Toward A System Approach to International News Communication Research: 
A Quest For Shifting The Research Paradigms and Moving Beyond 
the New International Information Order Debate

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to call for a paradigm change in the research field of 
international news communication. The first part of this paper deals with a review 
of the studies related to the New World Information Order debate. In the second 
section, a brief background discussion about the emerging system paradigm is provided. 
A set of assumptions and postulates derived from the proposed theory of social 
propinquity in international news communication are presented in the third part.

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Western theories of human development, both Marxist and liberal democratic, proceed from a shared assumption that the development of societies requires that modern economic and social organization replace traditional structures. ... But contemporary movements around the world, whether in groups, communities, or nations, all share an alternative vision of human and societal development. This “third way” eschews both Marxism and liberal democracy. It has its roots in more humane, ethical, traditionalist, anti-bloc, self-reliance theories of societal development. In short, the “third way” seeks not to promote itself or its ideology; it seeks dignity through dialogue. It is the quest for dialogue that underlies the current revolutionary movements around the world.

— Hamid Mowlana, 1986, p. 212

The purpose of this paper is three-fold: First, to review the current research on international news communication, particularly studies associated with the so-called New International Information Order debate. Secondly, to propose an alternative research framework for future international news studies by briefly scrutinizing the background of the General System Theory (GST). And finally, based on the concepts derived from the system theory, a set of assumptions and hypotheses are provided constructing a theoretical perspective called “social propinquity.” In essence, this theory stresses an interactive model, suggesting that relationships between two or more nations determine the volume of news flows. That is, the more similar the backgrounds of two nations, the closer the social and cultural relationships become, and therefore, the more news exchanges between two such countries. Conversely, the more disparate the backgrounds of two nations, the less news flow between these two nations. With such a teleology, emphasizing social relativity, to be pursued, it is hoped that current gaps between the two competing research paradigms (the Western libertarianism and the neo-Marxism) will be narrowed.

This study will begin with an introductory section which traces the roots of the international news research that has flourished in the last decade or two. First, an opening account of the New World Information Order (NWIO) debate will be presented and opinions held by scholars associated with the three “generations” in this debate will be described briefly. Second, a short delineation of the theoretical background of the systems theory will be followed by an outline of the proposed system perspective in international news studies.
1. Research on the NWIO Debate

For more than three decades a large body of research literature has been produced in the area of international news communication, ranging from studies examining the amount and type of news to those characterizing and detailing conflicts and disputes in the system from which the news originated. According to a recently released bibliographic account (Mowlana, 1985a), the “nearly geometric progression” in the research field of international news communication has yielded 441 papers, articles, reports, book chapters, and books between 1973 and 1983. Similarly, my own inventory shows that, in the period of 1980-1986 alone, book-form publications on international news have totalled over 40.

Frequently accompanying this dramatic expansion in volume and sophistication of scholarly productions, however, have been symptoms of a theoretical vacuum (i.e., Hur, 1980, 1983, 1984; Blumler, 1985; Smith, 1956; Sparkes & Winter, 1980; Tsang, 1985a, 1985b; Schramm, 1963) and ideological confrontations among scholars (i.e., Chu, 1985; Nwosu, 1983; Rosengren, 1983, 1985; Rogers and Balle, 1985) are still lingering in the field. As Hur remarked (1980): “Despite the plethora of research in international communication . . . there has been little systematic attempt to accurately reflect ‘the state of the art’ in research and theory in pertinent areas of international communication . . . As a result, international communication as a field of the study remains largely undefined and fragmented across different disciplines” (Hur, 1980, p. 1; emphasis added).

In a way, the current growth on international news research owes much of its origin to the so-called “Great Debate” (Gunter, 1978) on the New World Information Order (NWIO), which, according to Schramm (1980), has probably produced “more heat than light” in the last decade. Stimulated primarily by Third World nations’ call for more balance in international news flow, criticisms of Western media’s news practices began to surface in the mid-1970s and initially centered on two fundamental issues: Quantitatively, developing nations, particularly members of the Non-Aligned Movement (cf. Gunter, 1978, p. 147), charged that there was only a minimal amount of news about developing nations appearing in the Western media. Specifically, these media were criticized as containing too much coverage of the West and too little information about the developing regions or other parts of the Third World. Qualitatively, the accusations focused on the allegation that Western mass media, especially those international wire services and some major domestic news machines whose influences extend beyond the borders of one country (such as the New York Times), deliberately ignored the positive accomplishments of developing nations in political, economic, and social development and devoted their coverage, inaccurately and incompletely, to nothing but “bad” news — catastrophes, violations, and wars (cf. Masmoudi, 1979). As Rosenblum (1977) summarized:

The Western press gives inadequate and superficial attention to the realities of developing countries, often infusing coverage with cultural bias. The traditional emphasis on the dramatic, the emotional and the amusing — the “coupes and earthquakes” syndrome — is seen not only as unbalanced but also as detrimental to the development process . . . . The Western monopoly on the distribution of news . . . amounts to neo-colonialism and cultural domination.

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Interestingly, such rhetoric, after gaining popularity and becoming a “dogma” (Giffard, 1984, p. 14) that could be heard in conference after conference, was quickly followed by academics from all fields of interests whose concerns over the “free flow” of information not only refined but also expanded the scope of the debate. At least before the early 1980s, a large number of quantitative studies were conducted in order to either confirm (i.e., Beltrán and de Cardona, 1977; Harris, 1974; Hester, 1971, 1974; Lent & Rao, 1979; Larson, 1979a, 1984; Nnemeka, 1978; Pinch, 1978a; Richstad, 1978; Schramm, 1978; Semmel, 1976; also see Legum and Cornwell, 1978) or deny (i.e., al-Mujahid, 1970; Bishop, 1975; Hicks and Gordon, 1974) the presumption that there were indeed various inadequacies resulting from the world “dominance-dependency syndrome” – a problem established in previous colonial eras but continuing to be maintained by the developed countries in dealing with developing societies (Nnemeka and Richstad, 1980, p. 235). Later, other researchers pursued related issues by tackling more specific subjects such as whether the U.S. media were intrinsically crisis-oriented when reporting foreign events (Coffey, Frerich, and Bishop, 1977; Giffard, 1984; Rimmer, 1981; Winter, Ghaffari, and Sparkes, 1982) or whether such negative propensity of news coverage is directed to the Third World specifically (Charles, Shore, & Todd, 1979; Peterson, 1981; Pinch, 1978b; Riffe & Shaw, 1982; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1981; Wilhoit & Weaver, 1983).

Findings derived from these pieces of work are far from being conclusive; in fact, many results, if not most, have been divergent, conflicting with each other, and thus lacking generalizability (Hur, 1984, p. 370; Mowlana, 1985b, p. 7; Richstad and Sathre, 1977, p. 5). In essence, three “generations” of news studies, to borrow Collins’ terminology (1984), can be identified as related to the NWIO debate. Of course, the grouping of these “generations” does not mean that studies were produced chronologically or successively; rather, this is a general categorization based on the nature of previous studies in the area of international news communication.

The First Generation

Evident primarily during the mid-1970s, the first generation was probably represented by researchers who held sympathetic attitudes toward, and thus were in support of, the developing nations’ urgings for a “free flow of information.” One frequent topic was targeted at the selective and “biased” characteristic of the current global media structure, namely, international news is Europocentric and pro-Northern nations, with a tendency to create negative pictures of the 3rd World.

For example, Larson’s decade-long efforts in assessing three U.S. television networks’ world affairs coverage concluded that, among other things, 1. the major feature of network television’s news geography is a pattern of hierarchy and extreme concentration in which developing nations receive less coverage than developed nations; 2. there is proportionately more crisis reporting from developing nations than from developed nations; and 3. developing nations are covered most often in connection with the United States or with other developed nations (1984, p. 146; also see 1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1982; Larson and Hardy, 1977).

