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## THE NEW INFORMATION ORDER

by Barbara Harrell-Bond  
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**The debate on a "new information order" is concerned less with improving and extending technology than with the content of information, financial control, bias, ethics, problems of national security, and media responsibility to represent the public interest. The author reviews the controversy as it relates to Africa.**

"The power of the news media. Some of us didn't know it." Lt. Jerry Rawlings, the Ghanaian head of state, was talking with an Australian television team in Ghana in the second week of March 1982.

*It's a pity that there is not much time where we could actually sit down and exhaust this thing properly. Because this message has got to be gotten across to your people, you see. Situations are being misrepresented. This is the power of the so-called West. This is the power of the press.*

*To me it is a beautiful thing when I can show my fellow man a copy of Newsweek — when I start talking about how things are internationally related. There is a picture of Khadafi and the article is talking about him being the international terrorist. And you can open it and there is a passage that says that all over the world this is what he is doing here and there. And then there is Ghana and it says that Khadafi is supposed to be inciting some tribalist riot here.*

*And this man knows it is false. Then he sees the use to which Newsweek is put! But meanwhile there is no way that he or I, seeing that it is false, and knowing that the American newspapers are lying, there is no way that he or I have the chance to get out of Ghana and tell people outside that*

*what you are being told in Newsweek is false, that this is not happening in Ghana. See? This is the power of the news media.*

Several times during the interview the Australians asked Rawlings what Australia could do for Ghana.<sup>1</sup> He brought them back to the issue of the power of the press.

*For a start, you [journalists] are the ones who can do the most, actually, for us. Getting back [home] and re-representing properly what you have seen here. . . . Here you are, interviewing me and I am only telling you my version of it, as if I am supposed to be the [only] medium of expression. Why should my word be authoritative? As a matter of fact, yours can be even more authoritative than mine!*

In these few sentences, Jerry Rawlings, in his characteristic style, went straight to the heart of the issues that have produced the demand for a "new information order."

This report examines that demand — promoted by a majority of the members of the United Nations through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) — from the perspective of the "Third World," especially African states. It acknowledges the common beliefs that a free flow of information exists in the West, that the United States in particular has the freest press in the world, and that most African governments control and censor their press. These assumptions underlie the thinking of those who challenge UNESCO's efforts to achieve a more balanced flow of information.

The topic is complex and controversial, and cannot be covered adequately in this brief Report. The debate raises profound issues con-

cerning the relationship between the state (or those who hold political power) and the media. The problems that exist will not be solved simply by improving and extending technology, however. The United Nations has proclaimed 1983 World Communications Year, with the aim of establishing a fully-integrated global network, emphasizing technology. My objective in this *Report* is to bring attention to equally or more important questions, such as the content of information, financial control, bias, ethics, problems of national security, and the responsibility of the media to represent public interest. Without discussion of these more difficult, nontechnical issues, there is little likelihood of progress despite UNESCO's efforts.

### What's Wrong with the "Old" Order?

The current debate has its roots in the original United Nations Charter, which proclaimed the right to the free exchange of information. The first conference on the freedom of information, held in Geneva in 1948, identified the need for "re-establishing the world's equilibrium" in the circulation of information. (Some critics have pointed out the difficulty of re-establishing something that never existed.) In 1948 most of those countries now concerned with establishing a new information order were themselves dependent territories, subject to the control of the "big powers" and, as such, not participants in the debate. As their circumstances changed, however, concern and participation grew, so that the "debate" is now a "campaign."

Those who lead the campaign make two fundamental criticisms of the existing system. First, they argue, there is a gross imbalance of news reporting, with the affairs of the Third World receiving little attention in the international press. Second, the news that is disseminated is collected by reporters who are often ignorant of the achievements of Third World countries, and give disproportionate emphasis to their problems, especially political instability. Decisions about what constitutes "news" are made on the basis of criteria set by the Western press and interpreted according to its values.

Responsibility for the formal campaign for a new information order is now lodged with UNESCO. For a long time, UNESCO's activities were confined to helping member nations fight illiteracy, improve communica-

tions networks, and encourage educational development. Then, in 1976, at a general conference in Nairobi, UNESCO commissioned the International Association for Mass Communications Research to study foreign news presentation. As evidence of the Western monopoly of international communications mounted, the demands of the non-aligned states for change became more specific. Recognizing that they represented two-thirds of the world's population, they tried to assume the right to affect policy which this majority position within UNESCO should have allowed them. Suddenly UNESCO was thrust into the center of an increasingly heated debate. Then, in 1980, it published a study entitled *Many Voices, One World: Towards a New, More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, which evoked still more widespread criticism. According to a commentator in West Africa, UNESCO "ought to be the least controversial agency in the UN system. Yet in recent years UNESCO has become the most politicized of the UN agencies in the important sense that it has encouraged governments to assert their power in the perennially sensitive area of news. But it is being destroyed by schism over a single issue: the right of ordinary people to learn what they can of the world without the interference of their political masters."<sup>2</sup> While admitting that the "right to learn" is a vague concept and that access to news is always an "imperfect thing," the author nevertheless advises UNESCO to concentrate its efforts where they belong: eradicating illiteracy, providing access to radios, improving physical communications, and training journalists. One could cite hundreds of similar articles admonishing UNESCO to refocus the organization's activities on the "right" track.

### The News Monopoly

One must agree with Mario de Andrade, Commissioner of Information and Culture in Guinea-Bissau, that information might be "a right, but it has been over a long period of time and still is, an *industry* exercised by the big international agencies who distribute the news they have both collected and selected."<sup>3</sup>

The "big four" among the international news services are the United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence

France Presse (AFP). AFP receives state subsidies and is thus always identified as the voice of the French government. Tass, the Soviet agency, is supported completely by the state. Reuters and UPI began as private initiatives along with the rise of European and later American industrialism. AP is a cooperative, nonprofit membership corporation. The power of these agencies to determine the content of information which is disseminated throughout the world is hard to overestimate.

Over 90 percent of the foreign news printed by the world's newspapers is supplied by AP, UPI, AFP and Reuters.

*The Third World, which represents over two-thirds of the world population and area, accounts for only 25% of reports from the four agencies. Since these agencies are based in the West, the major part of their news package is about events in the industrialized countries. . . . Running against the fast current of this broad river of news from the West is a trickle of information from the Third World which barely manages to reach the doors of the readers in New York, London or Paris. This counterflow from the developing countries is also controlled by the "big four." The exchange of news between the West and Asia is typical of the imbalance. AP sends out from New York to Asia an average of 90,000 words daily. In return, AP takes in 19,000 words, either from its correspondents or from the national news agencies of Asia. Reuters and UPI also send out four or five times more than they take from that continent.<sup>4</sup>*

This staggering imbalance is also reflected in the postings of correspondents: 62 percent are based in the United States and Europe, with only 17 percent in Asia and Australia, 11 percent in Latin America, 6 percent in the Middle East, and 4 percent in Africa. Typically, a reporter posted to Delhi might be expected to cover events from Kabul to Rangoon, an area of five-and-a-half million square kilometres.

AP, the largest of the news agencies, was created in 1848 by six New York newspapers. Today it sends out 17 million words daily. Its expansion accompanied that of American economic power, after the Second World War, to Europe, Latin America, and the Far East. Ironically, in its early fight to break the monopoly power of Reuters, the Executive Manager of AP

once accused this British agency of "denigrating the U.S. in reporting American news to the world."

Agence France Presse has a network spread over 167 countries. Reuters, having the highest income among the "big four," gets more than 80 percent of its income from foreign subscribers. The economic imbalances between the North and the South are certainly a factor in the unequal exchange of information, and at least one commentator went so far as to say that a new global economic order is a precondition for change in the information order. Indeed, to a certain extent, the campaign for a new information order has been side-tracked by the question of how to get the funds to bring it about.

