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## ***The Newsflow Controversy: Professional Journalists' Evaluation of News Imbalance***

by Charles Okigbo\*

### ***Abstract***

This paper discusses the African journalists' perception of the new world information order, seeking to find out what changes they expect from it. The paper attempts to identify the positions taken by various journalists on the issue pertaining to this controversy. Basing his opinion on the results of a survey conducted in Nigeria, the author concludes that this debate cannot be fruitfully carried on since there is little agreement on the meanings of the concepts employed by the disputants.

### ***Résumé***

Cet article présente les perceptions des journalistes africains sur le nouvel ordre mondial de l'information à la recherche des changements qu'ils peuvent en attendre. L'article essaie d'identifier les positions prises par divers journalistes sur les questions relatives à cette controverse. Basant son opinion sur les résultats d'une enquête menée au Nigéria, l'auteur conclut que ce débat ne peut pas se poursuivre utilement dans la mesure où il n'y a pas d'accord sur le sens des concepts employés par les protagonistes.

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## Introduction

Few issues in international communication have attracted as much attention from scholars, professional journalists and government bureaucrats as the controversy over the new world information order. Though the debate has raged for about ten years and has been marked by accusations, counter accusations, and sometimes inept or inperspicuous defences, the issues have often been most unclearly stated. In the opinion of some scholars, "the debate began with attacks followed by counter attacks and soon degenerated into juxtaposed monologues, a condition hardly conducive to sharing ideas."<sup>1</sup>

The debate is far from abating and in fact is gathering greater momentum as it persists in many quarters with various motivations, emitting a lot of heat, but hardly any illumination. It is this conspicuous absence of illumination that has qualified the controversy as a "dialogue of the deaf", as opposing sides shout without listening.<sup>2</sup> The most vocal parties are journalism educators, many of whom jumped headlong into the debate without the benefit of reliable research evidence on the nature of international news imbalance.

The journalism educators that have participated in the debate seem to be classifiable according to their world regions or the ideological camps they belong to. For instance, while American educators (most notably Atwood and Murphy<sup>3</sup>, Stevenson<sup>4</sup>, and Weaver and Wilhoit<sup>5</sup>) try to excuse American and Western journalism, Russian and East European scholars and educators (most notably Gracher<sup>6</sup>, Nordenstreng<sup>7</sup> and Yermoshkin<sup>8</sup>) pile enough accusations to have western journalism indicted by any independent and objective jury.

Third World educators are afflicted by their characteristic ambivalence, arising mostly from their recent colonial experience that has left an indelible imprint on their intellectual and ideological stances. While educators such as Nwosu<sup>9</sup> and Mgbemena<sup>10</sup> defend the classic Third World point of view, others such as Ekwelie<sup>11</sup>, Nwuneli and Udoh<sup>12</sup>, and Okigbo<sup>13</sup> chart a new trajectory that is neither pro-nor anti-Western or Third World press. This last group sees imbalance as a universal trait in international journalism; more importantly, it identifies aspects of imbalance even in the coverage of local news by Third World media.

Government bureaucrats constitute another group of concerned professionals that has participated actively in the debate. In fact, bureaucrats at national and international levels have been one of



the most vociferous contributors, and in their characteristic disdain for research, they have often eschewed factual presentations and adopted emotional styles. One of the earliest articulators of the Third World point of view was Masmoudi, as the Tunisian representative at the United Nations.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Western perspective or defence has been championed by American bureaucrats, most notably Abel.<sup>15</sup> Black African bureaucrats are not less interested in the debate, though they have been slow in articulating the stands of the various governments. Russian and East European bureaucrats, like their scholars and educators, are committed to championing the call for a new order of information.<sup>16</sup>

Though the controversy centers on the professional judgements and activities of journalists, this group has not yet been organized enough to make a significant contribution to the resolution of the conflict. No doubt, many journalists have contributed to the controversy more by whipping up sentiments than by critically analysing the issues and making concrete suggestions. Two journalists that have attempted some analytical contributions are Kent Cooper, who in his book *Barriers Down*<sup>17</sup> admitted the imbalance perpetrated by western journalism through the operations of the big five news agencies, and Mort Rosenblum who attributed the imbalance to the peculiar problems of covering the Third World.<sup>18</sup>

Ordinarily, Third World journalists defend the classic Third World point of view, just as their Western counterparts defend the Western view point. Surprisingly, there are no serious attempts to evaluate the views of these journalists in order to determine their perceptions of the problem and also their clues as to how the controversy can be resolved. Coorientation studies suggest that reporters provide what editors want, though some reporters "may act in accord with their own conceptions of what they should be doing."<sup>19</sup> On their part, editors often make their judgements based on their expectations of what the audience members want.<sup>20</sup>

