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## International News Agencies:

Global eyes that never blink

*Phil MacGregor*

One of the things we have managed to do in the last 15 years is to diversify..... We have managed to maintain the value and spread the risk of our business globally across a whole range of markets and we are not dependent on say, an individual crisis in any one market.

Nigel Baker, Vice President of  
Associated Press (2009)

The evolution of the online news agency has laid bare the news industries' near total dependence on a few wholesale news providers and the limitations on public discourse that it inevitably yields.

Chris Paterson (2006)

When anybody reads, hears, or looks at any news today, they will almost certainly see an impressive proportion of stories first produced by one or more of the international news agencies – outfits that are global in their reach but until recently almost entirely outside the public gaze.

The work of these “wholesale news providers” permeates print and online media. Turn to any television news bulletin, and you are likely to see film footage that originated from, or was procured by, one of the three international news agencies. The more dangerous the news scene, the more that probability increases. Media coverage of warzones, and of any major incident in the world originates as often than not in the words, photos, audio, and raw film footage coming from three main international agencies. Even if people are now beginning to know names like Thomson Reuters, the Associated Press (AP), and Agence

France-Presse, (AFP) until very recently these organisations tended to remain well below the public's radar. The journalists who worked for them were seldom by-lined or interviewed, and rarely credited on the page or in film footage. The anonymity is part and parcel of the long history of the news agencies, whose ethos is to treat news first and foremost as a saleable commodity produced in bulk to be sold to their clients.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter looks at how the work of the international news agencies permeates the news scene, often creating an 'off-the-peg version of events' used extensively by news outlets around the world. It looks at three main challenges linked to the biggest international agencies, namely:

- Is news diversity threatened by the continuing dominance of the international news agencies?
- How do the news agencies deal with rapid changes in world power and new markets?
- Will the role of the news agencies be enhanced or undermined by the internet's shifting democratic and digital potentials?

In reality, the three major agencies – supply the media we see with volumes of news in all formats that outstrip all the household names by several orders of magnitude. The BBC or the *New York Times* are small in terms of their global reach and penetration. Thomson Reuters, for example, has over 55,000 employees in more than 100 countries, with an annual revenue of \$12.9 Billion in 2011 ([Reuters.com](http://Reuters.com)). Moreover, the international agencies sit at the top of a hierarchy of smaller agencies focused at national or regional levels (Boyd-Barrett (2010)). They include the Japanese Kyodo, the Russian ITAR TASS and the Spanish EFE, to name a few. In Britain, of course, there is the Press Association, which is based in London with several offices in Europe.

In considering how the news agencies operate, it is worth noting here at the outset that the challenges they face are becoming all the more acute in an internet age. Indeed, the internet has often been perceived to be a potential threat to the very existence of the news agencies. It's linked both to the protection of their commitment to public service journalism and diversity, and to the risk of them being side-lined by the news democratisation ushered in by the web. The internet is

a global network of communications that replaces the agencies' own private communication networks. So how could the agencies cope in a world of multiple voices, of instant widespread access to publishing, and with the arrival of new players like the global portals, MSN, Yahoo, Google news? On the web there is the ability of regular media like CNN or any media to publish globally and in real-time. Add to that the vigorous new web-based aggregators and distributors like Livestation and [Demotix.com](http://Demotix.com). All or any of these and might have used the internet to undercut the agencies with their own news and videos, while the agencies' preserve of speed was eroded.

These new global communication patterns might have spelled trouble for agencies. They had previously been in a superior position with a 'top-down', vertical structure of news ('we tell, you listen') that characterised the pre-internet agency monopolies. With social media, and online communication between members of the public, the agencies' business model is at risk. More than simply being outflanked by the internet's deluge of voices, their market edge – dependent on copyright protections, monopoly and speed – was at risk.

Before explaining their fate in more detail, however, some background on the agencies is required, and with it a view of the academic debates that have flared around their historical grip on the news-flow of the world.

### How the agencies created international news

The international news agency system has been a hub of international news-gathering and distribution for more than 150 years. Today the key names are Thomson Reuters, the Associated Press (and their television wing APTN), and Agence France-Presse. Bloomberg is a new and dangerous rival to Thomson Reuters on financial news, but so far has not made much inroad into the general news market.

The agency story began with a few individuals, some luck, and the advent of electricity to support communication. Pigeons, and horses had hitherto been the fastest way to convey news and information. In the mid-nineteenth century an urgent need for swifter information exchange arose, connected with increasing trade between nations. Startling innovations in physics led to the invention of the electric telegraph system.

The key was to find a code that would let electricity convey the alphabet. *Telegraph's* most famous founder was Samuel Morse – the inventor of Morse code – whose signal was in 1844 sent down the first ever telegraph line that joined Washington to Baltimore. Morse did not invent electric text communication but managed to commercialise his simple code system of tapping long and short signals. Such electric communication by wire was incredibly quick by comparison with the old methods. First pioneered in the early nineteenth century, cable began to be installed around Europe and the U.S.. It was the start of the electric era of communication, the birth of the so-called ‘wired world.’ Cable spread fast. By 1865 over 83,000 miles of wire in the U.S. alone was dedicated to telegraphy. Over ensuing decades cable laced its way through many countries and between continents. In 1852 a cable went under the English Channel. The undersea transatlantic cable laid in 1858 linked Europe and the U.S., while in 1863 London was directly linked to Bombay, India. The Pacific was traversed in 1902. Before that, it took weeks to carry information by sea between continents, so this development changed the game of news communication. It marked a watershed that can now be dubbed as the beginning of news globalisation.