In 1980, UNESCO appointed the McBride Commission to study the South-North communications problems. Its findings were reported and debated at a seminar sponsored by the World Federation of United Nations Associations held in Geneva in 1981. Emphasizing the need to "strengthen independence and self-reliance, to eradicate illiteracy and improve educational systems," the report recommended the use of sophisticated technologies such as satellite transmission, simultaneous interpretation, and automated translation facilities for crosscultural transmission, as well as preferential tariffs to favor poor nations. One member of the McBride Commission observed that the massive financial investment implied in the recommendations meant that the task would take several decades to effect.

In January 1982, representatives of 35 nations met at a second UNESCO-sponsored conference, to consider the development of news and information programs. The participants focused their attention on 54 projects which, had they been approved, would have cost \$80 million. All were proposed for funding by the International Programme for Development of Communications (IPDC), created in 1981 at the initiative of the United States, which "hoped to guide the debate on a 'new world information order' away from perceived efforts to control the press and towards such projects as training journalists and providing communications equipment."<sup>5</sup>

The United States declined to contribute directly to a central fund which would be under UNESCO control, arguing that many of the projects involved government control of news



*This photograph of Jerry Rawlings was taken while he was expounding on the power of the media. Even the choice of photographs can be used to influence people's view of leaders. Compare this pose with most press photographs, in which he is always shown in uniform, gesturing aggressively or scowling, suggesting a despotic, militaristic leader. (Photo: Barbara Harrell-Bond)*

agencies and the U.S. would not support any program that encouraged state control of the media. This argument was countered by a reminder from the Venezuelan representative that the principal responsibility for the development of communications belongs, after all, to states. Heavily criticized for its "frugality," the U.S. gave only \$100,000 to a communications project to be implemented by the US Agency for International Development (AID). Mr. William Harley, the representative from the U.S. State Department, pointed out that "what we hope from this meeting is appropriate recognition of the role of the private sector within the program." The Indian representative, Mr. Rasgotra, made an apt rejoinder. Pointing out that the developing nations had no objection to receiving private sector assistance, he added, "the developing countries should not become the dumping ground for discarded, obsolescent junk."

Efforts to get sufficient contributions from other member nations were undermined by the critics who "do not trust UNESCO enough to put money into a central fund for that purpose." Only about a tenth of the proposed costs were collected, and the meeting ended with a "modest first-year budget of £481,000."<sup>6</sup> Objecting to the fact that the Third World governments wanted the money to be contributed to a central fund because it was believed that this would invite government ownership and control of the press, some Western governments promised to *consider* direct funding to specific promising ventures. Mark August, editor of the *New African*, regarded this as an excuse and simply a delaying tactic: "I don't think that they want to pay. And if they want to pay, let them prove us wrong."<sup>7</sup> He believes that the West is actively blocking the creation of a new information order which it sees, mistakenly in his view, as against its interests.

## The Attack on the New World Information Order

Opposition from the United States was based on the argument for freedom of the press. As the U.S. State Department explained, for some of the more radical advocates of the new information order, "the remedy is to restrict the free international flow of information, particularly by curbing the power of the multinational news agencies. Specifically, they seek to license journalists, impose international codes of journalistic ethics, inhibit advertising, and extend government control over the press." Americans were warned, "the Soviets assiduously support all of these proposals for restricting press freedom." However, the State Department noted, not all developing countries are so unreasonable. While they recognize the gaps in information and communication capacity as real, "they seek cooperation with the developed countries, not confrontation."<sup>8</sup>

Others charged that, while UNESCO officials might claim their support for a new information order is "wholly benign," the entire program implies state involvement in the content of news and in the activities of journalists, and this has "brought UNESCO into sharp conflict with the Western democracies." The danger is camouflaged:

*Buried in impenetrable bureaucratic calculated to make the world look the other way, proposals have been surfacing at UNESCO for international codes to regulate the press. . . . The essence of all the proposals is that governments have the right to sit in judgement over what the press reports.*<sup>9</sup>

In May 1981, some 75 journalists and news executives from 24 countries met at Talloires, France. After three days of discussion, they issued a declaration urging UNESCO to abandon its attempts at regulating the press. The meeting was sponsored by the World Press Freedom Committee, headed by a United States newspaper publisher and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. The atmosphere at the meeting is captured in the report in the *Times* of London:

*Throughout the . . . conference, representatives of free news organizations attacked the whole idea as a politically-motivated attempt by the Soviet bloc and its Third World allies to legitimize government control of information and undermine interna-*

*tional respect for Western Press freedom. They also took a strong stand against many specific features of the proposed information order.*

*They opposed plans for UNESCO to license journalists by issuing them special identity cards, an idea they said was inconsistent with a free press, and opposed calls for UNESCO to draw up an international code of ethics, saying that such codes should be formulated only by the press itself and must be voluntary.*<sup>10</sup>

The meeting split, however, over a call led by Mr. Murray Gart, editor of the *Washington Star*, for representatives to put pressure on their governments to withdraw from UNESCO if it continued with its plan for a new information order along the present lines. Suggesting the contradiction in such a minority position, representatives of Third World and European news organizations said they could not support such a call for governments to withdraw from a world body just because its decisions, supported by the majority of its members, did not please those governments.

The *Times* report noted that representatives of the International Federation of Journalists had declined to attend. The IFJ represents most European journalists' unions and has taken an ambiguous stand on the new world information order because many of its Scandinavian and Dutch members tend to sympathize with it.

Since the very news monopoly which was itself under scrutiny was also reporting on the debates, it became increasingly difficult for the proponents of the new order to get their points across in the press. UNESCO's Director-General, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, a Senegalese, pointed out that it was the Western press itself which was arousing suspicions of UNESCO's intentions and that the reporting of UNESCO's activities had "verged on madness and had 'traumatised' Western governments."<sup>11</sup> Because major news agencies carried only attacks on the UNESCO plan and made no attempt to present the majority view of the member nations, a special fund was set up to pay newspapers to print the other side of the story. *Le Monde*, which printed UNESCO's position, declared that it had not accepted payment for doing so and charged that part of the Western press, particularly in the United States, was actively preventing the United Nations from helping Third World countries to publicize their opinion.

Given the many examples of Third World governments which do not tolerate a critical press and the number of cases of harassment, imprisonment, and expulsion of journalists, it should not be surprising that many writers from such countries joined the chorus of protest against the new information order. Bankole Timothy, a Ghanaian journalist expelled by the Nkrumah regime, set the tone. He claimed that the proposed charter for the new information order was being instigated by a group of Third World countries which maintain that "operators in the news media should submit themselves to dictatorial instructions from governments regarding the type and content of the news which should be published." He went on to comment more flamboyantly: "What a travesty of the concept of freedom of information and the professionalism of mass communicators! . . . Is UNESCO assuming the role of purveyor of cultural imperialism and political domination?"<sup>12</sup>

Like Bankole Timothy, few addressed the fundamental problems that prompted the demand for a new information order. Even reports like that in the *Sunday Times* subtly alert the reader to the politics of the constituency supporting the new order and to the extreme nature of its accusations:

*A foretaste of the charter's content emerged from last year's Baghdad Declaration when a conference of non-aligned countries' governments set out principles on which the new order might be based. It stressed non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and the right of every nation to protect its sovereignty. The declaration also called for resistance to "the distribution of false or distorted information" which could harm a country's interests or "jeopardise friendly relations between states." And it demanded the press should actively promote a series of political causes such as "the fight against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism (including Zionism), apartheid, and all forms of foreign aggression. . . ."*<sup>13</sup>

In December 1982, Mr. Amadou Mahtar M'Bow again attacked the Western press, especially in the United States and Britain, for what he described as a deliberate and "tendentious" campaign against UNESCO:

*In a certain number of countries there has been a tendentious and erroneous interpretation of what UNESCO does. What is more serious is*

*that, under the pretext of freedom of information which I respect, these member states have never explained the tendentious character of some of this information . . . and have never deigned to publish corrections made by UNESCO.*

He went on to announce his plan to set up a special study of the way the matter had been covered by the news media. "If the information media have the freedom to say what they like, then others have the right to judge what they say . . . without such freedom of judgement there would be a monopolistic and dictatorial system of news dissemination, devoid of true liberty."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Allegations: The Misrepresentation of Africa and Africans**

The issues that have given rise to the demand for a new world information order go considerably beyond the attack on the present Western monopoly of information or even the lack of finance to buy the technology to break it. They stem from a deep awareness of the capacity of various media to shape the thinking of their audiences. This *Report* examines those issues from the perspective of Africa.

