

News Agencies and Global News Flow in the 21st Century

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Abstract

News flow controversies have continued to dominate discussions on international communication. A lot of factors account for the lopsided flow of global information. One of such factors bothers on the role news agencies (otherwise called wire services) play in global information dissemination. The influence of news agencies on global news circulation can never be over emphasized. This simply implies that wire services, being suppliers of news choose what to supply, why to supply and how to supply. And often times the answers of these 5Ws and H of news agencies dissemination of global news tilt towards or favours the owners, the financiers, the location or areas of domicile-the West. News agencies have continued to improve in their quest to saturate the entire globe with up-to-the-minute information. To achieve this, a myriad of techniques and technologies have been employed. This article examines the influence of news agencies on global news flow in the 21st century. It highlights how the location of the largest wire services brings about imbalance in the flow of global mass communication.

Keywords: News flow, Imbalance, Imperialism, Wire services, Big four, Communication, Globalization, ICT, Third world, First world, Subscribers.



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INTRODUCTION

News agencies also called wire services, press agencies, news or wire services are organisations that gather, write and distribute news and reports from around a nation or the world to newspapers, radio and television broadcasters, government agencies or other users or subscribers. They do not generally publish news themselves, but supply news and reports to subscribers who, by sharing costs, obtain services they could not otherwise afford.

“News agencies which are also referred to as adjuncts or better still extenders specialize in the sourcing, processing and distribution of world news and information to other mass media organizations who are referred to as subscribers.” (Ekeanyanwu, 2016 p.51). There are basically three types of news agencies namely: national news agencies, regional or continental news agencies and transnational or World news agencies.

National News Agencies

These are the wire services owned and controlled by individual countries. Virtually every country in the world has their own news agency. National news agencies are mainly established to service the interests of the countries that own them. Examples of National news agencies include: News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), Ghana News Agency (GNA), Kenya News Agency (KNA), etc.

Regional News Agencies

These type of news agencies operate within the bounds of regions or continents of the world. They are bigger than national news agencies, but smaller than transnational or world news agencies. They have correspondents and subscribers across many countries within the regions or continents of their operation. Examples of these agencies include: Kyodo of Japan, Pan-African News Agency (PANA), the Non Aligned News Pool (NANP), etc.

Transnational /World News Agencies

These are wire services whose operations are on a global scale- their services extend to the whole world. These agencies have correspondents and subscribers in virtually every country on earth. There is no gain saying the fact that these agencies, more than anything else, influence the flow of world news. Examples of transnational or world news agencies include: Associated Press (AP), United Press Information (UPI), Reuters, Agence France Presse (AFP). These four world's largest wire services are commonly referred to as the 'Big Four'. Note the AP is the biggest of the 'Big Four'.

These wire services influence, to a very large extent, global news flow. News or information flow has to do with movement of data, cultural products, programmes from source to consumers. According to Ekeanyanwu (2016,p.41) global information flows involves the movement of data, cultural products, media programmes and messages from one country or group of countries to another. Statistics show that 80% of the news of the world comes from London, Paris and New York; the homes of the four biggest news agencies, otherwise called the 'Big Four' Vis: United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP) Reuters and Agence France Presse (AFP)." "This is expected in that these agencies have stringers and equipment that enable them to gather news from all countries as such news is breaking" (Udeze, 2005, p.21).

Mainstream media around the world mostly depend on news services for news and reports of events. Information supplied by wire services circulate across the globe via various media organization. Since news agencies serve as the arteries of world news circulation, suffice it to say that without news agencies, the world will be starved of vital news and reports of events and happenings. The problems we notice is that wire services are not evenly distributed across the globe and this is one of the reasons global news is not evenly distributed. It is the reason for imbalance in international communication.

The Big Four and Global News Flow

In international communication discourse, the 'Big Four' are the four biggest transnational news agencies namely the Associated Press (AP) founded in 1846 and owned by newspapers in the United States; United Press International (UPI), also owned by newspapers in the US and a conglomerate of media organizations. The agency was founded 10 years after the establishment of AP, Reuters founded in the 19th century and owned by the British government and Agence France Presse (AFP) owned by the French government and founded in the early 19th century.

The 'Big Four' currently dominate the sourcing and distribution of world news and information (Ekeanyanwu, 2016 p.54). The 'Big Four' have enormous influence and impact in the sourcing and distribution of world news and Information. They are owned by the advanced capitalist Western nations and these nations influence the operations of these transnational wire services. According to Rosenblum (1977, p. 818). All four major news agencies have a stated goal of objectivity; thousands of newspapers and broadcasters with positions rising from radical left to extreme right receive each of the four services. Neighboring countries with centuries of enmity all rely on them for news. For example, their subscribers include government controlled Arab media and conservative Israeli dailies.

