection and dissemination of information through channels independent of the former colonizers and the United States. African countries had no real ability to resist the flow of information from highly developed countries, which was then seen as cultural enslavement. For decades, African countries received information about each other from international, mostly Western agencies.

The Center for African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania has written about PANA's ambitious achievements since its re-activation, restructuring, and democratization: the adoption of a recovery plan, with private investment and privatization, with increased editorial independence, the launch of its own satellite network (*VSAT*) covering not only the African continent but also countries in Europe,

Asia, and even the Americas⁷. Since the mid-1990s, PANA has been connected to the Internet (*panapress.com*), enabling wider dissemination of information.

However, there are also critics of PANA's current editorial policy. For example, researchers from Nigeria and Malaysia compared Reuters' and PANA's coverage of the 2011 Somali famine, and their study finds that advocacy/humanitarian groups were the dominant news sources used by both news agencies. The study concludes that Panapress, an African news agency originally positioned to challenge Western mainstream media narratives, is doing the opposite by supplementing Reuters' narrative, hence entrenching homogenization of news flow. [Dauda, Omar 2015].

AN ATTEMPT TO FORM A NEW COMMUNICATION ORDER

The 1970s and the first half of the 1980s can be characterized as the period of the most active international efforts to protect the information sovereignty of developing countries. It can be roughly divided into several stages. For African countries, this collective multilateral format offered a significant opportunity for change that could not be achieved in a solo fight.

At the **first stage**, as part of the struggle against neo-colonialism at the global level, the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1970s put forward the concept of a New International Information and Communication Order⁸. The specific demands made by developing countries were first collectively expressed in a statement at the 1973 Non-Aligned Movement Summit. This document, known as the Non-Aligned Movement Declaration on Communication, although it is only a few paragraphs (xiii-xiv) in the Action Program for Economic Cooperation, encouraged developing countries to take coordinated action in the field of mass communication aimed at promoting greater interchange of ideas and information among themselves as a way of supplementing the inadequate and negative coverage given to them by the Western media⁹. Until the mid-1970s, the information sphere was dominated by ideas of the anti-colonial struggle of developing countries against the industrialized West. Herbert Schiller, a well-known American communication scholar and a critic of American imperialism, wrote that the first full-scale statement of resistance to cultural colonization was made at the Algiers Conference of Heads of State of Non-Aligned Countries in September 1973. The Fourth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Algiers (1973) proclaimed that "the activities of imperialism are not confined solely to the political and economic fields but also cover the cultural and social fields, thus imposing an alien ideological domination over the peoples of the developing world,"¹⁰ and demanded coordinated action in the field of mass communication [Schiller 1978: 36].

⁷ Ali-Dinar A.B. The New PANA: Professionalism in Action. African Studies Center. *The University of Pennsylvania*. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Acad_Research/pana.html (accessed: 04.08.2024)

⁸ New International Information and Communication Order. *Communication*. <https://communication.iresearchnet.com/international-communication/new-world-information-and-communication-order-nwico/> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

⁹ Action Program for economic cooperation. Fourth Conference of Heads of States or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. Algiers. *NAM*. 5-9.09.1973. Pp. 88–89. <https://ris.org.in/sites/default/files/NAM%20Summit-4-Sep%205-9-1973-FinalDocument-AlgiersDeclaration-min.pdf> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

¹⁰ Action Program for economic cooperation. Fourth Conference of Heads of States or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. Algiers. *NAM*. 5-9.09.1973. P. 73. <https://ris.org.in/sites/default/files/NAM%20Summit-4-Sep%205-9-1973-FinalDocument-AlgiersDeclaration-min.pdf> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

The anti-colonial struggle in the communications sphere continued at the International Symposium of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Tunis in March 1976, where the very term “New International Order” was first applied to information. Its final resolution, published by the Tunisian Secretariat of State for Information, declared: “Since information in the world shows a disequilibrium favoring some and ignoring others, it is the duty of the non-aligned countries and the other developing countries to change this situation and obtain the decolonialization of information and initiate a new international order in information.” [Sussman 2003]. In addition, a number of practical proposals were formulated for a gradual transition to a new international information order.

Five months later, in August 1976, the declaration of the Non-Aligned Movement was finalised and strengthened by the Heads of State at a meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Eighty-seven countries legitimized NAM's demands for a new order, declaring: “*A new international order in the fields of information and mass communication is as vital as a new international economic order...*” [Sussman 2003].

