

# INVISIBLE GIANTS IN BROADCAST JOURNALISM:

## news agencies and the global news ecosystem

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Brasileira de Pesquisa  
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**ABSTRACT** Key actors of the global informational web, the international television news agencies are not often covered in the communications field in Brazil. This paper aims to understand the dynamics established between these transnational companies and their subscribers (world television stations). It attempts to clarify how these western-led news agency companies operate within the flow of communication. It intends to identify production processes (assessment, collection, treatment and radial distribution) for the Associated Press Television News (APTN) and Reuters Television News (Reuters TV).

**Key words:** News agencies. International television. Reuters. Associated Press.

### INTRODUCTION

The information disclosed by the international media continues to be prospected primarily by the group of European and American news agencies, despite the visible growth of the so-called peripheral sources/visions, which act either as dams to contain western news hegemony (COTTLE, 2009), such as the pan-Arab television network Al-Jazeera, or agencies that benefit from the galloping economic expansion in their own countries, such as the Chinese Xinhua and the Japanese Kyodo. The Associated Press (AP), Thomson Reuters, Agence France Presse (AFP) and EFE control between 70% and 90% of news distributed to media outlets in the world (BOYD-BARRETT; RANTANEN 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, these agencies remain the “media of the media” (NEVEU, 2006, p. 62). In broad terms, the audiovisual division of AP (Associated Press Television News) and Thomson Reuters (Reuters Television) have been dominating the commercialization of news in a video format worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last 20 years Reuters TV and APTN were imbued with an extraordinary technological capacity to develop a *news commodity*

hidden and adjusted to TV networks' logistics. Simultaneously, oligopoly, the most frightening impasse to informational democracy, was also taking shape on the horizon of these companies. The then APTV, founded in 1994, bought World Television News (WTN) in 1998, and Reuters TV, which had already acquired Visnews in 1992, was a subsidiary of the Thomson group, one of the "second tier" media empires, as classified by Robert McChesney (2000, p. 88), since 2008. Compromised with and clinging to the neo-liberal ideology, the news agencies came up against an apparently competitive market, but which, paradoxically, Robert McChesney believes is more similar to a cartel than a formal economic competition environment per se, in which there would theoretically be a roll of players.

### **The duopoly at risk**

In order to explain the different fields in selling market news, with its unevenness, asynchrony and fractures, it is important to recall two classical concepts pointed out by Oliver Boyd-Barrett (1980, 2010). The *wholesale* media companies re-sell footage to their customers (in this case the TV stations that subscribe to their services), while *retail* media companies transmit those images directly to consumers, editing them with (or without) their correspondents.

This analogy, borrowed from and driven by traditional business, refers to how manufacturers, retailers and consumers are related. In the *wholesale* trade, stores sell to companies that also sell to end users. *Wholesalers* usually guide *retailers* in terms of trends and how they should offer their products strategically to attract the consumer (what is now in fashion or new in the market/industry). This process is also blatant in the transmutation of news events, the path between the raw material and its "packaging". News agencies have been guiding TV stations around the world by selecting what should be highlighted in the news, setting the agenda as much as CNN International and the BBC have been increasing a homogenization of news structures and content (THUSSU, 2006).

Indeed, the distinctions between *wholesale* and *retail* navigate through turbulent seas and tend to disappear because of new multilateral alliances between firms (BAKER, 2009; PATERSON, 2010). Therefore, the international network CNN, through its agency *Newssource*, promotes the circulation of its images and interviews to stations, while at the same time it displays the videos provided by news agencies for the viewer, assuming a hybrid face. It is a "client"

and also one of the agencies rivals and competitors.

Seeking to elaborate the international communicational flow's iconic figure, information was prospected with the news agencies (through their web portals and visits to their sites) and through specific research regarding their operations (JOHNSTON, 1998; PATERSON, 1998, 2010). The companies studied here do not possess systemized or historic documentation in the audiovisual segment, with the exception of two sole articles written by APTN's main executive, Nigel Baker (2004, 2009), a professional who made his career in AP and was distinguished for having implanted the service that focused on broadcasting stations.

The international news flow destined to television stations is controlled mainly by three big players in the media arena:

1. APTN and Reuters TV, which sell images to their clients, that are either web portals, such as Terra TV, or television broadcasting stations, such as Globo TV and Bandeirantes TV, or the Mexican Televisa;

2. Television broadcasting stations of global reach with vast activity beyond their countries of origin (SKY News, ABC, NBC, CBS and CNNI);

3. Consortiums, collaborations and partnerships among public and private broadcasting stations, profit or non-profit, the largest one represented by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

The three groups are symbolically interlinked as shown in the next figure, like a live organism that has to be irrigated: a cut in one of their arteries could compromise the whole systemic circulation of information. Biological sciences help throw light on the comprehension of the media field's complexity today: one that looks more like an *ecosystem*, for it remodels the manner of consumption and the prospecting of the news commodity, as well as putting the survival of traditional media, such as newspapers, at risk.

In flow 1, news agencies re-transmit reports, produced through their own support units and exclusive crews of reporters and cinematographers spread around the world, to their clients (broadcasting stations that subscribe to their services). There are 89 in APTN and 85 in Reuters TV. The whole production volume is sent to the Distribution Center, which has been the agencies' headquarters, in London, England, ever since the time of their antecessors.

