Information is power

Control of the world media keeps the poor in their place

That is one reason why independence movements are treated so negatively in the western media; they smash the beloved stereotype.

Consider the strictly controlled western perspective of Africa. The fact that Africa's recurring famines and extreme poverty—a poverty whose rapid increase is a feature of the new age—have political causes rooted in the west is not regarded as news. How many of us were aware during 1983—the year of the Ethiopian famine and of "Live Aid"—that the hungriest countries in Africa gave twice as much money to us as the west as we gave to them: billions of dollars just in interest payments.

We were shown terrible television pictures of children dying and we were not told of the part our financial institutions had played in their deaths. This also was not news. The camera was allowed to dictate a false neutrality, as is often the case, with the reporter playing the role of concerned innocent bystander and caption writer. Public attitudes flow both from perspectives and omissions. Unless prejudice is countered, it is reinforced. Unless misconceptions are corrected, they become received truth. This "neutrality" is commonly known, with unintended irony, as "objectivity." Indeed, it has been termed a "rule" and invested with a certain sanctity.

Among the many exceptions to this "rule" are civil disturbance and war: that is to say, whenever established forces deem themselves threatened, not by an adversary but by truth. During the Gulf war, the threat was so great that "objectivity" had to be suspended altogether.

Most of the British press is owned by oligarchies in the making: Murdoch, the Maxwell, Lord Stevens, Viscounts Rothermere and Blakenham, "Tiny" Rowland. TV and radio news have been greatly influenced by Murdoch and now, increasingly, by CNN. There are occasional programmes that digress from the orthodoxy and which probably provide legitimacy to the system. But when one of these went "too far," as Thames did with Death on the Rock, serious measures were taken. Thames is off the air from 1993.

The illusion is that we have access to a lot of information. The reality is that we have access to a lot of media to which unrestricted information is unwelcome, even a threat. If Maxwell "saved the Mirror," as the paper's front page claimed the day after his death, he saved it from this threat. All the media oligarchies collaborated with Thatcher's media "strategy," which was essential to her doctrine of a "free market/centralised state." The new age that saw Murtloch and Maxwell climb up their mountains of debt also saw enacted draconian legislation that not only undermined personal and political freedoms, but gave the police powers to confiscate news material and make arrests of those journalists who expose official lies and venality.

"News values" complement this. Whatever used to be said about him personally, one Maxwell is worth more than 6,000 Filipinos. One captured RAF pilot is worth more than tens of thousands of Iraqis killed, including those buried alive in their trenches by American bulldozers. One British child is worth more than countless Iraqi children, embroiled, traumatized and dying for want of essential services, food and drugs. When a group of London schoolchildren was asked for their view of the war, one of them wrote "Hell." None of them could provide a coherent picture of actual people.

The majority of humanity are not news, merely statistics, and incompetent lookouts that flit across the television screen. They do not argue or fight back. They are not brave. They do not have a vision. They do not conceive models of development that suit them. They do not form coherent, effective and organized grass-roots organizations that seek to mount the obstacles to a better life.

"Never," wrote Jeremy Seabrook of the western media, "is there a celebration of the survival, the resourcefulness and humanity of those who live in the city slums; nowhere is there mention of the generosity of the poorest, of the capacity for altruism of those who are tending, by dint of wisdom, endurance and tenacity of people displaced from forests, hills or pastures by western-inspired patterns of development."

Ninety per cent of international news published by the world's press comes from the "big four" western news agencies. They are United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), Reuter and Agence France Presse (AFP). Two are American, one is British, one is French. Their output is supplemented by the transnational giants from Murdoch to Times-Warner to CNN. Almost all of these are American. The largest news agency, UPI, gets 80 per cent of its funding from US newspapers. A survey in the mid-1980s found that UPI devoted 71 per cent of its coverage to the United States, 9 per cent to Europe, 5 per cent to Asia, 3 per cent to Latin America, 3 per cent to the Middle East and 1.8 per cent to Africa.

"These figures," wrote the Grenadian writer Derek Walcott, "are the very essence of the phenomenon called information imperialism. In the total volume of UPI's information, news about the United States took up more space than that devoted to the whole African continent, where more than 50 countries are situated."

Former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere once noted sarcastically, wrote Rojas, that "the inhabitants of developing countries should be allowed to take part in the presidential elections of the United States because they are bombarded with as
much information about the candidates as are North American citizens."

In the same issue of Third World Resurgence (an excellent analytical journal published in Malaysia), the Zimbabwean journalist Dingga Mpondah wrote that "running against the fast current of this broad river of news from the west is a trickle of information from the third world which barely manages to reach the doors of the readers in New York, London or Paris. The exchange of news between the west and Asia is typical of the imbalance. AP sends out from New York to Asia an average of 90,000 words a day. In return AP takes in 19,000 words ..."