Lent, another American scholar who has frequently promoted the assertion that international news coverage and usage by U.S. mass media contains too many crisis and sensational items, suggested in a study co-authored with Rao (1979) that “The emphasis on political-governmental and crisis-trivia news from Asia [by the American
media] lends some support to the Asian and Third World view that not much coverage is being given to the “incremental, the casual, the imperceptible shifts in the affairs of man that cumulatively more often than not share life on our planet” (pp. 21-22). In Lent’s view (1977), this type of uneven news treatment clearly portrays the West’s “deep disillusion with nearly all post-colonial societies, as well as the Western assumption that the West is still the ultimate arbiter of the rest of the world” (p. 47).

Following the same logical structure but obviously more “radical” (cf. Rosenzweig, 1985) in their panoramic view of the world, scholars linked to the critical school interpreted the nature of the NWIO debate by largely relying upon such theoretical frameworks as dependency theory (Buijtenhuijs & Baesj, 1974, cited in Mowlana, 1985a; Galtung, 1971; Nnemeka & Richstad, 1980, 1981), hegemony theory (Alraba, 1986; Gitlin, 1980; Pollock, 1978; also compare Altheide, 1984), electronic colonialism (McPhail, 1981); media imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 1977b; Gurevitch, Bennett, Curran, and Woollacott, 1982; Tunstall, 1977b); and cultural imperialism (Murdock and Golden, 1977; Schiller, 1976; also cf. Lee, 1980), which were all, in one way or another, developed from Marx’s theories of class conflict and Lenin’s arguments about imperialism. For example, Boyd-Barrett (1977b) defined media imperialism as “the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected” (p. 117). Two features, according to the same author, characterized this unequal process: First, there is a uni-directional nature of international media flow between, say, the United States and a Third World nation. Second, associated with this one-way flow of information is the situation in which a small number of countries control a very substantial number of international media and become the “global news wholesalers” (Boyd-Barrett, 1977a).

Similarly, Hall (1982) defined hegemony as “the dominance of certain formations [which] was secured, not by ideological compulsion, but by cultural leadership” (emphasis added; p. 85). As he wrote:

[Hegemony] circumscribed all those processes by means of which a dominant class alliance or ruling bloc . . . extends and expands its mastery over society in such a way that it can transform and re-fashion its ways of life, its mores and conceptualization, its very form and level of culture and civilization in a direction which . . . favours the development and expansion of the dominant social and productive system of life as a whole” (emphasis original; 1982, p. 85).

To these critical scholars, the potential influences of the debate are certainly not limited to what it implies rhetorically, or in policy contexts (see Richstad and Anderson, 1981). In fact, the new order has been frequently conceptualized as part of the class struggle aimed at challenging and reshaping the infrastructure of the world media systems (Hallowan, 1981, p. 33; Legum and Cornwell, 1978, p. 36; Naesslund, 1975, p. 68). Nordensteng, for example, argued that the new order represents “a radical program to change the world, pointing toward a global structure not far from Lenin’s theory of imperialism” (cited in Abel, 1985, p. 161). An earlier piece by Baran and Sweezy (1966) was even more straightforward:
The United States dominates and exploits to one extent or another all the countries and territories of the so-called 'free world' and correspondingly meets with varying degrees of resistance. The highest form of resistance is revolutionary war aimed at withdrawal from the world capitalist system and the initiation of social and economic reconstruction on a socialist basis... It is no longer mere rhetoric to speak of the world revolution: the term describes what is already a reality and is certain to become increasingly the dominant characteristic of the historical epoch in which we live. (cited in Haight, 1984, pp. 101-102; emphasis added).

Schiller, another articulate spokesman of those within American academia who share a critical perspective, has pioneered in characterizing the ideological domination as the capitalist countries' weapon in reforming world communication establishments as well as cultural patterns. In an attempt to put forth his theoretical interpretation of cultural imperialism, in which he denounced "almost all forms of Western communication styles and systems (including tourism, media technology, professional value, and educational training) as totally unacceptable to the Third World nations" (cited in Lee, 1980, p. 38), he once wrote: "The free flow of information, reinforced by economic power, has led to a worldwide situation in which the cultural autonomy of many (if not most) nations is increasingly subordinated to the communications outputs and perspectives of a few powerful, market-dominated economies" (1974, p. 116).

Schiller contended that it is the corporate interest of the powerful communication nations, such as the United States, that dominate international communication and thus threaten the cultural sovereignty of vulnerable developing nations (Schiller, 1971, 1981; also cf. Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974; Tunstall, 1977a, 1977b). In line with this observation, Schiller (1971) further denounced the so-called American communication empire which, in his opinion, is in fact a part of the military and industrial complex and significance of the worldwide U.S. media domination in that its policies stem directly from U.S. military and foreign policy (Cf. Becker, 1977). And Third World nations, as Schiller continued, have not been able to defend themselves against the "communications onslaught of the West" (cited in Hachten, 1981, p. 105).

In sum, the general tenor of these researchers' attacks, whether arising from a neo-Marxist viewpoint or not, was unequivocally explicit: the current international news flow was largely a one-way and uneven operation dominated by mass media systems in a small number of countries. The coverage of Third World or developing nations by these media was indeed frivolous, inadequate, and oversensational. Unless a free and "balanced" news transaction can be guaranteed across nations, developing nations' newly earned political independence and economic decolonization will again be shadowed by the rich countries' control over news content as well as news channels.

The Second Generation

In contrast to the diversified subject matter produced by the studies involved in the first generation, the output of the second camp, on the whole, was relatively more direct and easier to understand. As a group, these researchers, mostly Western and largely American scholars (i.e., Atwood and Bullion, 1982; Bishop, 1975; Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986; Giffard, 1984; Haque, 1983; Hachten and Beil, 1985; Meeske

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and Javaheri, 1982; Schramm and Atwood, 1981; Weaver, Porter, and Evans, 1984), launched their own wave of empirical research projects with a simple goal in mind—that is, to invalidate the debate by proving that no wrongdoings could be detected in the distribution of international news flows. Efforts, therefore, were oftentimes made to locate determining factors of news flow outside news organizations or news structure. In most cases, these studies purported more to refute the allegations stated earlier by critical scholars than to renew any theoretical insight or to expand the current theoretical models. In English's words (1982, p. 178), researchers in this camp are mostly "American detractors" who tried to draw the lines for a "skirmish" by using their research as a "tactical poly."

For example, Stevenson & Smith (1982) examined two U.S. newsmagazines' coverage of Mexico and Lebanon by using Osgood's method of specifying cross-cultural differences in the subjective meanings of words. Their result: "[W]e find no evidence to support the argument that the Third World is covered in mostly negative ways. In this case, using subjective meanings of words associated with the two countries, we find a strong positive cultural meaning, a somewhat less strong but still positive image of power and essentially a neutral coverage of activity" (p. 12; emphasis added). Similar conclusions were repeatedly generalized by Stevenson and his colleague in another set of reports which were all derived from the IAMCR project on international news flow,* including:

- The assertion that the Western agencies ignore the Third World in regional service to those parts of the world is simply not true. The Industrialized West is less prominent in these services than the audience region, and in general, North America gets less attention than Europe (Stevenson and Cole, 1980, p. 17; emphasis added).

- Foreign [news] coverage in the United States press and in in [sic] its coverage of Latin America in particular does not, as has often been alleged, concentrate on 'bad news.' Most of the material deals with international politics, domestic affairs, economics and to a surprising degree to news of education, science and culture (Stevenson, Cole, & Ahern, 1980, p. 13; emphasis added).

- In this analysis, we have found that the issue of bad news from the Third World is more complex than the rhetoric suggests. News from the Third World does contain more conflict than news from the West, but a large part of that imbalance results from decisions of Third World editors who over-select it from the large and diverse menu available to them. And to the extent that conflict is newsworthy, the imbalance is often a reflection of events: there is more international conflict in the Third World than in the rest of the world (Stevenson and Gaddy, 1982, p. 20; emphasis added).

