

CANADA & ASIA

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE MEDIA

A media survey has found, among other things, that China perceives Canada as a big but quiet country with an important role to play in world politics. On the other hand, Canadians rely too heavily on foreign media to let them know what is going on in Asia. Margaret Coates takes a look at this fascinating survey.

If the media's perceptions shape its coverage of the news, then the findings of a recent study do not bode well for the future flow of information between Canada and Asia. A critical report suggests that the Canadian media's coverage of Asia is not as good as its coverage of many other parts of the world, while Canada suffers from poor visibility in the Asian media generally.

The report, entitled "Canadian Media's Perceptions of Asia/Asian Media's Perceptions of Canada", was published in June, 1992 by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, an independent, non-profit organization established in 1984 by an Act of the Canadian Parliament. In 1989, the Foundation commissioned Pacific Rim Information Network (PRIN International Inc.) to survey Asian coverage in the Canadian print and electronic media. In 1990, the Canada-ASEAN Centre in Singapore and the Foundation jointly commissioned a survey of the Asian media's perceptions of Canada.

The survey of the Canadian media created a data base of articles from 14 newspapers and also conducted personal interviews with influential Canadian media people in a broad cross-section of news organizations. However, as pointed out in the report, 70 per cent of Canadians look to TV as their primary source of information and the fact that the data base was limited to newspapers would seem to be a major flaw in the survey. Nevertheless, the survey gives a fascinating description of how Canada gets its news of Asia.

The major finding of the survey is that the media contains inadequate coverage of Asia from a Canadian perspective, a failing that it blames on lack of leadership and commitment from the Canadian media. Only five percent of all international news published in Canadian newspapers in 1988 related to Asia. The report also complains of over-reliance on foreign-produced material, especially American sources. An interesting tangent in the report is its comments on what Canadians purportedly want to see in the news: more concern with development issues,

less interest in conflict issues, demand for cultural and economic stories, and willingness to grapple with "grey areas" of issues.

The report also finds that there is insufficient coverage of Asian business stories in the Canadian media. It says this is partly due to the inherent difficulty in reporting business stories and the lack of adequately trained business journalists. However part of the problem can be traced, according to the report, to the Canadian media's reliance on foreign sources, which tend to emphasize political stories.

An interesting finding from the data base is the regional differences within Canada in coverage of Asian stories. *The Halifax Herald Chronicle* had the second highest percentage of Asia-related stories taken from Canadian news agencies. *The Regina Post-Leader* had the highest percentage of stories on tourism in Asia and the largest percentage of China-related stories. Not surprisingly, the *Vancouver Province* had the largest number of Hong Kong related stories published in Canada.

The report suggests that the future holds more of the same. Part of the reason, apparently, is that the public does not complain about poor coverage of international news. Foreign news editors report a lack of pressure from the public to do a better job, which, they say, makes it difficult to obtain more resources to allocate to international news coverage.

The survey of the Asian media interviewed media people from 115 Asian news organizations in Canada, Brunei, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore. In addition to trying to determine the sources and scope of Canadian news coverage in the Asian media, the survey sought their perceptions of the following topics: Canadian foreign policy, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, bilateral relations between Canada and Asian countries, Canadian development programs, and Canadian goods and services.

The major finding of the survey is that, while Canada's profile in the Asian media is very low, the perception of Canada is generally positive. The report complains that the Asian media receives much of its information about Canada through an American filter and a number of specific suggestions are made to improve Canada's visibility in the region. One is that Canadian businesspeople actively maintain good relations with the Asian media, and make time to meet with and give exclusive interviews to Asian journalists.

According to the report, China sees Canada as "a big but quiet country that does not produce provocative stories...a peace-loving, modern nation that is expected to play an important role in world affairs. Economically, Canada is seen as very dependent on the United States, although recognized as being technologically advanced in fields such as medicine and agriculture..." Japan has very positive perceptions of Canada: "...a favourite destination for Japanese tourists because of its clean environment and spectacular scenery...a safe and peaceful country..." In Hong Kong, Canada benefitted from the raised profile gained during Festival Canada 91 and interest in Canada remains high.

The report is not a rigorous analysis of the issues related to media coverage of the news either in Canada or in Asia. It is a snapshot, not a study or a critique. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting and thought-provoking insight into how the news is reported. As it says itself, its intention was to stimulate further research on the subject.

In the meantime, however, perhaps the most important point to emerge from the report is that Canadians should play a more active role, both in Canada and in Asia. As consumers, this means demanding better coverage of Asian stories. As Canadian business people, it means developing relationships with the media and participating in shaping the perceptions that in turn shape its coverage of the news. ♦