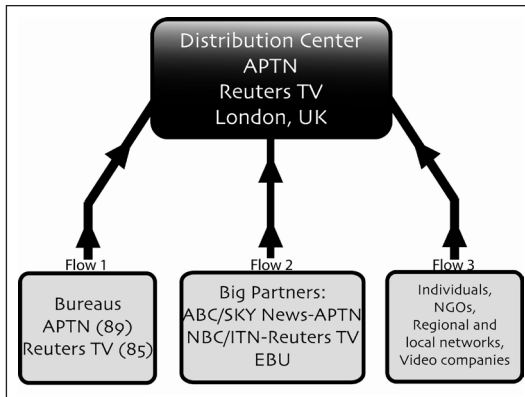


Figure 1: How the news flows within the agencies

In flow 2, the news agencies receive images directly from their major collaborators, those clients who have a greater scope of coverage in their countries of origin and around the world. Another international agency with a differentiated legal structure is also to be found in this collaboration, the EBU. At the time this article was written, APTN detained exclusive rights for the re-distribution of images and interviews originated by the American ABC and British Sky News networks. On the other end of the process, Reuters affiliates itself with NBC and the British ITN. These associations have always marked and constituted the *wholesale-resale* business, ever since the times of Visnews and UPITN.

It happens that these alliances have two controversial consequences. In the first place, it is these first tier clients who determine priorities in the news coverage, eliminate subjects and regions that are outside their interests and presume a uniformity of content in their agencies. Secondly, these interwoven circumstances also suggest monopolistic distortions: during the first Gulf War, in 1991, it was the agreement made with the extinct World Television News, WTN, which allowed CNN to dominate live transmissions during three consecutive weeks.

Finally, in flow 3, the agencies bought, or acquired at no cost (depending on the contract) news exhibited by smaller public or commercial networks, such as Globo, Record, Televisa and CCTV, also having access to video footage made by video producers. In a term used by AP and Reuters, these are *pick-ups*: the process for collecting outsourced material, that which has already been edited

by another broadcasting station<sup>3</sup>. There are also units ceded by individuals and companies, aside from others made available by NGOs acting internationally.

The two following figures are adaptations of previous attempts at illustrating the informational cycle of the international news flow, elaborated by British professors Chris Paterson (1998) and Simon Cottle (2009). As in any production chain, there are flexible and parallel hierarchical levels in which members nurture one another in order to survive, which produce competitive, dependent and powerful relationships. In this case the metaphor “news ecology” generally defined by Cottle (2009, p. 176) as “ a concept that refers to the complex and differentiated forms of the flow of news in today’s local-to-global news environments, encompassing new forms of online news as traditional news media organizations and outlets”. Yet Dan Gillmor (2010) speaks about the evolution of *the journalistic ecosystem*, to mark the contradictions and surprises of this new media environment. It is within these two concepts that one can assume that Brazilian Globo TV and Qatari Al-Jazeera are *floating* members of the chain. That means these two “regional” networks may be allocated to a more extreme (or even secondary) level of the chain, at the same time they may move to the top of it, influencing and guiding other media outlets.<sup>4</sup>

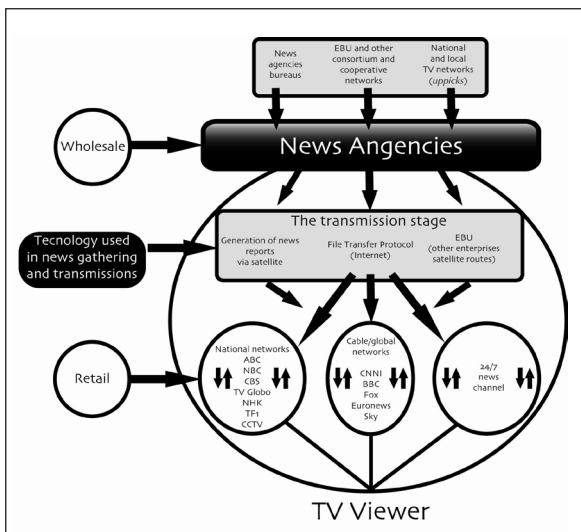


Figure 2: The main sources, models and ways to distribute news from news agencies  
 Based on Paterson (1999, p. 81)

In the figure below, however, new actors in the same chain are included: those who go after a specific new environment market: web portals and social networks that have gained a voice in the midst of the traditional media range. For instance, YouTube, owned by the giant Google, Twitter, Facebook and WikiLeaks. There are also companies that may soon lead to damage the AP-Reuters duopoly, such as AFPTV, although still limited to the generation of 500 videos per month, produced by only 12 branches dedicated to video transmission. The figure also allows us to view the group defined by Thussu Daya (2006) as guardians of a counter-flow (Al-Jazeera and the Turkish news agency, Ilhas, alternatives for issues related to the Middle East)<sup>5</sup>. The scheme discussed here includes various media organizations (commercial, cooperative, state, public), located in urban centers of the East, West, North and South regions of the planet. All media feed the same global news ecology, exchanging images and information, which finally reach the screen of the consumer:

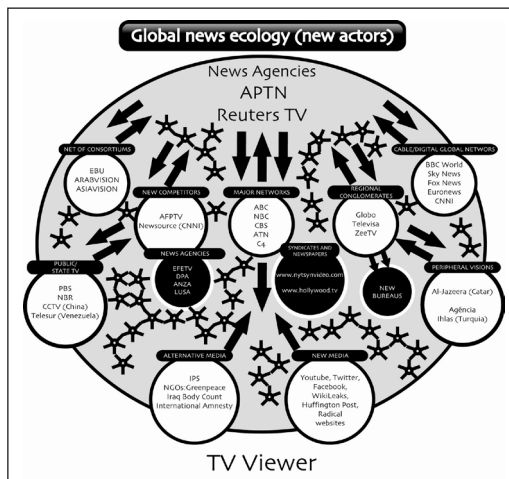


Figure 3: The current global news ecology regarding television industry  
Based upon Cottle (2009, p. 18)

### The assembly line

Going back to the manufacturing processes of the news agencies, it is necessary to highlight the socio-economic order that led the agencies to financial stabilization. The operation of businesses, from the mid-20th century until the present day, has been restructured, as Harvey believes

(2008, p. 140), and it is the “flexibility of work processes, labor markets, products and consumption patterns. Harvey mentions the “flexible accumulation” of capitalism in post-modernity, as opposed to the rigidity of Fordism, altering the relations between workers and their companies.