The problems of reporting on Africa are immense. They begin with the fact that Western journalists have grown up in societies that hold remarkably consistent assumptions concerning Africa and Africans. These images — or stereotypes — are carried, perhaps unconsciously, along with notebook and pen, and directly influence news-gathering and writing. Very few journalists have, or make, the opportunity to learn enough to change these images. In *The Image of Africa*, Philip Curtin points out that "It has not usually been thought relevant or useful to consider anything so broad as the national 'image' one people may hold of another." Yet he shows how the unstated ideas and assumptions that were held with remarkable consistency throughout the period of British imperialism led to the policies that emerged. "Racism . . . colored British attitudes toward other peoples across the whole spectrum of thought, from the theory of history at one end to explicit provisions for African education at the other." His aim in writing this work was to show how early origins of the image of Africa illuminate present relations between Africa and the West.<sup>15</sup>

Examples of the influence of racism on the news accounts from Africa abound, although in recent years some of the worst excesses have been moderated. Still, the main thrust of information about Africa carried by the Western media is on the sensational. As Mark August put it in his interview with Michael Cader, ". . . unless it is a man-bites-dog type of story, the news cartels are not interested. They are interested in coups, which country is doing badly, which despotic leader has killed how many of his people. That's the sort of thing they're looking for. The positive stories don't get covered."

In a letter to the *Sunday Times*, written in response to an editorial entitled "Dark Continent," Dr. Alastair Niven, Director General of the Africa Centre in London, speaks for many Africans when he says,

*Your editorial on Africa [last week] is full of dismal judgements and contains not a word of confidence in the massive attainments of many parts of that continent in recent years. Worst of all, you allocate all the blame for the problems of Africa to Africans and none at all to the pressures imposed upon it from outside.*

*Last week saw the publication of the 1982 report of the UN Conference on Trade and Development which specifically links the economic crisis of the Third World with the deflationary obsession of Western governments. How then can you argue that "there is . . . not much that non-Africans can contribute" to bettering the conditions of Africa?*

*If they had the will to do so, the industrialized nations could contribute more aid, give preferential interest rates to Third World government borrowing and accept some portion of moral responsibility for the situation you describe in your Editorial. There is not much hope of this happening, but at least the intelligent press in this country could try to be more constructive about Africa's difficulties.*

*You could start by avoiding emotive headings such as "Dark Continent." And why not try writing your next Editorial on Africa without mentioning Amin or Bakassa? Thousands of Africans have contributed to the progress of man, but their names are unknown in the West, partly because you do not report their achievements.*

*Why must your touchstones whenever Africa is mentioned be failure and brutality? Perhaps you could take your tune from the more optimis-*

*tic note of the new World Bank report on developing countries to see that an analysis of contemporary Africa need not be all doom and disaster.*<sup>16</sup>

There is danger, too, in over-compensation. Xan Smiley, best known as the former editor of *Africa Confidential*, accuses the Western press of being too sympathetic to Africa in its press coverage. He writes:

*It is probably true that the run-of-the-mill mass-circulation papers in the United States and Europe are not as interested as they might be in the building of dams, the eradication of illiteracy and the glories of anti-malaria schemes. Their readers prefer to have their racist prejudices confirmed by gory tales of Emperor Bokassa's cannibalism, or by the threat, jocular if macabre, of the Liberian ruler, Samuel Doe, to shoot his national football team if it loses its match. This is unfair to Africa. The serious press, on the other hand, bends over backward to see the black point of view, and this, paradoxically, is also unfair to Africa.*<sup>17</sup>

He goes on to point out how heavy self-censorship is a standard feature of reporting — if a reporter has any hope of returning to the country:

*If he wants to show — as most Western whites do — that he sympathizes with the blacks whom his ancestors have oppressed, then he may fudge so much that he becomes a liar. For example, examining the "underlying causes" of the continent's malaise, a reporter will assign them to anything or anybody except the Africans themselves. . . . Above all, if he is to survive in respectable, journalistic circles, he must paint over the rank incompetence, cruelty, and corruption of the new elites — be they right-wing or left-wing — and ignore the amorality and inertia among the ordinary people.*

Smiley, who is now reporting on eastern Europe, concludes his overview of the problems of the continent by returning to the role of the journalist who, he says, "through a remorseless determination to wear the fixed, understanding smile, to see the 'underlying causes' of the African malaise . . . becomes unintentionally racist":

*We Western reporters have allowed Africans to play by different rules when it suits them while heaping moral anger and ridicule upon white supremacists for their scarcely unusual desire to assert their own tribal dominance. By trying too hard to be fair to the blacks, the Observer and*

countless other benign voices further insult Africa. Positive discrimination is, after all, discrimination. If we want Africans to be treated as equals, it is time we judged and damned them as equals.

Echoing Curtin, journalist Andrew Torchia comments on the ignorance of Africa:

*Most foreign correspondents, in my experience, arrive unprepared for Africa. I certainly did. We may lack language skills. We almost certainly lack a relevant cultural background. It may take us two or three years to make one swing around our beat, particularly if we are covering all fifty African countries. By the time we begin to understand a little of what is going on, we are exhausted, frustrated, and probably about to be reassigned out of Africa.*<sup>18</sup>

Referring to the enormous differences between the life of a nomadic woman who has to walk 30 kilometers to collect her family's supply of water and the experience of his Western readers, he poses the question of how a sense of the realities of African life can be conveyed:

*Is the West, or the East, ready to understand that many Africans truly wish both superpowers would just go away and take any trace of the cold war with them? If you write that, does your story have as much impact on readers as a rival story, written not from the African but the foreign point of view, that begins, dramatically: "The United States moved today to counter Soviet influence in eastern Africa by sending in . . .?"*

Aware of the enormous economic and political problems that grip Africa today, he comments that "Reporters are going to need all their professional skills to tell this story." In contrast to Xan Smiley's message, which concluded with the rather preposterous statement that "sensible journalists are learning to keep out of Africa," Torchia calls journalists to "a special kind of unspoken sympathy and receptivity":

*This commitment need not impair objectivity. It simply involves an effort to overcome the barriers to understanding that, after all, make us correspondents so foreign. Meanwhile, it probably behooves us to approach our jobs humbly. Anybody who thinks he is reporting more than a fraction of what is reportable on this immense and turbulent continent is kidding himself.*

### The Media and the Destabilization of African States

The complaints against the Western-dominated media by the majority members of UNESCO go far beyond the pervasive racist tone of much reporting or even the tendency for the news to concentrate on gory deaths, riots, and the personal scandals of leaders. The growing body of evidence of deliberate use of the media to destabilize certain regimes has created enormous suspicion and hostility among the leaders of the Third World. In a discussion of this problem, the *New Internationalist* notes that:

*Even the language used in reports is heavily loaded in favour of the Western establishment. Guerrillas fighting racist regimes in Africa or military dictatorships in Latin America are described as "terrorists." Not till the last years of the war in Vietnam did the Western news agencies explain that the National Liberation Front enjoyed widespread popularity, and was fighting what the Vietnamese people considered an occupying army. Likewise, the names of many independent-minded nationalist leaders of the Third World — like Mossadeq or Allende — are invariably prefixed by terms like "Leftist" or "Marxist," but a Reagan or a Pinochet is hardly described as a "Rightist" or "capitalist." The effects of the constant use of terminology should not be underrated. It tends to reinforce stereotypes that have been built up over generations — the Far East as an area constantly ablaze with revolts and carnage; the Middle East seething with Sheikhs and their harems and Africa teeming with strange animals prowling through the jungle. Such a bias moulds public opinion to the point where Western military intervention in Vietnam or El Salvador is made quite acceptable.*<sup>19</sup>

The editorial goes on to point out that news about the Third World is often tailored to create the sense that the threat is from without. When the Third World bauxite producers held a meeting, according to the *New Internationalist*, the UPI report added the provocative line, "Some experts feel this could be the first step in the establishment of a series of international cartels for controlling raw materials essential to the industrialized nations, which could set the United States' economy back more than 40 years."

