

The Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World
By Anthony Smith
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THEY'RE ALWAYS RIOTING IN Africa. It's always flooding in the Philippines, too, while they're revolting in Latin America and starving in Asia. Our images of the rest of the world are disconcertingly consistent. It's no accident that they are, either. In fact, the international struggle for power is being waged with news stories, with bands on the radio wave spectrum and with computer chips.

It's a fast-changing situation, and Anthony Smith has just written the best—the most informed and most reasonable, if not always the most pithy—introduction to the issues. Director of the British Film Institute and author of the recent *Goodbye Gutenberg: The Newspaper Revolution of the 1980s*, he provides a political context for issues of information flow such as deregulation, privacy in data processing and news definition.

Information is at the center of the world economy, he argues. In the U.S. alone, since the 1950s, telephone companies have provided a quarter of all new public equity. Telecommunication is growing three times as fast as the economy as a whole. And the information business, from its home base at IBM headquarters, is tentaculating its way around the world at a rate that would have buffaloed a science fiction writer only two decades ago.

The information business is a product and a part of longstanding relationships of empire and dependence. Freedom of the press, one of the most basic tenets of Western democracies, is also in practice one of the basic tools of capitalist expansion and of cultural imperialism. The governments of poor nations have not let that fact slip by them. But their only ready alternative, practiced in socialist countries, is governmental control over information, a.k.a. censorship.

The issue is old, but both politics and technology are pushing us toward a crisis. In the wake of Vietnam's challenge to American supremacy, Third World nations began to raise issues of inequality in information flow. Discussion in two arenas—the UN and the World Administrative Radio Conferences of the International Telecommunication Union—brought the problems that Smith looks at out in the open. UN meetings resulted in a 1978 Declaration of Mass Media calling for a "free and balanced flow" of information. The WARC conferences, which are supposed to allocate parts of the spectrum, have bogged down with Third World nations' insistence on more room on the band,

more space on satellites and more control over reception.

Perhaps the most useful function of both arenas was raising the issue. Smith is not starry-eyed about proposals put forward by Third World governments. About the demands that make up the UN's "New International Information Order" he writes, "Seldom can the charter of a great political cause have been so mean in spirit, so ungenerous in sentiment, so obsessively petty, so insistent on the obligations of others and so niggardly in ascribing difficult duties to its own adherents." But he also recognizes the difficulty of finding a third alternative to the "free flow," to-the-victor-the-spoils doctrine and Idi Amin-style information-by-fiat.

One of the reasons Smith's perspective stays sober is his historical understanding.

His description of the rise of international news agencies, for example, showing how they shape our concepts of foreign countries and of the news, is fascinating. Capitalism has always been an information system too; with worldwide growth in the 19th century went the telegraph and cable. Close behind were businesses that transformed newspaper publishing: news agencies. Three—Reuters of England, Wolff of Germany and Havas of France (now Agence France-Presse)—developed to feed colonialists'

need for commercial information and to produce stories of high imperial drama for the folks at home. They provided a cheap solution to the highly expensive alternative of sending out your own correspondent and paying for him to wire the story.

These days five agencies—Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, AFP and the Soviet Union's Tass—cover the globe. Sort of. Their coverage reflects the priorities of big business.

The Empire of Information

By Pat Aufderheide

Together they deploy 34 percent of their correspondents in the U.S. Only 21 percent handle all of Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

The history of news agencies poses the international information issues in brief: corporations in the imperial strongholds control the hardware, the software and the next gambit.

The expense of setting up an agency—UPI hasn't returned a dividend in two decades; and AP is a cooperative that just breaks even—is such that Third World nations can rarely compete. When

they do, their fate can be that of Agence Zaire-Presse, which depends on word of mouth from the interior, on walkie-talkie communication within the capital, and is an international laughingstock for its reliability.

The news agencies control content as well as the medium. The shape of the news is a little map of power. Smith recounts a study of the image of Guyana in news agencies' reports of the Jim Jones massacre. Not only were there only the lightest references to the country in which the incident took place, but images of underdevelopment were simply borrowed where reporters didn't know. We were told, for instance, that the Guyanese were illiterate, although Guyana has 85 percent literacy, and that people speak "pidgin," although Guyanese English is a pure, if distinct, strain.

Employees of news agencies can be expected to feed back to their boss the kind of "news of exception"—revolution, famine, disaster—that is in the Western tradition of news about the other. But the problem goes deeper. Other journalists also learn to define what international news is from the agencies. Perhaps that explains why the independence of Surinam was buried in the middle of major Latin American newspapers, while on the same days they covered celebrity stories from Hollywood.

The issue is an old one. For instance, in the 19th century Americans were regularly outraged at Reuters' coverage of American news. As far as the agency was concerned, we were only interesting

Continued on page 15.

**The whole world
is watching**

and listening

**to a few sources
of news. But the
audience
is restless.**

