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CANADIAN PRESS COVERAGE OF ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT ISSUES

by John R. Walker

The media in Canada faces a continuing problem that few developed nations do: the sizeable influence of a foreign neighbour's news reporting and commentary on the coverage, in Canadian newspapers, radio and television, of international affairs.

The largely American influence is especially noticeable in coverage of foreign affairs issues involving peace and security. Despite a recent increase in Canadian coverage of foreign affairs, there is still much room for improvement in the quality, consistency and critical assessment of questions about the nuclear arms race and the basic survival of our planet.

The 'Uncertain Mirror' was how the Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media in Canada described the Canadian press, radio and television's reflection of life in 1970.¹ But the examples of distortion, exaggeration and trivialization that Senator Keith Davey and his commission spoke about in those days were largely confined to the subject of domestic coverage.

There was very little in their report about Canadian coverage of foreign affairs, much less peace and security issues. Although a special survey of Canadian papers for the Davey commission showed that nearly 33 per cent of the news in those papers was world news, as opposed to Canadian, there was certainly little comment in the Davey Report on how all that foreign news was covered.

The one concern in the report which did involve foreign coverage was that Canada received most of its foreign news from American, British and French news agencies, not Canadian ones. The suggestion was made in the Davey report that more Canadian reporters ought to be sent abroad to increase the "Canadian content" in foreign reports.

There was little or no response to the report. A decade later, in 1981, the Kent commission on newspapers was still able to say that "as for the coverage of foreign news, Canadian newspapers rely heavily on foreign news services, thereby failing to project a distinctly Canadian perspective on international events. In addition, the ready availability of American feature materials at low prices has clearly retarded the development of Canadian alternatives."²

Former diplomat and foreign policy expert John Holmes suggested in the 1970 Davey Report that "better, not necessarily more" Canadian foreign correspondents were needed. In the 1981 Kent report, however, Professor Denis Stairs found that "foreign policy makers had little respect for Canada's newspapers. With few foreign correspondents and only a handful of writers with expertise in foreign or defence policy, the Canadian newspapers had little to offer the informed reader. External Affairs officials did read the *Globe and Mail* and the Ottawa dailies, but turned in their official capacities to the quality British, American and French newspapers as supplements to official sources."

In 1981, two-thirds of the "foreign" file of the main Canadian news agency, the Canadian Press, was coverage of American news items, and the majority of the other third involved British and West European items. The rest of the world, where a majority of the current issues of peace and war actually develop, was given short shrift.

When faced with criticism of their foreign coverage, Canadian editors argued that it was not the public that was complaining, but rather a few academics. There has been a response, however; today more Canadian foreign correspondents are working abroad than at any time in recent years.

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