The **second** phase, according to the well-known Finnish media expert Kaarle Nordenstreng, can be characterised as a counterattack by the developed Western countries in an attempt to preserve their position. The campaign against information exchange initiatives peaked in 1976–1977. Its target was UNESCO’s programmes for the development of communication policies. The UNESCO General Conference in Nairobi in November 1976 was the beginning of the confrontation between Western countries and developing countries, the latter actively supported by the USSR. This was the first such conference on the African continent, where one of the agenda items was a project titled “Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War”¹¹ [Nordenstreng, Hannikainen 1984: 101–113].

The preparation of the draft declaration was actively promoted by the USSR, contributing to UNESCO initiatives aimed at developing normative guidelines for the media on issues of global interest. The document was prepared by experts and diplomats and was essentially just a reminder of existing international norms and instruments. But it did include an article on state responsibility and a reference to an earlier UN resolution defining Zionism as ‘a form of racism and racial discrimination.’¹² These are two points that became the *casus belli* for Western governments and the media [Nordenstreng 1984]. A campaign was launched against the draft Declaration, arguing that the Declaration

¹¹ Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War. Records of the General Conference, 20th session, Paris, 24 October to 28 November 1978, v. 1: Resolutions. *UNESCO*. <https://unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/declaration-fundamental-principles-concerning-contribution-mass-media-strengthening-peace-and> (accessed: 01.08.2024)

¹² Resolution A/RES/3379(XXX) of the General Assembly. Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination. *UN*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/650324> (accessed: 05.08.2024). In 1991, on the initiative of Israel and the US, a new GA Resolution, A/RES/46/86, “Elimination of racism and racial discrimination,” was adopted, this time without stating that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination. See: <https://undocs.org/a/res/46/86> (дата обращения: 05.08.2024)

would favour media control in the interests of the socialist East and most part of the developing South.

The **third** strategic phase in 1978–1980 was marked by the adoption of the Media Declaration (Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War)¹³ and the creation of the McBride Commission. These were the years of searching for a compromise, which were followed by a new confrontation, a kind of offensive by large information corporations.

The international commission was set up to examine the controversies that had arisen, headed by Sean MacBride, a well-known Irish politician and public figure, winner of the 1974 Nobel Peace Prize. He was also the 1977 recipient of the USSR's honourable award, the International Lenin Prize 'For Strengthening Peace Between Peoples.' The report of the MacBride Commission, presented to the twenty-first session of the General Conference of UNESCO in Belgrade (1980), was the result of studies on global information processes. The report examined the consequences of inequalities in information sharing by analysing a massive amount of evidence.

“DEFENCE OF THE PRESS FREEDOM” AS A COUNTER-REACTION

The MacBride report was endorsed by practically all African states. Western countries, primarily the United States, were initially opposed to the work of the commission and the report itself. In particular, the West was dissatisfied with the conclusions on the negative impact of the commercial approach to information, which adversely affects the organisation and content of national and international information flows. Despite the softening of some wording, the main conclusion of the Commission—about the unbalanced flow of information in the world and the dominance of the West in the information systems of the liberated countries—was retained.

The final report endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference in Belgrade in 1980, published under the title “Many Voices, One World,” emphasised that the new international information and communication order should initiate a new relationship aimed at overcoming stereotyped thinking, a better understanding of the meaning of diversity and multiple ways of being, with full respect for the dignity and equality of people with different ways, styles, and conditions of life [MacBride 1981]. From the perspective of developing countries at that time, confronting information dependence and placing it at the centre of the report was both brave and necessary for the prospect of self-reliant development [Nordenstreng Somavia 2021].

The struggle for information independence began with decolonisation and was part of a wider struggle against neo-colonialism but quickly transformed into a powerful Third World movement, both governmental and non-governmental: countries wanted to assert themselves, their own cultural and political identity. The ideas about the prejudiced

¹³ Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War. 1978. *UNESCO*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/declaration-fundamental-principles-concerning-contribution-mass-media-strengthening-peace-and?hub=66535> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

image of the African continent that was being broadcast around the world were formulated. The leading Western information agencies (*Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, United Press International*) not only ignore the development successes and cultural uniqueness of African countries but also create an image of them as something wild, as an ‘underdeveloped,’ possibly even unable to develop, exotic, non-subjective phenomenon. And not only in the international information field but also within the African continent, the mutual perception of African peoples is determined by the content of the Western media. And all this was aggravated by the conditions of the Cold War with a polarised East-West information agenda. The opposition to the Cold War was expressed in evaluations of the MacBride Commission, whose work was closely linked to the activation of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) movement. Many of the movement’s ideas were reflected in the already mentioned 1978 Media Declaration.