The metaphor of the *global factory* is used by Octavio Ianni (2006, p.67) precisely because the author understands that the term represents the staggered operations of companies operating on an unthinkable scale, whose ubiquitous capital moves in the extremes of the planet, like the seas and the ocean. For him, “the global factory is designed to go beyond any border, linking capital, technology, labor and other productive forces. [...] Promoting re-dimensioning of space and time” (IANNI, 2006, p. 19).

The media groups follow these models. The agencies’ routine for the production and distribution of information is undertaken in a centralized manner and, at the same time, diluted and flexible. For example, Reuters TV today has 35 stringers, that is, cinematographic reporters with no formal contract, spread around Iraq. By means of multiple platforms (via Internet, traditional satellites or Broadband Global Area Network - BGAN),<sup>6</sup> these collaborators send their images to one of the “hubs” in the Middle East (offices in Baghdad, Amman and Beirut). These bases then check and refine these videos and then send them directly to the agencies’ epicenters in London that, on the last layer of processing, re-pack the audiovisual “packages” and place them in circulation for the other clients.<sup>7</sup> Up to 300 videos with 30 to 60 different subjects and themes are distributed a day by both agencies, including those inserted in the subscribers’ basic contracts; these videos are disengaged from the actual occurrences of the day and generally prepared with issues regarding technology, behavior, entertainment, celebrities, the environment, health and science.

Therefore, it does not matter where the factories are in the current global economy: the productive chains have reinvented themselves and command centers now “coordinate, innovate and manage activities interconnected to the company networks” (CASTELLS, 2005, p. 469). Although Castells was describing the technological networks of large corporations without any particular application to the news agencies, one can apply his assumptions to Reuters and AP, whose role has been to create models of exploitation and dissemination of information based upon the provision of services in a decentralized manner.

London was chosen as the headquarters of these two agencies in the 1960s, when Visnews began operating. The city did not become a nodal point by chance. With a consolidated technology infrastructure, the British capital

was designed as the “media capital”, to which all countries turned when the sun went down, the heart of the planet, a symbol of the European elite.

Even American Associated Press, whose main office is located in New York, decided to keep its audiovisual division in the London Borough of Camden Town, while Thomson Reuters TV moved to the old port of Canary Wharf, a recently revitalized area of London. Over the past two decades, however, the audiovisual divisions of AP and Reuters have implemented a parallel network of sub-centers, whose task is to gain autonomy and manage the support units. The following figure shows the dynamic operation in the agencies’ offices.

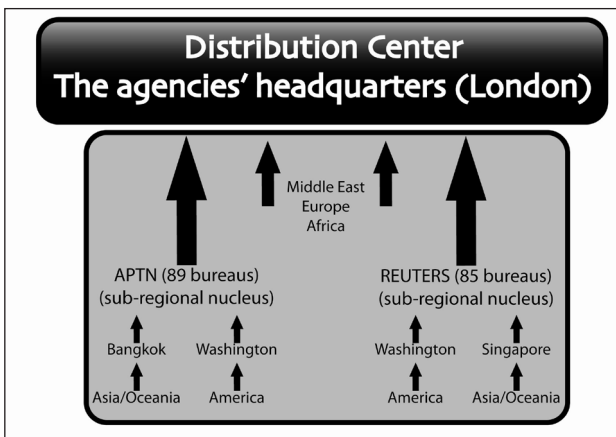


Figure 4: The radial model of news agencies distribution

The agencies’ headquarters (in London), a kind of editorial decision center, is interlinked with three nuclei. The first functions in the headquarters itself, in London, and is directly responsible for the news production in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The second is located in Washington, in the United States, and has the infrastructure and autonomy to edit video footage shot by its crews throughout the Americas, plus a permanent source of generation. Washington accompanies the region’s whole production and only then does it distribute the news to headquarters in London. The third nucleus capitalizes the material prospected in Asia. In practical terms, the offices in Bangkok (AP) and Singapore (Reuters) follow Washington’s same routine. None of the Asian bureaus report directly to the London headquarters: they have to report first to the sub-regional nucleus and only later does the news arrive at



the headquarters' server in London.

One aspect of the news negotiated by both agencies should be mentioned. Audiovisual stories grouped together in specific issues offered to media organizations by APTN and Reuters TV detach themselves from closed formats, as generally there is no narration (“voice-over”). They are distributed in pre-edited video footage with an average duration of two to three minutes. They are the result of the pronunciation of a set of autonomous, and not necessarily independent, statements (interviews, surrounding sound, images in movement, photos, charts, etc). An electronic *script* is transmitted to the client for each “raw” story unit, with all the information necessary for the understanding of the content inserted in the edition.