Others have noted a consistent right-wing bias in the Western media coverage of African affairs. The at-

tempted overthrow of the Gambian government in 1981 is a prime example. Because the image of Sir Dawda Jawara had been built up over the years as the best example in Africa of a democratic leader, it was impossible for journalists to appreciate the significance of events in the country for at least the three years prior to the coup attempt. The government had become increasingly corrupt and oppressive and had most definitely lost its base of support — not only among the uneducated peasant population but also among the educated elites. The failure of journalists to report on this deteriorating situation left the uninformed Western reading public ready to support British military intervention in the uprising (not to mention that of the French/Senegal invasion). No journalist seemed the least concerned with the ethics of outsiders moving in to protect not just Mrs. Jawara but the combined interests of British Caledonian Airways and the hoteliers. Chris Dunton, writing in *West Africa*, described the reportage and its failures:

*It is now axiomatic that Africa affairs are newsworthy only if they are sensational — doubly newsworthy if British citizens are involved. So with the Gambian crisis. When the Daily Express devoted half its front page to the coup, under the banner heading "Maggie Orders SAS to Rescue," The Gambia seemed to retreat reassuringly beneath a protective British umbrella (and its President proved duly grateful: "In his capital of Banjul . . . Sir Dawda Jawada [sic] hugged his baby son and said 'I'm very relieved and happy'"). The paper's editorial exulted over this British achievement ("who needs James Bond and 'M' when we've got the SAS?"). The following day a party of British tourists joined the heroes as the Mail devoted three-quarters of a page to its hotel-siege story, juxtaposing a tempting photo of the pool in a Banjul hotel and an excerpt from a tourist guide with the headline "It was like Toxteth . . . utter destruction" (or like Railton Road — riot in Banjul instigated by blacks, mainly coloured . . .). Both papers were concerned only to boost the patriotic pride of their readership: neither showed the slightest concern with the background to the coup, nor with its implications for the political future of The Gambia.*<sup>20</sup>

Nor was any reader treated to the inside information that for a very long time the imposed union of Senegal and Gambia had been on the cards as



far as Western (particularly French and United States') interests were concerned. The United States had plans to build an embassy in the Gambia that would be one of its largest in West Africa. It was rumored that all the intelligence operations and communications monitoring activities, now located in Monrovia, were to be moved to Banjul. The establishment of a Senegambia has proceeded, despite the wishes of the Gambians.

An alleged Soviet threat is a most common excuse for military intervention in Africa. In the case of the Gambian coup attempt, the effort to drag the Soviets into the picture was transparent. The newspapers reported (in Senegal) that the coup-makers were using Soviet arms. Not actually very surprising since they obtained their arms from the government's own armory and, five years earlier, the Gambia had purchased arms from the Soviets. There was also a report that the Soviets had landed a supply of vehicles. Again, the reality was that a Lebanese businessman had imported some Lada cars which had arrived just before the coup.

South Africa has been highly successful in using the press to justify to its Western allies the necessity for its military build-up and intervention in southern Africa on the grounds of the Soviet ambitions in the region. The Soviet threat has been used to confuse those who might understand that South Africa is involved in a last-ditch attempt to protect its racist apartheid policy. In the same article in *West Africa*, Chris Dunton analyzes how this conservative bias works at a number of levels "in selecting news items for publication, in determining which aspects of an event should be emphasized, [and] in controlling the language in which an article is couched."

*In reporting the Angolan crisis, all three papers again displayed selective coverage. Here the emphasis was placed very firmly on the Soviet threat, with a flurry of front-page headlines following the capture of Soviet army officers. The Mail was critical of Lord Carrington's condemnation of South Africa ("The American government was wiser") — later, it praised Edward Heath for his boldness in criticising apartheid, but largely on account of his realism in acknowledging the threat of Soviet influence (an aspect of his speech that was appreciated also by Pik Botha, the South African Foreign Minister).*

Language, as Dunton points out,

is all-important. The reader is carried along by careful modulation of style and, of course, the persuasiveness of the article is entirely predictable. Such writing depends on a sympathetic reader's response, and is designed to nurture a pre-existing viewpoint.

Anomalies do arise. Dunton gives an example from the *Express* which carried an article by Max Hastings on South Africa, which he describes as "a well-written and uncompromising attack on apartheid." However, the paper published, side-by-side with this article, a cartoon on the Angolan crisis "that was breathtaking in its offensiveness: the black African dictator depicted with horns and hooves and a forked tail, the UN depicted as a donkey on a cloud and the Angolan troops as a pack of runty goliwogs with hammer-and-sickle insignia printed on their shirts (the South African army, meanwhile, comes out looking stern but handsome)." Dunton concludes his analysis by referring to the movement toward a new information order:

*Efforts are now underway to reform the system by which news of Third World events is disseminated — an enterprise of UNESCO's that has been heavily criticised in the West. The usefulness of this project isn't compromised by the recognition of a separate problem — the editorial bias defined above. It is, though, salutary to remain aware of the way in which news is determined by editorial policy, and to recognise that in the middle-market British press there is a very firmly entrenched approach to black affairs, identifiable in every aspect of the selection and presentation of news copy. A move towards a realistic and unbiased approach to these affairs might well be hampered by the possibility that the readers of papers like the Mail and Express have come dangerously close to being ineducable.*

The editor of this issue of *West Africa* added a note to Dunton's article which quoted the Lord Scarman report on the race riots in Brixton: he recommended that "the media should pay attention to 'their awesome power to influence the minds, the attitudes and the behaviour' of society."

African leaders too have utilized the notion that "the enemy is without" to justify repression in their own countries. The Khadafi "bogey" is a case in point. The alleged Libyan threat continues to be manipulated in the Sudan where the United States has plans to establish four military bases, two of

them positioned to counter the "Soviet" threat from Ethiopia, and in Kenya where military bases have already been established. When, as in Kenya, opposition toward an increasingly oppressive government becomes more vocal, African leaders take advantage of the consensus opinion in the West regarding such threats from the Soviets or others to get more arms or military support. Sometimes these efforts are so hollow as to be laughable. In the early summer 1982, for example, Kenyan newspapers claimed that explosive devices had been found — origin Tripoli, destination the American Club in Khartoum. One wonders if the package was addressed!

