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D I S C U S S I O N P A P E R

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY IN A

LIBERATED SOUTH AFRICA:

LESSONS FROM THE NEW WORLD INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to encourage discussion on future communications policy in a liberated South Africa. It is intended to rally pertinent bodies -the ANC's Department of International Affairs, the Constitutional Committee, COSAW, POTWA, the civics, relevant educational structures, alternative news services, small press, library and community resource centres, etc. and all workers involved in each-behind the basic perspectives and aims of the **New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO)**. The essential meaning of NWICO for national communications policy is that **the rights of receivers of information must take priority over the privileges of corporate distributors of information.**

BACKGROUND TO THE NEW WORLD INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS ORDER

At a 1976 Tunisian seminar of the Non-Aligned Movement, member states began formally discussing the gross inequities in global communications and information flow. The Western industrial powers, chiefly the United States, had almost total control in the crucial areas of news flow, television flow, advertising and technology.

UNESCO took on the New World Information and Communications Order as a serious endeavor. Its MacBride Report (One World, Many Voices), named after Sean MacBride, was just one of a multitude of volumes clearly documenting the inequities of global information flows and making recommendations to redress the problems.

NWICO's documentation and recommendations conflicted with another developing movement: the idea of the Information Society, which was gaining strength in the arena of capital, and had as a basic premise the privatization and exploitation of information flow. Adherents to this trend spoke continually of the need for a "free flow of information", a phrase traditionally used in the battle against censorship. Thus, the major communications conglomerates, with heavy ownership of computer, database, satellite, publishing, television and media sectors made an immediate link with those organizations exposing and combatting censorship.

The "free flow of information" became a principle in the service of other principles; that is, the ideals of anti-censorship are now employed as just another marketing strategy. As a result, genuine anti-censorship forces have become involved in a systemic problem that they do not necessarily believe in. Herb Schiller, probably the top scholar on official US communications policy, writes,

"The free flow of information principle has been one of the pillars of American imperial policy for nearly half a century. As it has functioned, it has facilitated a tidal wave of US corporate-produced media product and informational goods to sweep across the globe".

Beyond doubt it has been demonstrated over and over again that not only is "free flow" used to force US/Western media and communications products across the borders of other nations, the very opposite principle --censorship and protectionism-- is used to keep US and Western borders closed to the "free flow of ideas" from around the world.

Using the "free flow of information", a very strong coalition comprised of the US government (especially the State Department), the major news media conglomerates, and private lobbying groups such as the far-right Heritage Foundation and the World Press Freedom Committee, Western elites declared war on NWICO. UNESCO, especially its President (M'Bow), was continually denounced by the Western press and Foreign Secretaries as condoning government censorship of journalists and control of information.

The Heritage Foundation played a major role in this disinformation campaign (well-documented in the only major book on the subject, Hope and Folly). In 1985, Heritage's influence in the Reagan Administration was strong enough to lead to one of the major goals of the US far-right: US withdrawal from UNESCO. The justification for the withdrawal was based on completely fabricated premises that UNESCO's New World Information and Communications Order promoted government control over news coverage -most ironic in light of NWICO's call for an increase in news sources.

This coalition actively suppressed and disregarded the chief components of NWICO's work:

- *data transfer;
- *satellite domination;
- *the fundamental relationship between information flow and economy;
- *the very real effects of U.S. cultural products bombarding small, struggling countries attempting to foster a sense of national identity;
- *and the permanent role of disinformation in international destabilization.

SOUTH AFRICA, NWICO AND THE DOMESTIC AGENDA

Domestic aspects of a new communications policy must recognize, as James Barron describes, "that a right of expression is somewhat thin if it can be exercised only at the sufferance of the managers of mass communications." Not surprisingly, there already exists in South Africa an extensive network of domestic-level information and cultural resources: alternative press, newsletters, community resource centers, theater, music, etc. The development of this unofficial tier of national communications is directly linked to the cultural boycott. The boycott itself contributed to a flourishing cultural and information system. And while the cultural boycott may be in the process of de facto abolishment, **the principles and positions already debated and decided on in previous boycott discussions actually form the basis of a future domestic communications policy.**

Hence, it is not a question of developing domestic sources of ideas, news and communications -these exist in abundance- but rather of developing governing mechanisms that ensure the already existing resources have the capability of becoming THE national media. That is a policy issue. And as policy in South Africa should promote and enhance national identity and national dialogue, there must be **an emphasis on ensuring popular, reliable avenues to cultural, economic, political and social information:**

***Distribution networks for information products (ANC, COSAW, trade unions and civics can develop their own vendor system, a major component of privatized information capital in global communications);**

***Allocation of a significant percentage of the broadcast spectrum to non-commercial, community-based broadcasting;**

***Right of reply statutory guarantees in both print and broadcast media;**

***Anti-trust legislation to prevent huge concentrations of communications/media holdings in private firms**

SOUTH AFRICA, NWICO AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The relationship between a liberated South Africa and global communications is difficult. How does South Africa contribute to global exchange? And since the region of Southern Africa has experienced extensive **outside interference**, how does South Africa face the import/export of information and cultural products across its borders? Herb Schiller, who has witnessed many uninformed states form disastrous communications policies, lends this advice (which can and should be utilized by the liberation movement):

"A society would be well advised to review carefully the arguments for an open door for cultural products which are circulated in transnational media circuits."