The next figure is designed to explore the functioning of the international news agencies in Brazil, subordinated to the Washington nucleus. The Brazilian office follows the same norms and routines followed by bureaus in other Latin American countries. APTN, as does Reuters TV, exchanges and buys news reports from Brazilian commercial broadcasting stations, whose programming schedule devoted to journalism allows for the supply of a daily news volume to the agencies. From Rio de Janeiro the material is forwarded to Washington, where it is edited and reviewed. After this first treatment, the news is disseminated to London, which finally distributes the images through its net of subscribers (including those in Brazil)<sup>8</sup> and through EBU.

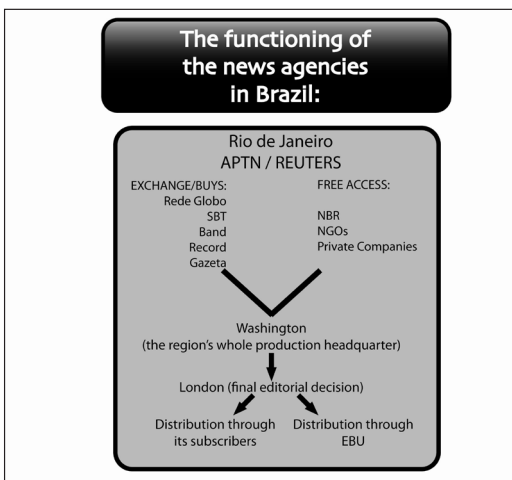


Figure 5: The dynamics of the Brazilian offices of APTN and Reuters TV

Although they have the capacity and mobility to inject regional productions in their system, the agencies' nuclei are still subject to budget and editorial limitations, conducted by headquarters, says APTN director, Sandy MacIntyre:

You may decentralize various operations, but in order to guarantee information legitimacy we still need London to be a decision center. We might get another regional office that allows for more rapid forwarding of news reports to some regions. But the editorial process must go through us; it's a question of minimal hierarchy. Just think if you in Brazil would allow, for example, a reporter to film the floods in Florianópolis and then place them on the air on a national network without any editor in Rio or São Paulo evaluating them first. It would be chaos.<sup>9</sup>

The most controversial stage of production for news agencies has to do with the prospecting of information first hand: fact gathering and investigation. The filming, treatment and transmission only happen after this phase. Long before the Internet reached its current relevance of prospecting information about other countries, Jeremy Tunstall (1981) had already issued an alert regarding that which seemed to him to be an incongruence in the practice of journalism: the international news agency correspondent utilized only four sources to obtain data: the most far-reaching broadcasting companies and newspapers in the country; public or cooperative national news agencies; the federal government; banks and financial institutions. There was no *modus operandi* that allowed reporters to get around this model, which had taken root years ago, for the agencies are not considered to be the mass media, they are looked on more as acting indirectly, recalls José Afonso Silva Júnior (2006).

Fenby (1986) also sees these weak points and explains that reduced crews installed in gigantic countries tend to reproduce second-hand news. News agencies assume the perceptions originating with the economic and political elite concentrated in the capitals and big cities. According to the author, upon re-processing what the broadcasting stations had already defined as news, the agencies run the serious risk of simplifying, stereotyping and caricaturing countries. Trying to service so many clients with different expectations, agency correspondents compromise themselves with a more conventional than daring coverage, perpetuating visions later disseminated to their net of subscribers.

Let us imagine how investigation from a distance is established in nations like China and Russia. If we draw a parallel to Brazil, the fragility of the model is astounding. APTN has only one reporter-producer and one cinematographer, based in Rio de Janeiro, responsible for translating, writing, taping images, editing them and transmitting them. The editorial

room also counts on an AP text service correspondent, aside from others in São Paulo, who work as support units. There are fixed collaborators in Rio, Brasília and São Paulo.

With no human or financial resources for mobility and travel around Brazil, news correspondents working for television broadcasting agencies end up following a passive routine of monitoring the national press. Reuters TV producers, as do those from APTN, make a habit of using third parties for prospecting: they wake up watching *Bom Dia Brasil* and end their working day with the *Jornal Nacional*, TV news programs aired by the biggest Brazilian commercial broadcasting company. At the same time they follow newspaper sites such as the *Folha de São Paulo*, *O Estado de São Paulo*, *O Globo* and *O Dia*. In both offices the TV is always turned on to *Globo News*, the Globo Group's news channel, and NBR, a federal government cable channel. It is an inverse process to that adopted by international Brazilian newspaper and broadcasting company editorships that, on their part, check foreign broadcasting stations such as CNN and BBC (AGUIAR, 2008).

After the first filtering is concluded, producers in the agencies studied here present the daily specials to the Washington editors, always taking into consideration the availability or not of images (if they will be made by the agency and if they demand video footage from the broadcasting stations). As they are in Rio de Janeiro, part of the employees' day is set aside to buy images that come from other Brazilian regions. It is a way to get around operational difficulties, says Flora Charner, of APTN:<sup>10</sup>

The newspaper or broadcasting company correspondent can usually count on a relative autonomy, works for a specific public and knows his/her reader or TV news consumer. He is able to spend five days in the Amazon producing a special feature. We cover the factual, the daily news in an enormous country like Brazil. We cannot leave the city, we don't have a big budget; we act more like a base. We are particularly impaired here in Rio, for we are neither in the financial capital nor in the official Brazilian capital. The correspondent also generally has enough money to hire someone who will get everything ready for taping in advance. The correspondent's editors rarely veto the agendas. To them, anything the correspondents can offer is a profit. Not us. We have to meet a wide demand to please the Japanese client, the European client, the Chinese client and so on. To leave Rio we have to have a very good agenda, one that's worth the investment, you understand?