- The argument that the Third World is singled out for special treatment is also not supported by data. News emphasizing politics is by and large the standard all over the world (Stevenson, Cole, and Shaw, 1980; p. 20; emphasis added).

With these and other studies at hand (i.e., Ahem, Jr., 1984; Haynes, 1984), Stevenson concluded (1984):

This study suggests that the ideological rhetoric is misplaced in three ways. First, many of the charges against the Western media and news services are without evidence to support them. Second, the lack of difference among media of very different political systems argues against the theory of cultural imperialism. And third, much of the rhetoric addresses outdated questions (p. 137).
Slightly different conclusions were published by Weaver and Wilhoit, the other team of the American researchers in charge of the IAMCR survey, who, unlike Stevenson, concentrated on evaluating the performances of the two U.S. wire services—the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). Their findings were generally in tune with Stevenson’s, except they did find more crisis and violent news stories from underdeveloped nations than from developed countries (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1981). In an update study conducted two years later (Wilhoit and Weaver, 1983), they traced the flow of international news from these two wires to a sample of 11 small dailies in Indiana and found the similar pattern still holds. That is, the tendency of wire services to give more frequent coverage to news of conflict in developing nations was “enhanced by the even greater proportionate use of such dispatches by [these small] newspapers” (p. 143). In yet another study designed to detect changes overtime in the two U.S. news wire services’ coverage of Third World nations, Kirat and Weaver (1985) concluded that news of internal conflict and crisis declined dramatically, especially for the less-developed countries, from about 47 percent in 1979 to 10 percent in 1983 (p. 39).

Another prolific writer in the second camp was Sussman, executive director of Freedom House, a New York-based national organization devoted to strengthening free institutions around the world (Sussman, 1982b). Like Stevenson academically, Sussman politically represents the group who outspokenly rejected the Third World’s claims in free flow of information issues. He charged that projects encouraged by UNESCO have “tended to ‘deepen’ the confusion by emphasizing numbers, without crediting the great diversity of subjects and earnest striving for neutrality in the Western media” (1981b, p. 4).

In defending the Western news systems, Sussman added “No matter how poorly some independent commercial media may function, they are far less threatening than even the most benign government press-controller. He has the police power of the state backing up his editorial commands. There are no restraints on his distortions, and save for dissidents who risk imprisonment, rarely a questioner to inject a contrary thought” (1982b, p. 21). Here, Sussman considered the NWIO debate part of an attempt by the Soviet Union and its allies to legitimize their own press policies and news structures (Cf., Sussman, 1981a, 1981c, 1981/82, 1982a; also Aggarwala, 1981, p. xvii). Likewise, Sussman distinguishes the Third World journalists’ request for independent control of the news-making process, which he labelled as “development journalism,” from a “government-say-so” form which was broadly supported by the Soviet bloc to increase the government’s role in controlling the press. “Development journalism grew up in the 1960s in Asia . . .” Sussman once wrote. “[It] was created by journalists to improve their skills. What we have called ‘developmental journalism’ is advanced by government and imposed on journalists to control the press” (1977, p. 77). His definition of development journalism is also different from the so-called “positive” news/journalism (Aggarwala, 1979). As he stated, “Development journalism is concentration by objective journalists on the news, the newness, of developments in education, agriculture, industry, communications, and applied science; developments that leaders hope will eventually produce economic success and a secure sense of national unity” (1980, p. 87; emphasis original).5

A number of analytic studies appeared in the early 1980s as the West launched its own pragmatic mainstream response to the challenge from the Third World over communication issues (Richstad and Anderson, 1981, p. 151; Smythe, 1982). Nwoso
(1983) and Cioffi-Revilla and Merritt (1981/2), for instance, questioned both the connotative and denotative meanings of such a "balanced flow" of international information, while Ansah (1984) added: "Third World does not fit into the commercial structure and profit ethic; the present structure itself precludes international fair play . . . Third world editors themselves must learn to emphasize positive development" (p. 84). Hachten (1981) and Merrill (1981), on the other hand, argued that it is unrealistic and "naive" to expect news to flow in a balanced way between or within nations since "unevenness of flow is a basic characteristic of news" (Merrill, 1981, p. 156). As Abel (1985) further explained:

News is perverse. It will not flow evenly. A great deal more news, for example, flows from Paris to Ouagadougou than from Ouagadougou to Paris. This regrettable lack of symmetry can and must be put right, some Third World spokesman [sic] suggest, by proclaiming a new world information order. What about the lack of symmetry in news flow between one region and another within the same country? Why does so much more news from New Delhi to Ponna than flows from Poona to New Delhi? Or from Pine Ridge, Arkansas, to New York? These are not wholly frivolous questions (p. 150).

To sum up, a smaple of studies included here has shown that the concerted efforts by the libertarian researchers have attempted to deny and reject the Third World's charge that the flow of international news was primarily one way and limited. In doing so, researchers often cite supportive empirical findings contradictory to what makes the new order an important issue. Finally, these studies maintained that it has been merely a "pseudo debate" and that the assertions against the Western media "were [simply] never true and are certainly no longer true" (Stevenson, 1984, p. 137).

The Third Generation

Also emerging in the early 1980s was another group of studies which, generally speaking, did not hold any particular theoretical groundwork but rather took a neutral stand in the debate by, on the one hand, acknowledging the validity of arguments held by each side but still, on the other hand, criticizing the statements made by earlier researchers as being mostly doctrinaire and ideological-directed (i.e., Ansah, 1984; Berger, 1982; Blumler, 1985; Chu, 1985; Rosengren, 1985). This alternative school of thought also considered the intellectual basis for both neo-Marxists and libertarians ethnocentric and parochial and therefore failed to advance our knowledge about the flow of world news. Repeatedly, scholars have called for more theoretical integrations and synthesizes in the field, emphasizing the urgency of developing a "third" or alternative model for international news research (i.e., Chu, 1985; Hur, 1984; Mowlana, 1986; Cf. Gudykunst, 1985).

For example, Atwood and Murphy (1982), in their assessment of the implementation of the NWIO debate, suggested calling the debate "a dialogue of the deaf" because the arguments involved constantly "degenerated into juxtaposed monologues" by both sides (p. 13; also see Lange, 1984, p. 71). By the same token, Okigbo (1985; 1986) felt that the debate was "without much substance," failing to produce any mature and judicious discussion, and was more emotional than factual. Lange (1984)
then considered both criticisms “the results of the same socio-cultural fallacy (or cultural myopia): judging the products of one culture by the values of another” (emphasis added; p. 69). John Rex, a British sociologist, went even further by stating that the debate has gone “astray,” and the confrontation between opposing scholars is similar to the “religious wars of the past” (cited in Halloran, 1981, p. 39). To these researchers, moreover, the debate has obviously widened the hiatus, rather than closing the gaps, between the “warring schools” in the field. For one thing, as Nwoso (1983) observed, “there is a clearly drawn line of conflict between studies done by researchers sympathetic to the Western point of view of perspective in the debate and those done by researchers sympathetic to the Third World perspective” (p. 85). Mowlana’s recent work (1986) noted that the field of communication research has been the victim of either pure positivism or crude ideological orientation and biases. “If there is to be a correction in communication imbalance,” claims Mowlana, “we need no less than a new order in communication research” (emphasis added; 1986, p. 201).

In order to reduce the antagonistic attitudes toward each other, Berger (1982) suggested it is important that researchers be fully aware and avoid the terrible pitfall of being doctrinaire. Atwood and Murphy (1982), on the other hand, called for a truce between the two rigid camps, stressing that each side must first stop attacking others for what they have done or failed to do, and instead, ask what each has to contribute (p. 15). Similarly, while expressing his concerns over the “myopic and immanent lack of ecumenism in much of present-day communication research,” Lindsay said (1978): “I plead for the ideological neutralizing of mass communication research. Even as a scalpel is for healing and a sword for mayhem, so ought mass communication research be used, not to exacerbate world tension, but to ameliorate ignorance, to reduce social friction and to harmonize common strivings” (cited in Nwoso, 1983, p. 86; emphasis added).