The ‘wired world’ was rapidly taking form, networking the globe into one system. The international news agencies were founded as this revolution began. AFP was begun by Charles Louis Havas (with his name) in 1835 using a core of translators and correspondents – at first using pigeons to fly news from across Europe from Paris. In 1845 telegraphy was adopted and quickly incorporated by the French agency. The second pioneering agency figure, Julius Reuter, exploited the telegraph especially for global financial trading. An astute entrepreneur, he made his first mark in Germany using translators to serve European financial news to clients in Cologne. To begin with, while there were gaps in cable links, he dovetailed wire and pigeons to reach clients. In 1851 Reuter moved to London and formed the Submarine Telegraph office near the London Stock Exchange, selling news by wire to commercial clients and newspapers on the wire. His most famous early success was in 1859. He transmitted a speech that he had acquired from the emperor Napoleon III across Europe as it was being spoken. Its dramatic news that war was declared on Italy was a journalistic scoop, and perhaps

the first real-time distribution of news in history. Reuter's wire network expanded at considerable speed, including linking to the telegraph news agency in Russia in 1857.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Bernard Wolff ran an agency in Berlin that rivalled AFP in Paris and Reuters in London, but it did not survive. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the Associated Press was launched in 1846 in New York to help five newspapers share costs of getting news of a war in Mexico. The news co-operative they formed blossomed despite legal tussles for control. Papers from more and more states became members. The agency grew rapidly and finally settled in New York. It was the first privately owned company to operate on a national scale and has never looked back. Now centred on the west side of Manhattan, it claims to be the largest news agency, with over 240 bureaus in 100 countries, 1700 member newspapers, 6000 member TV or radio stations and 8,500 clients. ([FundingUniverse.com](http://FundingUniverse.com), 2012).

News and politics were intertwined. AFP was openly propagandist for French interests in its early days, while Reuters was blatantly pro-British, and the AP was influenced by the newspapers to which it belonged. More recently, the agencies have been credited – as well as blamed – for setting the global news agenda. They tell us what is 'the news'. As Boyd-Barrett (1980: 19) notes, "they have been one of the most formative influences in the very concept of 'news' in the western world." In other words, they influenced the way news is conceived and presented, packed in tight paragraphs, omitting opinion, sticking to 'facts,' and using an intro paragraph or 'lead' as it's called in the U.S.. The style is predicated on the need for brevity, speed, and avoiding where possible offence to people of different beliefs. Also the telegraph influenced the style towards brevity, as sending words cost money.

Since the fall of the "Iron Curtain" in 1989, there is almost no nation the big three agencies do not penetrate, including China and North Korea, to which AP gained access in 2006. Shrivastava (2007: 135) explains their scope: "News agencies generally prepare text news so it can be used by other news organisations with little or no modification, and then sell them to other news organisations and non-media subscribers, like government departments, corporations, individuals, analysts etc." Effectively the agencies gather news in all formats, send it back to head office where it is edited and prepared, and from where it is distributed almost

instantly to thousands of clients worldwide to any platform – TV to tablet. What clients get depends on what deal they have chosen. For video the process is a little more complicated. In countries where agencies have few staff and cannot shoot it themselves, AP and Reuters acquire video from local news organisations. So in the UK, any gaps in AP coverage are supplied by Sky, while for Reuters in the UK the job is done by ITN.

Despite an initial threat to their core business model posed by the internet, the western agencies appear to be surviving and thriving (Paterson, 2006). This is not to suggest their funding models are simple: AFP is 40 percent financed by the French state and based in Paris (Laville, 2010), the AP is a co-operative owned and paid for by a collective of the newspapers in the U.S., while Thomson Reuters is a commercial company quoted on the New York Stock Exchange, though the controlling interest is with the Canadian Thomson family. The Reuters Trust principles still structure its news provision, although some of the protection of Thomson Reuters from concentration of ownership has been lost: the Trust's original narrow restriction on the percentage of ownership allowed to any one party was burst wide open when the Thomson company acquired 53% in 2008.

These three agencies are mostly in cut-throat competition with each other. They must serve and please clients, and do so more than rivals if they are to stay in business. Speaking hypothetically, were Thomson Reuters behind the others by five seconds in publishing an interest rate change, some clients might strongly object for fear they had lost invaluable time for financial dealing. Split seconds count. Nearly every big agency story is editorially judged by reference to competitors' efforts. International agencies are in constant touch with their customers, finding out their news needs, and adjusting coverage to provide maximum long-term satisfaction. If a client asks for a specific event to be covered like an African footballer on a trip to Europe, an agency like AFP will look sympathetically at arranging it, so long as it is not public relations or compromising their ethics in some way.

Despite their financial and ownership patterns, all three agencies today pride themselves on independence, neutrality, and freedom from political interests. That means they claim to run stories without fear or bias, and without regard to whose interests may be threatened. When Reuters started publishing

details of some Swiss bankers' alleged links to the Nazi holocaust, the editorial side ignored the whiplash of fury in the reaction of their Swiss banking clients. They did that for commercial as well as journalistic reasons, because to cave in to pressure would destroy their reputation. "Reuters trades on the impartiality of its news – the fact that it is not political, that it represents both sides of the story in that old-fashioned concept of impartiality and balance. If you undermine that, then effectively you would be undermining your own business," said a recent global news editor that I interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Likewise all agencies operate 'Chinese walls' with their commercial departments refusing to respond to direct commercial pressures. At least, this is what they claim in public.