Indeed, APTN's situation in Brazil of course reflects the American news agency's priorities and hierarchical focal points. If we make a comparison with branches in Germany, the disparity is significant. Aside from Frankfurt, there are four crews and eight people working in the

capital city of Berlin. On the other hand, of APTN's 89 offices, there are only three in Central America, and these offices also have the responsibility for covering the whole region. During the Honduras political crisis in 2009, Flora Charner was dislocated from Rio de Janeiro to reinforce the local crew. "The infrastructure was so tiny that I set up my office on the little tables in Bob's (a fast-food chain), from where I answered my e-mails and transmitted the interviews over the Internet, using the restaurant's wireless connection". Groups from neighboring countries are called up in the case of big media events, such as the Haiti earthquake, when APTN, in the first few days, mobilized seven crews in the field. Today APTN does not have a fixed base in Haiti<sup>11</sup>.

Reuter TV's structure is larger, as the "mother agency" has nearly 30 professionals scattered around São Paulo and Brasília in order to meet the needs of the most diverse clients in different digital platforms. However, in Reuter's audiovisual department, there are two trainees and only one senior producer responsible for the writing and translating of the edited interviews, as well as two fixed cinematographers. Leandra Camera exemplifies the operational limitations she faces daily: "The sector heads who cover finances for foreign newspapers are able to have sources. They even beat Brazilian vehicles. Making television is complicated; one has to deal with the headlines".<sup>12</sup>

Nick Davies (2008) believes that the role of agencies is now much more linked to risk management than to actually making a newspaper. He correlates these two activities as a parameter using the fact that in over one hundred countries there is no news broadcasting agency, including places like the Sudan and Congo that for years have undergone ethnic conflicts and human tragedies. In much of the globe, only one man or one woman is responsible for the flow of news in a vast area of land, with millions of people living far from big cities. Vast populations are completely oblivious to what is said about them. In the more than 50 nations on the African continent, APTN maintains only four branches (Cairo, Dakar, Nairobi and Johannesburg).

Davies (2008, p. 56) suggests that today journalists make *churnalism*: a term that defines the extreme rotation of journalism, the mechanisms in which the reporter is trapped by a computer screen, with no direct contact with his sources and the public. The journalists' investigation practices have become increasingly hostage to the agencies, which, on their part, gather and investigate their news by means of online newspapers and public relations firms. Davies invites viewers around the globe to critically observe television news that reproduces scenes,

interviews, points of view, policy frameworks and even worse, the errors of calculation and contextualization of the news.

The agencies respond to criticism with formulas and solutions that are quite concrete: if they are not installed in a certain country they hire local journalists and request support from the TV stations. They count on indirect arteries to circulate their news. Nick Davies (2008), however, is wary of this strategy, mentioning a research undertaken into the compromising effects of this intermediation. Davies cites research done by the PR and corporate video company, World Television (WT), which between 2002 and 2004 evaluated 262 reports distributed by Reuters TV and APTN referring to New Zealand. Over half (140) had been produced by crews based outside the country, such as in Jakarta, Indonesia and Sidney, Australia, over 5,000 kilometers away. Most subjects were of interest to the Western nations, with visits by rulers from Europe and Asia. At the same time, “none of them touched on issues such as health, youth, the environment and science” (DAVIES, 2008, p. 105).[1] Two years later, when WT advisors repeated the methodology, they found that APTN and Reuters TV limited themselves to merely reproducing stories aired on New Zealand TV stations, most of them about natural disasters, weird occurrences and the filming of *Shrek* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as parliamentary elections.

In the sharing between agency correspondents and regional or local vehicles, there is an imminent risk of journalists reaching the most compromising and delicate position in the investigative process brokered and mediated by others: disproving information collected arbitrarily. It was thus, continues the same Nick Davies, when AP, quoting the Baghdad press, said Iraqi militants had kidnapped and tortured an American soldier in February 2005. Later, they discovered the hoax, and the soldier’s image was actually a doll.

Let us now imagine the operational circumstances in the Middle East, where no journalist is authorized to enter the Gaza Strip without Israel’s permission. A good part of what circulates outside of the Palestinian territory is filmed by reporter-cinematographers indirectly linked to different political factions, submitted to a daily scrutiny by parties that shape the region’s complex and fragile leadership:

That may explain why the same event in the Gaza Strip, or even on the West Bank, presents completely different angles. Reuters may hire *fixers* and *stringers* authorized by the Hamas, while AP calls on professionals connected more to the other Palestinian organization, the Fatah, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty in circulating in Palestinian territories is also compared to restrictions in Iraq. In this country American soldiers are accused of intercepting cameras used by the news agencies, which lost many of their collaborators over the last years, all victims of the war and kidnappings. Caution is redoubled when checking facts, as many of the cinematographers are Shiites filming Sunni areas, or vice versa, increasing the risk of only partially conducting the coverage.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the news-gathering process, the structure correspondent-office still has some characteristics that are worth noting. Up to the late 1980s, the correspondents were mostly western, white, had a college education and were American, British and French, having been trained in major world capitals. Therefore, their perception of the world was quite similar. There was a tacit agreement of perceptions about newsworthiness, choosing especially what was unusual and exceptional (SMITH, 1984, p. 91). The “star system of bureaus” that Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Terhi Rantanen (2001, p. 135) referred to more than 10 years ago, involved selecting a certain kind of professional, one able to establish what matters as news for the agencies.