Russian researchers S.M. Vinogradova and G.S. Melnik point out that the Talloires Declaration (adopted in May 1981 at the International Conference ‘Voice of Freedom’ in Talloires, France) became a kind of antipode of the abovementioned Declaration. Whereas supporters of the 1978 Media Declaration and the New World Information Order accused the West of imposing on the world a one-way flow of information, received, produced, and disseminated by the major media monopolies, supporters of the Talloires Declaration believed that the NWICO supported the aspirations of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to establish state control over the media on a global scale [Vinogradova, Melnik 2012].

The decision to hold the first ever conference convened by Western news organisations to discuss UNESCO issues reflected concern that the Soviet Union and its Third World backers were winning the diplomatic battle to establish restrictive international rules governing press behaviour.

In May 1981, representatives of more than 50 Western information organisations from 20 countries gathered in Talloires¹⁴, establishing the International Committee in Defence of Press Freedom. The Committee demanded that UNESCO stop trying to regulate news content and formulate rules for the press. Amadou Mahtar M’Bow, Director-General of UNESCO, who was seen as ‘the chief arbiter of the new order,’ entered the debate with them. “The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization will continue in its effort to regulate the news media despite Western fears that it will limit press freedom,”¹⁵ he said at a conference.

The outright fear that the implementation of important practical measures outlined by UNESCO would result in a loss of Western influence in the new independent countries led to fierce criticism of the organisation’s media policy and the work of the MacBride Commission. The USA and Great Britain threatened to stop paying their contributions to UNESCO and questioned their participation in the organisation. Western mass media accused the New World Information Order, “which Communist and third-world nations

¹⁴ Russian Journalism: the freedom of access to information. https://dzyalosh.ru/01-03-Problemi-Dostupa/svoboda_96/p1.pdf (In Russ.). (accessed: 05.08.2024)

¹⁵ Lewis P. UNESCO says it will persist in effort to regulate press. *The New York Times*. 17.05.1981. <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/17/world/unesco-says-it-will-persist-in-effort-to-regulate-press.html> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

steamrolled through the organization at a meeting in Belgrade last year over Western opposition.”¹⁶ Most discontent was triggered by UNESCO’s plans to create an international code of journalistic ethics, to study journalist and media licensing systems, to investigate the impact of advertising on media coverage, and to actively pursue international regulation of satellite communications.

The Talloires conference brought together not only representatives of the major Western news organisations but also Third World countries such as India, and together they sought to develop a common strategy to combat plans for a new world information order that would give UNESCO the power to regulate the flow of news and information around the world.

As Paul Lewis wrote special for *The New York Times*: “Complaints by third-world nations and the Soviet Union that that Western news media dominates world communications, and their calls for the press to promote economic development and peace, were widely dismissed by speakers today as an attempt to justify political control of the news.”¹⁷

The end of the Cold War also meant a victory for the opponents of the NWICO in this dispute. The fight for media freedom further developed as a struggle against authoritarianism, not against the domination of transnational information corporations and their products.

According to a number of scholars, the MacBride Commission was not a separate chapter in history—it was an integral part of a highly politicised information war, academically known as the ‘great global media debate’ [Gerbner, Mowlana, Nordenstreng 1993; McQuail 2005]. The debate on the imbalance in news flows between developed and developing countries, between North and South, grew throughout the 1970s, highly politicised and even ideologised, embedded in the general Cold War polemics. Established almost 50 years ago, in the eventful year of 1976, the Commission must be seen as the manifestation of a long and painful process that was admittedly unsuccessful.

THE TIMELESS VALUES OF THE MACBRIDE REPORT

The bias in the selection of international news still remains to a large extent due to the organisation of the news flow itself and the policies of large news agencies and transnational corporations. The ideas of the Report that call for equal access to information and the exchange of information between countries are still relevant. The essence of the report was the realisation that we all need a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) expressed in four key values [Nordenstreng, Somavia 2021].