What really happens is more subtle and complicated – because, even for state-sponsored AFP, the customer is ultimately in charge. Agency editors would claim that reacting to shifts in market demand, for example by covering more leisure, entertainment and sports news, is acceptable and essential, but crucially differs from censoring or altering news under client pressure.

Not that they never make mistakes. One recent error was of a picture of four Iranian missiles being launched, distributed by AFP. Sadly for the agency, the picture had been photo-shopped to ostensibly show all four missiles firing when only three had actually done so, a deception apparently practiced by the Iranian state news agency Sepah News. The doctored AFP image was run by the *New York Times*, the *Palm Beach Post* and *Los Angeles Times* among others. (New York Times, 2012). Digital dirty tactics duped Reuters editors in 2006. In a photo of an Israeli airstrike on Beirut in 2006, the smoke plumes were altered by the photographer to appear blacker. But these are exceptions that prove the rule of dedication to accuracy.

The ideal of editorial neutrality arose over time. Slowly, commercial advantage began to attach to reputation based on impartiality, but this process was only fully realized after the Second World War. Because they were born in the mid-nineteenth century at the height of the European imperial and colonial era, the agencies are part and parcel of the colonial dominance of the west, a fact which has excited academic and international controversy since the 1960s.

## Controversies in the agency system

The international news agencies are linked by commentators to some of the key controversies and rival perspectives facing journalism and communication around all the world. The perspectives and theories include:

- *Media imperialism*: News helps stronger countries influence weaker ones – news flows from western centres to economically peripheral countries and carries with it western values, including democratic ideals, and consumerist culture.
- *Media domestication*: Media do not take spoon-fed agency video and text – they alter it and make it relevant to their local situations and cultures. Domestication includes styling and presentation as well as modifying content such as news angles, and omitting irrelevant material.
- *Flow and contra-flow models*: Rather than flowing in one direction west to east or north to south, global news flows back and forth in many directions. A flow one way may be matched by a contra flow in the opposite direction. (Hollywood goes out globally, Bollywood comes out of India back to the developed world).
- *Homogenization*: News formats are much the same wherever you look in the world. Whatever the media, news concentrates around a very few versions of a news story, with few original stories being reproduced many times in different global outlets.
- *'Dumbing down'*: Complex or intricate debate in news stories is removed or toned down so as to engage wider publics. For instance in health news, many of the 'ifs' and 'buts' and qualifications around medical research are removed by media to make it simple.
- *Public service*: The idea that news should be for the public good so as to ensure audiences are properly informed citizens. Sometimes that means publishing news that it is 'necessary' to know, rather than what people would like to take in at the time. It is an argument linked to the quality of information provision. Public service often includes a commitment to providing diversity in news, and catering for minority interests not served by commercial,



market-oriented media.

- *News ethics*: The label often given to the journalistic virtues of impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, truthfulness, and fairness that news media often claim underpin their work routines.

The arguments made regarding news diversity have had different manifestations. Media imperialism was a key criticism of news agency news systems for many of the last 50 years. The criticism suggested undue western cultural influence was being imposed through the control of news content and distribution, the effect of which – it was feared – was to influence populations in developing countries to adopt western norms and material desires. Agency news, in other words, represented a form of propaganda aimed at expanding markets and political influence. A political movement against this alleged information imbalance arising from western dominance began in the 1960s when ‘non-aligned’ countries fought to offset the western media by starting their own agencies – the most important of which was the Inter Press Service set up in 1964 (Shrivastava, 2007). This agency aimed to rival the western agencies with bureaus worldwide and employ journalists who would guarantee sufficient diversity in their news reports, thus resisting news homogenisation. Inter Press Services’ success and that of others was limited. The media imperialism debate, therefore, has been characterized by some as a structural dependency of the developing world on dominant ‘First World’ countries (Reeves, 1993). The notion of western influence still resonates strongly in critics like Rauch (2003) and Bui (2010), who maintain there remains a tendency toward homogenization of all news cultures into one American-style model.

This imperialist perspective is less common today. It is now usual to talk in less emotive terms, replacing imperialism with ideas of news or information flow, and contra-flow (Boyd-Barrett and Thusu, 1992; Thusu, 2006), encouraging recognition of the many directions and channels for information to filter around various nations and regions. Another possible counter argument to media imperialism and homogenisation revolves around the idea of the domestication of news. That means that clients who take agency products edit them again and give a local national or cultural slant, adding adjectives, or further com-

ment and information, and relating the news to the domestic audiences with cues they will recognise. This perspective emphasises how news is altered for audiences in different regions.

Academics have examined the agencies' coverage to see, for example, how much of their reporting is included in national bulletins, and also how their material is edited to reflect national outlooks and cultures (e.g. Clausen 2004, Johnston, 2009). In these views some domestication is taking place because it can be seen that a domestic slant and styling is being put on news and video, including perhaps a local angle or some further reporting to amplify local significance. (Clausen, 2004, Sparks, 1998). Domestication is not a full answer to the argument of media imperialism. Merely changing a lead angle or styling news in a specific way does not mean a story's core messages are altered, nor that the selection of what is regarded as news is really being changed.

