The Daily Newspaper: 
Mirror Of Our Myths

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ABSTRACT

The object of this paper is to demonstrate that if it can be said, as a general rule, that Québec's daily newspapers — and this observation is no doubt true also of Canadian and American dailies — do not grant news or information from the Third world much importance, it should not be taken for granted that trying to improve this situation will contribute significantly to the advent of a new world order of information, that it will do justice to the real and huge problems hindering the production and circulation of information in developing countries.

Obviously, the commercial aspects of the news market in Western countries bear heavily on the 'social vocation' of newspapers. The intimate structural ties between these two orders of necessity are such that not much can be done to have newspapers offer their readers, in a sustained way, instructive information on the development processes of the Third world instead of supplying, often in a haphazard way, news which entertains or shocks.

A realistic approach, then, to these problems requires that a basic fact be taken into account: namely that what is most urgently needed in Third world countries are infrastructures that could generate and disseminate information horizontally among their inhabitants and those of other underdeveloped countries; much more so, it seems to me, than a more balanced flow of news between North and South. Concretely, this implies that it is more important for people living in remote Senegalese villages to be adequately informed about agricultural techniques suited to their specific needs, than for me to be informed by a news dispatch coming from an African news agency, that Senghor has just published a new collection of poems.

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When one speaks of a new world order of information, it is usually meant that a more balanced flow of international information is required, along with an access to new, fast-spreading (in some parts of the world) communication technologies. In either case, the scope of the problems involved is indeed international — thus giving the topic at hand an imposing and important dimension — but in the end, the true perspective of this issue is really the split — in all areas and not only in the fields of information and communication — between rich and poor countries, those of the Northern hemisphere and those of the Southern hemisphere, those who are developed and those who are underdeveloped. In fact, what this new order involves is the possibility for developing countries to become active agents in international communication processes, to be heard and not only to hear. Also generally speaking — and the following reaction can be observed as well with people who have a professional interest in these matters as with ordinary people — the concept of a “new world order of information” is too quickly associated with the idea of a “new order of information published or broadcast by the mass media”. In my view — and it is the object of my talk — associating the one with the other represents the surest way not to renew anything at all.

In brief, I will first examine the nature of news (news, not information: there are important differences of meaning between the two) pertaining to the Third World in Québec daily newspapers; this overview of international news content in Québec dailies will lead me to suggest that the press in our free enterprise system being what it is, the role one might be tempted to assign it in order to achieve a new world information order would be at best problematic and at worst, useless.

**Insufficient international news coverage in newspapers**

I will not dwell upon the question of the insufficient coverage, by Québec newspapers, of international news in general and of news pertaining to underdeveloped countries in particular: others have dealt with this subject before and some, like my colleagues Gertrude Robinson and Jacques Zylberberg, in expertly and convincing ways.

If I may be allowed to summarize, perhaps excessively, the main results of such studies, they point out that this coverage is inadequate for three reasons:

a) newspapers do not give international news the space and the importance it warrants;

b) the prevailing bias in the articles that are published is not necessarily Québécois or Canadian since such bias as may be found in these articles is that of American, French or British international news agencies;

c) the content of Third world news is generally of three kinds:

i- it pertains to some good deed carried out by a developed country — most often one’s own — and focuses attention on the know-how or the moral virtues of the Western world;

ii- it describes a catastrophe: drought, earthquake or accident;

iii- it reveals events which are fanciful, odd or exotic.
Newspapers: a mirror, not a window

If this kind of Third world news content doesn’t seem too far from the daily reality of what is given to read in North American newspapers, then it would seem obvious that the press is not really a window through which one might look at the world of others but a mirror of one’s own world.

As a takeoff from this, I am reminded of a sketch by the former comic group “Les Cyniques”, in which they had the program director of Télémetropole in Montréal say: “Our viewers don’t want to learn new things, they only want us to jog their memory.”

So it is that newspapers, over a certain period of time and after publishing a given number of news dispatches, establish the ‘fact’ that Latin America, for example, is made up of countries where only the following can happen:

a) a bus falls off a cliff;

b) a stadium crumbles under the weight of an over-capacity crowd;

c) a coup d’Etat fails or succeeds:


Once this pattern of possible Latin American news is drawn, newspapers jog their readers’ memory every time one or all three of these events take place.

Seen from this angle, newspapers don’t really inform us about Third world countries: essentially, they tell us over and over again things we already know, and not much more. In so doing, of course, they serve to strengthen reader prejudices, to sanction their often narrow views on peoples of the Third world.