Old empires live on with the "big four". AFI is strongest in French-speaking Africa. AP and UPI are in the Americas and Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, which the US dominated in the postwar period, and Reuters maintains its influence in the former Commonwealth. "No other single factor," said Reuters chairman Roderick Jones in 1939, "has contributed so much to the maintenance of British prestige ..." These days Reuters makes huge profits from dispensing "market information" to the world.

The agencies produce much fine on-the-spot reporting, as well as critical analysis of events, individuals and policies. But these seldom illuminate false assumptions or challenge stereotypes. In the cataclysms of words that go out every day, the jargon, euphemisms, acronyms and assorted inanities that are the deadening shorthand of modern, establishment propaganda are rarely weeded out. Terrorism is almost never associated with the west, only with the third world. It is not important that the US government trains terrorist armies and its agents run death squads. The State of Israel is not described, like the Libyan regime, as a terrorist organisation; only Arabs are terrorists. As Dingga Mpondah pointed out, "The names of many independent-minded nationalist leaders—like Mossadeq or Allende—are invariably prefixed by terms like 'leftist' or 'capitalist'. The effects of the constant use of terminology should not be underrated. Such a bias moulds public opinion to the point where western military intervention in Vietnam or El Salvador is made quite acceptable."

Indeed, during most of the Vietnam war the Vietcong, who were southern Vietnamese, were portrayed as "communist aggressors". They were guilty, in Adlai Stevenson's memorable doublespeak, of "internal aggression". In truth, they were the resistance against a foreign invasion of their country. The Americans, to my knowledge, were never referred to in the mainstream media as invaders. They were merely "involved". Thus the transition from news to Hollywood was smooth, with the emphasis on the angst of those "involved", not the suffering and heroism of the defenders.

Without the American media's concentration on the personality of General Noriega—"old pineapple face", the classic Latino bad guy—President Bush might not have entirely succeeded with an invasion that had little to do with Noriega and everything to do with reinforcing the US strategic position in Central America. Without a six-month media campaign that elevated Saddam Hussein to the status of a "new Hitler", General Schwartzkopf might not have been able to conduct his "media war", along with his slaughter of Iraqis, quite as expeditiously. Journalists are essential to these endeavours. The "new democracy", according to Edward Bernays, the leading figure in 1980s corporate propaganda, is the "engineering of consent". This can be a subtle process, and many journalists may not be aware of it: I wasn't.

Reading third-world commentators, I am struck by their inherent fear of post-cold war reconsolisation, especially that which deploys information technology. "The global news giants prescribe us information ..." wrote Shiraz Kissam. "Like the explorers who preceded them, they are mapping the world on a principle of perpetual extension. Hence, the globe is seen in terms of the west's need for it. People see and learn about each other, she says, "only via this distorting mirror".

And yet there is awareness. In many third-world countries the seduction is not going well; many people know by their own experience that consumerism and democracy are not the same thing, and that the so-called "free market" is about the power of capital and not at all free. The recent World Bank/IMF conference in Bangkok was reported very differently in many third-world countries from the way it was in the west. The World Bank was seen as responsible for, not a solver of, problems. The same was true of the Gatt meetings, in which the US sought to include as "free trade" the resources of "services, finance, tourism and intellectual property rights" in the developing countries. During the Gulf war, you only had to take a sample of third-world newspapers to glimpse a worldwide opposition to the war and a recognition of western, as well as Iraqi, militarism that was unknown to us in the west.

The media labours under many restrictions in the third world; yet much of it is bold and many of its journalists see themselves as allied not with the establishment but with the people. This can be frustrating and dangerous work. In Britain, the situation is very different; and it is ironic that, as media technology advances, it is not only the traditional methods of journalism that have become obsolete, but the honourable traditions. It will be a further, shaming irony if these traditions are upheld in the 1990s by the very people who never make news.

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Lines from Galeano

for Eduardo Galeano

"We gave you our spices, pepper, ginger and cloves, to preserve your meat from putrefaction."

And you ate us.

"We gave you our silver and gold, keys to the Renaissance, to pave your way to paradise and soothe your souls."

Your machines ate us.

"We gave you our wives and children, we gave you our prophets, we gave you our love and trust to add to empty self-respect."

And you ate us.

"We gave you our land and you drew maps, we gave you our rivers and you put up customs posts, we gave you our heaven and you sold it."

You ate us.

You ate us, you did not notice us.

You ate us, you did not find our soul.

You ate us, you could not stop our greed.

You ate us, you could not sow our seed.

You ate us.

You did not chew our bones. And in the hidden narrow of our bones, is our courage.

Victor Anant