Working against domestication is the argument that news homogenization is taking place when agency content is used unchanged on multiple sites across the world. In other words the same news is run on different sites, so the same stories go on Yahoo as on MSN, AOL or a host of news websites and portals. A body of evidence supports the idea of homogenisation too (e.g. Bui 2011) – that agencies' content is not domesticated but used unchanged in a welter of commercial news outlets and portals. Although the sites may present the news with their own labels and web designs to appear different, when you scratch beneath the surface there is little more than clever presentation that conceals an absence of any original reporting. The reason is of course that it is far cheaper to buy news from an international agency than to go out and get it. Paterson (2006, 2011) suggests that a 'myth of diversity' hides a homogenization of news and a reduction in the amount of original reporting worldwide: retailers like portals, websites, papers and broadcasters buy their news on contract, saving the huge costs of having their own reporters scouting news for themselves. He concludes that despite apparent choice 'international news still comes from few sources – the international news agencies' (Paterson, 2006).

Behind homogenization of news, which is the argument that the same news appears on many sites over the world, lie questions about the power of market journalism and political

economy and the danger of ‘dumbing down’ (Franklin 1997, McManus, 1994). ‘Market-driven news’ (McManus, 1994) is often believed to replace public service news with trivial, cheap sensationalist news such as celebrity gossip. This happens, it is said, because the public prefers trivia and non-serious news and people shy away from buying serious content that takes an effort to understand – for example, grappling with how systems of proportional representation might work. In the case of the news agencies, it might be argued they are driven or tempted to remove public service news because they seek profit. They might be tempted, therefore, to rely on providing dumbed down content, because that is what increases their appeal to clients who directly serve the market. Everyone wins, but trivia triumphs.

There is evidence both ways. The first point is that agencies do not rely on popular content to please mass markets – for Thomson Reuters the core market is financiers, while the French government is the second biggest client of AFP. Anyway, within the agencies themselves, there is a strong belief in the ideal of protecting public interest news. Laville (2010) notes that AFP has a mission to protect the public interest endorsed by its journalists. This opinion is shared outside the agencies: UNESCO began a drive to support news agencies in the later 20th century because it believed the national news agencies protect public service journalism (Boyd-Barrett, 2000). There are reasons why this might be so: the agencies’ political and financial clients require hard information and a balanced and accurate worldview on which to base policy or investment decisions. News that lacks necessary complexity could be dangerous for them. They need nuance and depth, and are not as interested as some members of the public in trivia, celebrity news and gossip unless it moves markets.

Market orientation has also been given as one of the key factors in forming one of the most characteristic aspects of the agency system – the news ethic of objectivity in news reporting. In historical terms, the belief that journalism should be objective – that is to say, value-neutral – can be traced to the early days of the news agencies, particularly the U.S.-based Associated Press. The agency’s prime purpose from the outset was to supply newspapers, its owners, with news reports in as neutral manner as possible. Signs of partisanship and bias were removed in order to

allow the most chance for the uptake of AP copy by newspapers of any political standpoint. If a report seemed biased towards a political opinion, then clients with an alternative editorial stance might refuse to become the AP's client or stop subscriptions. So the less opinionated the material, the more likely is the agency to sell to the widest client base. The telegraph system also favours 'neutrality': Words cost money. That favoured dry factual reporting, with no adjectival comment. Fact-led copy was the cheapest to relay by wire. For these reasons, AP secured its position by using neutrality as a selling point (Campbell, 2004).

Reuters, based in Britain, developed a similar ideal of objectivity but it took time. They began by being closely linked to the British Empire. They would side with Britain in its wars, but at the same time they did develop a sense of 'public service' that was regarded as being consistent with non-partisan coverage (Read, 1999). Their output was to be suitable for any newspaper, prepared in such a manner that it would be difficult to detect a political slant, bias or agenda. Independence gradually evolved at Reuters as the main value they held to guide their editing principles and practices. Such principles assured them of credibility among its publics and clients, who could be sure that as far as possible nothing was included or left out because it might conflict with a national, business, or regional interest.

A well-known turning point for Reuters was the Suez Crisis of 1956. Previously loyal to British national interests, the company at that time openly distanced itself from the official viewpoint and declared its independence of any national perspective. So they no longer referred to 'our troops' but the 'British troops' for example. They preferred not to be identified with British interests, and the change happened at a symbolic moment of the visible loss of imperial power. Reuters' move traced and reflected the shift in global influence away from Britain. Clients and the business model came first (Read 1999).

Of course objectivity has its academic critics. Some like Bourdieu (1984) would say it leads to bland, boring news that lacks mission or purpose so as never to cause offence. In any case, neutrality is rarely totally possible: In 2001 Reuters refused to bow to pressure to label the 9/11 hijackers as terrorists. That decision might alienate the U.S. audience, but it secured credibility in other parts of the world. There was no middle ground. As Paterson (2006) suggests:

*“Because the news agencies must please all news editors, everywhere, they must work harder than their client journalists to create the appearance of objectivity and neutrality. In so doing they manufacture a bland and homogenous, but still ideologically distinctive, view of the world. Stories challenging the ideological positions of the dominant political players on the world scene (in agency eyes, the U.S.) receive little attention.”*

Not everyone would agree with such an outlook, however. There are patently many anti-U.S. viewpoints in agencies’ news. But an example to support it would be the reporting of the ‘arming’ of Iran with nuclear weapons, (vigorously denied by Iran) in which the dominant reported view sees a potential nuclear-armed Iran from the U.S. perspective. Also the amount of U.S. content in international agency copy and video is declining, as will be seen below. This view of Paterson’s (2006) contends that overall, the agencies and the corporate mainstream news media relay and therefore reinforce existing global interests: Their news lacks a progressive reforming agenda, they put corporate interests before public good, and they marginalize progressive voices because those are not seen as affecting regular politics and markets. In the opinion of Thussu (2006) and many others this dominance creates a moral imperative to create alternative communication channels, either rival agencies, or a non-commercial system of news supply to help redress the balance.

