

Third World News and Views

The Latin American Concept of News

by Fernando Reyes Matta

Dependence on the North American journalism model and the transnational news agencies means that the Latin American press sees the news through foreign eyes.

A look at the development of the Latin American press since the middle of the last century shows that the concept of news was originally understood as a current of opinion, with newspapers presenting ideological debates and political positions on the growth of new nations. With the changing economic structures brought on by colonial independence and shifting international dependencies, the Latin American concept of news gradually changed. After 1870, Latin American news agencies were legally tied with the French news agency Havas. The French influence lasted until 1920, when the first agreement between United Press (now United Press International—UPI) and the daily *La Prensa* of Buenos Aires was signed. New factors—an eager market, the need for information with impact, and an interest in the immediacy of information—then gradually affected the concept of news. The affect was strengthened by the growing dominance of North American news agencies (12), which in turn led to a strong emphasis on “professionalism” along the lines of the North American model. The result was a concept of news which moved from the task of interpreting events and presenting opinion to the daily process of selecting events deemed “newsworthy” and commercially interesting.

After World War II, the United Nations debate on human rights and advocacy of the “free flow of information” principle resulted in the expansion of the United Press and Associated Press (AP) role in Latin America. Technological advances which ratified news “objectivity,” in which the facts were the news,

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upheld the North American “professionalism” and strengthened the imported news values.

The current status of the Latin American press manifests the continuing dominance of North American news values, as institutionalized in the transnational news agencies. The transnational news agencies produce and process nearly 60 percent of the information published in Latin America (11, p. 189). UPI and AP alone provide 39 percent and 21 percent of the information received by the principal Latin American dailies. Another large percentage is covered by the large European agencies, leaving only an insignificant amount of the total information flow to be covered by Third World news agencies (11, p. 189). A good example of how the transnational agencies are used as sources for news is given below in Table 1, which gives a breakdown by news agencies of the origin of the stories for the major Latin American dailies on one day.

Table 1: Sources of news copy for Latin American dailies on one sample day in 1965 (in column centimeters)

	UPI	AP	Reuter	AFP	Ansa	Other
<i>El Universal</i>	507	—	—	209	—	69
<i>El Nacional</i>	—	545	—	150	—	14
<i>El Tiempo</i>	83	92	—	85	—	—
<i>El Espectador</i>	322	—	—	—	—	35
<i>Excelsior</i>	—	455	—	109	—	18
<i>Novedades</i>	102	295	—	138	—	23
<i>Diario de Noticias</i>	94	—	—	—	15	15
<i>O Globo</i>	124	125	—	94	—	—
<i>El Comercio</i> (Quito)	540	—	—	140	—	30
<i>La Nación</i>	—	186	—	61	—	40
<i>La Prensa</i>	544	—	—	—	—	—
<i>El Comercio</i> (Lima)	227	—	57	63	3	—
<i>El Mercurio</i>	244	220	58	110	—	152
<i>La Mañana</i>	—	217	—	114	69	30
Total centimeters	2783	2135	115	1273	87	426
% of total coverage	40.8	31.3	1.6	18.6	1.2	6.2

Source: (4)

The Latin American dependency on transnational news agencies results in part from a scarcity of capital and resources with which the Latin Americans could form a news agency of their own to satisfactorily compete with the transnational news agencies. As Díaz Rangel (4) points out, in the case of Venezuela, “no daily maintains permanent correspondents abroad, not even in neighboring countries.” This problem may be observed in several other Latin American countries.

Yet economic difficulties do not entirely explain the lack of a Latin American news-information structure, for certain countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, and to a lesser extent, Chile, Venezuela, and Colombia have become sophisticated enough in information services and have the resources to have set up one for themselves. However, this has not occurred because the concept of the “journalism industry” and the concept of news held by the Latin American

press is primarily North American. Therefore, the modification of the prevailing dependence on transnational (primarily U.S.) news agencies does not constitute one of their objectives. The constant flow of news which fits easily into the North American concept of news has produced an inertia in those responsible for journalistic decisions, especially in the selection of what is news.

