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The Role of Intergovernmental Organizations in International Information Transfer and Policy

Robert V. Williams

■ The increasing complexity of the issues involved in the international free flow of information has had serious effects on the roles that intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have traditionally played in this area. This paper examines the roles of IGOs (with a focus on UNESCO) in the development of international information policy initiatives and international information transfer systems within the last 40 years. It concludes that even though very little progress has been made on international information policy issues, significant gains have taken place in the development of information transfer systems. Specific recommendations are made for continuing work in this area.

NOBEL laureate Kenneth Arrow once asked: "If one nation or class has the knowledge which enables it to achieve higher productivity, why are not the others acquiring that information." (1) There is, obviously, no simple answer to this question. And, as the world grows increasingly complex and information becomes a more valuable commodity, answers to his question take on new dimensions and become even more controversial than when he originally posed it in 1969.

The purpose of this paper is to address part—and I want to emphasize that it is

a small part—of the issue posed by Arrow. Specifically, I will examine the roles played by international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) over the last 40 years in the development of information transfer mechanisms and attempts to develop international information policy. Within this larger context, I will then consider the extent to which efforts in these two areas, information transfer and information policy, have considered and been influenced by the needs and contributions of special librarians around the world. This is a semi-historical critique and a review of current trends in these

areas. I will conclude with some recommendations as to how special librarians may play more vital roles in this increasingly important arena.

IGOs have been in existence for well over 100 years. During that time they have been influential in a variety of international affairs, ranging from peace keeping to preservation of antiquities. These organizations, as official bodies representing national member governments, have had both glowing successes and dismal failures. The range and variety of IGOs did not develop until after World War II with the formation of the United Nations and the affiliated specialized agencies. Since the late 1940s, there has been a blossoming of these organizations into a wide variety of types, sizes, and interest areas. Today, there are well over 500 individual IGOs, many of which have large subsidiary bodies with responsibility for specific geographical regions. (2)

Until recently, information-related issues have been of concern to only a few of these organizations. However, during the 1970s, as it became increasingly obvious that information was a valuable commodity and as international information transfer became more easily accomplished through sophisticated technology, these organizations began to take a keener interest in these issues. At the same time, the issues themselves became more complex. First, national governments of the developed world, interested in the protection of their own information, were posed against the concerns of the governments of lesser developed nations for a sharing of information for development. At the same time, the developing nations feared that their own nascent information industries, particularly the communications media, would be overwhelmed by the large multinational corporations (MNCs) of the developed nations. Mixed in with these concerns were the issues of privacy, censorship, copyright and patent protection, standards, and, most importantly, the free flow of information for scientific progress and the growth of democracy.

Despite the complexity of the issues involved, it appears possible to dichotomize them into two logical components: information transfer and information policy. Here, international information transfer will be defined as the processes and systems that promote the flow of information from the creating nation or organization to other nations or organizations. It will particularly include the issue of transborder data flow (TDF), which is probably the central issue in current discussions of international information problems. International information policy will be defined as those efforts by national governments and intergovernmental organizations to develop official policy or law for the transmission and receipt of information from outside national borders. It will become obvious very quickly that there have been far greater successes in dealing with problems of information transfer than with those relating to international information policy.

The Leadership of UNESCO

Even though the international transfer of information—primarily in the form of exchange agreements between libraries and scientific societies—has been a long-term phenomenon, the establishment of UNESCO in 1945 and the creation within it of a libraries program was to have a significant effect on international activities in this area. Through the development of programs for popular libraries, training of librarians for the developing countries, bibliographic control, establishment of library demonstration projects as part of educational programs, and, particularly, an emphatic stress on the importance of national library planning, UNESCO gave significant and long-term leadership in the area of international cooperation. Utilizing close ties with the two major international library associations, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the International Federation for Documentation (IFD), UNESCO had a significant effect

on the development of an international library community. The work of UNESCO during the period 1945 to 1980 centered on the development of a national library and information infrastructure within nations (with work being focused on the lesser developed nations) that would, when brought together in a unified system, constitute a worldwide bibliographical system that could be easily exchanged and shared to the profit of all. During these years, UNESCO supported over 700 missions to the developing nations to support a variety of technical assistance, educational, and planning efforts. (3)