How are the current challenges met?

Despite the continuing revolution ushered in by the internet and web communications, the structure of the news agencies as businesses has not significantly altered. It is true that Thomson Reuters had severe problems in 2003, suffering ill-effects of exposures to internet technologies, and having problems defining their focus. They slimmed the company down after losing money on failed diversification projects. But the agency recovered and capitalised on the boom in the mid-2000s.

By and large the international news agencies have weathered the storms since 2000 by adapting their existing business model and keeping their core values. This model is simple: Gather news everywhere, in all formats, and sell it everywhere to anyone.

Thus agencies still gain most business by selling news and video as a saleable commodity to their clients, as they have always done. Indeed the internet has vastly helped AFP, because it uses the internet for video distribution. What has changed is that the agencies' client list has grown. They have cornered the market in selling news to many start-up websites and portals. High on the list of the AP's clients, for example, is Yahoo News!, who take large quantities of news and video. Thomson Reuters, on the other hand, still sells most news in text pictures and video to banks, and commercial clients as it always did. Regular media (BBC, CNN, SKY News) also take the product as before.

There are serious complications, of course. The reality of collapsing newspaper businesses is a problem particularly for the AP and AFP. Newspaper subscribers are a core funding source. Some papers have disappeared and many are too cash-strapped to pay for the services. In response, the AP has cut subscription costs by 20% to help keep clients (Paterson, 2011). La Provence, a French regional paper, dropped AFP in 2009 because the 550,000 Euro annual cost was too high (Editors Weblog, 2010).

Still, the agencies continue to operate with organizational flair, as Shrivastava (2007) points out. They have maintained their core model, and shown a flexible approach turning many technological challenges into business opportunities. Rather than being swamped or swallowed by internet rivals, they simply sell news products to them. In 2012 AP fixed a contract to sell its video feed to the *Daily Mail Online*, one of the biggest global newspaper websites. The AP has even done a deal with Spotify to relay music lists (AP 2012). Where the web revolution has led to contraction and losses in advertising revenues of some media, the agencies have moved in. The well-documented decline of television staffing, (Paterson 2011) is reflected too in other media who have also cut overseas correspondents. This plays to the agencies' strengths as they can fill the gaps.

Digital changes have had little effect on the traditional style of journalism that the agencies have always followed. That is to say, the agencies' professional conduct reflects much from past statements about agencies' ethical values (Shrivastava, 2007). The agency editors term these values as the 'age-old elements' of news that are based on accuracy and neutrality. Alluding to their traditional nature, one editor called them 'that old-fashioned concept of impartiality and balance' (Thomson Reuters editor).

As an APTN editor put it: “Agencies have a mandate to be balanced and fair and they strive for that in their output.”

Of the senior editors interviewed for this article, none would accept that concepts of fairness and neutrality are applied inconsistently or have changed. A news story of an event necessarily evolves, of course, but balance is never fudged because a particular client’s beliefs or preferences. News is not amended to suit religious sensibilities of different regions of the world. Great efforts are made to ensure that identical editing principles are applied, even though of course a particular story will be amended for its region – for example if disaster fatalities come from several countries, the story will prioritise the numbers of dead relevant to the client of that region or country. That is not considered to fudge the principle of impartiality.

The agencies still carve up their provision in much the same way as they have always done. Their commercial focus drives them towards translating the global event into regional terms. The destruction wrought by Hurricane Sandy in November 2012 was a major story, its significance requiring interpretation in ways tailored to the particular interests of different countries or regions – one version for Japan, one for Indonesia, one for northern Europe, and so on. Not all are re-versioned. A news story about a local political debate in Bangladesh may have little interest for Dutch news consumers, and vice versa of course. In other words, there is a delicate balance between journalistic priorities and geographic and/or cultural differences that require constant attention. As an APTN editor<sup>2</sup> said:

*“What we send out and what we gather is thought through from the regional point of view. So the prime news bulletins that go out to Asia are edited and collected to reflect the needs of that region.”*

Such an approach to regional segmentation is true for the other agencies. In the case of AFP, for instance, the Asian countries comprise about 14.5% of the total annual output of news (Laville, 2010). As indicated there is a relationship between the global story and regional treatment. This is part of normal practice, as a former Reuters’ editor explained:

*“We do edit regionally and that is important, but there is also*

*a function when we all get together, regional editors, and discuss the story, so we are editing globally as well.”*

Meanwhile an AFP editor said: “We recognize that in our news-gathering and distribution efforts that the interests of clients in, say, Europe are different to those in, say, Asia.” In the Middle East, Thomson Reuters editors point out that the notion of interest rates is against the Muslim faith and must on occasion be avoided, while the AP editors also alluded to the range of cultural preferences across the world.

The enormous challenge of the shift in world economic power and the rising importance of the East is being met by developing this technique of regionalisation. The agencies are concentrating on the new markets. For example, Asia has become the largest market for the AFP English service, and has grown vastly in importance for the agency. These adjustments and alignments reflect changing tastes and economic relations between countries and regions. Some parts of the world are getting much richer, with bigger GDP and much more wealth per head of the population, which creates and builds new news markets and more clients for the agencies.

