No news is not good news

Dennis Schroeder

Just as Canada stands on the brink of a communications revolution, Canadians appear to be turning their gaze inward. Nowhere is the prevailing introspective mood more clearly reflected than in the news media. So concludes Dennis Schroeder, a journalist who carried out a survey of international news coverage in Canadian media. In this article he summarizes the results of the study, which point to the need for better coverage, particularly of developing countries, and for alternatives to regular news sources. One such alternative is presented on the next page.

With the aim of creating a "new world information order", some members of Unesco's international commission for the study of communication problems — better known as the MacBride Commission — have proposed a variety of measures to reduce the domination of international news exchanges by the major Western wire services. Meanwhile, alarmed members of the Western news media have rallied behind the freedom of the press banner, attacking proposals for regulations and controls on news reports coming out of the Third World.

A new information order governing the flow of news between rich and poor countries may well be unpalatable for most Canadians, but many of them might miss it when it arrives. An IDRC-supported study of coverage of the Third World in Canadian media, conducted in 1977 and expanded in 1979, shows that, in general, coverage tends to be scanty. And most of it is very much a part of the "old order".

The initial study concentrated on Canadian newspapers and magazines. Information was gathered through a questionnaire sent to editors of more than 1000 newspapers and other publications, the editorial staff of more than 30 publications was interviewed, and the content of 10 newspapers and periodicals was analyzed.

Replies to the questionnaire showed that although most editors were interested in Third World affairs, they ranked international news coverage as one of the lowest priorities for their publications. Respondents from daily newspapers estimated that international coverage occupied between 10 and 30 percent of total news space. The content analyses of six daily papers showed that Third World items occupied between two and eight percent of the average "news hole". The survey also showed that the number of news items related to the Third World was small. In daily newspapers, they ranged from a high average of 10 items an issue down to a low of 3.3 items.

Of the items used, 52 percent were news reports and another 20 percent were news briefs. Backgrounders accounted for 15 percent and general features for about seven percent of all items. Other items, such as editorials, columns, photos, cartoons, and letters, ranged from just more than two percent to less than one percent. All daily newspapers rely primarily on the major Western wire services — AP, Reuter, UPI — for news stories from other countries.

Thus, on an average day, a typical Canadian daily newspaper might carry about a half-dozen news reports or briefs dealing with the Third World in some way, and it might also have one news background or general feature.

The questionnaires and the content analysis revealed that reports of political and economic affairs, political upheavals, international crimes, and personalities in the news dominate Third World news coverage. Development questions such as population, urban problems, energy, medicine, scientific research, and education get almost no coverage.

Also as part of the study, a comparison was made of international coverage in Maclean's, a Canadian news magazine, and before and after its change from a bimonthly to a weekly format in 1978. It was found that the "World News" section increased substantially, from an average of 0.7 to 3.6 pages per issue, and that the average number of items related to the Third World increased from 1.6 to 3.4 per issue. However, articles tended to become shorter, and there was greater emphasis on people rather than issues or ideas following the changeover.

In the past year, a second phase of the media study was carried out. News and public affairs programs on several radio and television networks were monitored and the international coverage was analyzed. In addition, some senior production personnel in the networks were interviewed.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) Radio News has a few staff correspondents and a network of freelance contributors around the world. The survey showed that the Third World accounted for 33.3 percent of all stories and 20.7 percent of time on English radio newscasts. On French radio news, the Third World accounted for just over 11 percent of all stories and time. To put this into perspective, a 30-minute CBC newscast has about the same number, and length, of stories as two or three pages in a daily newspaper.

By far the best in-depth radio coverage of the Third World is on CBC current affairs programs. The two leading programs are "Sunday Morning" and "As It Happens", both of which have worldwide networks of contributors. On "Sunday Morning", an average of nearly half of the three hours is spent on international events and issues outside of Canada and the United States. Close to 38 percent of the time is devoted to the Third World. In addition, "Sunday Morning" has lengthy documentary features on international topics lasting up to an hour. "As It Happens", a daily news program, devoted about 20 percent of its time (90 minutes) and items to the Third World and it provides good backgrounding to the news.

The CBC television news, especially the French network, concentrated more heavily on domestic Canadian news than did radio news. Part of the reason is cost. According to one estimate, it would cost at least $500,000 a year to operate a foreign bureau staffed with a correspondent, a cameraman, and possibly a sound man. In Africa, the cost would be much higher.

In the survey, there was a higher percentage of Third World coverage on CTV — Canada's second national network — than on CBC. However, like CBC, CTV staff claim that rising costs prevent them from expanding international coverage. Both networks use film from the USA and British television networks quite extensively.

There are other efforts being made by individuals and groups in Canada to provide more information on international affairs and particularly the Third World than is normally available in the news media. Also, attempts are being made to upgrade international coverage in the news media.

In the long term, perhaps the best way to improve international coverage is to give journalists a better grounding in international affairs. The Carleton University School of Journalism — one of two English-language

18
The idea of a world newspaper came to him “out of the blue,” as he was gazing out on the Atlantic Ocean one September morning in 1976, remembers Harry Hollins, founder of WorldPaper. Now, three years later, WorldPaper is being distributed to more than one million people on five continents. “Still far from the goal,” says Harry candidly, “but a good beginning.”

Harry wants WorldPaper to be a “global community newspaper” in which the voices of the world can speak for themselves and be heard worldwide. Publisher Crocker Snow and I, who have worked with Harry from the beginning, are committed to this same goal.

WorldPaper is unique in that its eleven Associate Editors, in all corners of the world, are outstanding journalists who report from their regions. They are not correspondents or stringers who have been parachuted into a specific location to cover newsworthy events. They are experienced resident journalists who have witnessed and participated in the struggles and achievements of their countries—the processes of development. They do not write the homogenized prose of the multinational news magazines. Their writing is marked by the clear and unmistakable authenticity of their own cultures.

In addition to writing for WorldPaper, these editors assign stories within their regions, contribute to the “Global Editorial” page, and select the major topics to be covered. Through constant correspondence as well as regular meetings, they work with those of us at the Boston headquarters to make WorldPaper a forum for unbiased discussion of international issues.

The journalists have been attracted to WorldPaper because in it their work can appear alongside that of writers from any other nation. Their ideas will not be screened or rejected because of any single nation's political or cultural biases. In particular, Third World journalists are offered an opportunity to be read in the developed world, not by a small select group of scholars or foreign policy specialists, but by millions of regular newspaper subscribers. We hope this will help to reverse the one-way, North-South flow of news. Finally, we offer journalists everywhere a professional challenge: to write on subjects of global relevance for a worldwide audience.

WorldPaper's readership is also international. With the cooperation of innovative and farsighted metropolitan newspapers on five continents—including, very recently, one Canadian daily—we have devised a decentralized and efficient distribution method. In these papers we appear as a bimonthly magazine supplement. More than 1.5 million readers thus