It cannot be denied that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are a source of arms in Africa for both genuine liberation movements and opposition groups that have no popular base of support in their countries. But the problem for any group of people who seek a change of government is that the only method that appears open to them is the use of force. This is so even in supposedly "democratic" countries such as Kenya or the Gambia. Where the government is supported by Western interests, as in these two cases, the problem of where to find arms is obvious. As one refugee from Uganda put it, "Where in the world can we find a country to support us?" Appreciating the dangers of all the alliances required to secure military assistance, his group was dismayed to realize that they were forced to resort to either the "Eastern" or the "Western" blocks for help. Despite the association of Libya with the Soviet Union, as espoused by the media, Libya is the only country viewed by many Africans as "unaligned." Amilcar Cabral was one of the few leaders of a liberation struggle who was able to obtain military assistance without falling into the embrace of either side, largely owing to support from the Swedish government, which consistently backed the struggle against the Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau.<sup>21</sup>

In his article, "The CIA and the Media: An Overview," Cyrille Fall reports on the findings of an American congressional subcommittee charged with investigating the activities of the CIA in the manipulation of news, especially in the Third World. He points out that while the role played by the CIA in the international press is not a surprise to those who observe the spy scene, "the revelations which emerged dur-

ing the testimony of ambassadors, journalists, and retired diplomats have cast new light on developments in the Third World."<sup>22</sup> These revelations explain to a very large extent the difficulties Western journalists have in getting into countries nowadays to report and the frequent experiences of detention, imprisonment, and harassment which occur. They also give some justification to the efforts by that majority of members of the United Nations who support the new information order with its aim to give member nations some control over the collection and dissemination of information from their countries. According to Fall, among the facts collected by the congressional subcommittee was the evidence that many correspondents of the U.S. press overseas were "paid agents of the CIA or instruments (conscious or unconscious) who furnished precise and often very useful information to the CIA station chiefs in various Third World capitals." Fall reports that one well-known writer, Cyrus Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, admitted to the committee that he had published an article under his name which was "entirely drafted by the CIA."

Fall says the Committee investigations revealed that "Several newspapers and press agencies having correspondents abroad were financed or entirely controlled by the CIA. . . . The number of newspapers, magazines, press agencies, radio stations and other news media entirely or partially financed by the Agency is estimated at more than 200." Books, too, had been "fabricated entirely by the CIA" and promoted and distributed to African, Middle Eastern, Asian and South American markets.

Perhaps more serious, Fall charges, is the regular input of fabricated news into the press service transmissions:

*The effort expended by the CIA to manipulate the news and mold public opinion have [sic] often succeeded in fooling not only the chancelleries but also the American diplomats themselves. At that point, a system was installed in all the American embassies to put them on guard against "black propaganda," that is, the propaganda manufactured by the CIA, generally through the intermediary of foreign newspapers or magazines financed by the Agency. Interrogated publicly by the congressional subcommittee about whether the CIA gave instructions to its journalist-agents on what they should write, former CIA director*

*William Colby answered without hesitation, according to the New York Times of January 2, "Oh, certainly. We do it all the time." . . . As for the [then] new CIA director, Admiral Turner, he has maintained all during the subcommittee debates the necessity of recruiting and utilizing foreign journalists, even while pointing out that he was committed to put an end to that practice in regard to American journalists and press people only.*

### Human Rights and the Media

Although on one hand, the Western media have been accused of emphasizing the brutal and the bloody in their reporting on Africa, there is also evidence of highly selective reporting on human rights violations in line with Western economic or strategic interests in particular regimes. Again, it is evident there are sometimes contradictions between official policies and particular biases in the news, as when Idi Amin was in power. While the British government was sorely embarrassed by its support for the rise of Amin, at the same time business interests continued to benefit under his rule. At one point, the BBC actually called special meetings of its lay constituencies to inform them that the government was attempting to interfere with their presentation of the news concerning Idi Amin's government.

There is, however, considerable evidence that reporters exaggerated the atrocities committed by the Amin government and in some cases published deliberate lies to discredit the regime. At the alleged massacre of students on the Makerere University campus, for instance, eye witnesses, including an American lecturer at the university, state that not one student lost his life, although soldiers forced them to march on their knees across the campus to humiliate them. Many Europeans who remained in Uganda during that period testify how such falsifications increased the level of violence.<sup>23</sup>

Mongo Beti, the Cameroonian novelist who lives in exile in France, has written about the hypocrisy of the manner in which human rights is treated by the French press. He asks if we should not have the right to expect the French to be "indignant about and to condemn equally each and every outrage against human dignity, whoever the victim and wherever the violence?" But, in fact, as he discovered, the "French are very unequally and, in

fact, very differently sensitive to the way human rights are violated across the world:"

*. . . there are two areas that stir the passions of the French when human rights are being flouted: Communist Europe and Latin America. . . . The newspapers . . . inveigh energetically against the sufferings inflicted on the militants involved in the fight for freedom in Poland, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union. Their editorials could not have been more belligerent when the Soviet tanks swept into Budapest in 1956 and into Prague twelve years later. When Jan Palach set himself alight in the main square of his city to give expression to his despair at seeing his country fall once more into slavery, I really thought the French, in their sympathy for the unfortunate Czechs, were bent on committing collective suicide themselves.<sup>24</sup>*

Contrasting the French press treatment of Africa with that of the Soviet "empire" or Latin America, he observes,

*There is nothing more admirable than the enthusiasm of the French on the subject of the violation of human rights in Latin America. Information on that part of the world abounds in France. . . . No massacre of Indian peasants in Guatemala escapes the vigilance of the commentators or writers of editorials. The dictatorships influenced or inspired by "Yankee imperialism" are analysed and virtually denounced.*

He compares the press treatment of communism in Eastern Europe, where it is denounced as the cruellest instrument of man's enslavement, with its treatment of leftist figures in Latin America where, for example, Che Guevara was regarded by the French press "as the Redeemer, practically on the same level as Christ." Yet, *the African living in France who reads or listens to the arguments of the defenders of human rights in Eastern Europe or Latin America remains unconvinced, realising to his astonishment and anger that these arguments are rarely applied to a third section of the globe . . . even though human rights are violated there with more regularity and greater cynicism than in any other part of the planet: the region in question is Africa, and more particularly what is known as Francophone Africa.*

When it comes to Africa, whatever the intellectual background, the media and the politicians are unan-



imous—but it is a unanimity of silence or indulgence.

Beti continues by examining the situation in the Cameroons, a country which was ruled for just over 20 years by a president who came to power with France's help.

*Commerce, industry and banking remain a French monopoly, and their language is the only one used in the highest spheres of communication. French technical assistants are to be found in all the ministries and behind the scenes of the Presidency. . . . You would expect that events in this country would not only be of immediate interest to the French media, but would also be reported according to their gravity. Yet, when four hundred Cameroonian peasants were massacred in a village during a raid by government troops, this crime warranted hardly a mention in the French press, and then only in the inside pages of the newspapers, and in the briefest terms.*

When, in 1972, Beti published his book, *Main Basse sur le Cameroun*, it was banned in France two days after it appeared. Deportation proceedings were begun against him and, as he puts it, "swarms of uniformed and plain-clothes policemen took to descending on my humble home."