Even the biggest global stories are often broken down to suit individual nations and local markets. Cultural interests and sensitivities ensure content supply is adapted to region, as explained by APTN:

*“It’s very important to be culturally sensitive [...] with any of our producers in London, for example, we try to make them realise that there are different cultural sensitivities and sensibilities. So for example, the Middle East might have a whole different raft of concerns to Europeans. Southern Europeans are different to Northern Europeans, and again there are different cultures in Asia where they might have completely different requirements.”*

The APTN editor has here highlighted how the look of the agency output in Asia is considerably different to that in the west. This would be true both of both hard news like hurricanes and tsunamis, and softer news about lifestyle, travel, fashion, and technology news, as will be explained below.



## Shifting values

Among the core changes to news agencies' practices in the past decade is their perception of a widespread shift in what people consider news. The then APTN managing editor Nigel Baker said in 2009:

*“Because people had more choice they can set their own agenda and that’s resulted in an increase in information obviously for sports and entertainment. Our revenues from entertainment have doubled in the past five years. They are still not as large as news but the market research leads us to believe that entertainment is a strong growth area globally.”* (Nigel Baker, Interview with author)

This reveals a widespread agency shift towards softer news and to a middlebrow rather than highly serious approach due to market demand.

If you look at all sections of the media whether here or some emerging markets – if you look at Europe or North America or Latin America or Asia and the Middle East – anywhere – the customers by and large want a larger spectrum of news, so in the world of commercial broadcasters there’s been a response to the middle market rather than highbrow. (Nigel Baker, Interview with author)

An APTN marketing manager interviewed in 2009 echoed the theme of changing market preferences: “A trend is for lighter stories [...] a number of people said [...] we have had enough of Iraq and constant bombs – we are looking for agencies to provide us with more light and shade” to make it less “depressing.” Thomson Reuters editors backed this same point: “We are more in the entertainment business now, this is a clear reflection through the media in the internet – more environmentally specialist issues, trade relations, entertainment. Sport is a big thing we do as well.”

Some of these comments support the argument that news is shifting its emphasis to softer lifestyle news, which some people might interpret as dumbing down, because it could be seen as a move from the serious to the trivial.

However there are interesting market reasons why the shift to the middlebrow market may not have eroded some public

service ideals which, as explained above, means agencies take care to include serious news that may have a narrower appeal, but which serve informational needs (even if they are really helping market decision-makers). By public service is meant the news providers' commitment to what people ought to know and for news that is not fashioned only to mass market wishes. The dynamics of the internet have not undermined their need to include serious news.

A key reason is that financial clients, embassies and politicians need reliable, varied information. To some extent such demand protects coverage of neglected or unprofitable geographical zones, such as portions of Africa. Despite their huge influence around the world, none of the major agencies enjoys a global monopoly. Faced with competition from other agencies, each "has to have something that is distinctive" (AFP editor). Focusing on different regions or zones of interest is one way for the agencies to stay different. The AP is strong in the US and south America. AFP proudly speaks of its coverage of African affairs in terms of the way it is valued by its clients, and therefore also for the competitive advantage it offers by plugging a gap that other agencies cannot fill. So even though covering Afghanistan was very expensive, AFP still puts a lot of their resources into covering it:

*"...in Afghanistan, we make virtually no money. I think we sell our copy to a couple of embassies and Nato or whatever. But we put a lot of our resources in to covering it, because of the broader implications."* (AFP former UK Editor)

Another factor sustaining public service journalism is the stated editorial missions of the three agencies. AP stresses its commitment to democracy and its aggressive advocacy of the importance of transparency and accountability in government in its core mission statements, "making sure the public has the information it has a right to know" (AP, 2012). These ideals go beyond mere market advantage and are embedded in the requirements of its journalists. Thomson Reuters openly state a belief in public service, and AFP statutes commit journalists to absolute independence and objectivity (AFP Statutes, 2010).

In addition, all three consciously aim to reflect liberal (western) political ideals, especially those of human rights (to life, politi-

cal self-determination, to freedom of information, and freedom from poverty). The AFP editor phrased this as a commitment to Enlightenment ideals of universalism, reflected in coverage of gender equality and women's rights across the world.

*“We report on human rights abuses, we accept the idea that there are human rights. If you read the stories about women's rights, you get the idea that women have them, and so on [...] I think that there's an unspoken consensus that stories about women's rights are important stories, valuable stories.”*

(AFP)

*“These are time-honoured ideals developed over decades. The recent web era thus has barely affected the professional codes of agency journalism to provide unbiased information useful to the public. In fact when Reuters was expanding in the 1990s in the U.S., it made its objectivity a market selling point – to contrast with the internet bloggers and many U.S. regular media who take political sides.”*  
(Former Reuters editor).

## Agencies, UGC, and social media

Can the same be said for the ways agencies go about getting and filtering news and video as it appears on the web? Social media like Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Youtube, and Vine pose new challenges to journalists, not least because ‘citizens’ can publish what they see and hear around them using their mobiles, releasing pictures and words to the internet as events happen. News agencies, with their significant numbers of staff and stringers, may seem less vulnerable to this new power of instant news than many news providers who have so few staff posted abroad. But there is still the threat that their impact will be stolen by bloggers or citizens on the spot who can upload news themselves. In a case typical of many, there was an explosion of Arab citizens media publishing pictures of Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi's grotesquely luxurious palaces when they fell, before any journalists arrived.