When they migrated to the audiovisual sector, Reuters and AP went on to adopt a multicultural recruitment. APTN arrived in Brazil in 1996, represented by Brazilian journalist and former TV Globo reporter, Edmar Figueiredo. Today the office is directed by Flora Charner, a Venezuelan who worked for many years in the United States and speaks three languages. Latin America is headed in Washington by Brazilian Cristiana Mesquita. Leandra Camera assumed command of Reuters TV in 1995 and says that being Brazilian was crucial to understanding and putting together reality in a more in-depth way. By employing regional voices the agencies have attempted to induce a counter-flow: from the periphery to the center, a different way of seeing the events, even though most of the decision makers are executives from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Furthermore, if during their first years of activity APTN and Reuters TV depended on the structure of their major television partners, today there is a breakthrough in trying to provide a parallel production, a more enterprising coverage, with more original material than that provided in previous years, when operations began in Brazil.

However, because of increasingly ubiquitous technologies that enhance connectivity, the agencies’ work has been changing in several levels of production, not only due to the fact that correspondents are overly devoted to Internet gossip, with little

time to hear testimony in the field, but mainly because they lost the autonomy they used to enjoy in the so-called golden years, or glory days, as defined David Perlmutter and John Hamilton (2007). Until the early years of the 1990s, correspondents traveled for days, their editors back home were not aware of their whereabouts and there was no way to locate them (GIRIDHARDAS, 2009, p. 4). Telephone calls were expensive and the hotel room phones were often the only means of contact with the chiefs.

In 2005, when Nokia launched its smartphone capable of running the flash program, with two cameras, as well as other functions such as receiving e-mails and access to newspapers around the world, correspondents faced a lot of pressure and competition (LIVINGSTON, 2007). As a consequence, the news-gathering work begins at home, on the bus, any place. Their employees can reach them any time, without interruption. The correspondents now have to come to terms with speed and multi-tasking.

This *multifunctional* profile of the news agency journalist becomes very clear on the production level of gathering information. APTN is more inclined to hire and maintain in its roster what it defines as a “one man crew” or “news person”, the professional responsible for investigating, filming, interviewing, editing and forwarding a news report<sup>15</sup>.

According to Flora Charner, in charge of APTN's office in Brazil, the production mode is becoming more and more demanding, acquiring unique configurations:

The demand is so big today that the cinematographer frequently doubles up even as a driver. He doesn't only press the camera button. In theory we all should be able to interview anyone. In practical terms, if the president of Venezuela is in Brasília and we don't have a travel budget, I have to hire a cinematographer in Brasília and suggest some questions for him to ask. But the stringer has to pay attention, know what news is, he can't let his mind wander as if he weren't a reporter, or someone who just holds a microphone and a camera. He needs to shoot expressions, looks and seek out information. While he is in the capital, participating in the press conference, I stay here in Rio watching the pool made available by NBR. I start to make notes of what bears highlighting, making a script of Chavez's answers that will be used later in the edition. I pass on the pieces I need to my cinematographer and then he forwards them directly to Washington while I write the script along with my text colleague, deciding together what will be our common headline and what words of the Venezuelan president we want to quote. Aside from all this, the head of the news office has management responsibilities; correspondents must have various vocations, such as the responsibility for accounting and rendering office accounts.<sup>16</sup>

All treatment given material gathered in the field is undertaken

on the computer by means of non-linear editing software that varies according to each company. Many times the images made or delivered by the broadcasting stations differ from the standard used by Reuters TV and APTN, who now adopted the 16 (width) x 9 (height) format instead of the 4 x 3, the two basic systems that service the subscribers' universe. Reuters already works with a Sony camera with a memory card that can be coupled to any computer, while AP still uses mini DVD cameras and therefore needs to decode the images every day before editing them.

The impact of new technologies on international coverage also affects network logistics. In 2002, an American TV crew would use 75 bags and boxes to store all the equipment it would need for the live broadcasts from Afghanistan. Almost 18 months later, in Iraq, an American correspondent reserved only seven separate volumes for the paraphernalia needed to cover the war live (PERMUTTER; HAMILTON, 2007).

More and more ubiquitous and fast, the transmission stage was one of the most affected in the process of making international news geared to television journalism. During their first decades in operation, Visnews and UPITN were obliged to install editing islands with very few resources in their offices. When they were traveling away from their base, the correspondents had to decide previously how they were going to set up the images, unleashing extremely bureaucratic and expensive operations. When Visnews and UPITN entered the market, their news stories were forwarded by plane, in the film format. The U-Matic system only arrived after 1969, and the Betamax, in 1975. There were usually time slots reserved for the generation of news reports via satellite, known as satellite "windows", with two daily, 15-minute transmissions each, containing a summary of the best scenes filmed by the agencies or their major collaborators overseas.

Brazilian Globo TV, for example, only received images from other countries by means of a pool, the SIN (Iberian-American News System). The system operated in daily collaboration with the EBU agency and would forward from London, via satellite, almost ten minutes of raw news reports from Europe, the Middle East and from the Iberian-American countries. Operational limitations interfered directly with the content of the news forwarded.

Every morning there was a conference call with all the countries that were part of the pool to elaborate the agenda for the day. In order for the piece to be accepted on the satellite, there had to be at least three countries voting for it. At that time, with Franco in Spain and Salazar in Portugal and military regimes in Latin America, the criteria for choosing the material was sometimes far removed



from journalistic interests. The problem was only solved in 1973, with the signing of a contract with the United Press International news agency, which went on to forward images of the *Jornal Nacional* from all over the world and via satellite on a daily basis. Up to then, all UPI material was forwarded by plane, arrived with many discrepancies and with an almost three-day delay (MEMÓRIA GLOBO, 2004, p. 43).<sup>17</sup>

Fenby (1986) points out what he considers to be Visnews's trademark: innovation. In 1984 the agency implanted a pilot experiment: a daily package with 30 minutes of images embracing various countries destined for Western Europe. In the 1990s, Reuters TV's antecessor launched a service called Vis Europe, distributing a continuous generation of news reports as soon as their editions were finalized in London, only to European clients.

