

Nov 04, 2016 by **Monroe E. Price**

Xinhua, China's Soft Power Initiative and the Return of the New World Information Order ^[1]


I've been tracking elements of China's complicated and ambitious policy of expanding its information sphere to a possibly waiting world. In late May, I heard Dr. Hu Zhengrong, one of China's most distinguished ambassadors to the international academic world, give a talk on this "going out" policy to the International Communications Association in Boston.

Then in early June, Li Congjun, president of the extraordinarily important Chinese global news service, *Xinhua*, published a statement in the *Wall Street Journal* as part of the process of being more public. In the opinion essay, Li declared a set of principles that, he thought, should govern information flows in the next several decades. The comments require study and scrutiny.

Li's first move was to place a question mark over current Western and global thinking concerning the regulation of the media:

The rules governing the international media order lag behind the times, especially compared to changes in politics and economics. The gap is seen, first and foremost, in the extremely uneven pattern of international communication. The flow of information is basically one-way: from West to East, North to South, and from developed to developing countries.

The piece was a not very veiled criticism of aspects of Article 19 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. Li harked back, perhaps not too surprisingly, to 1980, where the 21st General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sought to address "the imbalance and inequality in international news reporting" by calling "for a new order in international mass communication."


For many, invoking the New World Information and Communications Order debate flagged and begged the question of control: whether, without heavy state involvement, one can gain an information system that, in his aspiration, is "just, rational and balanced." Li did not mention the huge rift  the 1980s debate created (nerves are still raw), including the two-decade withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO.

In his *Wall Street Journal* essay, Li certainly shied away from the use of the various "c" words (control or censorship). Instead he called for another "c" word, superficially more palatable: "a set of more civilized rules to govern international mass communication." He invoked the game of bridge in which "wise and effective exchanges of information rely on collaboration and communication carried out in a fair and just manner."

Li's principles were fascinating. They included an idea of "fairness," namely that "media organizations from all countries should have the right to participate in international communication on equal terms." It is not clear what this means, but may suggest that decisions concerning international media regulation be the province of the General Assembly of the UN where all nations have a vote.

The quid pro quo would be that "those media organizations in turn should provide comprehensive, objective, fair, balanced and accurate coverage to minimize discrimination and prejudice." This is the kind of goal that has traditionally sounded beautiful, but is mired in the complexity of varied human perspectives. Deciding what is "fair and balanced" in a wildly polar world is, at the least, challenging.


It is not clear whether the *Xinhua* president is suggesting that where states do not provide "objective, fair, balanced and accurate coverage," they would no longer have the right to participate on equal terms in international communication. That might leave a small number of players.


A second principle is for "media organizations from different countries to share the fruits of development in information and communication industries, to play an active role in international mass communication, and to reverse the unbalanced situation where the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker." This is a significant goal, reflective of China's vigorous information-expansionist policy. The effort is interesting to look at in detail—as colleagues at Oxford University's PCMLP have done with respect to China's investment and promotional activity with media in Africa. 

Even more complex is Li's plea that "to maintain the world's diversity...media must respect the unique cultures, customs, beliefs and values of different nations; strive to dispel suspicions and remove barriers between different cultures and civilizations; enhance dialogue and communication; and seek common ground while putting aside differences."

This has elements of the contradictory. Truly to respect unique cultures is to report on their differences and understand efforts to homogenize, harmonize or suppress them. Otherwise journalism becomes a celebration of touristic or museum customs without a detailed sense of the deep conflicts that are characteristic or generative of so many current disputes. It will take a great deal of care to understand how *Xinhua*—or other news organizations—deal with these complexities.

Most connected to the issue of sovereignty, however, is Li's call for a particular kind of media "responsibility," namely that media organizations should not only ensure openness and transparency to promote the building of an open society, but also "keep to rational and constructive rules so as to turn mass communication into an active force for promoting social progress."

The call may be an appeal that media entities respect the wishes of the sovereign where their information is distributed. *Al Jazeera*, for example, would comply, or "respect," the rules of receiving states on questions of insult, blasphemy and similar standards—efforts encapsulated, for example, by the Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter .

I see echoes of this rising debate everywhere, as this issue of sovereignty and the structure of information flows is growing as a subject of concern and argument. For example, the nice summary  by David Bollier for the Aspen Institute's 25th Annual Conference on

Communications Policy quotes Robert Pepper of Cisco Systems: “We used to have this notion of the global Internet...We would talk about how the Internet violates sovereignty and isn’t that a good thing?—and that countries would not be able to control it. Well, guess what? Wrong! Countries are controlling it for a variety of good and bad reasons. Sovereignty still exists. It hasn’t disappeared.”

Li’s statement on responsibility should be read in the context of last year’s China Internet White Paper, brilliantly discussed by Rebecca MacKinnon. The White Paper was a longer, somewhat more careful and thorough discussion than Li’s of China’s general philosophy of what role a state should play in managing information.

That White Paper stressed the need for entities that did business in China to respect its rules, its laws, its filtering requirements. Li’s plea for constructive rules promoting social progress might have the equivalent vector. Time will tell (Secretary Clinton’s speeches on the Internet are relevant as a contrast).

The China Internet White Paper, too, had a significant nod for a role for the UN (in that case on Internet regulation). Li seeks to define a “media U.N.” He ultimately opts—in this soft-power essay—for a soft-power version of such an international role. “This can be a mechanism for global media exchanges and consultation, and it may evolve into an organization for coordination and maybe even arbitration.”

It is a positive step that Li is so publicly entering into an international debate, and there is a nice flourish to publish his opening gambit in the Wall Street Journal. His contribution will be useful, however, only if it is part of a process of engagement and strong discussion. In this respect, it will take a great deal for there to be common ground for discourse. Yoking his wagon of future thinking to the 1980 NWICO debate may be an unnecessary distraction. If the goal is to think of ways to engage in dialogue on these questions, raising the issue in this way may not have been the most appropriate opening gambit.