In fact, agencies like the AP have taken social media in their stride, helping to pioneer techniques for the use of social media in newsgathering. They are especially useful in dangerous places with difficult access for journalists. In the brutally re-

pressed Arab uprising in Syria, for example, the AP delivered clients' video straight from the citizens of its towns, shot that day by inhabitants. It pictured fire, bodies, blood, and the merciless government shelling of civilians. This was a fusion of the citizen activists fighting for their lives, with direct 'journalistic' witnessing of events through technology. The AP takes the 'journalistic' content or editorial matter from the source – in this case the citizen with video – and distributes it after vigorous checking and verification. As AP said of its first Social Media editor, Fergus Bell, he “established a network of sources in Syria we could depend on for material and helped set in place a multilayered verification process involving AP Television, the Middle East desk's regional and linguistic experts and the Nerve Center.” (AP, 2012)

Do we see something new in the relationship of news agencies to ordinary citizens engaged in 'accidental journalism' on the ground? The short answer is no. It is hard to interpret this use of citizen video as any new agency practice or relationship with news sources. The work is conceived by the journalists exactly according to established professional routines. Citizen contributors are treated as news sources, just as journalists would treat any other source or interviewee. When the AP considers how to deal with the citizen voice, the solution is to embrace it as content sources for its text news stories, video packages or rushes. The sources and content are subjected to procedures that fit normal news routines. First, the AP journalists discover the news by searching social networking sites, such as YouTube, rigorously checking what it finds for accuracy, to ensure that it is what it appears to be. (There are plenty of hoaxes on the web and pressure groups or governments with a motive to fake video especially to suggest atrocity by one warring side or another).

The checks are as stringent as in any other branch of the job – identity and place checks, triangulation with other sources, and the seeking of permission by direct contact with the persons who provided the video. Technical scans are then run on the quality of the 'citizen video' for more clues to its truthfulness. Only when the gathering and packaging is done, fully checked, does the job move to worldwide distribution. The content, enhanced with the AP name, is passed to world populations via clients. It is not fool-proof, but its newly pioneered social media routines are entirely in line with traditional practices of journalism.

This routine absorbs the ‘citizen’ content into professional behaviour, and bringing to it the qualitative intelligence skills of journalism. The commercial value of the content is provided by verification. If it is mutual exploitation between source and agency, this is more of an unspoken civil trade between non-equals, than a sharing of journalistic identity. The citizen has not suddenly become a journalist, or an equal to the journalist, at least not in the journalist’s eyes. The citizen source is as a provider – giving or coaxed into giving information – but they are not afforded any special or extra bargaining power or journalistic status, though they take huge risks. In Syria 58 citizen journalists have been killed in the uprising compared to 23 reporters (AFP 2013).

### Bursting into the open

News agency technologies are adapting to global networks today, it seems, just as they were when they adopted cable communications in the 19th century. For parts of agency communications, internet technologies have moved to the frontline but the systems, global organization, and routines cannot be said to have been overturned. Nor has the organising system that underpins the agency business model been modified. As Boyd-Barrett (1980) noted over 30 years ago, the agencies show “remarkable” stabilities in the framing and categorization of news across time and place. Only in the proportion of news delivered to different nations and regions is there significant rebalancing.

But, the news agencies today are visible to the public in a way they never were before (Shrivastava, 2007; Paterson 2011). Gone is their secrecy, anonymity, and avoidance of the public limelight. The shift has been enabled by web technology. In the late 1990s two agencies suddenly started to publish some political and social news direct to the public in real-time, with little delay. Thomson Reuters and AFP can be seen on their own websites – and Thomson Reuters especially has a fully-fledged website of breaking news and video. AP has introduced its own direct online video service too, which – like Thomson Reuters’ site – is supported by advertising similar to ordinary commercial media (Paterson, 2006). AP has nearly 1.5 million followers on Twitter, while Reuters has nearly 2.3 million, all directing traffic to web stories. Suddenly, agencies are competing in the retail market, and their clients, such as CNN, or MSN, or

the BBC, or the *Wall Street Journal*, are their competitors too. However, to be sure, the offering on the website is delayed. It is a cut-down and light version, slowed up so to avoid spoiling the exclusive service to commercial clients.

That is one aspect of visibility. The second aspect is a sea change in naming and branding, especially in the way web-based media label their agency material. Manywriters have noted the way global portal and search engine sites, such as AOL, Yahoo, or MSN, unashamedly flag up their agency material. That may not seem odd unless you realise that in the past, media clients tended to hide the fact that the text and video they ran was taken from an outside source. Today the international agencies are becoming part of the world you see online, openly there, especially in text. It's too early to say what this may mean for the agencies themselves but they certainly risk becoming more of a target for public criticism. That may be welcomed: Anonymity is rarely the best basis for information provision. Visibility is bringing them into a more open relationship with the public.

A dangerous dependency?

On balance, the story of the news agencies has been a positive one. As seen from their own point of view, they are surmounting and taking advantage of some fundamental transformations of digital technologies. However, is their prolific production of global news a threat to local or national cultural health and the diversity of points of view?