Factual news and mythical information

While bringing up this issue of Third world news content, I am not, of course, casting any doubt on the realness or the authenticity of what is published. Readers have no reason to question:

a) the fact that a given bus fell off some road in the Andes, carrying to their death, besides the driver, 70 people (of whom 35 were children), 49 hens and one goat;

b) the fact that the stadium which fell to the ground under the weight of 100,000 enthusiastic soccer fans had been built the previous year at a cost of a billion pesos;

c) the fact that the coup attempt in Bolivia sought to overthrow general Luis Garcia Meza, himself the author of a successful coup last July.

These things happen; the newspaper is right.

It is nonetheless obvious that international news agencies choose events taking place in the Third world according to certain presuppositions as to what is expected of them by their newspaper customers in regards to news content. On the other hand, it is no less obvious that one of our merchant press’ main presuppositions is that
international news doesn’t ‘sell’ very well among its clients, the 
readers. Consequently, agency material is often presented, in formal 
terms, like so many short news items and, except for great 
cataclysms, newspapers assemble all these dispatches in the hodge-
podge of its last sections. This is called “awareness of constituency”. 

Newspaper editors say: “people are not interested in far away 
countries; they only want to know what happened at home or close to 
home.” Reading habits are thus created which in turn justify this 
point of view and make it a premise for selecting news and 
determining their respective place in a given copy of the newspaper. 

Furthermore, newspapers seldom re-write the dispatches they 
receive from agencies who remain foreign agencies for us Canadians, 
despite the fact that we all have friends in the United States, France 
and England. News received on the wire are published in their 
original form either as a single source or as part of a string: AP, UPI, 
REUTER, NYTS, AFP, etc. This criticism of Québec or Canadian 
newspapers has often been voiced: I am referring to it only to point 
out that if news from international agencies, news with exotic 
datelines, represent a window on the world, it is not our window. 

What are we to think from this brief and offhand description of 
international news coverage in daily newspapers? 

A first observation that can be made, is that factual news reported 
by newspapers (49 hens and one goat...) constitute a set of mythical 
information. In the sense that this type of news creates and maintains 
stereotyped views on people and things of far-away countries in the 
Third world. It is no doubt part of human nature to perceive 
strangers as strange, people who differ considerably from ourselves 
in terms which make up a very limited number of short and simple 
opinions. The typical Third world news content I have spoken of 
offers a good example of this type of perception as it can be seen in 
the press. 

Here is an example: some Québécois are sent off to Algeria to work 
on a house-building project in El Asnam, destroyed by an 
earthquake last December. Title in the Journal de Québec (my 
translation)
- For the Québécois in El Asnam
  13 TONS OF DEEP FROZEN MEAT (22.01.81, p. 21)
  Headsline in the Soleil:
- Québécois in El Asnam
  SEEN FROM ALGERIA, JAMES BAY IS PARADISE (02.05.81, 
p.A1)
- A woman from the Beauce region
  SHE'S AN ARCHITECT IN EL ASNAM (04.05.81, p. A1).
Many students who answered an exam question on the Journal de 
Québec article wrote that this was not ‘true’ information, that it did 
not tell readers ‘what they wanted to know’. It can readily be seen that
these students are young, naive and idealistic: they spontaneously condemn this kind of reporting. They hold that 'true' information, the readers ‘would have wanted to know’, would have borne on the Algerians, on the situation in El Asnam since the earthquake struck, etc.: in short, a window on Algeria. Instead of which the Soleil offers a window on the James Bay project! The mirror effect is clearly shown: James Bay is paradise, Québécois, in real North American style, eat huge quantities of meat, the Beauce region sends to El Asnam a woman architect where, we are told, “she draws great personal benefit on the human relations level: the only woman in a work camp of 300 men.” Mythical information, then, is the type of information that is given in the reflection of one’s self, in the reflected imagery of one’s own world and which is given to read, or contemplate, in lieu of information, let’s say of a disinterested nature (my students would say ‘true’), on the world of others. So defined, news which serves only to reflect readers’ images of themselves are opaque news, much the way a mirror is opaque glass.

I am not personally blaming journalists for doing things this way: I believe we would be getting hold of the wrong persons. Mythical information is not false information anyway: it’s simply self-glorifying. And as long as a newspaper and making believe that its client-readers are reasonably happy with the product and that this customer satisfaction justifies, among other things, the space granted news from the Third world and the way it’s treated or processed in the paper. As long as newspapers are operating profitably, they will uphold the handyman’s motto: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” No commission, be it presided by Sean MacBride or Thomas Kent, will make it take out its tool box.

One can always deplore that the written press in Québec or elsewhere does not better inform on developing countries; one can always blame it for its lack of scale or scope in this matter, its subservience to American, French or British points of view on international affairs, its marked preference for events taking place in the Third world which can function as a stage on which Québécois or Canadians can parade.

Deploring this situation will not easily change a state of things which has prevailed since newspapers and international news agencies were born and which has changed remarkably little ever since.

