Canada's TV World is US-made

By William Miller

At the very time the government cracks down on foreign news magazines, and the CRTC and the CBC work busily to purge Canadian broadcasting of foreign commercials and entertainment programs, there is a curious lack of concern about the foreign filters through which Canadians receive their television coverage of world affairs. This lack of concern about the foreign newsfilm which is so prevalent on Canadian television is puzzling especially in light of the many surveys which show that more people learn about news from television than from any other medium, and that more people believe television's version of the news than they do any other medium's version. It would seem logical, in a country concerned about the maintenance of more than the semblance of independence, that the need for Canadian-gathered and filtered news is more important than the need for Canadian-produced light entertainment—but such is not the priority of most Canadians who are concerned with the quality of their television broadcasting.

One should make a distinction between the foreign news coverage of the CBC and that of other Canadian networks and independent stations. Watching foreign coverage on most Canadian stations means watching American network coverage. The film is purchased from one of the networks, and the voice-overs are those of the American correspondents. Such film is likely to be only the starting point of foreign coverage on the American network itself, but on the Canadian station it is likely to be the only foreign coverage except for the reading of wire service headlines (and even these, as Peter Worthington has pointed out in his Media Mosaic article, are probably American or British rather than Canadian in origin). One's impression of the many Canadian stations which report foreign news in this hand-me-down way is that they are amateurish and second-rate, not professional news-gathering agencies which deserve to be taken seriously.

The CBC does much better. Approximately two years ago, CBC news made a conscious decision to cut down on its American news-film use. Its latest internal survey (for the week of March 2-8, 1975 inclusive) indicates that U.S. film, including that of domestic U.S. events, consumed an average 51 seconds of the average 13 minutes' and 5 seconds of newsfilm used on the evening news "The National". With its five international film crews, many national film crews, and larger budget, the CBC is able to present a professional appearance as a serious news-gathering agency. Still, budget restrictions hamper coverage (there is, for instance, only one man assigned to cover all of Southeast Asia), and the exorbitant cost of satellite transmissions often dictates that the leading international stories will be covered by American network film. There is no breakdown on what percentage of foreign film coverage
is American, but my impression is that those 51 seconds constitute a large part of CBC's international coverage. It seems that while the CBC has the potential to provide us with a thorough alternative to American network coverage of foreign events, it lacks either the budget or the will to do so.

Some may wonder if, after all, it is not wise to accept American or British coverage of world affairs, especially given restrictive budgets and the desire to use them on improving domestic coverage. If American networks are already covering the world, why duplicate that coverage? The answer can be found in such books as Edward Epstein's *News from Nowhere* (Random House, 1973) which discusses U.S. network policies. Epstein reports that in 1968 the three networks made a policy decision to stop covering the war in Vietnam from a combat angle and begin covering it from the perspective of an eventual American withdrawal. They made this decision, one might add, for Canadian as well as for American viewers because Canadian television must accept American network biases if it wants to purchase U.S. coverage. Doubtlessly, it is easier on the budget to accept American definitions of what is news and where news is happening, but is it really cost-beneficial in the long-run? Buying rather than providing world coverage may eventually prove to be one of the more expensive decisions made by short-sighted Canadian broadcasting officials.