Admittedly, a number of researchers have urged viewing the debate more impartially — at least, rash statements should be avoided and care has to be taken in assigning the term “bias” to the Western media’s unequal coverage of the Third World (cf., Chu, 1985; Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986; Korzenny, Del Toro, and Gaudino, 1984; Lange, 1984; Riffe and Shaw, 1982; Skurnik, 1981). For instance, Adams (1986), when challenging the request for more “in-depth” coverage of the Third World, asked: “At which countries’ expense should such coverage come? If Ghana and Peru are to receive more coverage, then France or the Soviet Union and some other objects of news attention must receive proportionately less” (pp. 113-4). Several other studies warned that the breakdown of the Western dominance in the world news market does not necessarily mean an equitable use and sharing of international news channels for developing nations in the future because the so-called “bias” in international news coverage is not peculiar to the Western press (Alabrea, 1986; Atwood and Murphy, 1982; Mattelart, cited in Matta, 1979, p. 165; Okigbo, 1986; Skurnik, 1981; Schramm and Atwood, 1981; also cf. Sussman, 1980, p. 84). As Chopra put it:

The tendency to exaggerate, to oversimplify or otherwise distort is not a vice [reserved for] Asian or Western journalism or an infection passed by the latter to the former as is sometimes alleged. It has grown up as part of the malformation of the mass media as such. Such problems will persist even if
Asian journalism becomes more Asian in content or the Western agencies working in Asia increase the Asian content in their services or the proportion of Asians on their staffs. (cited in Sussman, 1980, p. 84).6

After all, it was said that the future of international communication research seems to depend on a mutual understanding between researchers in both camps who are more willing to go across their borders and seek a collaboration, instead of confrontation, of ideas (cf. Blumler, 1985; Lange, 1984). “Certainly in the past American mass communication researchers have displayed a shared loyalty to one main paradigm for research,” Rogers and Balle (1985) recently stated in their comparative study of communication research in Europe and the United States. “We double this intellectual consensus will continue into the future, nor should it. There is today ferment in the field of communication research, and one result will be a greater diversity of theories and methodologies” (p. 300).

To recapitulate, three generations of studies on the NWIO debate have been reviewed and discussed in this section. The earlier research tended to support the challenges coming from the Third World (mostly encouraged by UNESCO) and acknowledged that news exchanges across national boundaries were indeed uneven and prone to be in favor of developed countries which have historically controlled and dominated the flow of global news. After the late 1970s another group of scholars (mostly from American universities) began their “counterattacks” (Halloran, 1981) by testing and re-testing critics’ allegations. Their findings generally were contradictory to the earlier ones raised in the debate. Recent trends in the field involved a more neutral approach to the subjects disclosed by the debate, and researchers were asked to be patient and not to rush their conclusions until a more complete understanding about the nature of international news is achieved.

More than a decade has elapsed since the new order agenda were formally organized in the Nineteenth General conference of UNESCO held in Nairobi (Kenya) in 1976,7 which, as a result, led to seemingly endless reiterations between two stands emanating from basic ideological differences between the main intellectual schools of though (Rooy, 1978). In a way, as Mowlana (1985b; also, Sussman, 1982b) said, the initial flourish of research resulted primarily from the new order debate has calmed at the mid-1980s; other researchers, however, insisted that the debate is not over yet (Lent and Giffard, 1982), and the search for improvements and solutions must continue (Ahern, Jr., 1984; Nwoso, 1983).

In general, with research findings available so far, there is evidence showing that the condition of world news transmission has indeed improved somewhat – at least in terms of the number of crisis news or stories of the Third World. For example, in Kirat and Weaver’s study (1985) which duplicates Weaver and Wilhoit’s methodology (1981), it was reported that the proportion of news dealing with conflict or crisis in the Third World declined dramatically (from about 47% in 1979 to 10% in 1983), “suggesting that criticisms of advocates of the New International Information Order and previous research may have had some impact on the news values of foreign correspondents and editors of AP and UPI” (p. 45). In a like manner, Pasadeo’s study (1984) found 1) the amount of news devoted to Western Europe in Time and Newsweek decreased significantly from 1973-76 to 1977-80, and 2) the concentration of news coverage of these two newsmagazines has slightly shifted to such developing nations as Africa and the Middle East. Weaver, Porter, & Evans (1984) also detected
a substantial increase in stories devoted to non-crisis events or non-conflict occurrences as well as an expanded coverage of countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America in three U.S. television networks (p. 362). In view of these improvements, Richstad and Anderson (1981) concluded in this way:

By the early 1980s, it was clear that one result of a decade of heated North-South debate and East-West confrontation over communication was an increasingly multi-polar international news environment. Various dynamic processes were evident in the way the existing news system was working and — more significantly — was being transformed. Particularly important were the unmistakable trends toward more explicit national and international communication policies and planning and the gradual evolution of a new conceptual and institutional foundation as the 'New International Communication Order' (p. 315).

2. The Search For An Alternative Research Paradigm

To those who consider communication problems with a macroscopic perspective (i.e., Halloran, 1981), the debate has been compared as a miniature intellectual development similar to its counterparts in sociological theories whose history in the last century can be seen as a series of debates or questions among various thinkers and theorists (see Turner, 1982). The recent calls for an alternate research paradigm in international communication, in a way, also follow a similar trend made loudly in other disciplines by social scientists who are interested in having a different scientific framework other than the traditional reductionism and positivism.

Several writers have traced the historical development of modern science with a criticism that reductionism, a doctrine originating from the laws of Galileo and Newton, was too mechanical (Ackoff, 1974; Aulin, 1982; Casimir, 1978b; Laszlo; 1972, 1986; van Gigch, 1974; also cf. Schramm and Lerner, 1976). For instance, Kuhn (1974) observes that a reductionistic logic generally involves an approach to examine social problems downward from a system to the subsystems, that is, one looking at parts rather than the whole and considering the subject matter through “lower” disciplines. In an analogous manner, van Gigch (1974) explains that models in modern science stress an analytical process in which problems are solved “from the whole to the parts and from the more complicated to the more simple” (p. 47).

Von Bertalanffy (1968a), on the other hand, claims that such a maneuver of splitting up reality into smaller units, or isolating the individual parts in a system from its “environment” for analytic purpose, has been proven extremely insufficient for interpreting realities of human societies. Von Bertalanffy further argues that, for instance, conventional laws of physics tend to explain our world by means of objective, scientific observations and therefore, in principle, treat the human organism as a closed system independently existing with no connection to its immediate purview. "How is it possible to understand life [an open system]," von Bertalanffy once noted, "when the whole world is ruled by such a law as the second principle of thermodynamics [working mainly in a closed system] which points towards death and annihilation? (1975b, p. 19)"

More specifically and synthetically, van Gigch (1974, p. 47) listed the following shortcomings of the reductionistic reasoning: First, the model was said to be basically
applicable in the physical sciences in the first place and cannot completely explain such phenomena as organizations, structure, maintenance and other biological processes that are characteristic of human systems. Second, the model was mainly related to the study of individual properties and therefore was not suitable to the study of wholeness. Third, and more importantly, this mechanistic model of thought was not designed to deal with systems of organized complexity coupled with strong interactions such as human organism.

