News Agencies In Canada

AN ANALYSIS OF INFORMATIONAL DEPENDENCY

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III. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

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Profitable and "efficient" though the reliance on foreign news agencies undoubtedly is for the media owners, it creates at least two profoundly significant cultural problems for Canadians. First, our daily view of world affairs is largely selected and written by U.S. editors and reporters. If AP chooses not to report a particular international story, for whatever reason, as far as many media outlets in Canada are concerned, it simply did not happen. Second, U.S. news assumes a dominant position in the international news picture reported in Canada, ranging from 32% of total coverage upwards.

The reports of all news agencies are affected by the national background and biases of the reporters and editors behind the finished stories. In choosing to rely on foreign agencies for international news, Canadian publishers have imported the agencies' biases and their versions of what is significant in the world and why it is. This is particularly important in terms of audience effect since, unlike the entertainment media,
news is read by the public daily and is often accepted uncritically as "fact". The economically expedient course of action adopted over fifty years ago by Canadian publishers amounts to cultural imperialism by request.

The over-dependence of Canadian newspapers on U.S. wire services has also led to the virtual disappearance of interpretive international reporting and feature writing in Canada. With the occasional exception of the largest of the country's papers, international Canadian correspondents have given way to anonymous agency stringers whose reports must be sufficiently bland to be acceptable to the thousands of editorial desks at the other end of the wire. As a result, the Canadian public all too often receives a shallow and uncritical account of even the most complex and controversial stories.

A more recent side-effect of Canada's dependence on the AP wire is that the language of Canadian news media has become increasingly Americanized, to the detriment of clear, honest reporting. Perhaps understandably, U.S. reporters are more likely than their foreign counterparts to employ the jargon of the White House press release in their stories. Thus, a phoney and misleading jargon designed to serve the interests of the White House and the Pentagon finds its way, through uncritical AP dispatches, into Canadian newspapers, electronic media, and everyday speech. The process began during the Vietnam war when, in White House press statements, bombing raids became "protective reaction" strikes, the My Lai massacre became the My Lai "incident" the invasion of Laos became an "incursion", and censorship in Vietnam became a "news embargo". This practice of creating confusing and euphemistic terms was continued under President Nixon when the Watergate burglars were referred to as "operatives", false official statements became "inoperative", and the initial burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office became a "vulnerability and feasibility study". This misleading
political jargon became a part of daily news reporting in Canada through the AP news wire which runs direct to most media outlets.

The second problem area of an over-representation of U.S. news in the international reporting of the Canadian press is rather difficult to empirically prove. Now much U.S. news is too much? Obviously this is a question of editorial judgement, and it is possible to argue that U.S. news has formed such a large proportion of Canadian international coverage because of America's powerful, often violent role in world affairs and her strong influence on the Canadian economy. However, the McNaught study showed that as early as 1937, the United States received more press coverage in Canada than did Great Britain.(31) This is particularly interesting finding since Britain was at the time a much more significant world power than isolationist America, and the U.S. economic takeover of Canadian resources and industry had not achieved its present massive scale by 1937. It is therefore at best questionable to argue that the Canadian newspapers in the inter-war period printed what their readers wanted or needed to know about world affairs, and not what CP could buy most cheaply.

Galtung has demonstrated that partner concentration in information flows is characteristic of a dependent or "peripheral" country.

"We all know that the major wire services are in the hands of the Centre countries, relying on centre-dominated feudal networks of communication. In other words, the pattern of partner concentration as something found more in the periphery than in the Centre is very pronounced.(32)

An analysis of the existing evidence indicates that such a pattern does in fact exist in the information exchanges between Canada and the U.S.A., and the im-
balance in favour of American news has been growing. The primary source of U.S. news in Canada is the AP newswire and the CP wire which relies heavily on AP reporting. Why Canadian newspapers are so dependent upon U.S. news agencies for their international coverage appears to be related more closely to financial considerations than to editorial decisions. The CP-AP news agreement makes it financially expedient for CP to rely upon AP reporters and resources for its international coverage. Additional financial factors include the current rate structure governing the sending of international cables which makes it difficult for all but the largest of the international wire services to operate on a global scale. In addition, satellitic and other forms of expensive and advanced communications technology are in the hands of the multi-national communication giants. The root of the problem of informational dependency in Canada is an imbalanced international communications structure based on American-owned wire services that understandably reflect U.S. news, interests, and biases. The unrestricted North American news media market place of the past half century has produced the present imbalanced, heavily American view of the world sold daily in this country.

Major structural changes in Canadian news services are essential if Canadians are to receive a view of the world that coincides with their own interests and aspirations. Specifically, the reliance on American wire services must be substantially lessened and alternative sources of information developed. The record of the newspapers to date in this area is dismal, and does not lead one to expect immediate change from this quarter. While Government assistance is usually viewed with suspicion in this area, it may be necessary if the people of the world's informationally-dependent countries are to have any real choice regarding their range of global information. There are several options open to the press and to government.

Canadian Press could be financially encouraged to
expand its own meagre international coverage by Canadian reporters, thus lessening its chronic dependence on AP. The Senate Committee on the Mass Media estimated the cost at $240,000 for six Canadian correspondents abroad, divided up among all daily papers in Canada. (33)

Taxation measures designed to encourage the expansion of foreign news bureaux for CP and individual newspapers and broadcasting stations would do much to promote Canadian coverage of international affairs. A second option is for CP to negotiate new bilateral or multilateral exchange agreements with the news services of other non-dominant areas such as Scandinavia or Third World Countries. This would enable CP to substantially reduce its heavy emphasis on U.S. news and help restore a semblance of balance to its international news reporting. Telex links with Scandinavian, Third World or European news agencies could be made financially feasible through an alteration in the international wire rate structure, or through permanent government subsidy or tax relief for such costs. An arrangement similar in principle to the preferential postage rates available to the Canadian press and magazine industries could be devised, avoiding the possibility of government "interference" with freedom of the press.

While U.S. reporting in itself may be no more "biased" or ethnocentric than Canadian or Ghanaian reporting for that matter, the fact that approximately 40% of the international priorities and of America's position in the world. What proportion of the international news reported in Canada should be American? It is difficult to suggest a precise proportion since the alternative views of the world that would be presented by more Canadian reporters or Third World news agencies have not been available. It would be sensible to first broaden the communications structures along the lines suggested above, and let the newspapers then learn for themselves what their readers prefer to read. One would be sur-
prised if the present preponderance of U.S. news in international coverage (approximately 40%) were not at least halved.

While extensive research remains to be done, it should now be clear that major changes in the international news delivery system are necessary if Canadian are to receive a comprehensive and balanced news service.

The present international news delivery system with its heavy reliance on U.S.-owned wire services has produced an imbalanced and overly-American view of world affairs to the Canadian public. In addition to the problems of national identity formation discussed above, Canadians on a daily basis are not receiving a balanced news service responsive to their unique needs and interests. The problem is a long-standing one that is inextricably tied up in the economics of the Canadian news market place: for the past fifty years it has been cheaper for the news media in this country to rely upon foreign news agencies for their view of world events, instead of sending their own correspondents abroad or expanding CP's international network. Canada's situation of informational dependency will persist until rising public pressure from news consumers for increased Canadian coverage of international affairs is felt by the media owners and managers. Alternatively, it is possible that a politically acceptable form of government assistance to the news media could be devised, along the general lines discussed above. Barring change from either of these directions, Canadians will continue to see the world primarily through American eyes.

FOOTNOTES
31. McNaught, Canada Gets The News (Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1940) p.39