The first of these is respect for diversity and cultural identity—the basic notion of respect for others. And this is not only in terms of recognising that the developing world is under-represented; it is also related to the essence of communication at the national level: you must respect the other—nation, society, culture, personality, gender.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Communication should strengthen social cohesion and convey a sense of belonging [Nordenstreng, Somavia 2021]. As stated in Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Somavia's¹⁸ commentary on the MacBride Report, 'Communication <...> is a determinant of all social processes and a fundamental component of how society is organised' [MacBride 1981: 281].

The second keystone is the need to democratise communications, which means recognising the right to inform and be informed in line with the human rights enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The report did not deny control of the media, but it called for relations that are open and balanced, for a balance between freedom and responsibility, which was seen as the basis of democracy.

No one disputed the fact that developing countries needed the technical resources that developed countries had, but there was concern about the neutrality (including ideological neutrality) of both the technical resources and the information product itself. Mass media capable of broadcasting the content they want, regardless of state borders and sovereignties, have the ability to subordinate society to the interests of transnational companies that operate with a *de facto* monopoly and are therefore prepared to ignore the fundamental rights of citizens and peoples to free access to information, since it is they who determine what information will be available and in what form.

The report emphasised, and this is the **third** key value, that information is a social good and a cultural product, not an object of material consumption or trade: communications in general can be likened to air or sunlight, in the sense that everyone has an equal right to them. It is the common property of humanity [Землянова 2012].

Hence the conviction that information and communication cannot be seen simply as commodities. Information fulfils a social function because the right to access information is inherent in the individual. The Report states that a distinction must be made between communication as a business and the importance of communication in society.

Obviously, the viewpoint of the developed countries of the West, especially the political leadership and transnational corporations, opposes this approach. Western countries, especially the US, have adopted a commercial approach (or libertarian, in terms of normative theories of communication [Siebert, Schram, Peterson 1963]) to the media and information circulation—news is a commodity that can be sold and bought, available to those who have the money, independent of cultural and national characteristics and interests. [Giffard 1989; Hamelink 1983: 22; McQuail 2005: 261–263].

At the same time, at the declarative level, no one denied the right to information to the people of African countries; it was simply necessary to improve the literacy of the population, create media accessible to all, establish information agencies, and exchange information with other world agencies. This Western approach, on the one hand, ignored the inherently unequal position of countries and thus the impossibility of equal information exchange, and on the other hand, created the basis for a new neo-colonialism, implemented through the system of education, training, 'proper' textbooks, and so on.

The fourth key value is to recognise the link between international information and global peace and security issues in that information should not be used as a tool in the

¹⁸ The former head of the International Labor Organization Juan Somavia and the Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez represented Latin America in the MacBride Commission.

Cold War. As the prominent Russian communicativist L.M. Zemlyanova points out, “while supporting the principles of democracy and national sovereignty in the free development of the mass media in all countries of the world, the Commission’s report also affirmed the need of international mutual respect for the rights of peoples to create “an atmosphere of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence of nations”” [Zemlyanova 1995: 176].

The report indirectly touched upon the issues of cultural equality and ‘not imposing’ the cultures of developed countries. In some respects, a similar concept was developed by J. Galtung in his works, where he spoke about cultural violence as comprising various aspects of culture, language, art, science that “justify or legitimise direct or structural violence” [Galtung 1990: 291].

The great global debate on the media from the mid-1970s onwards was largely fuelled by UNESCO, with the MacBride Commission as its flagship. By the mid-1980s, however, UNESCO had lost its leadership in the intellectual movement after the administration of US President Ronald Reagan forced it to do a U-turn in media policy [Preston, Herman, Schiller 1989]. In the mid-1980s, the USA even withdrew from UNESCO, reputedly in disagreement with the new international information order¹⁹. At this stage, UNESCO stopped promoting the ideas of the MacBride Commission. Moreover, materials on the subject and reports were no longer published; even the main report “Many Voices One World” was re-published only in 2003 at the initiative of enthusiastic scholars. [MacBride 2003].

The Media Declaration was deliberately forgotten, and the NWICO was left out of the organisation. Normative and standard-setting issues were sidelined, and UNESCO adopted the traditional doctrine of the free flow of information, while its Constitution stipulate the promotion of the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples for the supreme cause of peace and security as its primary mission [Nordenstreng 2013].