In addition, Casimir (1978b), referring to Alfred N. Whitehead's early criticism in the 1920s about the unintelligible foundations of modern scientific thought, was similarly concerned that the classical models of social sciences have been equally mechanical, closed, and institutionally-oriented. "In the long run," as Casimir says, "these models have frequently been control- or dominance-pyramid-shaped models... [And] the use of such models... may create significant problems for human survival because they can stifle the innate, creative, generative mechanism in human beings, as open systems" (p. 249). Particularly puzzled by the limitations associated with the traditional communication models, Casimir criticized the fact that human beings are seen in these models as primarily playing a passive role, producing mechanical signals or attempting to create mechanical feedback loops similar to those found in cybernetic systems (Cf. Eisenstadt, 1976). The truth is, according to Casimir,

human beings are not machines but metabolic, open systems, their communicative behavior must be considered from a holistic, open systems, metabolic, cultural-ecological point of view... After all, it is not cultures which communicate, but individual human beings (who are often associated in groups), who communicate with other individuals in other cultures, in a never-ending varied, changing, individualized kaleidoscope of interaction (1978a, pp. iv-v).

To these and other researchers who have claimed the current reductionistic model inadequate for explaining human realities, system theories have been suggested to promise an alternative research framework in and out of the social sciences (i.e., Becvar and Becvar, 1982; Cushman and Craig, 1976; Finkle and Gable, 1966; Fisher, 1982; Grunig, 1978; Larson, 1979b; McClelland, 1961; Monge, 1973, 1977). For example, Schefflen (1983) noted a conceptual revolution in the American academy arising by the late 1950s and 1960s, in which a central feature was shifted from the interest in the nature of separate phenomena to an interest in relationship and organization. "In the American ethos," as he said, "the emphasis on the individual differences and rugged individualism subsided and enthusiasm for togetherness, corporate loyalty, community participation and international relations flourished" (p. 7). Similar observation of this type of "paradigm change," to use Kuhn's conception (1970), was also recorded by other theorists, who contributed the retardation of the classical scientific theorems in interpreting many aspects of human relationships to the primary impetus of the development of system theories (i.e., Laszlo, 1972, 1986; Littlejohn, 1983; von Bertalanffy, 1975a). As Turner (1982) sees it:

Philosophically, there has been a dramatic shift over the last 100 years in the scientific analysis of phenomena. Rather than viewing the universe in simple cause-and-effect terms, it is increasingly recognized that any cause-
and-effect relationship occurs within a more complex system of relationships. At all levels of reality, from subatomic physics to the analysis of world systems on earth or the formation of galaxies in the universe, phenomena are not analyzed in isolation but in terms of their connections to a larger system. Moreover, such systems of interconnected events reveal emergent properties that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 448).

Some researchers have suggested that system theory is not a single theory; rather, it is a sort of “philosophy of nature, contrasting the ‘blind law of nature’ of the mechanistic world view and the world process . . . with an organismic outlook of the world as a great organization” (von Bertalanffy, 1975a, p. 164; also see Fisher, 1982). To Ruben and Kim (1975), on the other hand, system theory is more than a system; it is an alternative Weltanschauung—a new and unique world view which integrated and unified studies across a number of different disciplines, thus pointing to rather different ways of thinking. Essentially, Laszlo (1972) credited the system view as an emerging contemporary view of organized complexity which has forwarded “one step beyond the Newtonian view of organized simplicity, and two steps beyond the classical world views of divinely ordered or imaginatively envisage complexity” (p. 15).

At least five earlier scholarly perspectives have been identified as closely related to the development of system theories: First, the contributions of von Bertalanffy (i.e., 1968a, 1975a, 1975b) and Boulding (1968, 1985), who have labelled their work the General Systems Theory (GST) and co-organized, in 1954, the Society for General System Research to, among other things, “promote the unity of science” (von Bertalanffy, 1968a, p. 15); second, studies of Wiener (1948) and Ashby (1956) in cybernetics as well as a more recent application of this concept to the social sciences (which has been named as “new cybernetics” or “sociocybernetics”; see Geyer & van der Zouwen, 1978, 1986); third, Shannon and Weaver’s study of information theory (1949); fourth, von Neumann and Morgenstern’s insights in game theory (1947); and fifth, Cannon’s concept of homeostasis (1929). Additionally, the paralleled growth of functionalism in the last century, according to Turner (1982), has also strengthened the emergence of the so-called system science, which may include three levels of framework: the General Systems Theory, cybernetic system, and the social system. In a way, all these three share similar properties and thus can be considered altogether, including: 1) The whole is more than the sum of the parts; 2) the whole determines the nature of the parts; 3) the parts cannot be understood if considered in isolation from the the whole; 4) the parts are dynamically interrelated or interdependent (van Gigch, 1974).

In the study of communication, the advantages of using a system approach have been explicitly and implicitly noted by a number of studies. In communication and development, for example, Grunig noted the problem of the predominant paradigm, such as Lerner’s classical model (1958) which emphasized that communication is a prerequisite of modernization, was mainly caused by its inability to explain social change as a dynamic, interactive process. As Grunig continues: “[It] is possible to interpret most of the existing literature on communication and development in precisely the opposite fashion. Communication does not cause change. Change creates the need for communication... Essentially, this [system] paradigm holds that structural change must come first and that communication then enlarges and supports the consequences of that change by making more and more individuals
aware of new opportunities” (p. 75).

Notwithstanding, in the domain of international news communication research, the adoption of this alternative framework was comparatively slow (except Hester, 1973; Larson, 1979b), despite the use of system-related conceptions was — albeit unorganized and separated in a general sense — easily observed. Semmel (1977), for example, admitted that the current theoretical models, either critical or libertarian, failed to interpret the flow of international news with culturally-free definitions. News, in his opinion, is determined by the “relative distance” between two nations. Similar perspicuity was also reported in other international news studies (i.e., Bergsma, 1978; Dupree, 1971; Paletz and Entman, 1981; Pinch, 1978a; Terestypeni, cited in Mowlana, 1985a; Vilanilam, 1983), which, in one way or another, all agreed that news flows are rather influenced by interrelationships between two or more nations.

In summary, two issues have been discussed briefly in this section: First, the progress of so-called scientific paradigm change occurring in the last few decades has mainly resulted from the dissatisfaction of many researchers who consider the current scientific foundations too mechanical and thus cannot reflect realities of the human society. Secondly, a new and alternative school of thought has been flourishing which suggests to develop an "integrated and unified" way of studying human problems. As noted earlier, communication research, particularly in the realm of international news communication, has not produced enough work to support this alternative thinking, although the concepts were widely cultivated here and there without being "systemized." To conclude, Laszlo's optimistic comment (1972) on the commitment of this system theory is borrowed:

'System sciences' are springing up everywhere, as contemporary scientists are discovering organized wholes in many realms of investigation. Systems theories are applied in almost all of the natural and social sciences today, and they are coming to the forefront of the human sciences as well. ... A systems science can look at a cell or an atom as a system, or it can look at the organ, the organism, the family, the community, the nation, the economy, and the ecology as systems, and it can view even the biosphere as such. A system in one perspective is a subsystem in another. But the system view always treats systems as integrated wholes of their subsidiary components and never as the mechanistic aggregate of parts in isolable causal relations (p. 14).

3. An Outline of the Theory of Social Propinquity

The purpose of this paper has been to join the rising system paradigm by proposing to examine the flow of international news from a "relational" perspective. In essence, unlike previous studies in this area which have relied heavily upon Marxist doctrines of social conflict theory or the Western libertarianism, the present study prefers to take a "middle-of-the-road" approach (Chu, 1985). News (messages) is conceived in this study as an outcome of a dynamic process produced by a social system such as nation. The flow of news between two or more nations is then considered to be constantly influenced by the corresponding environmental factors — that is, two systems with homogeneous backgrounds will relay more news than two systems with heterogeneous properties.
The following discussion will concentrate on the introduction of the concept of social propinquity by briefly surveying the literature in the area of international news communication. Social propinquity is to be defined as the relative nearness in terms of both physical and psychological similarities between two or more than two national systems. The basic assumption of this theory follows Rosengren's suggestion (1970, 1974, 1983, 1985) that a social theory should consider the influence coming from the environmental factors. Some of these proposed environmental factors to be included in this section are: cultural similarity, ideological affinity, geographical proximity, ethnocentrism, political and economic ties, contacts, etc. Main assumptions and postulates of the theory will be presented afterward.