As conceived by UNESCO in the late 1960s, this National Information System (NATIS) program emphasized the development of national library, archives, and documentation systems that could be integrated into one worldwide bibliographic and information system. Each nation would construct its own plans for bibliographical control, standards, manpower requirements, and national information policy. These plans would then be shared and coordinated with other nations in, first, regional and, eventually, in worldwide efforts. UNESCO sponsored a series of regional conferences, with the cooperation of the regional intergovernmental organizations, to foster these ideas and plans. The plan was an ambitious one. It would, at its best, lead to a long-term dream of librarians: Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC).

The NATIS program was—and, to some extent, still is—UNESCO's most systematic plan for the development of a worldwide information system. Many factors, however, would work against successful implementation. An immediate problem was the structure of the library/information program within UNESCO itself. Originally created as a part of the Department of Cultural Affairs, issues related to the development of scientific and technical information and mass communications media were not integrated with the library and bibliographical issues. A reorganization in 1967, creating a separate division of Doc-

umentation, Libraries and Archives, was of some assistance in joint progress on library development and scientific and technical information, but separate programs for the two were maintained until 1977 when the General Information Program (PGI) was created.

Efforts by UNESCO to establish leadership in the area of scientific and technical information began in the late 1960s, but were under the auspices of the Science Sector of UNESCO and not the library programs section. This meant that, from the beginning, scientific documentation and library planning issues were separated within UNESCO and, as time passed, increasingly competitive for scarce resources. The UNISIST I conference in 1971, planned in cooperation with the International Council of Scientific Unions, was an effort to begin the construction of an international information system in this area. Regional conferences to promote and expand the idea resulted in the decision to focus on the building of a worldwide system of scientific and technical information for development. The UNISIST II conference of 1979 solidified this approach and established the necessity of developing national and international information policy to aid the building of systems that would lead to the flow of appropriate information and technology to the developing nations.

The combining of the UNISIST and NATIS programs into PGI of UNESCO in 1977 gave hopes that the two formerly competing programs would now receive equal and integrated attention. This was—and still is—the intent of UNESCO. Significant events, however, have intervened that make the realization of dreams such as UBC and a worldwide science information system much more difficult to accomplish than in earlier years. Foremost among these have been events fostered by UNESCO for the development of national and international information and communication policies. As a result of these efforts, UNESCO has come under increasing attack by the developed nations for “selling out” to the lesser developed nations and the Soviet

bloc countries, and, according to its critics, stifling the free flow of information. The U.S. government, under President Reagan, has been one of the chief critics. In 1984, the U.S. withdrew from membership in UNESCO because of the perceived lack of responsiveness to these complaints. Other nations have also withdrawn and some have reduced contributions. The overall effect has been a severe curtailment of efforts in all of these vital areas. Progress through UNESCO on information transfer and information policy now look very bleak.

The Development Issue: Dependence, Independence, and Interdependence

Any understanding of the current lack of progress on these issues is predicated on an understanding of the larger world of economic development and development theory. Modernization theory was the first significant proposal for addressing the needs of poor countries. Developed in the 1950s, the general concept was that as the poor nations of the world developed their economies they would become "modern," and benefits would begin to trickle down even to the poorest in the country. These countries would also develop modern communications and information systems, and be able to both create and receive the world's knowledge. By the 1960s, it had become evident that modernization theory was not working as presumed and, indeed, the poor nations were becoming even poorer. More importantly, even in countries where economic growth was respectable, social and educational developments were likely to lag far behind, and income redistribution within nations was frequently worse than before. From the viewpoint of these nations, it was clear that a patron/client relationship was clearly the case between the poor and rich nations. This "dependency theory" led to aggressive political action within the United Nations by these countries, and they demanded, through such infor-

mal organizations as the "Group of 77," significant changes in what was perceived as economic and cultural imperialism. Specifically, there was a demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that would recognize and redress this inherently unjust international system. (4) Most of the proposals were economic in nature, such as lower credit rates and support prices for raw materials, but integral to the NIEO was the conclusion that a different approach had to be taken on the development of communications and information systems.