THE NEW NEO-COLONIALISM AND NEW CHALLENGES TO MEDIA SOVEREIGNTY

The mass media changed and developed, but at each stage of development it turned out that the influence of the former colonial powers and the United States did not weaken but was transformed, often intensifying, and after the collapse of the bipolar world became almost total.

Followers of the New Information Order movement in the 1990s put forward the concept of a *New “New order,”* where the emphasis was shifted to the further democratisation of information relations. Anti-colonial struggles, ideas of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism were completely removed from the concept [Sussman 1992]. The focus was on the active participation of various social forces, movements, and organisations, first of all on a national and then on an international level. According to the proponents of this theory, non-profit organisations and non-governmental organisations (NPOs and NGOs) should fight for the establishment of free democratic

¹⁹ Daly J. McBride and the New World Information Order. *GSED – Global Studies in Education Digest*. 29.03.2008. <http://gsed.wordpress.com/2008/03/29/mcbride-and-the-new-world-information-order/> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

rights to information in a multicultural world and resist pressure from the government and other power structures. Initiative must come from below—this is the fundamental difference between the new order and the old one [Землянова 2004]. World Summits on the Information Society were organised in 2003 and 2004, UNESCO was effectively displaced by non-governmental organisations, especially in the context of the development of digital and social media.

The end of the Cold War, the “end of history,” and the “victory of the Western countries” did not simply lead to the abolition of the state in the information sphere and the denial of the right of states to interfere in the activities of the media; on the contrary, it was the dictate of the states that the “free” media had to fight against, advocating the de facto replacement of the state by NGOs and other organised social forces.

This contradicted the adopted in 1965 at the 20th session of the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty²⁰. The Declaration was adopted at the proposal of the USSR as a follow-up to the content of the famous UNGA Resolution 1514 with the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples²¹.

It was at this time that, in our opinion, a qualitative change in neo-colonialism took place: it not only became global, with a certain centre of influence, but also denied states the right to implement a national information policy—in fact, denied them sovereignty of the information sphere. If there is no state, there is no sovereignty to speak of.

The liberalisation of the media in Africa in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the declared “victory of the West,” caused dramatic changes in society and led to the collapse of public broadcasting in many countries. Social and ideological uncertainties and financial difficulties of African media coincided with the growing information globalisation, where national borders were no longer an obstacle for information flows. Despite the efforts of previous decades, the asymmetrical flow of information and cultural products between the West and the Global South was increasing, and Western countries were actively broadcasting their worldview, system of values, and ideology.

A distinctive feature of the 1990s was the absence of its own ‘African’ topics in the African media. Africa was poorly represented on radio and television, with audiences receiving analyses of the situation in their own country from Western media. Television channels were filled with cheap entertainment content promoting Western lifestyles and values.

In time, the mainstream Western media—*CNN*, *DW-Radio*, *Radio France International*, *BBC Africa*, *Voice of America*, etc.—have begun to set up their own regional, African divisions (e.g., in Tanzania using Swahili), as well as contracting with local media to publish their own content or allocate broadcasting time. According to Tanzanian scholar Samson Malekela, “*Through the radio, television and the internet*,

²⁰ Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty. General Assembly resolution 2131 (XX). 21 December 1965. *UN*. https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/ga_2131-xx/ga_2131-xx.html (accessed: 05.08.2024)

²¹ Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Resolution 1514 (XV) GA UN. 14 December 1960. *UN*. <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/dicc/dicc.html> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

varied information is accessed by Africans, which changes their attitude and behavior, hence affecting their life system to fit into the neocolonial one."²²

The constant introduction of new technologies has not led to fairer cultural and informational exchange but has created new forms of dependency and inequality. Today, the Internet is the main tool for the spreading of ideas, opinions, and different knowledge systems. Ideas and images of communities are promoted through the Internet, thus maintaining the power structures of the global world order, and communication platforms are never free from ideological influence.

Mobile platforms are also dependent on their owners, and the headquarters of the top five multinational communications companies are in the US²³ [Degterev 2022: 359–366, Griбанова Usacheva 2021: 177–178]. Social media communication is done through servers in the US, Europe, or Bahrain, and this is essentially not much different from the old media that communicated through former metropolises, now joined by the US.

Neocolonialism as a contemporary form of domination manifests itself in a variety of dimensions. As such, it is mediated through various media platforms, including mainstream media—television, radio, print and digital media platforms. Today, social media are also central to the promotion of the neo-colonial agenda.