Cultural Similarities — Similarity has long been found to be closely associated with the flow of international news. For example, Galtung and Ruge stated in their classic study (1965) that cultural similarity was indeed a major asset for a news story because "the event-scanner will pay particular attention to the familiar, to the culturally similar" items, and the culturally distant events will probably be passed or not noticed at all (p. 263). Peterson (1979) surveyed stringers, correspondents, and editors of the London Times and found "cultural proximity," along with national elitism, was operational at all levels of the organization. Hester's study (1974) of the Associated Press (AP) concluded that AP editors believe their clients [U.S. editors] "are more interested in news from foreign nations which share a common cultural and ethnic background with the United States — mainly Western Europe" (p. 37). These gatekeepers, according to Hester (1974), did give first priority to stories from developed Anglo-Saxon nations over items from non-Anglo-Saxon developing countries if other news values were held constant. This outcome confirmed Hester's earlier hypothesis that "information flows between nations having cultural and historical affinities will be greater than flows of information between nations not having such affinities" (1973, p. 245).

Ideological Affinities — A number of studies have contributed the coverage of international news to ideological affinities existing between and among nations. Dajani and Donohue (1973), for example, concluded in their study of six Arab dailies that newspapers in socialist countries, such as Algeria and Syria, reported more events related to other socialist countries, while Saudi Arabia's close ties with the West were reflected in its heavy coverage of the U.S. events. Abu-Lughod's earlier content analysis of international news in the Arabic press (1962) also produced a similar conclusion: "The two countries with prominent coverage of Soviet events are also the countries in which the press is either governmentally controlled or owned and the mass media are consciously used to gain public support for major policies" (p. 608). Burke (1983) and Haynes (1984) both concluded in their more recent studies that communication partially follows ideological affinities.

Geographical Proximity — The other form of similarity could be expressed in terms of geographical proximity between nations. For example, MacLean and Pinna (1958) studied communication patterns in Scarperia, Italy, and found a significant correlation between physical distance and level of news interest (r = .88). Zipf (1946), on the other hand, developed a formula (P_1 P_2/d) which expresses that information exchanged between two populations (i.e., the United States and Britain) is a function of the product of population sizes (P_1 and P_2) divided by the distance, d, between populations. Meanwhile, Lundberg, Bratfisch, & Ekman (1972) proposed an "inverse square root law (p. 169)," suggesting that subjective geographic distance, d, is inversely
related to the intensity of emotional involvement \( Y = B/\sqrt{d} \), where \( B \) is constant due to the arbitrary unit of measurement. A similar generalization was advanced by Rosengren (1976) and Bergsma (1978), who stated that the more distant the event, the less important it seems.

Still others argued that the proximity dimension of news is more psychological than geographical (e.g., Bush, 1960; Carter and Mitofsky, 1961; Luttbeg, 1983; Robinson, 1981; Schramm, 1949). Recent studies, nevertheless, tend to show that geographical proximity should be explained by regionalism (i.e., Haynes, 1984; Lee, 1982; Mowlana, 1986; Nnemeka & Richstad, 1980; Peterson, 1981; Rachty, 1978; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Stevenson and Gaddy, 1982; Stevenson, 1984). As Sreberny-Mohammadi summarized in her report to the UNESCO/IAMCR survey (1984), there was a prevalent emphasis on regionalism across the world media analyzed — “every national system devoted most attention to events happening within and to actors belonging to its immediate geographical region” (p. 127). Stevenson and Cole (1984a) called it “provincialism” and noted this type of reporting is not limited to the Western press. To Wilhoit and Weaver (1983), “the closer to home the altercation, the more likely it is to be news in almost any part of the world.” (p. 1).

While refuting the earlier complaints from the Third World in the UNESCO debate that non-Western countries were largely ignored by, if not completely excluded from, the global news system, Stevenson and Cole (1984b) concluded that “[Physical] proximity and timeliness seem to be nearly universal news values. In every country, more attention was given to news from the immediate geographic region than to any other part of the world . . .” (p. 56). With a similar tone, Haynes (1984) suggested that international news is determined rather by the “continental lines of demarcation” (p. 209). That is,

Asian newspapers report about Asia, African about Africa, and Latin American about Latin America . . . Latin American newspapers report very little about Africa and so forth. Cultural isolation is defined in continental rather than national terms. The continental lines of demarcation are reinforced by the world agencies’ propensity to funnel regional news to various areas rather than news about other developing areas (Haynes, 1984, p. 209).

**Ethnocentricity** — To some researchers this recently identified character of international news (regionalism) is nothing but an extension of ethnocentrism, which can probably be defined as the tendency of the media to devote a large proportion of their coverage to international events involving their own nation (Peterson, 1981, p. 146). After a study of 4,139 stories of AFP, UPI, and Reuters, for example, Harris (cited in Kirat & Weaver, 1985) concluded that “news about developing nations was not crisis-oriented, but rather was presented from an ethnocentric perspective to satisfy a Western-dominated news market” (p. 31; emphasis added). In Adams and Heyl’s opinion (1982), “international news anywhere in the world tends to be ethnocentric. Foremost, people are concerned about their own country and its place in the world” (p. 13). Smith (1971) reported that the New York Times’ editorials “tended to evaluate favorably nations or events which furthered the national interests or security of the United States” (p. 450). This nature of favoring domestically-related foreign events was nit-picked by Kaplan (1979) as the “nationalism” of the media. Others (i.e. Gould, 1969; Peterson, 1981), on the other hand, referred it to
the "narcissism" of the news people.

When addressing this self-centered attitude toward international news, Abu-Lughod (1962) suggested that "the degree to which a country feels that events taking place in the outside world directly affect internal affairs will be translated into its coverage of international events" (p. 605). Abu-Lughod also pointed out two principles related to this ethnocentrism of the media: First, the greater the perceived dependence upon the outside by the media, the higher the percentage of space devoted to foreign news. And second, the greater the perceived dependence upon internal economic or other domestic development, the higher the percentage of space devoted to local news (p. 605).

**Political and Economic Ties** — In addition to such subjective and objective factors mentioned above, political and economic ties between nations have also been frequently treated as significant determinants affecting the volume and direction of international news. For instance, editors of the London Times revealed that they regarded the Commonwealth as similar or in close relationship with Great Britain (Peterson, 1981). Vilanilam's analysis (1983) showed that economic, political, and military interests all have been proven to be influential to the selection of foreign news. Ugbojah's investigation (1984) of foreign news coverage in Nigerian media also indicated that economic and diplomatic relations were the two principal concerns among Nigerian editors. Robinson and Hefner (1967) proposed that shared political systems and economic development (power) may be the strongest factors to predict the perception of similarity of nations. Other studies (Charles, et al., 1979; Cherry, 1971; Hicks and Gordon, 1974; Sparkes, 1978) also implied that the economic relationships among nations "shape sketchy [international] news coverage" (Charles et al., 1979, p. 148).

**Contacts** — Finally, contacts among peoples have been suggested by researchers as another news factor related to the paralleled relationship among nations. Two types of "contact" have been studied previously. First, Charles, et al. (1979), De Verneil (1977), Hur (1979), and Larson (1979a) analyzed the predictability of international telecommunication exchanges (including international mail, foreign telegrams, foreign telephone calls, telex messages etc.) upon news coverage. Most of their hypotheses, however, were not supported statistically. Second, another group of researchers have pointed out the importance and increasing value of tourism (personal contacts) in accordance with the escalation of news coverage (Cherry, 1971; Merritt, 1972; Mowlana 1986; Reigrotsky and Anderson, 1959-60). For instance, Reigrotsky and Anderson's study of stereotype (1959-60) showed that 1) increasing foreign contact tends to increase favorable opinion about other people, and 2) favorable opinions of other peoples seem to increase directly with education. The definition and type of education, unfortunately, was not specified in the research. Some of the categories of tourism which have been identified include: relative visitings in neighboring countries such as between East and West Germany or between Hong Kong and Mainland China, installment of servicemen abroad, educational, scientific, and cultural exchanges, travelers, movement of labor force across nations, etc. (Mowlana, 1986, p. 122).