*As for the Central African Republic, Bokassa had to exceed all acceptable bounds of horror in massacring dozens of children; the English-speaking and Scandinavian press had to express concern before some of the more Neronian excesses of this Francophone emperor — the personal friend of M. Giscard D'Estaing — began at last to filter into the French press.*

Beti explains how the French public is largely unaware of the violence that occurs in Francophone African states, and how, when such information does appear, a systematic attempt is made to develop philosophical arguments to justify the atrocities:

*Is it then that men are no longer all born free and equal? Not entirely, comes the reply — some people have never known anything other than authoritarian rule: they have therefore internalised this historical reality, in the course of time, in the shape of philosophical and religious systems which see the ruler as a transcendent or charismatic being. That great newspaper, Le Monde, is past master at this kind of rhetorical exercise, which would not pass in any other advanced country.*

*Besides, they continue in a voice of authority, the enjoyment of Western-type freedom is incompatible with the economic underdevelopment.*

As this Cameroonian writer-in-exile correctly points out, the kind of economic interests France holds in Africa would be jeopardized if the indigenous inhabitants did take it into their heads to discuss such matters openly:

*This is all there is to this about-face. All that matters is the protection of one's own interests. . . . The defence of human rights lends itself too readily to being adopted by the great powers, who then use it as a convenient rhetorical ploy to deceive public opinion. . . . In Francophone Africa . . . everything is done purely and simply to minimize or obscure the ravages of the dictators, with the intention of doing nothing which might compromise France's privileges or discredit the men who serve and support them.*

Beti concludes his essay by pointing out that,

*Genuine defence of human rights therefore demands the relentless denunciation of this hypocrisy and the ever-determined insistence that the greatest enemy of human rights is imperialism: that is, the usurpation of the vital resources of a weak people for the profit of a strong people, whatever the pretext.*

### The Power of the Media

Most media "consumers" in the United States and Western Europe have confidence that their countries' laws, conventions, or constitutional guarantees are sufficient to insure a free and independent press. When it is suggested that the media is vulnerable to outside control and influence, comfort is drawn from such examples as the exposures of Watergate or of U.S. brutalities in Vietnam. But for some observers, these are the exceptions. They warn that the freedom of the press is a right which may never be considered safe and requires constant vigilance.

E.P. Thompson, one of Britain's most eminent historians and a leader in the peace movement, reminds us that while broadcasting should be an open thoroughfare for the nation's opinions, over the years quite the opposite situation has arisen, partly, he says, as "a result of our amazing advances in technology. A large part of the popular press is bought, and some part of the public mind is bought with it."<sup>25</sup>

Thompson traces how, in the past, new ideas and opinions came from poets, artists, polemicists, dramatists, philosophers, and preachers, and "the means of communication which these intellectual craftsmen used didn't require vast capital to buy a newspaper or else access — by kind permission — to broadcasting media. The small printing press, the pulpit, the stage — these weren't beyond their reach." This area of culture — where opinions change and where new ideas and values arise — is, as Thompson puts it, the most sensitive, the most delicate, and the most significant of all our public life. He argues that today this "delicate innovative area of our culture" is more manipulated, more marginalized, and more threatened than for a long time. "New ideas do still arise, but they are either co-opted into a manipulated 'consensus' or they're pushed out into a margin of public life where people can still march around with banners in their hands — but their hands will never be permitted to touch the levers of power."

Pointing out how the media in Britain is hedged around with "D" notices, the Official Secrets Acts, and other means of political pressure and interference, he goes on to criticize them for failing to ask the right questions.

*What's generally appalling, on British telly — and on all channels — is not only the prejudicial handling of particular political issues, but also the definition of what "politics" is, and of who has the right to be in that set of frames.*

*They go on and on, in these frames, to the point of tedium, with the how questions only. How do we get inflation down? How should we cut up the defense budget? . . . A national "consensus" is assumed — but in fact is manufactured daily within these frames. . . .*

*For example, all political discourse must assume that we're agreed on the need for economic growth, and the only problem is to find the party which can best fix it. But across the world people are asking questions of why and where? Do we have the right to pollute this spinning planet any more? To consume and lay waste resources needed by future generations? Might not nil growth be better, if we could divide up the product more wisely and fairly?*

These questions cannot be asked because they are not "proper

political questions." This, Thompson says, is because of the "insufferable arrogance of the major political parties" who had the "audacity through parliamentary control of broadcasting to confiscate this part of the nation's intellectual life to themselves." He points out that if today there were a John Milton or a William Hazlitt on the scene who wanted to ask the *why* or *where* questions, "the managers of all the parties would gang up to keep them off." Today, the "alternative culture," this rich source of new ideas and values, is kept away from access to the media despite the fact that it has been the source of some of the most humane innovations in such areas as segregation, the rights of labor, of women, a free press.

In the United States there is a false sense of complacency because the media is privately, not government, owned. But how often do we ask the question: who does own the media? Private enterprise does not protect the public from the deliberate attempts to manipulate the thinking of a society through the media. Enormous investments are made to influence or determine the content of the news. Advertisers with substantial accounts, for example, can determine what information is excluded. Journalists have received gifts or money, as was demonstrated during the Iranian crisis when a list of journalists who had received gifts from the Shah was released. One, Barbara Walters, admitted having accepted a diamond-studded watch. Whether or not this compromised her objectivity can be debated, but as is clear from a detailed study by Edward Said, Americans in the absence of any other source of information concerning events in Iran (and the nature of Islam) were led by the media to believe enormous distortions of reality.<sup>26</sup>

The *Columbia Journalism Review*, in an article entitled "Citizen Scaife," traces the career of Richard Mellon Scaife. A champion of the "new Right" media in the United States, author Rothermyer concludes, "Scaife could claim to have done more than any other individual in the past five or six years to influence the way in which Americans think about their country and the world."<sup>27</sup>

Even these few examples illustrate how comparisons between the supposed freedom of the Western media and that which obtains in most African or other Third World nations are false comparisons. In Africa and elsewhere power struggles still rage.

There is as yet no agreement on the meanings of the concepts which influence the content of the information disseminated: concepts such as values, interests, rules, what constitutes reliable sources, newsworthiness, public service or public interest. In short, in Africa, one may still find an active advisory press struggling against the efforts of the state to control its activities.

### African Writers

Many African writers see their roles and responsibilities as qualitatively different from those of their Western counterparts, but their words strike a note of accord with those in the West who recognize the way our own media have become the voice of the establishment rather than its conscience.

Syl Cheney-Coker, a Sierra Leonean poet living in self-imposed exile in Nigeria, believes a writer must be committed, "Committed in the sense that he has to be able to speak out against those outrages which are so frequently perpetrated by those who are in power in his society."<sup>28</sup> The writer's primary responsibility, he says, is to hold a mirror to his society:

... when you consider the very few channels of dissent in African societies then the African writer has a grave responsibility to ask that society to look at the mirror of its own existence, to see what it has done to itself, what it has done to its people.

Noting that in many cases the poet is going to be thrown into jail, he observes that:

... the very existence of the African writer is a political statement. . . . Writers like Achebe, Okigbo, Soyinka and Clarke, are writers . . . conscious of political mobilisation; they are conscious of the political and social advancements of their people. Achebe, for one, would not deny that in a novel like *Things Fall Apart* he intended to show that there was indeed some coherent, logical, socio-political system within that society before outsiders came. And in most of Soyinka's plays — *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Road* — there is political consciousness in the way the characters mirror the happenings of their epochs. For this reason I think that every African writer is in some way a political animal. His artistic representations, or as you put it, "interventions," are coloured by some degree of political awareness.

Cheney-Coker was asked

whether or not he could operate "comfortably" from Sierra Leone. He reviewed events since Siaka Stevens became Prime Minister:

*There is so much political barbarism and injustice in Sierra Leone today that no artist can function at all. The courageous Sierra Leonean playwright Redmond Sarif Easmon was locked up, and you already know about the stupid vengeful action taken against Yulisa Amadu Maddy, the eminent dramatist and actor, because he dared to criticize the excesses of the Minister of Culture at the last FESTAC. . . . It becomes doubtful whether anybody, not just Syl Cheney-Coker, can operate "comfortably" in Sierra Leone in the present political climate.*

He goes on to say that he does not believe that any writer "worth his or her name on this continent can go for long without falling victim to his government, one way or another." But, still aware of what so many journalists and writers in the West have apparently forgotten, he continues:

... what is much more self-damaging and destructive is for the writer to impose a kind of self-censorship on his own writing. Then he begins to ask himself what the government would or wouldn't want to hear. How do you decide what is all right for the government to accept? In other words, what right has anybody other than the writer to decide on the quality of his own writing?