One accusation made against the agencies is that they are gaining an ever more monopolistic position. They are feeding all media websites and platforms including tablets and mobiles. And they are providing more and more content as regular media shed staff. If the internet once seemed to herald new possibilities for multi-voiced global pluralism (and many forms of community-based 'alternative journalism'), Paterson (2006, 2007) argues many regular media and emergent news sources like portals, show a heavier-than-ever reliance on agency output. Many stories display a common reliance on agency material, especially for international news. Although portals like Yahoo put up a pretence of source diversity, Paterson claims their content is overly reliant upon the same few agencies that

supply the news. The portal sites, he said, barely altered agency content and ran it unchanged. Bui (2010) notes that Yahoo News was using 57 percent of its news from AP. An earlier study showed the average verbatim content of the portals was 85 percent (Paterson, 2007). Ninety eight percent of Yahoo top stories were from APTN or Reuters, a joint survey by this author observed in 2011. Thus the concentration of international news flow into fewer hands, noted by Boyd-Barrett (1980) years ago, may have intensified in recent years. Paterson (2007) claims this follows on from the fact that television networks have reduced their own reporting since the 1980s. Production of original (non-agency) news reporting seems to be in perilous decline, according to this view.

However this picture should not be taken uncritically. Portals like Yahoo and MSN have different websites in each country (e.g. UK, France, Norway, South Korea). Even a cursory glance at the portal Yahoo in Russia shows a preponderance of BBC World Service content, much of which is probably not taken from international news agencies, but from the BBC's own reporting or other inputs. Countries, such as South Korea, Turkey, or China, and doubtless many more, seem to have news sources on the Yahoo pages that do not derive from international agencies. They are quite possibly taken from domestic national news agencies rather than the international ones. Comparative country research on that topic remains to be done. Meanwhile a further shading on Paterson's (2006, 2007, 2011) pessimistic picture of a news monopoly comes from Boyd-Barrett (2010b), who shows that the majority of international news in Indonesia is coming from the Chinese agency, Xinhua. A similar argument against agency homogenization is joined by Thussu (2012), who predicts the power of Indian media will be seen as a new and dominating influence in news provision in coming decades, rivalled and matched no doubt by China.

This would clearly reduce the homogenizing influence of agencies. It would suggest that contra-flow, would increase and soften the impact of (western) agency news on eastern audiences. One way or another, news media products from emergent countries may challenge and perhaps erode the western international agencies' position. The balance of advantage is far from stable.

## Conclusions

From these observations, it seems the agencies are still crucial to the globalization of news. They appear to be charting an effective course within the realignments of digital technologies. They are absorbing new arrivals into their orbit – turning them into clients. As a result of these successful agency policies, the key issue is less to do with their survival than with what it means for citizens to experience their continuing, even increasing, capacity to set a global news agenda. Even if agencies might begin to secure the western liberal ideal of ‘full and free’ information exchange (Boyd-Barrett, 1992) across the world, that outcome may be gained at the price of unwelcome news homogenization. The emphasis of agencies is on short-term news and politics. Long-term interests like climate change and environmental damage don’t get so much attention. A way to reverse this tendency might be to provide stronger national media or more regionally based agencies. Resistance might also be achieved through government funded news organisations, or ones belonging to ethical organisations like Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). That might require also less reliance on the commodity system of production, which is so nakedly based on gaining the widest audiences, and which governs agencies’ actions.

Agency news, collected with to sell in as many news markets as possible, has developed a style that can be seen as impersonal, even callous: The ideal of journalistic emotional detachment chosen by agencies can be seen as sparking a moral deficit, the vice of passionless indifference. Put in a more abstract way, we the public are constructed in a spectator role by the objective style of agency news, rather than a role that invites action – and this is the result of a specific impartial style of journalism.

On the other hand, the international agencies can be said to provide a social benefit in helping to stabilise the existence of public service journalism. As described, they are committed to some extent to report from areas that need to be known but are not financially viable for regular media providers. In the meantime, for better or worse, agencies remain an icon of traditional corporate mainstream news, with their ideals of objectivity and definitions of ‘news’, against which the concepts of ‘alternative’ and ‘citizen’ voices and movements are defined and take their meaning.



Looking ahead, the agencies' model seems to be adapting the wholesale business of news and adjusting to changing global market demand. Thomson Reuters graphically demonstrate this shift in focus when Jim Smith, the CEO, announced in 2011 a new globally focused section being set up devoted to accelerate business in growing geographies, i.e the East and Asia. "Just getting better in our core markets will not be sufficient if the majority of global growth happens elsewhere," he warned shareholders (Smith, 2011).

To conclude, this chapter has argued that the threats of internet technologies and the changing world balance of power are challenges that the three agencies are meeting on their own business terms. It has also suggested that their survival, and arguably greater dominance than before has profound implications for the public, because the agencies can be seen as monopolistic creatures that stifle the growth of other news providers, agendas, and news models. The contention in this chapter is that such a pessimistic view is not fully proven and also that there are considerable virtues in the services the agencies offer. The way things are shaping, it seems the international agencies are here to stay, a vast and often under-estimated force contributing to the public perception of politics, disaster, finance, sport and entertainment in much of the world.

## Notes

1. The three international agencies mentioned have a strong grip on the global news market. Other agencies include Bloomberg, based in New York, which competes with Thomson Reuters for financial news. Also significant, the Chinese news agency Xinhua can make some claim to ascendancy in the East, since it collects and distributes news there on a large scale (and shares some with AP). This chapter has omitted Xinhua or Bloomberg as they don't have the global news reach of the big three.
2. The editors and managers directly quoted are from author interviews in 2009/10, also carried out with Dr Lian Zhu.

## Challenging Questions

- Discuss the contribution to journalism made by the international news agencies. Can they still be said to be setting a global news agenda?
- To what extent do the ownership structures and/or national origins of the agencies affect their claims to independence?
- Can the international agencies be described as the friend or enemy of original news reporting?
- What impact have social media and citizen journalists had on the international news agencies?

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