The prevailing structure of the Latin American news media, then, can be explained in terms of economics and professionalism.

The vast majority of the news organizations are monopolies, controlled by the entrepreneurial, dominant classes of society. In this respect, states Elsy Bonilla de Ramos (3), "the characteristics of the foreign information monopolies are only reproduced in the country to the extent that national information monopolies exist which give them space and free access to the internal information networks."

In addition, the professional structure is deeply rooted in the practice of many years, which has implied a dependence of the media on the values of what are called the "central" countries, or those countries which dominate the world scene economically, politically, and militarily. There has been a tacit acceptance by journalists that events in these countries are more relevant than those in the "periphery," or those countries who are considered to be on the sidelines of world influence. This pattern has persisted, as shown by our 1977 study on the regional press coverage of the independence of Surinam (16).

We found that not one Latin American country sent correspondents to cover this event and only some of the newspapers had printed background information which had been supplied in a UPI cable. The day independence was formalized, November 26, 1975, not one newspaper carried the story on the front page. The Brazilian daily, *O Estado*, gave it three columns on an inside page, with less importance than a New York jewelry robbery. The rest of the Latin American papers studied treated the story similarly, as shown by the following examples:

- La Prensa* (Argentina): 2 columns of UPI information on an inside page.
- El Diario* (Bolivia): 6 centimeters of AP information, at the bottom of the front page. The event was given the same importance as a small fire in Tijuana, Mexico.
- Excelstor* (Mexico): Published an AP radio photograph on the front page. The inside pages provided a good synthesis, albeit of information from Reuters, AFP (Agence France Presse) and AP. This was the only paper to point out the Third World content of Premier Henk Arron's speech.
- La Prensa* (Nicaragua): No coverage.
- Critica* (Panama): No coverage.
- La Prensa* (Peru): UPI and AFP information on inside pages.

These papers not only did not give the event prominence, but also simply transcribed the agency dispatches word for word (see Table 2). Thus the Latin

Table 2: Coverage of Surinam independence on November 26, 1977

	Agency used	Column cms.	No. of columns	Page numbers
<i>La Prensa</i> (Argentina)	UPI	56	3	2
<i>El Imparcial</i> (Guatemala)	UPI	38	2	1
<i>La Prensa</i> (Nicaragua)	Reuter Latin	27	5	3
<i>La Nacion</i> (Costa Rica)	UPI	27	1	25
<i>La Prensa</i> (Peru)	UPI	24	4	15
<i>El Dia</i> (Uruguay)	UPI	20	1	2
<i>Critica</i> (Panama)	UPI	15	3	2

Source: (6)

American coverage of this event reflected the negative slant of the news agency reports which predicted racial conflicts, tacitly implying that the people of Surinam were incapable of governing alone and reinforcing the journalistic tendency to underline the negative aspects of the event. The possible racial conflicts, no doubt, were more competitive in the news markets than the strategic importance of the country as the third largest world producer of bauxite.

This devaluation of regional news applies not only to Latin America but also to all Third World countries.

The imbalance of Third World news coverage in the Latin American papers we studied is dramatic, as shown by Table 3 which lists the total material by region on November 24-27, 1975. The importance of Western Europe is magnified at this particular time because of the coronation of Juan Carlos of Spain, the subsequent demonstrations in Madrid against Pinochet, and the political crisis in Portugal. Even so, stories concerning the United States alone still account for 20.2 percent of the stories. If expressed in terms of world population, the panorama would be even more striking. Asia is undoubtedly the region of the world with the largest volume of inhabitants, but did not account for more than

Table 3: Total amount of news coverage by world region for 16 Latin American newspapers, November 24-27, 1975

	Column centimeters	%
Western Europe	9264	40.5
United States	4636	20.2
Latin America	4479	19.6
Middle East	1579	6.9
Africa-Arab States	—	—
North Africa-South Africa	806	3.5
Asia	836	3.6
U.N.-CEPAL	531	2.3
Socialist Europe	701	3.0

Source: (6)

3.6 percent of the information, confirming for the reader in Caracas or Buenos Aires that it is indeed a distant and impregnable continent.

