

Quebec in the US

rapidly. The stringers for US outlets are often fulltime employees of Canadian news organizations; virtually all of them are Anglo-Canadians. No matter how bilingual those Canadians may be, their involvement in the great national upheaval of Canada forms their opinions and perceptions. To reach an American audience, the reality of French Canada must overcome numerous obstacles — linguistic, cultural, national.

Despite all this, Henry Giniger of *The New York Times* received high marks from all sides for his explications of French Canadian life and his "fairness." An American, he is at home in French, and takes a special interest in reporting Quebec life. In the days leading up to the May 1980 referendum, Giniger focussed on a Quebec family who described themselves as nationalists, but who lined up three-to-one against the Sovereignty-Association proposal of the Parti Québécois. This was a journalistic coup, if not a scoop, and later some of his colleagues called him "prescient."

But Giniger, who has recently been transferred to New York, believes his coverage suffered from his being based in the federal capital. He says, "You can't cover Quebec sitting in Ottawa. It's an entirely different world, a different point of view. In Ottawa, you are constantly pounded by federal propaganda against the Parti Québécois. The Liberals, after all, are in power in Ottawa, and for them the main enemy is René Lévesque and the PQ."

As for his role as an American, Giniger says: "I have fewer hangups as a foreigner than if I were part of the struggle. I don't start off with deep prejudices that the Canadian-English community is apt to have. I can move from one world to the other. I can understand both — but I'm not involved in the damn thing. If Quebec wants to be independent, it's okay with me."

The "okay with me" — the mildness, the willingness to let the *Québec-libre* philosophy sink or swim as it deserves — is not an attitude found among many Canadians.

When there is attention

Despite the lack of direct coverage, US newspapers and magazines are comfortable expressing freewheeling opinions about Quebec. *The Arkansas Gazette* wrote on April 20, 1982, "Premier Rene Levesque of Quebec calls the Constitution a 'betrayal' of French Canada and his followers likely will continue their agitation for separation." *The Baltimore Sun*, however, opined a week later that, "With the Constitution finally 'patriated,' there is a distinct impression that the most perilous of secessionist times is over." The editorial did not state for whom the peril existed.

Just as Giniger is an exception to the generalization about covering Quebec from Ottawa, some editorialists write perceptive copy from their armchairs many miles away. *The Houston Post* seems to have an unusual sensitivity to Quebec issues. After describing the components of the constitutional question on April 17, 1982, the paper continued:

Puzzlingly, all this was done without the consent of Quebec and against the vociferous opposition of Quebec's Premier Rene Levesque. The provincial governments have always been strong. They think more in terms of a confederation of provinces than a federal union. Each is more aware of its assets and selfish interests than most American states.

Western Canada is intent on making the most of its oil wealth. Quebec is determined to be a French nation within the federation.

In a study of US newspaper coverage of the 1980 referendum, Vernone M. Sparkes, James P. Winter and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari of Syracuse University said the "most surprising finding" was that the *Wall Street Journal* ran only five stories on the subject during May, the month of the voting, but seventy-four non-referendum stories about Canada. Frozen by their academic stance, the authors wondered whether the newspaper "purposefully downplayed the referendum."

In another study in 1981, Sparkes and Ghaffari concluded that "The American press . . . has somewhat proved its coverage of Canada." They based their findings on various measurements, such as column inches. Jonathan Anderson of *The Washington Post* says, "There are a lot of people, Quebecers among them, who tend to equate column inches with moral standing. That is a calculus we are not prepared to deal with."

And notwithstanding the "improved coverage," correspondents in Canada often feel frustrated by the way their home offices handle their copy. It is cut, played back and shelved until a suitable space appears. Sometimes a story that has a fast-paced, breaking quality to it on the scene is shelved by the home office. An example is "L'aire Charron," which had many attractive ingredients: a news story, crime, institutions challenged, a politician disgraced, even a chase and a sex angle — and it provided a sharp focus of French-English bitterness in Quebec. In 1982, when reporter Susan Brown of the Knight News Service wrote a story about it, her dispatch was carried in *Detroit Free Press* on March 22, 1982, and in the *Buffalo News* on May 16, 1982. Same story, almost two months apart.

Scholars have trouble too

In their study of US coverage of the 1980 referendum, Professor Sparkes et al made the mistake of confusing with an outside contributor to a newspaper wrote with the permission of the newspaper itself. According to their study, "*The Washington Post* suggested [that the referendum] 'may be as ominous as was South Carolina's decision in 1860 to withdraw from the United States.'" They go on to state that "*The Washington Post* proposed that civil war in Canada was a serious possibility, a prospect that Canadians and the Canadian press would regard as ludicrous. The *Post* said

If the referendum does fail, then, there is a serious possibility that violence will break out in Montreal and perhaps other cities, and that Trudeau would again send in troops. In that case, the specter of civil war would hang over Canada.

In fact, *The Washington Post* did not say any of the above. Those words came from a writer named Don Nuechterlein. Unlike anonymous editorials which reflect the thinking of the newspaper, his signed article was buried on page 4 of the financial section, where people of various political and economic persuasions — sometimes extreme — are invited to set forth their views.

So it was not *The Washington Post* that anticipated a revolution in Canada over Quebec rights. It was an outside contributor who has never had any connection with the newspaper. Professor Sparkes and his colleagues should