Although the Nigerian Constitution includes protections for press freedom, incidents since the return to civilian government in 1979 suggest that an advisory press is still alive and healthy in Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> There have been arrests and detentions of news editors and other legal actions to contain some newspapers. As Nigeria prepares for the elections scheduled for October 1983, violence has flared in several quarters, and in Enugu the local radio and television stations were targets of arson. In *West Africa*, one critic charges that "materialism and self-interest have destroyed the core of Nigerian journalism. The Nigerian Press which should be responsible (certainly not to the powers-that-be but seeking from them public accountability) is reduced to the role of a boot-licker, the perennial scape-goat or at best, a praise-singer."<sup>30</sup>

Chinua Achebe sees the situation quite differently. Calling a meeting of Nigerian authors with the aim of creating a permanent association, he

believes the group should not only assist writers with business transactions and encourage new writers, but also help insure their freedom to publish:

*... I have no doubt that in the long run the best guarantee of this freedom and safety is an enlightened and humane public opinion. But we are nowhere near the long run; we are very much in the short one. And in that condition, enlightenment and humaneness are mere dreams for idealists. Therefore writers must seek some of their safety in their own organization and numbers.*

*In the cosy optimism in which most of us elite Nigerians live and move and have our being, danger may seem rather far-fetched. But behind the smiling facade of the present dispensation slouches the rough beast of religious fanaticism and political fanaticism.<sup>31</sup>*

Achebe goes on to illustrate his fear of fanaticism in Nigeria by analogy to Iran, where a poet had been executed for "crimes of 'earthly corruption' and 'war on God.'"

*I used to wonder why Bertrand Russell held that one of the greatest evils introduced into the world by religion was the notion of righteousness which, incidentally, the Jews must take the credit for inventing. But looking at the contemporary Nigeria, infested with all kinds of dangerous lunatics who believe in their own righteous justification to commit any crime in the name of God, we must understand what Bertrand Russell was talking about.*

In Nigeria, he asks, "Do we need prophetic insight to see the deadly portents?"

*The other day a State Governor said to an airport press conference: "Damn it, I am the government!" And he received an ovation and delighted laughter instead of shocked silence. Louis XIV of France said precisely the same thing more than 300 years ago. He not only ruined France, but two reigns later his descendant paid for it with his head in a revolution that unleashed a horrendous bloodbath.*

*Perhaps an airport press conference is not the ideal place to gauge the enlightenment and political sophistication of a country. Perhaps things are better in the sober, intellectual atmosphere of academe. If you think so, I have bad news for you. About the same time, another chief executive told an audience: "Politics is power, and nobody gives up power peacefully." He was applauded. By aca-*

*demics! In a seat of enlightenment!*

*My concern here is not what politicians say or do, but the absence of a countervailing tradition of enlightened criticism and dissent [echoes of E.P. Thompson]. I am not talking about our accustomed factional and inter-party squabbles that are largely devoid of objective ideas and principle. I am saying that in this situation a writer must be free, whose second nature is to dance to "a different drummer" and not march like a Boy Scout, such a person has no choice really but to run great risks. And we had better know it and prepare for it. [emphasis added]*

Some African writers have solved this problem by publishing outside the continent. The *New African*, edited by Mark August, is acutely conscious of its mission in this respect. August was interviewed in London by Michael Cader during research for this Report.

**Q:** How long have you been Editor?

**A:** I've been Editor for about a year now. *New African* has a history of sorts. It used to be called *New African Development*, and was one of the leading publications at the time, together with a publication called *Africa*. I think it has succeeded as a major independent publication on the continent and indeed in Europe, where its functions have been to reflect the African perspective vis-à-vis what happens in Europe and the West and the East in connection with Africa. . . . We have been exceedingly jealous of our independence to present matters not only in an African perspective, but in as independent a manner as one can possibly do. . . . I feel that the African perspective has not really always been given and if it has at times . . . it has tended to reflect the elitist section of the African population. . . . To the extent that *New African* sees itself as being independent, we would like to believe that we reflect the view of the entire African mass.

**Q:** So you feel that, as a journalist, you are able to work more effectively from here in London than you could out of Africa?

**A:** Yes. I suppose the natural question is why publish out of London when you could have done it out of Nigeria, Ghana, whatever. I think there are several reasons. It's not only a question of security. The larger reason we publish out of London is an historical reason. England has an historical connection with the former colonies, a kind of umbilical connection if you will. . . .

*There is easy access in London to information about these places. There is an easy communications link to these places. There is the relative security and safety in London from which one can say things that may be deemed detrimental to the interests of whatever government may be in power. . . .*

**Q:** Are you, then, distributed throughout Africa?

**A:** Yes, . . . not only in Africa but Europe, America, the Caribbean, Asia. Because, bear in mind, we are not only talking to Africa about Africans, we are talking to non-Africans about Africa. . . .

**Q:** For the purposes of the debate on the new world information order, are you considered one of the so-called Third World press, or part of the western press?

**A:** I do not see how we could be "Western press." I also say that being in America does not make you an American . . . the argument here is that our being here is precisely for the reasons that can be seen in the context of the new world information order. From here we can present a perspective which perhaps those institutions back home in the African countries may be ill-disposed to present. We feel that Africa is misrepresented, under-represented, and our function is to give that perspective, and that side of Africa — its politics, its problems, its successes, more importantly to those who will listen. . . .

We may or may not succeed at any given time, but I think to the extent that these needs are important, we do try, and I think we are reflective of the new information order — independently though.

**Q:** It would seem then that your comments reinforce the fears and reservations being expressed by Western governments that it is difficult if the aid is given directly to government, if governments in Africa are given major responsibility for not just organizing the press, but helping it to become more effective. You've spoken of the security of being able to publish from London.

**A:** Let's face it, the danger does exist. But it exists all over the place. We are often told about the objectivity of the Western press. Now, what is objectivity? I don't believe that the Western press is objective . . . objectivity is such a relative term. I think for the West to preach from the platform of what I consider immoral rectitude whereby they decide what constitutes the right of anybody to inform them-

selves or inform anybody else, is what the whole issue is about. As I said before, there is obviously a case to be made for possible misuse of the aid . . . with the establishment of the press in developing countries. But we must also try to break the news cartel. There is an information cartel that has to be broken. Your Agence France Presse, UPI, AP, Reuters, Deutsche Press . . . whose reports are being taken as sacred on any issue. This is what people have to try and break. I think that our organization tries to break it.

**Q:** Do you think there are legitimate grounds for African journalists to fear their governments, or is that a moot question in this debate?

**A:** I think that it is a moot point. Is there any legitimate reason for anyone in the Eastern bloc to fear their government? Is there any legitimate reason — I mean we talk about South Africa as a Western country — is there any legitimate reason for journalists in that country to fear? Are we assuming that we can publish anything, even in the West? I think one has to see it within context. Obviously the problems of journalists are found everywhere. It is a moot point who is freer than whom. . . . In some ways I would say the journalist in developing countries has more against him than does a journalist in the West who reflects a society that has more or less developed and is doing very well.

**Q:** Wouldn't that tend to support the West's argument that it's better to help countries and news organization on an individual basis rather than supporting governments to carry out this development as they choose?

**A:** Yes. That's a very studied yes. I am against providing governments with money which they would use for the furtherance of disseminating news which may not reflect the needs of the country. Who says that perhaps this is a rough justice by the governments? Who says that any given government has not the right to decide for its people? I think that's a question one must ask. But then, secondly, in context again, who says that a government necessarily reflects the needs of its own people? A classic example is in the United States of America. In the recent election, Ronald Reagan, out of 26 per cent of the voting electorate, represents a 'landslide.' To what extent can one argue that Reagan is in fact talking for the country? His views may not in fact reflect the aspirations of the majority. . . . Such are the vagaries of democracy. . . . If I had a choice

whether to give assistance to individual organizations, independent of the government, towards establishing a more equal dissemination of news for the Third World countries, or giving it to governments to help them . . . I would encourage those with the wherewithal to give the money to the institutions and independent organizations.

