

Inter press service : adventures of an alternative news agency

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**Inter Press Service :
Adventures Of An Alternative News Agency**

by

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Alternate to what?

At the onset, I would like to draw a distinction between the alternate media and alternate journalism. Media is plural generic term that includes theatre, video, radio and even soap operas. Alternate media can find new ways to use these outlets for specific communication purposes like rural re-awakening, family planning consciousness or political organising.

Alternative journalism focuses more narrowly on the press. But before we talk about alternate journalism, we have to determine what is it an alternative to? What is wrong with the mainstream media that we need an alternative?

When we pick up our daily newspaper, turn on the radio news or tune into current affairs programmes on cable TV we are bombarded by coverage from a wide variety of sources.

Most of these are based in northern industrialised countries. Cable News Network (CNN) and BBC now dominate the cable news market in Asia. Even television news in national broadcast borrow or pirate heavily from satellite feeds from BBC or CNN.

Newsweeklies like Time and Newsweek are U.S.-based. Even regional magazines like Asiaweek are actually owned by Time and the Far Eastern Economic Review is published by AP-Dow Jones. The International Herald Tribune tries very much to be a global newspaper, but is still a rehash of the New York Times and the Washington Post.

Among news agencies, the market is dominated by the Big Four: Associated press (AP), Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP) and United Press International (UPI).

What is wrong with western coverage?

Western journalism schools have for long propagated a particular definition of news: the prevalent model is wire service journalism which is largely a U.S. model based on an "inverted pyramid" structure that highlights attention-grabbing details that are unusual, the negative or absurd. This is the Man Bites Dog School of Journalism.

For the proponents of this school, News is NEW, News is NEAR, News is NEUTRAL and News is NORTH.

News for a wire service cannot be anything earlier than last night. If AP beats you to your story by 0.5 seconds, it has out-scooped you. But most events do not happen in isolation, facts are not mass-produced, they are apart of a process, a trend.

An event is deemed to have happened only if it takes place within the perimeter of your interest. But even as the world becomes

more and more interdependent, we see cities, states and nations looking increasingly inwards. Racism, migration, terrorism, recession are seen as discrete individual problems.

Objectivity is sacred for the western media where 100 percent neutrality is something to aspire to. Journalists are supposed to show super-human emotional aloofness and not be moved by injustice and greed. And even if they are moved, the anger is not supposed to show in copy. And above all, NO unattributed comment about who are the bad guys.

News is a commodity and its main revenue market is in the north. That is why reports of a French climber who loses his pinkie to frostbite while climbing Mt Everest is more newsworthy than three Sherpas who die in an avalanche.

In many ways, this type of western coverage of developing countries reflects market forces and ownership of the main media organisations.

The most recent and glaring example of the way western prisms distort news is coverage of the Gulf War, where the U.S. and European media was manipulated by governments trying to justify the war to their citizens at home.

This highly sanitised and one-sided version of the war was also the main source of news for readers and viewers in the rest of the world who faithfully reproduced them in the absence of an alternative news source.

The search for alternatives.

In the 1960's the newly-independent former colonies in Latin America, Africa and Asia felt the western media had a monopoly on international flows, it was biased, gave a distorted picture of the reality in developing countries and was deliberately negative about their societies.

They sought to change this, and through UNESCO in the 1970's, pushed for a New World Information Order. This unleashed a vigorous backlash in the United States and the western media over what was seen as an attempt to strangle the "free" press.

Unfortunately, what the proponents of the new order had to offer in terms of an alternative news mechanism was along the lines of the Non-aligned News Pool which turned out to be nothing more than an exchange of press releases between governments.

The proponents of the new orders also pushed the concept of "development journalism", which would neutralise the negative write-ups in the western press and accenuate the positive side of the development process. But development journalism was done so sloppily by so many for so long, that it has now lost most of its meaning.

This is not to say that development journalism is no longer relevant, but some new thinking is called for. For starters, we should discard the myth that it should highlight the positive. There is no surer way for a journalist to lose credibility.

Proponents of development journalism told us to keep away from coups and earthquakes. What rot. Do report on coups and earthquakes, better still, predict them. Or plunge into the affected society in their aftermath, long after the parachute journalists with their satellite dishes have come and gone.

Stoop down to the level of the common citizen. Don't just quote local officials about the casualty figures of a cyclone in Chittagong, talk to the farmer who lost all. Let us feel the sun beating down on the devastated farms and smell the rotting cattle.

Development journalism is not a snap-shot of an event, but a video that sets the event in perspective. What came before, what is likely to follow? As snakes disappear in the Deccan plateau, so do the charmers. When fisherfolk in Luzon have nothing left to fish they don't just lose their livelihood, they lose an entire vocabulary that had 15 words for different kinds of rain.

Alternate news agencies.

All this talk about better and more sensitive coverage of the Third World has not gone unnoticed in the western press. With their resources and staff, the Big Four have been covering more human interest stories. London's Financial Times does the kind of coverage of developing countries that would be excellent examples of how really to do development journalism.

Alternate feature services that provide news and analysis to complement the western media outlets have been active as well, but have seen better days. London-based Gemini has been distributing in-depth analysis and attractive graphics aimed at the feature pages of newspapers around the world. Depthnews, started by the Press Foundation of Asia in Manila also sends out a feature package to Asian newspapers. Another one, the Aga Khan's Compass News Features died last year.

Inter Press Service is the only alternative service that is a news agency. It was started nearly 25 years ago by a group of Latin American journalists based in Rome, who were disillusioned with the way the European press was covering their home countries. IPS later expanded to grow into a truly global news agency that has the six largest network.

It is a non-profit cooperative of journalists mainly from developing countries. The IPS management headquarter is in Rome and the World Desk for the journalistic services is in Amsterdam. IPS has correspondents and offices in some 100 countries, and

about 1,000 media and non-media subscribers around the world.

IPS is distributed through its satellite teleprinter network connected through central computer switching in Rome and London. It also offers a wide range of language services, including Spanish, English, German, French, Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian, Portuguese and Kiswahili. These are available through on-line computer services, electronic data bases, printed bulletins or daily teleprinter.

The IPS Asia-Pacific Regional Office is in Manila and a sub-regional editing centre is located in New Delhi. The Asia-Pacific network is made up of correspondents and stringers in 16 countries. IPS coverage includes just diverse topics as Japanese consumption patterns and how they affect the natural resources of developing countries, interviews with Chinese farmers who are setting up their own airline, an in-depth analysis of how historical factors have led to the present communal tensions in India, reports on how Sri Lankan villagers are getting tired of running away from war, how Nepal and China are getting together to set up the world's highest national park around Mt Everest.

IPS is distributed in Asia by teleprinter, by E-mail and a special fortnightly feature packet made up of special reports and a column by a well-known personality which are accompanied by graphics, cartoons and maps. IPS is now regularly used by major English national dailies across Asia.

In addition, IPS features are also translated into six local Asian languages like Bahasa Indonesia, Tamil, Nepali, Hindi, Thai and Chinese Mandarin.