The discussion in this section to far has been concentrating on a general review of correlates related to the concept of sociap propinquity in international news research. The following is a list of assumptions related to the theory. In Hage's opinion (1972), assumptions, like premises, stand for higher-order theoretical
statements from which a variety of theorems and corollaries can be deduced (p. 144).

Assumptions of the Theory of Social Propinquity:

1. The fundamental unit for study in this theory is nation-state, or an aggregation of people normally organized under a single government.

2. Each nation is considered a complete social system, or rather, a subsystem under a larger total system (the suprasystem; see Figure 1). A system is defined as "a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes" (Hall and Fagen, 1968, p. 81). A social system is, like all living systems, generated by the process of interaction among individual units. "Its distinctive properties are consequences and conditions of the specific modes of interrelationship obtaining among the living organisms which constitute its units" (Parson, 1977, p. 178). According to Farace and Donohue (1965), a country could be viewed as a system, much like human organism, within which "significant variation in the activity of one component is associated with significant variation in the activity of all other components" (p. 253). Hester (1973), also suggested that "the national system or nation-state is the major structure within which men govern themselves at [any] point in time" (p. 244; emphasis added).

3. Each nation is viewed as the center of a unique social milieu (environment). That is, each nation is the center of an array of inter-dependent relationships which may not be shared wholly by other national systems.

4. For each nation to survive it must conduct exchanging activities with its environment. In other words, the input and output activities with other social systems (nations, societies, international organizations, etc.) are considered necessary for the survival of any national system. Turner (1982) has observed that these input and output activities are mostly based on each system's own needs, or "requisites." Littlejohn (1983) also suggested that the nation is viewed as a "goal-oriented" organism, governed by their own purposes and aims. Similarly, Hester (1973) indicated that systems (or organisms) must have knowledge of events in the external environment to maintain the existence of the system from outside dangers. One principal way for a national system to exchange information with its environment is then through the use of media.

5. Each nation is considered equally in contributing to the total system. This assumption is based on the General System Theory, in which each part (subsystem, component, or cell) is considered equally important to the system of the higher order.

6. Because of the above assumption, the relationship between and among any two or more national systems are "interdependent." That is, one nation's act would influence the relationship between it and other national systems, as well as between it and the total system. Littlejohn (1983) has explicitly explained this type of relationship:

The reason we must view a system as a whole is that its parts interrelate and affect one another. Elements A and B may be separate when viewed apart from the system, but in combination a mutual interaction is present between them, the result of which is different from each element individually. The parts of a system are correlated; . . . a change in one part of the system will produce changes throughout the system (1983, p. 30)
Figure 1: System Structure Under The Theory of Social Propinquity

1. Each nation is considered a complete system (or rather, a subsystem under a larger total system (suprasystem));
2. Nation A and Nation B are equally contributing to the suprasystem;
3. The interaction from Nation A to Nation B is not equal to the interaction from Nation B to Nation A;
4. The interactions between Nations A and B are not static at all times.
5. The distance (social propinquity) between Nations A and B is not static either.

7. The media are also considered as social systems De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982) but at a lower level. The structure of this mass communication system, according to De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, has been heavily influenced by the general social, political, economic, and cultural conditions in the environment (environmental factors). A similar notion about the influence of environmental factors upon both individuals and groups was held by Lewin (1948), Thayer (1968).

8. In this theory, news exchanges are considered as one type of interactions (relationships) between and among national systems. Interaction has been defined as "two or more communicants in the process of, or at the level of, defining the nature of their relationship" (Watzlawick, et al., 1967, p. 121). In the present study,
interaction is considered the basic process of a social system. In fact, social systems are held together and change by the transfer of information/energy within and between the boundaries of different systems.

9. Because of Assumption Five, the interaction between two or more national systems is then considered horizontal at all times. In other words, because each subsystem is considered to function equally in the environment, the exchange of information between two subsystems, therefore, is not hierarchical nor vertical flowing from high to low. This assumption contradicts suggestions made by some communication scholars (e.g. Hester, 1973; Schramm, 1964) that interactions among nations are formed with a high-to-low order.

10. The distance between two national systems (A and B) is not static over time. This consideration is based on an assumption that a nation is an open system, constantly exchanging information, materials, or energies with the environment. Therefore, the distance between any two national system is influenced by environmental factors related to these two nations. In a given system, environment is defined as “the sets of all objects a change in whose attributes affect the system and also those objects whose attributes are changed by the behavior of the system” (Hall & Fagen, 1968, p. 83).

11. Following the above assumption, each nation’s interaction (relationship) with another national system is not static either. Byker and Anderson (1975) have stated that “Human communication is an ongoing, coactive, developmental sharing of information that creates identification between two or more [elements]” (p. 15).

12. The feedback of the interaction between two or more national systems need not be equal to the interaction itself (see Figure 1). In other words, interactions are not necessarily symmetrical between two or among more than two nations. Bateson (1958; cited in Watzlawick et al., 1967) pointed out that many systems of relationship, either individuals or groups, contain a tendency toward progressive changes. Watzlawick et al. (1967) further distinguished two types of interaction: symmetrical and complementary. Symmetrical interaction is the relationship based on equality; that is, partners mirror each other’s behavior. The second type, complementary interaction, is based on maximization of difference between partners (p. 68). In Eisentadt’s words (1976), “A communicative situation is, almost by definition, an asymmetrical and hierarchical situation” (p. 164).

Some of the primitive postulates are also listed as follows:

Theoretical Statements:

1. The closer the social propinquity, the higher the interactions (or news exchanges) between two or more than two national systems (see Figure 2; social propinquity is defined as the relative nearness in terms of both physical and psychological similarities between two or more than two national systems).

2. The farther the social propinquity, the lower the interactions between two or more than two national systems.

3. The more similar the background between two nations, the closer the relationships.

4. The closer the relationship between two nations, the more the news exchanges.

5. Therefore, the flow of international news is relational — the higher the degree
of similarity a foreign event, the more possible it will be covered as news.
6. The higher degree an event is domestically-related, the more it will be covered as news.
7. The more an event is regionally-related, the more it will be covered as news.
8. Countries with less similar background will be covered less in terms of news quantity.
9. Countries with less similar (dissimilar) backgrounds will be covered with a higher number of negative events than similar countries.
10. The more closey a nation is allied with the "opposition" of the source country (e.g. Communist-bloc countries vs. the United States), the fewer the news exchanges.
11. The more closely a nation is allied with the "opposition" of the source country, the more the negative news coverage.
4. Conclusion

By presenting a theory of social propinquity this paper has attempted to deal with the flow of international news in a way different from many of previous studies which had emphasized, if not overstated, the ideological values contained in the news, and had conceived that the pattern of world news was mainly characterized by power domination instead of information exchanges. In general, this paper proposed to study the flow of global news with a “culture-free” perspective, suggesting that similarities between or among nations would likely influence the direction and volume of international news coverages.

However, it is not the intention of this study to either downgrade or condemn the current research paradigms; rather, the proposed theoretical framework is outlined to complement the earlier theories. As having been repeatedly accounted before (i.e., Monge 1973; Fisher, 1982; Bohm, 1980), a theory merely represents a researcher’s insight of the world which does not have to totally replace the previous ones because man is continuously developing new forms of insight, “which are clear up to a point and then tend to become unclear” (Bohm, 1980, p. 5).