If this pattern holds as it is expected to, then journalists are responsible for much that is routinely carried out in the media, in spite of the alleged powers of the media owners (business men) to regulate content. The fact of the matter is that many publishers even in the Third World, do not get involved in the daily determination of media content. Their participation is usually restricted to a broad definition of audience interests, and thus, reporters and editors have an upper hand in "balancing" media content to reflect their perceptions of audiences' needs and

expectations. It is therefore, a serious oversight not to methodically examine these journalists' perception of the newsflow controversy, especially as history has shown that principles and legislations imposed from without rarely succeed in persuading or forcing journalists to comply.

What do African journalists think about the new world information order and what changes do they expect from the order? These questions and similar ones on news values and the operations of international news agencies provided the framework for this empirical study of journalists' perceptions and attitudes. The motive is to identify the journalists' positions on the issues and then speculate on the possible solutions to the imbalance from a cooperative rather than confrontational point of view.

### *Literature Review*

Though there are occasional publications, usually in the popular press, of journalists' perceptions of and reactions to the new world information order, so far, there is only one empirical survey of African journalists. A 1983 survey by Roser and Brown asked the views of 42 newspaper editors in 20 countries.<sup>21</sup> The small sample size was a result of poor responses, especially from the black African newspapers, as a result of which South Africa was over-represented, accounting for 38% of the sample.

The three important aims of the study were to determine the opinions of the newspaper editors, the influence of training on those opinions and differences between journalists' opinions in different political systems. The results showed that the editors were strongly in favour of balancing the flow of news, while at the same time advocating a free flow philosophy. They also favoured the establishment of a Pan-African news agency, though they regarded local and regional agencies ambivalently as sources of objective news and propaganda.

Journalism training in Africa actually reflects aspects of British and American education<sup>22</sup>, but in spite of this, the results showed that western training did not appear to impact on journalists' opinions of the newsflow as much as did ownership and sources of support for their newspapers. The place of training and the number of years of education of the journalists were not related to their attitudes about the new order. The expectation that Western educated journalists would oppose the new order was not supported by the data.

The examination of the opinions within different political systems revealed that editors from countries under military



regimes showed stronger support for the new order than their counterparts in multi-party governments. South African editors showed less support for the new order than other editors. However, there were no attitudinal differences between journalists from British and French ex-colonies.

The conclusion from these results is that there are different interpretations of the newsflow concept, and some of them are sometimes contradictory. Surprisingly, formal journalism training in any part of the world was not found to be related to any set of attitudes about the new order, but the political system in which the press operates could affect journalists' stand on the newsflow issue. It bears pointing out that the sample comprised only newspaper editors and that South Africa was over-represented.

### *The Problem*

Though journalists constitute one of the three important groups concerned in the newsflow controversy, (the other two being journalism educators and government officials or bureaucrats), their views on the issue have not yet been sought, and thus, their contributions to the resolution of the controversy have been occasional, episodic and off-handish. Not even UNESCO, with its reputation as an advocate of the new world information order, has formally sought and used the views of Third World journalists on the issue. As Roser and Brown rightly pointed out, Third World representatives at UNESCO conferences are typically government officials and/or academics.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, there is a gap in intelligence on the perceptions of Third World journalists on the issue. It is this gap which this study attempts to fill by seeking the views of Nigerian journalists employed in the country's print and electronic media. Whereas Roser and Brown sought the views of only newspaper editors, the views of reporters and editors in Nigerian newspapers, radio and television stations were sought for this study.

These five research questions guided the conduct of this study:

1. What proportion of Nigerian journalists know about the new world information order?
2. What is their interpretation of "information imbalance"?
3. What are their dominant opinions about the new order?
4. How concerned are they about the newsflow debate?
5. What major changes do they expect from the new order?

## **Method**

The survey research method was used to sample the views of 400 journalists in the three major regions of Nigeria, viz., North, East and West. One hundred questionnaires were distributed in the North, which was represented by two television stations. The East was represented by journalists from three newspapers, four radio and three television stations; and the West was represented by two newspapers, two radio and two television stations. The East was allotted 150 questionnaires, and so was the West. The sampled media houses were selected randomly and available and willing journalists in each establishments were selected.