Thus, the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) concept came to dominate the debate in the areas of communications and information policy. Essentially, the NWICO called for the same kind of drastic restructuring of information and communications systems as NIEO had for economic systems. Observing that the developed nations controlled the international news and communications systems, and were the possessors of valuable scientific and technical information needed for development, the lesser developed nations called for equity and reciprocity. A variety of issues are involved in the call for NWICO, and, while they have mostly been aired in the context of UNESCO meetings, they also relate directly to the work of many other IGOs, such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Intergovernmental Bureau for Informatics (IBI), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and many others. Central to the call for NWICO are three interrelated issues: changes in control of the worldwide telecommunications network by the developed nations, an insistence on sovereignty and internal control over the content and flow of information within the nation, and availability of appropriate information and technology for development. (5) Suprenant's recent summary of these trends and issues is appropriately titled "Global Threats to Information." (6) The threats, however, are two-sided ones. The lesser developed nations feel that there must be a drastic restructuring

of the communications and information systems in their favor. The developed nations, principally led by the transnational corporations that own the systems, have reacted very negatively to these issues, seeing them as attempts to license, control, or restrict the free flow of information.

Thus, in a very real sense, we have a stalemate on international information policy and no clear indications as to how we might resolve these complex issues. The response of the U.S., particularly from the current administration, has been one that is passive or, as in the case of our withdrawal from UNESCO, reactionary. Some have suggested that one possible way out of the dilemma is the development of our own national information policy, as a number of other nations have already done. The hope is that this would give direction as to how we might proceed in helping develop an international information policy. (7) At this time, however, there is little indication of progress in that direction.

The Rise of International Information Systems

That there is a stalemate on international information policy cannot be questioned. Equally certain, however, is the increasing growth and influence of international information systems that aid in the transfer of information. Many of these systems are commercial ones, operated by both old and new companies of the now worldwide information economy. More striking and perhaps more important to eventual resolution of international information policy issues is the development of the information systems of the IGOs. It is my view that these organizations present us with an excellent opportunity for continued effectiveness in international information transfer and a possible avenue for the resolution of policy issues.

Information systems of IGOs are not, of course, a new development. They have been around a long time, dating back at

least to the Pan American Union and, later, the League of Nations. What is new is the increasing variety and sophistication of these networks. Perhaps even more important, however, is the cooperative nature of these networks and the hope that they portend for increased mutual sharing between developed and developing nations. A 1980 study of the information systems in the U.N. family of IGOs (a total of about 15 separate organizations) showed that there were over 200 independent systems. (8) No systematic study of the information systems of the other IGOs has been made, but my beginning study of them shows that there are at least another 200 significant ones scattered among these non-U.N.-related organizations. (9) These systems include libraries, bibliographical services, databases, clearinghouses, referral centers, and information analysis centers.

Because these systems have been created by IGOs, most of which have developed and developing nations as members, they have been very responsive to a variety of different national problems. As Neelameghan and Tocatlian have pointed out, these systems also have greater legitimacy with the developing nations because of their formation under the auspices of the U.N. (10) These systems promise to have great influence on the development of information transfer and policy by giving decision makers access to high-quality information not otherwise affordable, by compensation to the poor nations who lack the resources and infrastructure to develop their own systems, and by structuring the information needed by these nations in terms that are specific to the language and culture of the nations.