**Q:** So, how does one break this cartel? What can be done?

**A:** That's the million dollar question. If the Third World countries knew how to solve that, by now they would have done so. I think there are more ways one can look at this. One way is, I think, the training of journalists, and I'm talking about Third World journalists. It is very important. Then there is the need for journalists to have a sense of pride, national pride, so that you are not judging development by the standards of those who have educated you. . . . I think the biggest problem the developing countries face is the training and state of preparedness, in terms of skill and otherwise. The journalists talk the foreigner's language and use the foreigner's standards in deciding what is good for their country. You are educated in the United States, you come back home and there are no skyscrapers, no underground tubes. Do you insist that you have to find that in your own country — that that is the model for development? Or is it that until such time as people are self-sufficient in food production and can feed themselves, that you can't take a look at these other things. I think it is a question of where one's priorities are.

### Conclusion

If the interests of the power (or class) structure of a society are reflected or shared by those who control the media, there need be no conflict concerning the content of information disseminated to the public. Given the amazing advances in technology, the media has assumed an enormous power to influence the thinking of a population and to create a false sense of consensus by the very manner in which dissent is treated. At worst, the media can simply ignore dissent. Or it can treat, as it did for so long in Britain, such issues as the women camping outside Greenham Common Air Force base protesting the placement of US Cruise missiles there, as eccentric and unrepresentative of the British population as a whole. When public dissent over such issues reaches the "critical mass," the government may be forced

to use the media in the very manner it claims would contradict its freedom. For example, at the very time of writing, the Conservative Party in Britain is considering a £1 million media campaign designed to convince the British public of the necessity of its particular stance on defense.

Those who aspire to a new world information order would not argue that there is freedom of the press in most poor countries of the world or that even given the monopoly control on information by the multinational press agencies that the media in Western nations is "unfree" as such. The proponents of the new information order do object to the disequilibrium of information available everywhere in today's world, a fact with which there can be little disagreement.

While recognizing these realities, a new world information order will not be born through the simple transfer of money to the Third World, or even from a dramatic upgrading of technology linking these countries with the industrialized world.

This Report began with the words of Jerry Rawlings, and his speech to a mass meeting in Accra on November 25, 1982 provides an apt conclusion:

*Fellow countrymen, a revolution works on a people's authority. . . . We must fight for principles of people's democracy. We have been speaking these things for years and it has always evaded us, always eluded us. . . . That I want to share with you, my fellow countrymen, the greatest crime that we have ever committed is the lack of information or ignorance. . . . The information you need to know to give you a clearer understanding, to know, to strengthen your hands, because when you do not have it you can always be derailed. . . . In America, hundreds of years ago, there were two kinds of slaves: what they called the field slave who was being whipped, tormented. He clearly knew his enemy and hated his guts. The domesticated one was the servant in the house who was being given crumbs and white shirts . . . neat fingernails because he was not working in the fields. And he thought this was good for him. The Third World has been domesticated like that slave, wearing a white shirt, eating crumbs in that master's house. . . . We have been captured for far too long, seeing ourselves as domesticated slaves and not understanding how the issues involved in our daily lives are what is keeping us subju-*

gated. . . . What I am concerned about is for you to know the issues involved.

Today, nobody has to use a chain because your minds have been captured. It is the thing of the mind that makes an educational process the

most important factor in any revolutionary process. It is unfortunate that our news media have not done very well in this respect. We had better form an information committee to ensure that the educational process is carried

out thoroughly and structures are reduced to the lowest denominator when the people come to understand their own strength and their own weakness.

## NOTES

1 The Australian team had seen Rawlings at a mass meeting in Ho the day before this interview. In a room at Burma Camp opposite Rawlings's office, lights were set up focusing on a chair at the head of the table where they wanted Rawlings to seat himself. He took one look at the position of the chair and stopped. Standing at the foot of the table he asked, "Why do you want to interview me? The last thing Ghana needs is a cult of a personality. Why not interview him [pointing to a law lecturer from the university] or that soldier at the door. They know as much about what is going on in Ghana as I do. I could be bumped off tomorrow. The revolution in Ghana is not dependent on me." It was at this point that he launched into his impromptu lecture on the power of the Western media.

2 *West Africa*, August 3, 1981, p. 1766

3 From a speech given by Mario de Andrade, Commissioner of Information and Culture, Guinea-Bissau, "Considerations on the National Politics of Information," translated by Carlos Nogueira

4 *New Internationalist*, no. 100, June 1982, for this and subsequent information on the scope of "big four" activity

5 See *International Herald Tribune*, January 21, 1982, for an account of the meeting, including statements by Mr. Harley and Mr. Rasgotra

Even if technological inputs into developing countries are not "discarded, obsolescent junk" (which so often has been the case) there can still be many problems. Since 1979 the Canadian government has been financing the installation of a communications system which will, when completed, stretch from Dakar, Senegal through Mali and Upper Volta to the coastal city of Cotonou, Benin. This system will allow international direct telephone dialing. In August 1981 the project had not been completed in Senegal. I stayed at a workers' camp in Tambacounda and was reassured that, once in a while, I might be able to telephone New York from this remote region.

The system required the installation of a series of antenna, each in sight of the next one, positioned inside a fenced compound. Each compound required an air-conditioned building to house the equipment, a generator to power the equipment, and a home for the caretaker. Canadian engineers working on the project pointed out that Senegal was not able to afford the diesel to keep these compounds functioning and that the entire system was a complete waste. They often complained about the obvious high-level connections of the communications industry in Canada which had been able to channel the country's development assistance to this project. They asked me how many nomads in Mali I thought would be interested in making international calls!

6 *The Sunday Times*, London, January 21, 1982

7 Interview conducted by Michael Cader, January 1983.

8 *Gist*, U.S. State Department, October 1981

9 *West Africa*, August 3, 1981, page 1767

10 *The Times*, London, May 19, 1981.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *West Africa*, August 17, 1981

13 *The Sunday Times*, London, May 24, 1981

14 *The Times*, London, December 4, 1982

15 University of Wisconsin Press, 1964, pp. xiii-xiv

16 The editorial, "Dark Continent," appeared on August 15, 1982 and the response quoted was published in the *Sunday Times*, August 22, 1982

17 "Misunderstanding Africa," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1982

18 *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1981 41

19 No. 100, June 1982. 13.

20 *West Africa*, December 7, 1981: 2904.

21 See my *AUFS Reports*, Nos. 20, 21, 22, 1981.

22 *Dirty Work: The CIA in Africa*, Zed Press, London 1980: 121-3

23 Today, observers inside Uganda agree that the situation under Obote is worse than under Amin, yet there is little criticism from journalists. There were relatively few refugees from the Amin regime, yet today there are perhaps hundreds of thousands of civilians who have been forced into exile, most living under desperate conditions in the Sudan, Zaire, Kenya, and Rwanda. In the first two weeks of 1983, 10,000 new refugees moved across the border into the Sudan, a fact unremarked in the British press. In 1982 when Amnesty International was preparing to release their report on the human rights violations of the Obote government, the Foreign Office in London attempted to suppress the report. After its release, a broadcast was carried on Deutsche Welle which discounted the evidence amassed by Amnesty.

24 *West Africa*, November 19, 1981: 2854-6.

25 *New Society*, November 1, 1982.

26 Said, Edward, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Pantheon, 1981

27 Rothermyer K, "Citizen Scaife," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1981

28 *West Africa*, December 21-28, 1981

29 See my "Freedom of the Press in Nigeria. A Debate," *AUFS Reports*, No. 32, 1978

30 *West Africa*, August 10, 1981

31 *West Africa*, July 27, 1981



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