The questionnaire was a 28-item instrument that elicited information on journalists' age, gender, medium of employment, academic qualification and awareness of new world information order. Other questions asked respondents what they understood by information imbalance and when they thought government censorship could be justified. Nineteen Likert items required respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements on various aspects of the newsflow issue. The responses ranged from strongly agree, though neutral, to strongly disagree. These Likert items were included for use in factor analysis. The positively-worded items were balanced with negatively-worded ones. One final question asked the journalists what major changes they expected from the new world information order.

All questionnaires were administered during the Christmas vacation of 1985 by four research assistants who also collected and coded them. The questionnaires were coded at the Department of Mass Communication University of Nigeria, Nsukka and data analysis was done at the University's Computer Centre.

## **RESULTS**

### ***General Characteristics***

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 213 were returned useable, yielding a 53% return rate. The North accounted for 33 respondents (15.5%) while the East and the West provided 110 (51.6%) and 70 (32.9%) respectively. Of the 213 journalists, 188 (88.3%) were men, while 22 (10.3%) were women; three (1.4%) did not indicate their gender. Respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 49; the average age was 29.



Most of the journalists reported they had academic qualifications in journalism/mass communication or one of the liberal arts or social science disciplines. There were 94 respondents (44.1%) with bachelor's or master's degrees and 90 with diploma (OND/HND) qualifications. Only 27 journalists (12.7%) were working with only WASC/GCE O/A levels, while two people (0.9%) failed to indicate their highest qualification.

The respondents were nearly evenly distributed between the print and electronic media; while the former accounted for 100 respondents (46.9%), the latter provided 108 (50.7). Five people (2.3%) did not indicate their medium of employment. Because some of the newspapers are owned by the government in addition to the print media, there were more journalists working for the government in the sample. There were 181 respondents (85.0%) working in government-owned media institutions, and only 28 (13.1%) in private media houses. Two respondents (1.9%) failed to show whether they worked for government or private media. (See Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
*Frequencies for Biographic Variables*

	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1a. GENDER	Male	188	88.3
	Female	22	10.3
	Missing	3	1.4
	Total	213	100.0
1b. EDUCATION	Diploma	90	42.3
	Bachelor's	94	44.1
	GCE/WASC	27	12.7
	Missing	2	0.9
Total	213	100.0	
1c. MEDIUM OWNERSHIP	Private	28	13.1
	Public	181	85.0
	Missing	4	1.9
	Total	213	100.0
1d. MEDIUM TYPE	Print	100	46.9
	Electronic	108	50.7
	Missing	5	2.3
	Total	213	100.0



## *Answers to Research Questions*

In this section, the answers to the four research questions are presented. To the first question on knowledge about the new world information order, 175 journalists (82.2%) said they knew something about the issue. Twenty-eight respondents (13.1%) admitted they had never heard about the new world information order, while 10 people (4.7%) refused to answer the question. (See Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
*Frequency for Knowledge of New Order*

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	175	82.2
No	28	13.1
Missing	10	4.8
Total	213	100.0

The second research question dealt with journalists' interpretation of information imbalance, which is the crux of the newsflow controversy. Expectedly, there were different interpretations of the concept, though a third of the respondents, 80 journalists (32.6%) agreed it meant negative coverage of Third World affairs by the press of the developed world. Forty-eight people (22.5%) said it meant the preponderance of distorted news about the Third World, while 30 people (14.1%) understood it to mean the absence of development news about the Third World in the international press. For 20 journalists (9.4%) it meant sensational news reporting, while 28 others (13.1%) said that aspects of all the above different interpretations are implied in the concept of information imbalance. (See Table 3)

**TABLE 3**  
*Interpretations of Newsflow Imbalance*

Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
1. Negative news	80	37.6
2. News distortion	48	22.5
3. No development news	30	14.1
4. Sensationalism	20	9.4
5. All of the above	28	13.1
6. Other	7	3.3
Total	213	100.0

The third research question addressed the issue of the predominant opinions of Nigerian journalists about the new world information order. The opinions were measured by responses to six key items that addressed different aspects of the controversy. The respondents were required to show how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about equal/balanced flow of news, disallowance of restrictions, operations of the big international news agencies and PANA. The other issues addressed were the nature of news from African news agencies and the responsibility of journalists to report "all the news, good or bad, regardless of what they think about them."