The information systems of IGOs vary in quality, but the best are as good as any that have been created by private or public organizations in the developed world. Such systems as INIS of the International Atomic Energy Agency, AGRIS of the Food and Agriculture Organization, INFOTERRA of the U.N. Environment Programme, and World

Weather Watch of the World Meteorological Organization are shining examples of this cooperation at work. They are based on international decentralized networks for input and output—networks that are located in both developed and developing nations. Through these model systems, significant information transfer is taking place, and there is great potential for even further progress. At the 1982 U.N. Conference on Science and Technology for Development, plans were laid for the formation of a Global Information Network for Scientific and Technological Information. The Global Information Network concept is aimed at: strengthening existing information systems, specialized training of personnel, development of standards and tools for information handling, and improvement of the information and communications technology for support of the network. (11) At the present time, it is more of an idea than a reality; but, with the cooperation and assistance of both developed and developing nations, it has great promise.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The International World of the Special Librarian

The fact that the world of information services has changed dramatically since 1945 no longer surprises any of us. What is surprising is the fact that we have made so little progress in the development of information policy for the equitable creation and sharing of the vast information resources available to us. Our information transfer systems are now sophisticated and powerful, thanks to technological development and dedicated information workers, but we now face the likelihood that these systems will be thwarted by our inability to come to grips with the political, economic, ideological, and equalitarian issues that face us at the present time.

It is my view that the intergovernmental organizations—with the help of nongovernmental organizations—offer the best hope for continued development of superior information transfer systems *and* for the equitable resolution of information policy issues. To this end, special librarians worldwide—but particularly those of the U.S. and Canada—have significant roles to play in future events related to international information transfer and policy. This was largely not the case in earlier years when the predominant emphasis (particularly within UNESCO) was on literacy programs, popular libraries, and cataloging rules. The multimillion dollar world of transborder data flow, the development of international business and science information systems, and, particularly, our increasingly interdependent world have made it essential that we take a more active role.

Fortunately, special librarians have already taken active leadership in some of these areas. Our colleagues in spirit—if not yet in membership—in the libraries and information centers of the IGOs have played a vital role in the development of the model information systems of AGRIS, INIS, and others. The development of online databases, specialized information services, and cooperative networks are evidence of their impact.

Within our professional associations, we must now begin to take more than a passing interest in these issues. We need to consider action on at least the following kinds of activities:

1. Appointment of standing committees on international relations. For each association, this committee should include any representatives to IFLA, FID, the UNESCO PGI observer, and at least five persons from a general membership. The committee should establish liaison with similar committees from other associations that represent the interests of special librarians and information managers;

2. Increased participation and involvement by association representatives to IFLA and FID in the affairs of these organizations. Associations should assist the representatives financially in attending all meetings of these organizations;
3. The establishment by the professional associations of observer status with other IGOs working actively in the areas of international information transfer and policy, such as ITU, IBI, WIPO, ISO, FAO, and the UN itself;
4. Begin efforts to recruit the librarians and information managers of the information systems within the IGOs to membership in national and international professional associations. Membership should be offered at a significant discount to information specialists in IGOs located in the lesser developed nations;
5. Continue and intensify efforts within the U.S. for the development of a national information policy that recognizes the legitimate needs of the U.S. and the lesser developed nations and promotes an equitable distribution of information resources worldwide.

When Kenneth Arrow posed his question about the inequitable distribution of knowledge across nations in 1969, he also partially answered it by noting that both economic and interpersonal factors have a great deal to do with the problem. Technological knowledge, he said, was both the result as well as the cause of economic change. The effective transmission of this knowledge, while partially dependent on the development of expensive international systems, is ultimately most affected by interpersonal contacts between those already possessing and using the knowledge and those that need the knowledge. Because of the expense involved in international interpersonal contacts, they are naturally much less common than within nation

contacts. Technology, however, is rapidly lowering the costs of these kinds of contacts and we must be ready to use them to the mutual advantage of special librarians around the world. Through greater cooperation and participation in the affairs of the international organizations, particularly the IGOs, we can break down the barriers that have led to the current state that some have called an "information war." Even more important, however, is the need for each of us, as dedicated information professionals, to increase our awareness of international information issues and our involvement with special librarians worldwide.

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