Sadly, Rosenblum's observation of 1977 still holds water today. No news agency in Africa and indeed the Third World has been able to measure up with the 'Big Four'. The attempts made so far on this issue like the establishment of Pan African News Agency (PANA) have failed. This is why the problems of imperialism and imbalance will continue to bedevil the Third World. He who pays the piper calls the tune and dictates even the dancing steps.

Agba (2002, p.258) also blames the news flow imbalance on the “monopolistic grip which the five transnational news agencies Reuters, United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), Agence France Press (AFP) all in the west , and the former soviet Unions TASS have on mass communication sourcing globally”. In fact, the world is regarded as a global village today because of the activities and operations of the “Big Four”

Challenges of Global News Flow

There is no denying the fact that there is imbalance, both in quantity and quality, in the flow of world information between the South and the North, otherwise referred to as the developed nations. Supporting this position Okunna (1993) says that a lot of research evidence has been gathered over the years to demonstrate the imbalance in the quality and particularly quantity of the global mass communication is at the root of the protracted demand for a new world information and communication order (NWICO). The North on its part argues that the flow of information should be free and unrestricted. While the South argues that global news flow should have some form of control, the North (or West) believes that any attempt by the state or anybody to control, or interfere with information flow punctures and mitigates the very idea of media freedom.

Problems of Global News Flow One-Way Flow: One-Way or Unidirectional Flow

One-way or unidirectional flow of global news and information is one of the challenges of global news flow. One way or unidirectional flow is an imbalance in global information sourcing and distribution. This flow is directed basically from the developed to the developing nations, bigger to smaller countries or from those countries with power and technological superiority to those less advanced in technology and know-how. (Ekeanyanwu, 2015). The one-way flow is seen as a challenge in international communication because it tends towards a North-South direction and inhibits development of exchanges between the technology-rich North and technology-poor South. The one-way flow results to other problems which include: imbalance (qualitative and quantitative), imperialism (media and cultural) to mention but a few.

Ekeanyanwu (2015, p.44) again opines that "the one-way flow is a reflection of the world's dominant political and socio-economic resources and structures which tend to reinforce the dependence of the 'have not' nations on the 'have' or rich nations". Their news agencies are regarded as international news agencies owing to their scope of operation, strength of service and areas as of coverage. They therefore monopolize the sourcing and distribution of world news and information. It is often said that about 82 percent of global news emanates from New York, Paris and London.

Free Flow

Free flow of global news is canvassed by the West. This is because they (the West) have the technological, political cum economic advantage over the South to dominate global news flow. Ekeanyanwu (2015) posits that the free-flow of information became a problem in international communication flow because overemphasis was placed on one of the components of this flow to the disadvantage of the other components. The free-flow has made the developed capitalist nations of the West the major producers and distributors of world news and information.

Vertical Flow

Vertical flow of global news refers to the movement of news and information from top downwards. It explains the movement of news and information from the

technologically and economically advantaged countries of the north to the technologically and economically disadvantaged countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Jean Arcy (1980, p. 125) describes vertical flow in the following words:

Over 50 years' experience of the mass media-press, film, radio, television - have Conditioned us, both at the national and international levels, to a single and of information flow, which we have come to accept as normal and indeed as the only possible kind: a vertical, one-way flow from top downwards to non-diversified anonymous messages, produced by a few and address to all. This is not communication.

Imbalance refers to the unequal flow of mass media messages from the First World to the Third World. Imbalance in the flow of global news and information is at the root of the call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Imbalance in global news flow manifests in two major forms - quantitative and qualitative imbalance.

Agba (2002,p.257) says quantitative imbalance concerns the amount of news flow in both directions (developing and developed) and that most news and information flow from the developed to the underdeveloped world while the reverse is the case from the latter to the former. Masmoudi (1979) also states that quantitative imbalance is created by the disparity between the volume of news and information emanating from the developed world and intended for the developing countries and the volume of the flow in the opposite direction. Qualitative imbalance, on the other hand refers to the negative reporting of the third World by the first world media.

Imperialism

Brown (1976, P.22) says that imperialism involves an idea of one nation or people seeking to dominate another for exploitation. In the process, the dominant party accumulates capital at the expense of the exploited party. Imperialism in international communication comes in two basic ways: Media and Cultural imperialism. According to Boyd-Barrett (1979:177-178) Media imperialism refers to the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressure from the media Interest of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of Influence by the country so affected. Cultural imperialism is the subjugation of a local culture and the imposition of an alien culture on the local culture. It is the subtle manipulation of the culture of the third World by the developed nations through the use of their powerful media.