The pattern of responses to these six issues showed that the journalists were strongly supportive of equal and balanced newsflow between the Third World and the developed countries. There were 190 journalists (89.2%) in support, and only 12 (5.7%) in disagreement. An equally high number, 188 (88.2%), also agreed that there should be no restrictions in the international flow of news. Ironically, they failed to detect the inherent contradiction in disallowing restrictions while urging equal and balanced newsflow. There were 161 journalists (75.6%) who thought that the big international news agencies (Reuters, AFP, TASS, AP and UPI) were not objective in their coverage of the Third World. About PANA's capability to change the existing imbalance in newsflow, 89 people (41.7%) said the continental agency could not do much, while 20 people (9.4%) disagreed with them. Fifty people (23.5%) were not sure. Surprisingly, a little over half the respondents, 110 people (51.7%) felt that the "news from African wire services are mainly government propaganda." 171 journalists (80.3%) agreed that it was the responsibility of journalists to report all the news, whether good or bad. (See Table 4.)

Surprisingly, the newsflow debate does not appear to be one of the most serious problems of Nigerian journalists. The respondents were nearly evenly divided between those that thought their counterparts were much concerned about the debate, and those that felt otherwise. There were 85 respondents (39.9%) that agreed Nigerian journalists were not much concerned about the debate; 87 people (40.9%) disagreed with them, while 41 (19.3%) were undecided or failed to proffer any opinion. (See Table 5).

The respondents were asked what major changes they expected from the new world order. There were various views expressed, and these were categorised into five major areas. More than half the respondents, 118 (55.4%), expected a more balanced and objective coverage of the Third World, while 36 others (16.9%) felt the new order would promote world peace. Twenty-six journalists (12.2%)



TABLE 4

*Opinions About Newsflow Imbalance*

Opinion	Strongly agree	agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Missing	Total
1. Equal/balanced flow	104 (48.8)	86 (40.4)	6 (2.8)	8 (3.8)	4 (1.9)	5 (2.3)	213 (100.0)
2. No restrictions	114 (53.5)	74 (34.7)	10 (4.7)	11 (5.2)	2 (0.9)	2 (0.9)	213 (100.0)
3. Foreign Agencies Not Objective	70 (32.9)	91 (42.7)	30 (14.1)	17 (8.0)	3 (1.4)	2 (0.9)	213 (100.0)
4. PANA is incapable	15 (7.0)	74 (34.7)	50 (23.5)	54 (25.4)	15 (7.0)	5 (2.3)	213 (100.0)
5. African wire is propaganda	43 (20.2)	67 (31.5)	38 (17.8)	53 (24.9)	9 (4.2)	3 (1.4)	213 (100.0)
6. Report all the news	109 (51.2)	62 (29.1)	10 (4.7)	28 (13.1)	2 (0.9)	2 (0.9)	213 (100.0)

TABLE 5

*Nigerian Journalists Are Not Concerned About New Order*

Strength	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	15	7.0
Agree	70	32.9
Neutral	34	16.0
Disagree	66	31.0
Strongly disagree	21	9.9
Missing	7	3.3
Total	213	100.0

said would lead to better appreciation of Third World problems while eight cynical respondents (3.8%) said the world would still be the same and no changes could result from the new order. 22 people (10.3%) did not have any ideas about the nature of the ensuing change, while three enigmatic respondents (1.4%) said whatever the changes, they would be detrimental to the Third World. (See Table 6.)

*Discussion*

Some of these results are as revealing as they are surprising. The new world information order is now a household phrase not only in the developed but also in the Third World. He must be a deaf and blind journalist who has not heard or read about the controversy by now. About 82% of the respondents said they knew something

**TABLE 6**  
*Expectations of New Order*

Expectation	Frequency	Percentage
1. Balanced and objective Reporting	118	55.4
2. Promote World Peace	36	16.9
3. Appreciation of 3rd World	26	12.2
4. No Chance	8	3.8
5. Negative Change	3	1.4
6. No Comment	22	10.3
Total	213	100.0

*about the controversy.* What they knew however was found to be varied. Many of them interpreted newsflow imbalance to mean that the press of the developed world gives mostly negative coverage to Third World affairs and events. Others interpreted it to mean news distortion, while still others said it referred to the absence of development news about the Third World in the major international media. To other still, it was sensational news reporting or aspects of each of the above features.

*The lack of consensus on the interpretation of news imbalance is a serious problem that requires more attention than it has been getting.* The diffuse views on the concept can only lead to imprecise identification of the crux of the issue, and consequently this will obfuscate whatever solutions are proffered to remedy the situation. If journalists disagree so easily about what constitutes newsflow imbalance they may not agree on proposed solutions.

Atwood and Murphy have noted that "most of the furor among academics and journalists over the new information order is . . . largely academic (in its most hollow sense)."<sup>24</sup> About 40% of the respondents did not feel that Nigerian journalists are much concerned about the new order. About the same proportion thought otherwise. The most serious concerns of the journalists would probably be "bread and butter" and press freedom-related issues rather than the more distant issue of how the Third World is covered by the international press.