Zelalem Teferra, Professor of Sociology (Ethiopia), identified the main neo-colonial practices in the information sphere, which are, first of all, the dominant cultural narratives and values ("*a sugar-coated poison*"), and by coincidence "*they reflect the interests and perspectives of the former colonial powers. The dominant global culture they promote in its turn obviously leads to marginalization or the erasure of indigenous cultures, languages, traditions, and ways of life, reinforcing a sense of inferiority in colonized societies.*"²⁴. Those are precisely the same phenomena that were unsuccessfully attempted to be combated in the 1970s and 1980s. Besides, "mass media can serve as a conduit for promoting consumerism, capitalist values, and economic dependency on powerful nations or corporations. Neocolonial powers often use media platforms to shape consumption patterns, propagate Western products and lifestyles, and maintain economic control over the developing world."²⁵ This is how economic dominance is exercised and maintained with the help of the information and cultural sphere.

The dominance of Western narratives persists in the African information space, often operating with ideas of development, progress, modernisation, international cooperation, human potential but resulting in priority being given to the interests of the dominant powers, thus perpetuating the neo-colonial agenda, cementing inequality and power imbalances.

African researchers are actively reflecting on the possibilities of decolonising the media and the information and cultural sphere in general. But there is little theoretical development, or it is not relevant or sufficiently related to the local situation. Among the

²² Cited in: Usacheva V. Paradise of lies: How the West manipulates Africa through neocolonial media. *RT*. 12.05.2024. <https://www.rt.com/africa/597218-african-media-west-control/> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

²³ The Big Five, BigTech, or GAMAM, refers to the five tech giants—Google, Amazon, Meta (recognised as extremist and banned in Russia), Apple, and Microsoft—who are driving significant change in society through their own dominance in the world of online activity.

²⁴ Cited in: Usacheva V. Paradise of lies: How the West manipulates Africa through neocolonial media. *RT*. 12.05.2024. <https://www.rt.com/africa/597218-african-media-west-control/> (accessed: 05.08.2024)

²⁵ *Ibid.*

early works of African researchers, who have tried to offer an alternative perspective, are the studies of Francis B. Nyamnjoh “*Africa’s Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*” [Nyamnjoh 2005] and Kwasi Ansu-Kyeremeh’s “*Indigenous Communication in Africa: Concept, Applications, and Prospects.*” [Ansu-Kyeremeh 2005]. Although theoretical understandings of African media are changing, researchers have noted the continuing problem of the dominance of media theory inherited from discourses of modernisation and liberal democracy [Ebo 1994]. This is in spite of the already obvious unsuitability of such theories for the reality of journalists and media practitioners in the African context [Wasserman 2010].

The well-known South African scholar G. Berger warns against “borrowing concepts such as media and democracy from Western contexts and thoughtlessly applying them to Africa” [Berger 2002], noting that it is necessary to explain what has happened in African theory and practice rather than what, from the perspective of Western scholars, should be but has not worked out [Berger 2002]. Another famous media researcher from South Africa, K. Tomaselli, stresses that it is necessary to take into account the difference in approaches between Western centres of knowledge production and the so-called peripheries, including Africa [Tomaselli 2009].

Awareness of the need for decolonisation in African society is now encountering a blurring of the very notion of colonialism; it is being replaced by the notion of coloniality [Tlostanova, Mignolo 2009], and then the logic of coloniality is attributed to China, Russia, and other countries. It becomes extremely political and technological, useful in the global geopolitical confrontation to fight competitors and opponents. Thus, the image of the real colonisers is blurred for African countries [Fituni, Abramova 2020; Degterev 2023].

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The information sector in African countries, despite the differences between them, faces similar problems and challenges. On the one hand, modern media should not undermine the values of their own society and the state; on the other hand, their transformation into an instrument of nation-building can lead to serving a particular regime, even a leader, which is difficult to reconcile with the social role of information in society. Overcoming neo-colonialism requires broad information enlightenment, diversification of the media, development of own languages and media platforms, including grassroots and local ones, promotion of own narratives, even if they challenge the dominant ones. A great deal of attention needs to be paid to educational programmes, while keeping in mind that educational programmes offered by the West are usually a variant of indoctrination beneficial to the West.