Global News Agencies and News Imbalance

In international communication, imbalance refers to the unequal flow of mass communication message from the First World to the Third World. It means the one -sided flow of information from the developed countries to the developing countries. There are two forms of imbalance quantitative and qualitative imbalance. Masmoudi (1979, p.173) states that quantitative imbalance is created by the disparity between the volume of news and information emanating from the developed world and intended for the developing countries and the volume of the flow in the opposite direction he argues that 80% percent of world news emanate from the major transnational news agencies owned by the western capitalist nations that have less than 25 percent of the world's population. This flow which is better known as the one-way flow is a type of quantitative imbalance in which data, message, programmes, cultural products and so on are directed predominantly from bigger to smaller nations, from those with higher technological means towards those advance; from the developed to the developing world and on the national level, from the power centres downwards (MacBride, 1987, p.145).

Quantitative imbalance on the other hand refers to the nature of type of new flowing from the developed to the developing world. The western world and their media treasure oddity as a news value, so they take pleasure in reporting the anomalies in the Third World so much that they forget so often that good things can also come of 'Nazareth' (Third world). The transnational new agencies contribute, in no small measure, to the problem of imbalance in international communication since the Third World is always at the receiving end, the first world always report anything they deem fit concerning them.

There are only two forces that carry light to all corners of the globe- the sun in the heaven and the associated press down here (Mark Twain). News dependency is said to be neocolonial in the sense that information from through "vertical" channels north to south and within distinct spheres of communication hegemony. It is said to lead to the adoption of western news values and subsequent cultural imperialism in the south. It has been observed by several communication scholars that the global flow of news follows narrow and ethnocentric media mappings (Chang, Lau & Hao, 2000; Ekeanyanwu et al, 2012). The developed and industrialized western nations dominate the global news flow in terms of what comes in and what goes out.

Masmoudi (1979) observed that the transnational media owned and controlled by the developing countries impose their own way of seeing as the world upon the developing countries as the former only transmit news already filtered, cut and distorted by them. Unfortunately, developing nations get more attention when the 'bad' news happens. Schulz (2001) observes that western media, especially the US media give more significance to negative news originating from the Third World countries than the industrialized and developed nations. Gupta (2012) attributes some of the negative portrayals of developing nations by the developed countries to poor international relations between countries, which can result in one nation's negative coverage of nation with which it has sour relations. The fact that western media concentrate on negative news about Africa terns to give the picture that Africa is a condemned continent, while western journalists argue that they are communicating reality (Jomo, 2006).

New Features in Functioning of News Agencies

News agencies have continued to evolve in terms of functions. This is basically due to the advancement in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Major news agencies like Reuters, AP, UPI, AFP, EFE, Kyodo, etc, today distinguish themselves by a number of new features of functioning viz: multimedia, online news multi-chaned availability, multilingual texts, etc. These trends have continued to boost flow of global news. At the same time, in modern condition, there is a decrease in quality of information flow, it seems that the source of information for news every day becomes considerably scanty. Therefore, news agencies are supported in major countries of the world where they are perceived as a kind of image brands of a country. Many of the known world news agencies are currently receiving significant financial subsidies from the governments of their countries (Reuters, Associated Press, etc) (Strashnov, 2012, p. 60).

News Agencies and Social Media in the 21st Century

Almost all the major news agencies in the world today have adapted to the social media. Giant wire services like Reuters, AP, AFP, Lusa, CTK, DPA, TT, Belga, STT, PA, EFE, ANP all have Facebook and Twitter accounts with which they connect with millions of people around the world. Twitter has become the most important social medium adopted by news agencies and indeed the online media. According to Sounman Hong, the strength of Twitter lies with its

asymmetric way of communication. Organizations may follow a few chosen accounts while they are followed by thousands of users worldwide. This asymmetry makes Twitter an attractive tool by which news organization can disseminate news.

Overall, it can be said that the core, traditional function of news agencies is not altered by social media. Quite on the contrary, many experts believe that their role as a distributor for other media outlets in the online market has even increased as news stories have to be up to date at all times. All experts agree that news agencies in the 21st century cannot afford not to be on any social media platform.

Christoph Griessner of the Reuters Institute of Journalism said: Although entering the realm of the social web may change the way news agencies gather news and interact with the audience, their core function still stays the same, as they try to gather and to sell news throughout the world for the benefit of 'retail' media (news papers, broadcasters, online suppliers) and other outlets (business, finance, institutions, governments private individuals). News agencies are now playing a growing role in the contemporary news environment, primarily due to the prevalence of 24/7 online newsroom and its associated need for speed and volume of copy.

Forde and Johnston (2012) argue that the online environment has enabled a blossoming role for the news produced by wire services. Internet initially appear to be threat than opportunity for news agencies because it reduced the cost of market-entry for news gathering and distribution (Terhi and Boyd- Barret 2009) On the other hand, major news agencies has been pioneers of new communication technologies (NCTs). All major news agencies run internet news and information services for direct client access, as well as information packages for client websites and mobile telephone services. Thus, the internet has greatly expanded the number of potential client for agencies services, increased agency flexibility in generating novel information packages and reduce the costs of distribution so that a greater proportion of expenditure could be dedicated to content and service quality.