The subordination of Third World news can also be illustrated by one of the stories from the United Nations on November 23 about excess mercantilism and profit-seeking occurring in the pharmaceutical industry. The AFP cable, in mentioning the uselessness of the majority of the products on the market, pointed out that a Brazilian study revealed that of 14,000 drugs sold, only 116 were considered fundamental and only 52 basic (11, p. 195). The story was transmitted to Latin American papers not only by AFP, but also by AP and Prensa Latina. However, except in Mexico where it was given slight coverage, the story was systematically ignored by all the Latin American papers studied. Thus the rejection of the information came from the newspapers themselves. They chose instead a story about Caroline Kennedy's photographs.

This example shows how both the agencies and the newspapers perpetuate the traditional information structure in the Latin American press. The local reporters send the New York offices what they think is wanted, and then the news sent to Latin America is that which the newspapers usually "consume" (5). Thus the local papers consistently reinforce the expectations of their readers, expectations created by the news structure. As a Latin American observer has pointed out, "the information calms [one] down, since the daily with which [one] identifies, permanently ratifies the correctness of [one's] view which is reinforced through being reproduced in the structure of the newspaper A survey has shown how during its first months, *La Opinion* generated a dependency similar to that which a patient establishes with his analyst: Mondays, when there is no edition (like its model *Le Monde*) produce anxiety in its readers who lose the rationality of the outside world" (13, p. 232).

The current information model was forged within the "liberal" view that individuals naturally and freely choose and demand what they need, forgetting that in reality the environment conditions needs. The circle closes in this way: (a) "News" is selected by the reporters of the national media from all available events or facts, according to the dominant criteria and values of their journalistic practice. (b) The transnational news agencies collect information from the national media and from their local representatives and then make a selection according to what is traditionally accepted by the central/regional office. (c) The central office in New York, Paris, or wherever, provided with the material preselected by their own representatives, send their clients the material, supposedly demanded by them, which coincides systematically with what the media are accustomed to receive and fits perfectly with the dominant values of the journalism of the continent. (d) The local media receive the cable information from the news agencies, *which they originally selected themselves*, and the circle is closed (5, p. 176). Finally (e) the public confirms the reigning journalistic practice by consuming the information to which it is accustomed.

Thus the seriousness of the current problem goes far beyond economic solutions. The answer is not the simple and mechanical nationalization of the media, since inherent in the concept of news value currently in force is a commercial and industrial concept of news. As Mattelart has said, "we will not

fully solve the question of cultural dependence simply by suppressing foreign, especially North American, programs. A Chilean program can reproduce the same ideological structure and thus, albeit camouflaged, suffer from the same vices as foreign material" (8, p. 175). It is therefore necessary, both empirically and theoretically, to look critically at the foundations of the entire concept and structure of news.

*News not only used by Latin America
but also about Latin America
comes primarily from UPI and AP.*

A synthesis of the situation is expressed by two ex-presidents of Venezuela. Rafael Caldera, during a 1970 press conference at the National Press Club of Washington D.C., pointed out that

[p]erhaps the phrase "no news is good news" has become "good news is no news." Only the most deplorable incidents, be they caused by nature or by man, receive prominent attention in the media (of the United States); little or nothing is mentioned about literary or scientific achievements; little or nothing is said about the efforts of man to dominate nature and to put it at the service of his needs; little is said about social achievements and the defense against the dangers which threaten our peace and development. It is much easier to present the Latin American as a disorderly and difficult neighbor, incapable of achieving those objectives achieved by others in the economic and technological fields (2).