The fight for sovereignty and resistance to neo-colonial pressures requires the political will of African leaders, elites, and society at large. The massive cultural and informational pressure exerted by Western countries on African audiences often backfires, especially if it conflicts with the cultural attitudes of African societies.

The history of the development of the information sphere in Africa is essentially the history of the struggle against colonialism, including all its new manifestations. The difficulties of this struggle are inherent in the very nature of the continent’s media, which

were created by the colonisers for their own purposes. The seventies of the last century were an example of a vivid, united struggle of developing countries, including African ones, for information equality. The collapse of the USSR and the bipolar world system led to the victory of Western countries in the global information sphere. Projects and endeavours were curtailed or reformatted so that the struggle for equal access to information became primarily a struggle against their own governments.

The liberalisation of the media in Africa coincided with the rise of globalisation and the establishment of a unipolar world. The desire of the state to control the media was clearly interpreted as authoritarianism. And while earlier states had a “monopoly on images,” such as the image of national unity, at the end of the 20th century all this became a matter of debate—sensitive issues of inter-religious, inter-ethnic, racial relations became the subject of discussion in the media. The issues of national unity and nation-building, state informational sovereignty were raised by governments and pro-government mass media, while public organisations, usually supported by international funds, and the opposition press more often spoke about the rights of certain groups, marginalised communities, and so on. Finding a balance between the social role of the media and the preservation of informational and cultural sovereignty is not an easy task in the modern world, not only for African countries.

The notion of “cultural sovereignty” in its Russian interpretation seems to us to be quite relevant for African countries as well, only instead of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values there is, naturally, talking about African ones. “Cultural sovereignty is a set of socio-cultural factors that allow the people and the state to form their identity, avoid socio-psychological and cultural dependence on external influence, be protected from destructive ideological and informational influence, preserve historical memory, and adhere to traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.”²⁶ Thus, the formation and strengthening of cultural and information sovereignty become one of the important functions of a modern sovereign state. It is possible that no state possesses the fullness of information sovereignty, but it is obvious that the level of cultural and information sovereignty varies from country to country.

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²⁶ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 25 January 2023 № 35 “On Amendments to the Fundamentals of the State Cultural Policy Approved by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 24 December 2014 № 808.” *GARANT*. <https://www.garant.ru/hotlaw/federal/1604954/> (accessed: 28.08.2024). Prior to the appearance of the Decree, in Russian political science, the issues of interpreting culture as a factor of Russia’s national security were also considered in a number of works [Malakhov 2011; Kostina 2015].

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АФРИКАНСКИЕ СТРАНЫ В ПОИСКАХ ИНФОРМАЦИОННОГО СУВЕРЕНИТЕТА: ПРОШЛОЕ И НАСТОЯЩЕЕ

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Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена проблеме информационного суверенитета, попыткам его обретения и поддержания на Африканском континенте. Наследие колониализма и неоколониальная политика бывших метрополий не позволяли африканским странам достичь информационной независимости, без которой невозможны государственная независимость и суверенитет. Новые независимые государства видели роль СМИ прежде всего в работе по созданию, укреплению и поддержанию национального единства, формированию национальной культурной идентичности, а также в борьбе с колониализмом.

В статье анализируются особенности формирования масс-медиа в Африке, основные направления деятельности СМИ после обретения независимости, влияние западных стран и транснациональных корпораций на культурно-информационную сферу Африканского континента. Особое внимание уделяется попыткам африканских стран добиться нового справедливого информационного порядка. Период либерализации информационного пространства в Африке привел к противоречивым результатам: борьба за свободу информации и насыщения СМИ национальным контентом приняла формы борьбы с внутривластным авторитаризмом. При этом проблема господства транснациональных информационных корпораций и их продукции отошла на второй план, затушевываясь. В этот период проявилась трансформация неоколониализма, который стал не только глобальным, но и лишил государства возможности проводить суверенную информационную политику.

В африканском информационном пространстве сохраняется доминирование западных нарративов, которые, оперируя тезисами развития, прогресса, модернизации, международного сотрудничества, человеческого потенциала, укрепления «демократических институтов» на самом деле пропагандируют интересы доминирующих держав, что способствует сохранению новой неоколониальной повестки дня, закреплению неравенства и дисбаланса сил.

Ключевые слова: Африка, средства массовой информации, информационный суверенитет, культурный суверенитет, информационный неоколониализм, империализм, Новый международный информационный порядок, антиколониальная борьба, деколонизация

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