

feature

by Tom Hawthorne for Canadian University Press
The eight-inch wad of perforated sheets struck the podium with a thud, tottering briefly before plunging unceremoniously to the floor. These, as *Edmonton Journal* editor Steve Hume admitted, were the more than one million words the paper's editors had spared from public consumption in a single day.

Not that the stories were of poor quality, Hume explained, because in fact they certainly met his newspaper's standards. The rejects merely could not fit into the *Journal's* "conscious" 15 per cent allotment, after advertisements, for international news. "A journalist is hired to be a filter," Hume said. "We are paid to go through this stuff."

And with good reason. That same night, the rescued wire copy provided no end of amusement for two dozen would-be Cronkites. Elephants rescued in Zimbabwe. Monk Skyjacks Jet to Learn Religious Secret. Omelette-Preparation Heats Up Trial.

Winnipeg free-lance journalist Eric Mills dripped with sarcasm when describing some of the more obvious cases of distortion in foreign coverage at an Edmonton conference on The International News Blues held in May. One ABC-TV correspondent, in the midst of a virtual civil war in El Salvador, reported that support for the rebels was faltering as civilians opted out of revolution on weekends for more patrician past-times at the beach. "I guess they all have cars," Mills said, "even though El Salvador is the poorest nation in Latin America, and they just drop their weapons to go to the beach every weekend."

The beach theme also helped one American journalist's promotion of Uruguay as a tourist spot. Although all pretences to democracy have been eliminated and all political activity declared illegal, the reporter duly noted for his readers that this loss of freedom wasn't of great significance since "all political movements are on the wane during the summer beach months anyway."

Laying face down in the street, his arms stretched out in front of him, the American television reporter must have thought the roadblock check a bit of annoying routine. The soldiers gave no suggestion that something was amiss. But then, unbelievably, a young Nicaraguan soldier walked towards the prone reporter, aimed his rifle, and with an imperceptible squeeze blew the reporter's head off. The execution stunned the millions of Americans who watched the news that day, becoming another of those harsh images of war that become ingrained on the psyche.

With the death of a single American television reporter, Americans suddenly "discovered" Nicaragua and its revolution.

"What we get is a coverage limited to a kind of crisis state," says Jacques Marchand, publisher of *Mother Jones* magazine. "Places appear and disappear again. The coverage in the U.S. and Canadian press promised us that a bloodbath should occur if the nationalists win, followed by economic collapse, societal collapse. Well, that didn't happen. Ergo, it drops out of the news."

"Obviously there are racist and nationalistic motives." And if the death of a single American reporter in Nicaragua or three American nuns in El Salvador, can create such a furor in the midst of bloody civil wars, the media has created a scale of values, Marchand says.

He said the scale would work out that 30,000 urban workers would be slaughtered with little adverse publicity, or 300 students, or 30 faculty members. "And, of course," Marchand offered, "50,000 faculty members would have to be killed to get the attention of one murdered journalist."

Iran, he says, has virtually faded back into a Totally Invisible Nation. "Similarly, the threat of the Russian juggernaut through Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf has not taken place. But no matter for we've suddenly discovered Communists in El Salvador."

Hugh McCullum says virtually the only reporting we see from El Salvador is of non-analytical

body counts. McCullum, editor of the liberal *United Church Observer*, reported from El Salvador last August. There he found only three journalists from the Western media: a Reuters stringer from Costa Rica, an NBC reporter in trouble with management and essentially banished, and a United Press International stringer from Columbia who

Western media ignores the attempts at restoring a war torn nation after "painting Mugabe as a baby-eating savage who would turn the country into a blood-bath."

"We don't cover the third world unless there is a crisis, a 'sexy' story. It has to be something to titillate, to confuse the readers back home. Information has

"The present information order must be destroyed. But how when so few control that order? This imposed information order is held in so few hands. Seventy per cent of the people consume 12 per cent of the world's newspapers, 10 per cent of the radios, and only 5 per cent of the televisions. There must be a significant change in content. There must be an attempt to understand why there is a volcano in Latin America instead of reporting that another 40 civilians have been shot in El Salvador."

Western media doesn't trust third world wire services, Char says, charging them with bias and propaganda while ignoring that "each service is dedicated to a certain image of the world. Sure some (third world reporting) is propaganda, but at least you can compare the news and come to some decision yourself."

Hume, the 38-year-old wunderkind of the *Edmonton Journal* whose rise to the editorship was officially announced during the conference, was perhaps the only person of the 150 at the conference who strongly defended the commercial media's coverage of the third world. He supported the *Journal's* coverage by pointing to the number of wire services to which it subscribed, only to be embarrassed later when he admitted his paper had declined to take the Inter Press Service, at a relatively inexpensive \$175 per month.

Called a "corporate apologist" by one delegate, Hume was angrily challenged throughout the conference for his backing of the current media system. And not surprisingly, Hume was also the only one there in any position to effect some immediate reforms.

(Editor's note: in all fairness, the most distinguished participant in the conference, *Mother Jones'* Jacques Marchand, defended Hume's prerogative to print anything in the *Journal* he thought readers would prefer. Marchand even said his own magazine, perhaps the most famous left-wing publication in America, didn't print so much international news because his readers weren't interested so much in reading it.)

WAR AGAINST MEDIA MOGULS

Journalists with demol' international news blues take on the old school

wanted to go home after receiving death threats. It was not as if the revolution had failed to heat up. More than 12,000 people had been assassinated or murdered by the time he arrived.

"Face it, the North American and European press does a completely lousy job of covering the third world. Until the next crisis, El Salvador will sink back into the oblivion that the mass media thinks it deserves."

McCullum said his visit to Zimbabwe after the election of Robert Mugabe revealed "some of the most exciting stories I've run into for some time." Yet the

become an economic commodity viewed in a profitable fashion. Packaged like soap, sold like a car, the amount of information you see depends on how your ratings are doing or what your sales are."

For Antoine Char, the only solution to the imbalance of the flow of information from the industrialized world to the third world is a "revolution in mentality." Only recently have the large news agencies become interested in third world demands, he says. The next step is to decolonize media influences.

Char is Montreal staffer for Inter Press Service, and alter-

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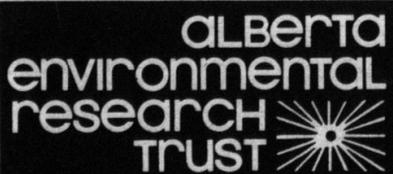
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