News agencies use the social media first as a tool for news gathering, and then as a tool for distribution of contents. The main Twitter for AP is followed by over 10.6million people. The strong affiliation of AP with social media does not mean that the will break news on these platforms. According to Carvin, customers and member come first, "though we may distribute it (on social media) very quickly (within seconds). The fact is, at that point, if we don't tweet it, everyone else will anywhere-once it breaks, it's out there, and you can't put the genie back in the bottle."

News Flow in the Era of Social Media

Global news flow has continued and will continue to be a debatable subject in the field of international communication. The global attention given to this subject by communication expert is not unconnected with the imbalance that existed in global news flow, which is linked to the world system theory and the unequal economic structure of the world.

However, victims of this imbalance, particularly the third world countries, have now heaved a sigh of relief with the emergence of the social media. Social media, according to Griessner(2012) are websites and applications that enables users to create and share contents or to participate in social networking. And with the social media in place, global news flow has not only experienced a revolution, but a renaissance. The information flow gap that hitherto existed is no longer deep and is less threatening. News flow is now participatory. Writing on the impact of social media on the global news flow, Ekeanyanwu (2015) Opines that the features of social media network have no doubt changed the debate and focus of international communication when it comes to international news flow patterns. Consequently, the old changes of news bias, slanted portrayals and claims that certain places

and people are usually misrepresented, underreported or inaccurately reported are fast becoming moot. In fact, the advent for social media has given birth to media democratization-journalism of the people, by the people and for the people.

According Uwakwe (2012,p.7),”with the social media platforms, many people all over the world can produce and share information within McLuhan’s prophetic global village. If you are in Afghanistan or Libya, you can relay pictures and text friends via a simple phone with the right features on Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo, MySpace, etc”. For almost two decades, social media has been a catalyst for change in the way we communicate, search and consume information. The outcome of connecting online has expanded our sphere for free expression and dissemination of content, as well as bridged all geographical barriers.

As the world is undergoing through deep transformation at various social, political and cultural levels, global news flow is also reflecting this ever-changing socio-cultural alteration. With the ascension of huge social media platform like Facebook, Twitter, YouTude, WhatsAPP, LinkedIn and MySpace, social media have play a facilitating and fascinating role to bridge the audience worldwide to the world news flow and occurrences in the fastest way possible. Writing further on social media and global news flow, Ekeanyanwu (2015) submits that social media networks have led to the deconstruction of the structure of what was consider then as unique domestics news gathering and dissemination process. Supporting Ekeanyanwu’s view, De Beer (2010) opines that informal news institutions which serves as pervasive agents of globalization and universal alignment now tend toward democratisation. A recent study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) attempted to compare information flows between social media networks and mainstream media in The United States to argue that global news flow has not really changed much in the era of social media emergence and participation in the news flow process. The study found out that social media and the traditional media usually share the same agenda to some extent (Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters, 2017).

In other words, the social media is working hand-in-hand with the traditional news media. No doubts, social media sites have important search engines, driving traffic and revenue to traditional news media. Most news organization, according Newman (2009) are devoting significant resources to exploit social networks for the aforementioned purpose. This presupposes that social media are not replacing the mainstream journalism, but are creating an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion. Almost all news agencies have exploited the various social media platforms to disseminate news globally, and it is more penetrating and staggering than ever before in the history of mankind. Subscribing to this view, Idiong (2011) avers that almost every major newspaper has web edition, a practice that follows the trend set in many other part of the world. Griessner (2012) also adds that more at any time in history, with the emergence of social media, the consumers create their own contents, be it text, photographs, audio or video files that can easily be shared and networked among friends. It is almost impossible to argue that freedom offer by social media networks is the most powerful free expensive dimension of communication of the 21st century. The social media platform’s basic features of accessibility, proximity and interactivity enable news to circulate in more efficient and coherent way (Omojuwa, 2012).

The social media has significantly changed the way news is being reported from news organizations, and participation by “ordinary” citizens is so active. People are free to create their own space and publish their thoughts, perspectives or report happenings in their own way. With the social media news flow which hitherto tilted towards a North-South direction is almost eroded, and people in the Third World nations can counteract ‘the blanketing effect of the one-way flow’ (MacBride, 1981).

CONCLUSION

News agencies influence global news flow greatly. World's major news agencies are located in the west. These agencies determine global news flow in favor of the west and to the detriment of the third world. Modern news agencies have embraced the ICT in order to remain competitive and relevant in the industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Third World should stop the culture of complaints and work towards building robust wire services that can compete favourably with AP, UPI, AFP, and Reuters. The 'Big Four' should establish strong outlets in the Third World that can help report the Third World adequately and favourably.

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