When APTV was launched on the market to oppose WTN and Visnews's operational procedures, it took a daring step. Up to 1994, the agencies had satellite channels/windows at previously fixed time frames. They transmitted the videos to the subscribers three, four, up to five times a day, during 30 minutes. AP's first step was to create the 24/7 system: 24-hour transmission seven days a week (BAKER, 2009). At the time,

ten minutes of satellite cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000. This was between Asia and Europe, or Latin America and Europe. It depended on the country. The prices later began to drop with the proliferation of companies and the privatization of satellites in various regions around the world. Today it costs between \$300 and \$400 for the same routes, although it still varies from country to country. And what did we do? Until then nobody had made a list of the satellites' capacity. We'd comb through all the available satellite routes to offer news and bulletins all the time.<sup>18</sup>

Over the last two decades, the most visible change in the transmissions was the reception mode of the raw material coming from correspondents. Today only special materials are sent by satellite. The forwarding by broadband eliminated the conventional system's bureaucracy. By means of software especially developed to meet this demand, images are edited and sent, at any moment, from anywhere in the world, through any means of data transmission available (including modem or satellite).

Nowadays over 70% of the news forwarded by the bureaus to agency headquarters is currently transmitted by optical fiber, cable or by some digital distribution mechanism, the most common being the FTP (*File Transfer Protocol*), basically a transfer of data via Internet to a server in a file format. In extreme cases, when there is no Internet connection,

the agencies count on the BGAN portable terminals that serve as much for the re-transmission of video footage as for live appearances by the correspondents. Looking like a laptop, as it is light and compact, the BGAN can be used in war zones “without depending on the communications infrastructure or potentially inadequate or inexistent mobile phones” (INMARSAT, 2010).

With the end of the imposition of pre-determined satellite times, Reuters TV decided that as of November, 2008, it would place its entire production in circulation only via the Internet. Since then clients only download the news that interests them.<sup>19</sup> With passwords issued by the news agency, TV stations and portals can access video footage stored in a server. By the end of 2012, APTN will eliminate the system known as roll-out, the so-called continual generation by satellite, also funneling its whole news bulk via the web (via *Media Port Service* or *IP delivery*).

Jeremy Smith,<sup>20</sup> director of Reuters TV in London, recounts the astounding way these cheap transmissions corrected some coverage anomalies, provoking changes in paradigms:

We recently went live with a reporter in Mongolia using the BGAN system. This would have been impossible five years ago. For example, in the past you would have an incredible story in Zaire. How would you generate this report to London? You would have to go to a local TV in that country and try to negotiate a pre-edition in the company itself in order to choose the best images, paying for all these services. Then you would buy a generation slot via satellite. You could spend \$2,000 for 10 minutes of satellite time. You would effectively have to invest a minimum of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 in the undertaking.<sup>21</sup> Today a work station of the Store & Forward type, a kind of correspondent-kit, made up basically of a camera and a laptop, is no more than \$10. And you can use the equipment all year long, at any time, anywhere in the world. So now everything from Africa to the Middle East is easy to cover.

We must point out the positive developments that arose with the reduction of transmission costs. The idea that technology favored a more ample coverage is not an exaggeration. Today a violent manifestation in Egypt reaches global networks in a few hours, just as the marches in Yemen were portrayed by mobile phones and sent to the news agencies. According to APTN director, Sandy MacIntyre<sup>22</sup>,

if we look at the volume of information content that each continent offers us compared to the year of 1968, it is astonishing. In 1968, a story in Africa would take three days to reach London. Today we can go to the Congo in the morning and the images will be here in London within hours. What maybe didn't happen was a deeper coverage of certain subjects, the story with deeper investment. But I imagine that this, once again, has more to do with technology. At that time the reporter knew his material would arrive in London with a three-day delay. The profile of the material was more exploratory, less linked to the news of the day. Imagine that this

report would take five days to air. Today the need to be quicker makes us invest in more objective and shorter stories. Instead of rolls and rolls of film to be edited, technology itself brought a new way of disseminating news. Instead of only one story, you can distribute various versions of the same material throughout the day. In the end the version will embrace all the most profound aspects of the story. Speed changed the profile. We became a daily coverage, with more attention to facts.

In Brazil the two agencies mostly use transmission via the Internet. Satellite time is bought only on special occasions. APTN's first story was forwarded by satellite from Rio de Janeiro to the sub-central in the United States on June 4, 1996. Until 2003, reports arrived in London by airmail, or by generation by means of satellite. In July of this year, using a still very slow and incipient system, the *Telestream*, the Brazilian APTN inaugurated the forwarding of production through the web. Today, to forward two minutes edited with images and interviews it takes, on the average, 18 minutes for the file to arrive in Washington. At Reuters TV the same operation does not take longer than 15 minutes. Leandra Camara does the math: "Because of this our demand is four times bigger. We used to produce one story a day. Now we produce four, or even five. During the last decade, that would be our weekly, or sometimes even monthly, volume".<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

The details of the news agencies' operating practices concluded here show that both APTN and Reuters TV continuously irrigate the global news ecology. The two global companies solve the TV stations structural impossibility of being present in places where the fact occurs. What they actually negotiate is the guarantee of coverage, in spite of criticism regarding its content, generally too closely tied to the world superpowers. They took on, with no embarrassment, the role of television journalism "middlemen", intermediating the mass sale of information extracted from their network of clients.