As far as a new world order of information is concerned, I submit that it would be illusory, for all practical purposes, to think that the merchant press of the Western world will ever want to play an active role in the issues involved, to assume an energetic stance on this platform. We already know how deeply the Western press in general and the American one in particular, distrust UNESCO and Third world undertakings relative to international news systems and the
flow of information: our newspapers’ position in matters regarding policies, resolutions and recommendations coming from international organizations or conferences is usually Manichean: freedom of the press on this side, State control of information on the other. *The New York Times* and *The Economist* wasted no time and pounced on UNESCO — and Sean MacBride in passing — when the 21st General Conference ended in Belgrade last Fall; said a *New York Times* editorial:

"The undemocratic governments that pine for order in what their people read, hear and think have won yet another “compromise” to advance the cause of censorship. So it needs to be said again, and less temperately than before, that no American negotiator speaks in these matters for the free press of the United States.” (24.10.80, p.32)

A week later, *The Economist* entitled its editorial: “Son of MacBride How an Irishman encouraged UNESCO to produce a monster.” (01.11.80, p. 18)

In any case, it needs to be proven that changing the news content in industrial world newspapers represents a good step in the direction of a new world order of information. It would not do any harm, of course, but it appears far from being a prerequisite in dealing with the mass of problems afflicting the underdeveloped countries, many of which are far more important than the problem of having more or ‘better’ information on the Third world circulating in developed countries.

Besides, it is a well-established fact that good newspapers, good journalism doesn’t necessarily entail a good circulation and good profits for any newspaper which must compete with mediocre papers, with tabloids which are meant to be looked at but not read, which merrily indulge in disco-style information. At a symposium in Dakar last year, Roberto Savio, of Inter Press Service, recalled Gresham's Law which states in essence that “a less valuable form of currency tends to drive a more valuable one from circulation”: it was Savio’s contention that there is a Gresham Law at work in the mass media market.

It is a legitimate hope that newspapers show greater interest in news pertaining to the development of the Third world and better inform people on the numerous aspects of this development. This is by either sending to these parts of the world their own reporters (and not only in times of great crises or when a Canadian finds him (her) self in some developing country’s jail) or by re-writing more often agency dispatches so that, either way, it be a fellow citizen who explains development news to his or her readers — it remains that many will also hope that our newspapers begin by showing more interest in news which informs us on our own underdeveloped regions or urban areas....
There is not much sense in deluding ourselves: one of the things that the old world order, the present order of international news, is criticized for, is the fact that it makes for a vertical system of information, that information flows in a one-way fashion from top to bottom, from the Northern hemisphere to the Southern hemisphere. But if one looks at the system at work in the mass media of our so-called ‘free world’ countries, it quickly comes to mind that within our own borders, the flow is vertical:
- from Montréal to Val d’Or, from Québec to Gaspé;
- so many public figures, relatively few in number, devoting their career, as they say, to politics and economics, from whom journalists gather information which their newspapers pass on to the élite who have a professional stake in keeping informed on political and economic matters;
- information earmarked for the lower echelons is made up of local news, short items and professional sports. Tabloids like Péladeau’s in Québec that make it their specialty to deal almost exclusively with this latter type of information are, in this limited sense, working-class newspapers.

It follows that, if renewing the present order of mass media information were to ensure a more balanced quantity of news between industrialized and developing countries, it would merely increase the number of political figures and industrial agents participating in international affairs: nothing is more appealing to an élite, from whichever part of the globe, than the possibility to beam on the international level. In this regard, Third world journalists and national news agencies tell us how humiliating and demoralizing it is for them to have their own élite and heads of State most often prefer to call in the local “stringer” of an international news agency when they feel they have an important declaration to make. One wonders, then, how it could be of any possible interest to three quarters of the total human population who live in the Third world and are faced with development problems and needs in practically all areas of their individual and social lives, to have the merchant press of the Western world increase ranks of the witchdoctors who would daily come entertain the ‘global village’.

To conclude on a more positive note, I would like to quote a few lines by Elie Abel, a member of the International Communication Association:

‘The debate on the flow of information will have served its purpose if in the end it helps create new national and regional information structures, especially in developing regions, capable of supporting the truly multidirectional international system which modern technology has placed within our grasp.’
To my mind, Abel’s wish means that it’s in great part the responsibility of the developing countries themselves to conceive and create the infrastructure required for the collection, the stocking and the circulation of information which will favor the development of their agriculture, industry, culture and — depending on the degree of goodwill shown by their respective ‘kings’ — political systems.

On the one hand, no one can want these infrastructures in lieu of those who need them; but on the other hand, underdeveloped countries must have the means to acquire them. Regarding foreign aid in this matter of developing horizontal information systems in the Third world, I will end with this quote from a former president of the I.D.R.C.: “what poor countries need most is money; now, that’s what they are receiving less.” (Le Devoir, 08.10.76)