Years later, Carlos Andrés Pérez considered the struggle for a new information order and especially for an improved concept of news as a main priority of his presidency. In his message to UNESCO during the 1976 San Jose conference he declared:

The international press only selects information that detracts from the image of our countries: the major press and the broadcast media from the developed world ignore our struggles, efforts, and fair demands for a just international system (9).

Hester's (5) large study of international news supports this assessment of agency news priorities. In a table ranking those topics AP correspondents perceived their editors were interested in, stories involving the U.S. ranked first and all "crisis" stories closely followed. Revolutions or coups ranked second, natural disasters third, crime or criminal violence fourth, and domestic politics and foreign relations tied for fifth place. While U.S.-related news, catastrophe, and violence were overvalued, news referring to development, cultural events, religion, science, or education ranked at the very bottom of the scale.

The version of Latin American news in which North American interests generally predominate has been documented by other researchers. For example, according to Markham (7), "... revolution is needed for Latin America to appear in the news." Whitaker (15) arrives at the conclusion that the informa-

tion which appears "concentrates on what the tourist should see, eat, drink or buy, or tells of the discomforts (not to say direct dangers) of living and travelling in Latin America."

Despite the profound nature of the political and social changes occurring in Santo Domingo in 1965 and Chile in 1970, which could have reoriented reporting towards a more sophisticated appraisal of Latin American life, that has not happened. As expressed by one observer: "One thing remains constant in the North American press: an apparent implacable hostility to social change in any part of the region, be it accompanied by violence or not . . . magazines and newspapers in the United States have resorted principally to sensationalism and ridicule when informing or commenting on the social revolutions which occurred in Mexico after 1910, in Bolivia in 1952, in Cuba in 1959, in Peru in 1968 and in Chile between 1970 and 1973" (6).

Thus, it is clear that the transnational news agencies not only determine what the Latin Americans read, but what other nations read about them. The ways in which that image has been distorted have been classified by Somavía (14). Distortion in this case does not necessarily imply a false presentation of the facts, but rather an arbitrary selection of facts according to an inaccurate news model. It can mean that an exaggerated sense of importance is given to anecdotes or events considered "folkloric," or a presentation of events isolated from the whole. It can also mean distortion by "implication," when events are reported so that their implicit consequences are favorable to the interests of the transnational agency or country doing the reporting. Distortion can also occur by a report "preconditioning the facts" for the purpose of conditioning the future behavior of people, firms, social groups, or governments, or by the silence surrounding situations which have ceased to interest the transnational agencies or countries. News practice in Latin America provides multiple examples of each one of these categories (see 1, 3, 10).

*Several efforts to develop alternatives
to the current dependency on the transnational
news agencies have been tried in Latin America.*

The news agencies EFE, Prensa Latina, and Inter Press Service have tried from a number of angles to provide a different view of Latin America and its current development, as in their coverage of the events in Chile from 1970 to 1973, the nationalization of Venezuelan oil, the Panama Canal question, and the political evolution of Jamaica. In addition, Latin American newspapers are making an effort to break away from the tendency toward inertia by using other sources of information, in addition to news agencies, to give events the broadest, most informative coverage. The best of the papers are trying to limit the verbatim printing of news agency dispatches.

Better and more accurate news coverage also requires an awareness on the part of the professionals that relying on the "old" news values cannot provide the insight needed to portray the processes of development as they are taking place within Latin America or in the Third World. The kind of reporting that

has been done should not be devalued but rather revised, and alternative news models and news treatment sought. News professionals must experiment widely with news forms which might supply attractiveness and dynamism to social issues which traditionally have not been considered as newsworthy. Finally, the public must be re-educated to the alternative news values, so that they can exercise critical vision of news coverage and participate more fully in the news process.

These fundamental questions about news values and news coverage and the need for alternative news processes and structures are part of the larger issue of information policies which, through UNESCO and other international forums, is now concerning the countries of the entire globe.

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