Essentially, the theory initiated in this paper may be considered useful to the research of international communication because of its two possible impacts upon future studies in the area:

1. In Stembery-Mohammadi’s final report of the UNESCO-IAMCR project (1984), she suggested that researchers in this area “to move away from this kind of study,” meaning those involved with simple frequency measurement of news coverages across nations (1984, p. 132). In this regard, this study may have provided a source for the re-validation, if not rejuvenation, in the area of international communication research because of its newly-established theoretical assumptions.

2. Finally, while the purpose of this paper is neither to criticize nor to despise the work involved in the current theoretical paradigms in international news communication, one of the advantages of applying this social propinquity theory to interpret the “imbalanced” flow of world news is obvious — it prevents researchers from making a conclusion with such dichotomous and still dubious assumption that certain countries have been the “dominators” and others the “victims” of the world news system. After all, the theory of social propinquity considers international news a “relative” product determined, instead, by the homogeneous backgrounds between or among nations. A news story about another nation will or will not be selected mainly depending on whether or not it fits the society’s own needs and interests.

FOOTNOTES

1 However intense has this debate shown in the last decade, it needs to be mentioned here that charges against foreign news coverage, particularly those aiming at the U.S. media, have probably been as old as the news practice itself. For an earlier review of such criticisms, that there are too few foreign news stories and/or that
foreign news tends to be oversensational, see Adams, 1964. Also see Cuthbert's article (1980), in which the author compared Third World's reaction to news flow in the 1970s with American media's similar complaint to the news agency cartel in the period before the 20th century. In addition, Wilhoit and Weaver (1983) cited Lippmann, who concluded in an earlier study of foreign news coverage that "the New York Times coverage of 1917 Russian revolution was 'nothing short of a disaster'" (p. 134). For a recent survey of the debate see Roser and Brown (1986) who claimed that "the supporters of the new order are principally academics and politicians from Third World or East European nations who participate in UNESCO-sponsored research and conferences, opponents are mostly journalists from the United States and Western Europe" (p. 114). For complete review of the NWIO debate, see articles included in Journal of Communication 1984, 34, 81-179.

2 A description such as the one presented here certainly cannot cover all of the important thoughts developed by scholars affiliated with the critical school, nor is it the purpose of this study to do so. More detailed discussions can easily be found in the following references: Curran et al., 1977; Gurevitch, et al., 1982; Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979. Books on the topics of the NWIO debate include: Nordenstreng, 1984; Richstad and Anderson, 1980; Shea and Jarrett, 1985; MacBride Commission, 1980.

3 It is interesting to mention here of Rosengren's satirical comments about the malaise of both the Western and critical studies: "The polemics raging between adherents of the various paradigms is paradoxical: The three dissident paradigms have raised important questions but, by and large, have been unable to provide any answers. The dominant paradigm, however, could answer the questions, but, by and large, has not raised them" (1985, p. 260).

4 The IAMCR project involved a multinational effort, sponsored by UNESCO, to study the problems linked to the NWIO debate. In the United States, the project was executed by researchers at two universities — the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), where Stevenson was in charge, and Indiana University (Bloomington). For detailed reviews of the project see the three articles included in "The global flow of information: Trends and patterns," Journal of Communication, 1984, 34 120-142. Also see Stevenson and Shaw, 1984.

5 Other references on this topic — development journalism or development news — include: Aggarwala, 1979; Gunaratne, 1978; Haque, 1986; Ogan, 1982; Ogan and Fair, 1984; Orech, 1978.

6 A similar observation was recorded by Mattelart, who said: "We will not fully solve the question of cultural dependence simply by suppressing foreign, especially North American, [news] programs. A Chilean program can reproduce the same ideological structure and thus, albeit camouflaged, suffer from the same vices as foreign material" (cited in Matta, 1979, pp. 168-9).

7 Also noticeable was the statement expressed by the non-Align countries at their 1976 Summit Meeting in Colombo, which stated: "A New International Order in the field of information and mass communication is as vital as a new international economic order . . . The emancipation and development of national information media is an integral part of the overall struggle for political, economic, and social independence for a large majority of the peoples of the world who should not be denied the right to inform and to be informed objectively and correctly" (cited in Ivacic, 1978, p. 157).
Ackoff (1974) described reductionism as "a doctrine that maintains that all objects and events, their properties, and our experience and knowledge of them are made up of ultimate elements, indivisible parts" (p. 8). Analytic thinking, according to Ackoff, is a "natural complement to the doctrine of reductionism. It is the mental process by which anything to be explained, hence understood, is broken down into its parts" (p. 8). As to the positivism, Mitchell (1968) explained that it is "the basic of [modern] science and the philosophy which put an end to idle speculation. Only observable facts and general propositions about them mattered and it is with these that sociology must be exclusively concerned" (p. 73). Von Bertalanffy (1975a) has attributed the early development of positivism to Galileo who visioned the world in causal, mathematical laws and thus tried to resolve and reduce complex phenomena into elementary parts and processes.

Thermodynamics explicitly declares that its laws must be applied to closed systems so that reactions, for example, in a closed vessel can be objectively measured. The second principle of thermodynamics states that, in a closed system, a certain quantity of disorder (entropy) must increase to a maximum level, degrading to an evenly distributed situation, and finally reaches and stops at a state of equilibrium. According to this principle, the final state in a (closed) system is determined by the initial condition – if initial conditions change, the final steady state will change. In an open system, however, the same final state (called equifinality) may be reached from different initial conditions due to the interaction with the environment. In addition, an open system, such as the living organism, is built up in a continuous inflow and outflow with its environment and is maintained by keeping constant breakdowns and growth of components, never being in a state of thermodynamic equilibrium but rather in a steady process referred to as "metabolism." For a more detailed description see von Bertalanffy, 1968a, chapter 2. Also see Buckley, 1968.

Homeostasis was defined by Cannon (cited in von Bertalanffy, 1968b, p. 16) as the "ensemble of organic regulations which act to maintain the steady states of the organism and are effectuated by regulating mechanisms in such a way that they do not occur necessarily in the same, and often in the opposite, direction to what a corresponding external change would cause according to physical laws."

Generally speaking, the General Systems theory (GST) includes both an open and a closed system approach whereas the cybernetic system 1) considers the society as a controlled system which 2) uses information, serving as a feedback function, to regulate and maintain the homeostasis of such system. The structural-functional system, on the other hand, conceptualizes the society as a social system composed of interrelated parts. In recent years, there has been a trend trying to combine the first two in order to form a broader foundation. This movement, in general, can be observed in two occurrences: 1) a new title was adopted for the Cybernetics and System Theory (previously called Journal of Cybernetics), and 2) the arising of sociocybernetics, in which an effort was made to bring together these two schools of thought (see Gever and van der Zouwen, 1978, 1986). As Beniger and Nass (1986) say:

Whatever the origins or substances of these feelings, social systems analysis has undeniably shifted over the last decade, from the katascopic or 'top-down' view of society as a cybernetic system dominating individual behavior, to an anascopic or 'bottom-up' view of behavioral programming of individuals as
purposive, goal-directed open systems which continuously generate society through their intercommunication. The new view has been dubbed the 'new cybernetics' or 'sociocybernetics' by Geyer and van der Zouwen, who characterize the change as a 'paradigm shift' (emphasis original; p. 119).

In this study, the main theoretical foundation will be set upon the GST and the so-called “sociocybernetics,” while the concept of living system, mainly developed under the cover of social system theories, will also be used. For a discussion of both social system and general system theories, see Berrien, 1968; Rubin, 1971 (section 3 in particular).


Many synonyms of this term have been adopted by contemporary social scientists; these include similarity (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), homophily (Rogers, 1983), social nearness/distance (Bogardus, 1967), and proximity (Bush, 1960). For the purpose of avoiding further ambiguity, this theory may also be renamed as social relativism, proposing that the news coverage of another country depends on 1) the relative closeness with the country perceived by both the gatekeepers and the public, and 2) some extra distance factors which could be used to measure the closeness with that country (physical, psychological, and cultural, etc.).

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