In their opinions about the new information order, the journalists expressed somewhat contradictory views. Whereas they support equal and balanced flow of news between/among world nations, they are against the imposition of any kind of restrictions to regulate newsflow. It did not occur to them that without restrictions, all the channels will be so completely free that the flow can hardly ever be equal and balanced.

The big international news agencies have a very poor image with respect to objective coverage of the Third World. Most of the respondents indict them for biased coverage. It is generally accepted that the big news agencies perform less creditably in their coverage of the Third World, though some of them can be excused on account of the extraneous factors that make good coverage difficult.<sup>25</sup>

Arising from their interpretations of newsflow imbalances, the journalists expected that the new order would lead to more balanced and objective coverage of the Third World. Others think it would lead to a better appreciation of Third World problems and also promote world peace. An important question about these expectation is "who sets the standards?" Who is to say when international reporting has become balanced and objective enough, and when the rest of the world has achieved an adequate appreciation of Third World problems? Nearly everybody wants to be on the jury that decides on these questions, and even though many do not have foggiest idea about what the parameters should be, they think (like Justice Stewart on obscenity)<sup>26</sup> that they will know the results when they see them.

The cynical and enigmatic respondents who expect no change and negative change, respectively, deserve some attention. In spite of their fewness, they may be more accurate than the majority. The establishment of many Third World news agencies and the long arguments about the new order have not changed much yet. The image of Third World countries may in the long run depend more on their actual political and economic behaviour than on how they are perceived and reported about by the international press.

### **Conclusion**

*The characteristic ambivalence for which professional journalists are known is obvious in these results. For instance, they support equal and balanced newsflow as well as the disallowance of restrictions. They will like more emphasis on Third World development news while at the same time asking that journalists be required to report all the news, whether good or bad. This ambivalence is noticeable even in their opinions about their*

colleagues' concern for the new order; they were nearly equally divided between those that saw some concern and those that didn't.

This ambivalence was also reported from the results of Roser and Brown's survey of African newspaper editors; the editors were strongly in favour of a balanced flow as well as a free flow of news. It does appear that many African journalists want to have their cake and eat it. On the operation of the news agencies, three-fourths of the sample agree that the big international agencies are not objective in their coverage of the Third World, and about half think African agencies are mostly mouth-pieces for government propaganda.

*Obviously, there is no consensus of opinion on the newsflow interpretation.* Negative news is not necessarily synonymous with news distortion, nor does it mean the same thing as absence of development news or sensational reporting. There are no simple solutions to the basic controversy about newsflow imbalance. There should be a commonality of views within each side (Third World or developed world) to obviate discussions being at cross-purposes.

Newsflow imbalance is a convenient term, but in a situation where it is given different interpretations by those who should be seeking ways to redress the anomaly, wide ranging and perhaps irreconcilable positions can be taken. It was with this in view that Rosenblum pointed out that "there is no common position among news organizations of a single country"<sup>27</sup>, much less among journalists in different world regions.

These results suggest that some work is still required at national levels to properly educate journalists about the newsflow problem. It is not essential that all should hold only one view of the issues, but there should be a clear consensual or majority view to serve as the focus for all suggested solutions to the controversy.

*So far, in spite of copious outpouring of academic publications and popular media articles on the newsflow problem, there is as yet no identifiable theoretical framework to elucidate the issue.* Though media imperialism, as a research paradigm can be extended to apply in newsflow research,<sup>28</sup> and some variations of gate-keeping theory are applicable in international communication research,<sup>29</sup> a thorough-going theory of the newsflow has so far eluded modern mass communication scholarship. As in other areas of communication, a theory of the newsflow will enlighten the discussions and help in the proffering of solutions. Such a theory is unlikely now because of the diffuse interpretations of the key concept.



In conclusion, a resolution of the newsflow problem will benefit immensely from increased consensus on the interpretations of the key concept. Such a consensus can also inform a formulation of a newsflow theory, which consequently can help researchers and professional journalists in their search for acceptable solutions to the controversy.

Future research efforts should extend sample selection beyond individual countries in order to take account of the views of a wider section of professional journalists. The results of Roser and Brown's survey, along with these ones presented here can be used to design studies of wider scope that can employ multivariate analyses and tests of hypotheses to determine the dominant dimensions of journalists' attitudes, and also examine the antecedents and effects of such dimensions. More research may not provide all the answers, but it can ensure that we ask the right questions.

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