### NOTES

- 1 According to the World Council of News Agencies, it now ranks between 60% and 70%. See: <<http://www.nawc.com.ar/en/showNews/18>>. Access: October 24, 2010.
- 2 APTN has 89 offices in 67 countries; Reuters TV has around 85

in 60 countries. APTN has 550 customers located in 113 countries and it claims it is responsible for 88% of the content emanating from broadcasters worldwide. Reuters TV has 611 customers in 108 countries. Information provided directly to the author by e-mail. These two companies also stand as leaders in the market. See: <[http://thomsonreuters.com/products\\_services/media/](http://thomsonreuters.com/products_services/media/)>. In 2007, Reuters said it had produced almost two and a half billion headlines worldwide and was viewed by a billion people, conveying 54 thousand videos. See: <[http://thomsonreuters.com/about/reuters\\_news/](http://thomsonreuters.com/about/reuters_news/)>. Access: January 20, 2009. The Associated Press Television News claims it is viewed by half the world population in a single day. <[http://www.aptn.com/80256FEE0057BF4E/\(httpPages\)/43E6D3165367B78280256FF8004A1474?OpenDocument](http://www.aptn.com/80256FEE0057BF4E/(httpPages)/43E6D3165367B78280256FF8004A1474?OpenDocument)>.Access: June 26, 2011.

- 3 In practical terms, an agency employee goes to the broadcasting station and has access to the report's images.
- 4 In 2010, during the first week of the earthquake crisis in Haiti, for example, both Reuters and the AP found themselves pressured to buy (buying in the case of APTN, and exchanging, in the case of Reuters TV) a story produced by Globo's team about the rescue of a woman trapped in the debris in Porto Príncipe. In 2011, Al-Jazeera had exclusive access to secret documents about the peace process in the Middle East, while it is still banned and censored in some states in US because it exposed the recent uprisings in the Arab dictatorships, dictatorships supported by America for years.
- 5 In its official website, IHLAS says that it is the "third largest news agency". It says it produces 125 video segments every day, has 155 offices, 700 cameras and 400 reporters. See: <[HTTP://www.ihavideo.net/static\\_content.jsp?type=about&banner=no&bottom=no](http://www.ihavideo.net/static_content.jsp?type=about&banner=no&bottom=no)>. Access: November 20, 2009.
- 6 Through the Internet it is necessary to connect to a network server and deposit a specific file. The server works as a kind of intermediary point for the receiver, which goes to the same address and downloads the same file. In generation via satellite there is only one emission point for reception. BGAN is a mobile satellite service, a compact machine that allows for the transmission of data, voice and videos to remote places.
- 7 Information from Victor Antonie, director of Reuters TV for the Americas. Cf. <<http://www.blip.tv/file/795651>>. Access: Jan. 20, 2010.
- 8 It is important to underline that many news stories sent to Brazil are prohibited for use in the country. For example: if one station ceded or

sold images of a forest fire in Mato Grosso state, it is not going to want these images to go on news programs in other stations in Brazil. That is why there are reproduction restrictions that extend also to web portals.

- 9 In an interview with the author on November 26, 2008.
- 10 In an interview with the author on April 28, 2010.
- 11 During the four years he investigated text agencies, Boyd-Barrett (1980, p. 48) counted the number of employees in the branches. In Brazil, during the 1970s, the population was 73 million and the number of employees in one single American news agency was 21, at the time scattered around Rio, São Paulo and Brasília. Indonesia had only three professionals to cover a population estimated at 125 million. In Great Britain there were 40 employees to cover a country with 53 million people.
- 12 In an interview with the author on April 29, 2010.
- 13 Khaled Abu Toameh, in an interview with the author in September, 2007, when he visited Globo TV's office in São Paulo. Toameh is an Arab-Israeli journalist from *The Jerusalem Post* and has been rendering services for the American network ABC since 1989.
- 14 Information given by Victor Antonie, director of Reuters for the Americas. Cf. <<http://www.blip.tv/file/795651>>. Access: Jan. 20, 2010.
- 15 Pavlik (2008) says we will soon see reporters going out into the streets with futuristic and strange prototypes, machines capable of recording, in various media, instants of daily life, like the project developed by Columbia University.
- 16 Flora Charner, in an interview mentioned formerly by the author.
- 17 The TV company correspondent, on his part, was also forced to adhere strictly to satellite time frames. In the first Gulf War, due to the time zone difference, reporters would spend the early hours of the morning traveling to Iraq's big central cities to try to send at least 10% of the material taped in time to meet the satellite's deadline (FIALKA, 1991).
- 18 Sandy MacIntyre, in the same interview mentioned before.
- 19 It is interesting to see that Brazilian broadcasting stations also make great use of IP protocols in order to receive news produced by their affiliates. Nearly 80% of the correspondents' work arrives in Brazil via the Internet and no longer by satellite, by means of programs bought or developed

by the TV stations themselves (ESPERIDIÃO, 2007).

- 20 In an interview with the author on November 28, 2008.
- 21 Not to mention the risks of local political censorship and monitoring, such as what CNN producers faced during the Gulf War when it used the Iraqi TV structure to forward its stories. In spite of romanticizing and glorifying these risky operations, the HBO film *Live in Baghdad* (2003) reveals how just how complicated the transmissions were.
- 22 In an interview with the author on November 26, 2008.
- 23 In the same interview formerly cited.

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