A closed door communications policy (e.g., similar to that of Albania or North Korea) is not an option. The liberation movement has made it clear that it considers global relations, based on dialogue and exchange, to be of paramount importance to South Africa's future. On the other hand, if a liberated South Africa advocates an unregulated open door policy, the communications/entertainment/media conglomerates of the US (probably the strongest sector of its economy) will absolutely overwhelm South Africa with uni-directional flow of information/cultural products. The effects of this will be those both predicted and, more importantly, experienced by the strongest proponents of NWICO:

- a) cultural hegemony;
- b) transfer of vital data (raw economic data, capital transfers);
- c) an atmosphere ripe for destabilization via electoral and political disinformation, etc.

In this way, the decision to **loosen the cultural boycott and transform it into a more sophisticated communications policy** is directly linked to the issue of national sovereignty and liberation. The lessons of the past indicate that a free

South Africa must assert its true liberation well before the first national elections.

The question of an "open door" or "closed door" is complex enough to involve constitutional principles. For example, should the wealthy, influential right-wing blocs in the United States, which have racism as a basic principle, be able to disseminate materials that will help destabilize a young, liberated nation? How can South Africa refuse entry of materials without drawing the wrath (with its political and economical thorns) of powerful players from the North, who will surely cry "censorship"? The answer to such regulatory matters comes in the ANC's **constitutional models**, as advocated by Albie Sachs: anti-racism as a constitutional principle.

The anti-racism/anti-fascism clauses of previous discussion documents on constitutional matters will enhance future communications policy in keeping much of the destabilizing propaganda of international fascism from crossing the South African border. The **1988 Constitutional Guidelines** state in no uncertain terms that "the advocacy or practice of racism, fascism, nazism or the incitement of ethnic or regional exclusiveness or hatred shall be outlawed" (section k). This fundamental principle is further enhanced by the **Statement of Principles in the OAU's Harare Declaration of August, 1989**: "All shall have the right to form and join any political party of their choice, provided that this is not in furtherance of racism" (16.4).

Satellite broadcasts, video tapes, books, pamphlets, magazines, lecture series and the like must adhere to these principles. If exceptions are made to accommodate fascism and racism, pertinent sections of the Constitution and Bill of Rights run the risk of becoming hollow platitudes.

In addition to the realities of destabilization sponsored by external forces, communications policy in a liberated South Africa must remain subservient to those constitutional principles aimed at economic and cultural development. Private and foreign firms may engage in questionable activities in the import and export of informational products.

For example, what if a U.S. multinational seeking unhindered flow of raw economic data from its South African holdings invokes the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to protest those South African policies regulating the export of such data? If communications policy is based on South Africa's constitutional principles, and not the short-lived agenda of one administration or the next, South African sovereignty will not be compromised. Similarly, Western cultural products and news media have no right to dominate public airwaves or distribution networks under the same constitutional principles.

The ANC's April 1991 Constitutional Principles and Structures for a Democratic South Africa clearly give the state the constitutional authority to achieve these ends:

"National tasks would include external links and representation, defence and ensuring the basic security of the country, general economic, fiscal and tax policy, the creation of national policy framework and the furnishing of resources for eradicating racism and racial practices..."

The national government has **both the constitutional authority and the constitutional responsibility** to ground South Africa's economic and cultural interests in these principles. Such interests must be included in a national communications policy.

CONCLUSION

It is worth noting how South Africa fits into the larger neo-isolationist aims of the US right and the strategies employed to achieve such aims. This becomes obvious as relationships previously hidden come to light. For example, we know that the Heritage Foundation was essential to the US withdrawal from UNESCO in 1985 -a victory in its campaign to bring about the collapse of the UN. Heritage produced an impressive array of polemicals against NWICO and the UN in general, and these position pieces were adopted in their entirety by the Reagan Administration. Think of the connections between Heritage's work to destroy NWICO and its current participation in destabilizing South Africa via NED programs and the Council for National Policy, chiefly targeting the ANC. One has to respect the organization and strategies adopted by the US right. The goals, of course, are based on the wholly criminal premise that if the US cannot have complete control over a region and its resources, then no one else (most especially the local population) should have that capability.

NWICO has direct relevance to the organs of peoples' power in South Africa. The Postal and Telecommunications Workers Association, the civic organizations, the teacher and student bodies, community resource centres -basically the grass roots structures that are now and will be playing an important role in policy-making decisions in a liberated South Africa- must understand their capabilities to fulfill the responsibilities of their positions in a global framework. Without doubt, NWICO offers a basic model for understanding the global implications of communications policy. It is perfectly reasonable to implement a policy that neither contributes to the establishment of elite bureaucratic control over information nor opens a liberated South Africa to the international forces of destabilization and economic exploitation.