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ABSTRACT

New media give birth to new challenges. This third edition in the series of *Working Papers Film & TV Studies* examines the transformation of an alternative news agency towards a digital way of communicating and creating content. By focusing on Inter Press Service (IPS) and its daily online news service in Flanders (Belgium), the surplus value of the agency within the international news market and our Western democracy is being evaluated. Based on an extensive literature review and a quantitative online survey among Flemish journalists and editors, it is argued that IPS still represents a useful and necessary supplement to the mainstream news offer. The IPS news output critically questions establishment and ultimately aspires to create a sense of commitment. However, the study reported on in this paper also indicates that if the agency wishes to maintain its unique role of sensitizing the audience and bridging the information gap between North and South, a faster and more professional news service is vital.

ABSTRACT

Het digitale tijdperk leidde tot het ontstaan van nieuwe communicatiekanalen voor (alternatieve) media maar leidde eveneens de komst in van nieuwe spelers op de internationale nieuwsmarkt. Deze derde uitgave in de reeks *Working Papers Film & TV Studies* evalueert de meerwaarde van het alternatieve nieuwsagentschap Inter Press Service (IPS) en haar dagelijkse online nieuwsservice in Vlaanderen. Aan de hand van een overzicht van de relevante literatuur en een kwantitatieve survey onder krantenredacteurs en buitenlandjournalisten, achterhalen we de 'raison d'être' van het agentschap binnen onze hedendaagse digitale samenleving. Als buitenbeentje in de internationale nieuwssector en het academische veld van de Internationale Communicatie, slaagt IPS er na 42 jaar immers nog altijd in een nuttig, relevant én noodzakelijk alternatief te bieden voor het mainstream nieuwsaanbod. Anderzijds toont het empirisch onderzoek aan dat als het agentschap deze unieke rol wenst te behouden van het sensibiliseren van een Westers publiek en het overbruggen van de informatiekloof tussen Noord en Zuid, een snellere en meer professionele dienst van vitaal belang is. Deze paper wenst op basis van theorie en empirisch onderzoek de positie en rol van een alternatief nieuwsagentschap te analyseren binnen de Westerse nieuwsmarkt van de digitale 21^{ste} eeuw.

PREFACE

We are living in interesting times with constant innovations and (r)evolutions taken place at high pace. For the news media these global trends led to the establishment of a new 'news ecology'. This is a news context which is seemingly defined by a number of inherent paradoxes. On the one hand, the overwhelming proliferation of the Internet gave rise to new challenges and unbridled opportunities for journalists with practically unlimited access to information. Journalists searching for a fresh focus on the world news can rely on specialized news sites while emerging forms of journalism like civic journalism and the popular web log phenomenon represent an alternative to the mainstream news offer. On the other hand, the international sector of news purveyors has witnessed an increasing shift towards media concentration, consolidation and commercialization driven by a few major Western news agencies. In the age of the ubiquitous Internet and an ever consolidating power of media conglomerates like Reuters and AP, the world of the news does not seem much in need of the alternative news providers rampantly established in the roaring 1960s and 1970s.

Inter Press Service (IPS), one of these alternative initiatives, attracted most scholarly attention. In this Working Paper, Stijn Joye analyses the contemporary role and surplus value of IPS. Drawing on data from an evaluation of IPS Flanders, Joye critically assesses the impact of a small alternative news agency on the mainstream news sector and our Western democracy.

The research reported upon in this WP has already been presented in a shorter version at various international conferences. At the 2006 conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in Cairo, Egypt, Stijn Joye's paper *Raising Awareness in a Digital Society: The case of IPS Flanders* was awarded the prestigious *IAMCR Prize in Memory of Herbert Schiller* chaired by Graham Murdock.

Daniël Biltereyst and Sofie Van Bauwel

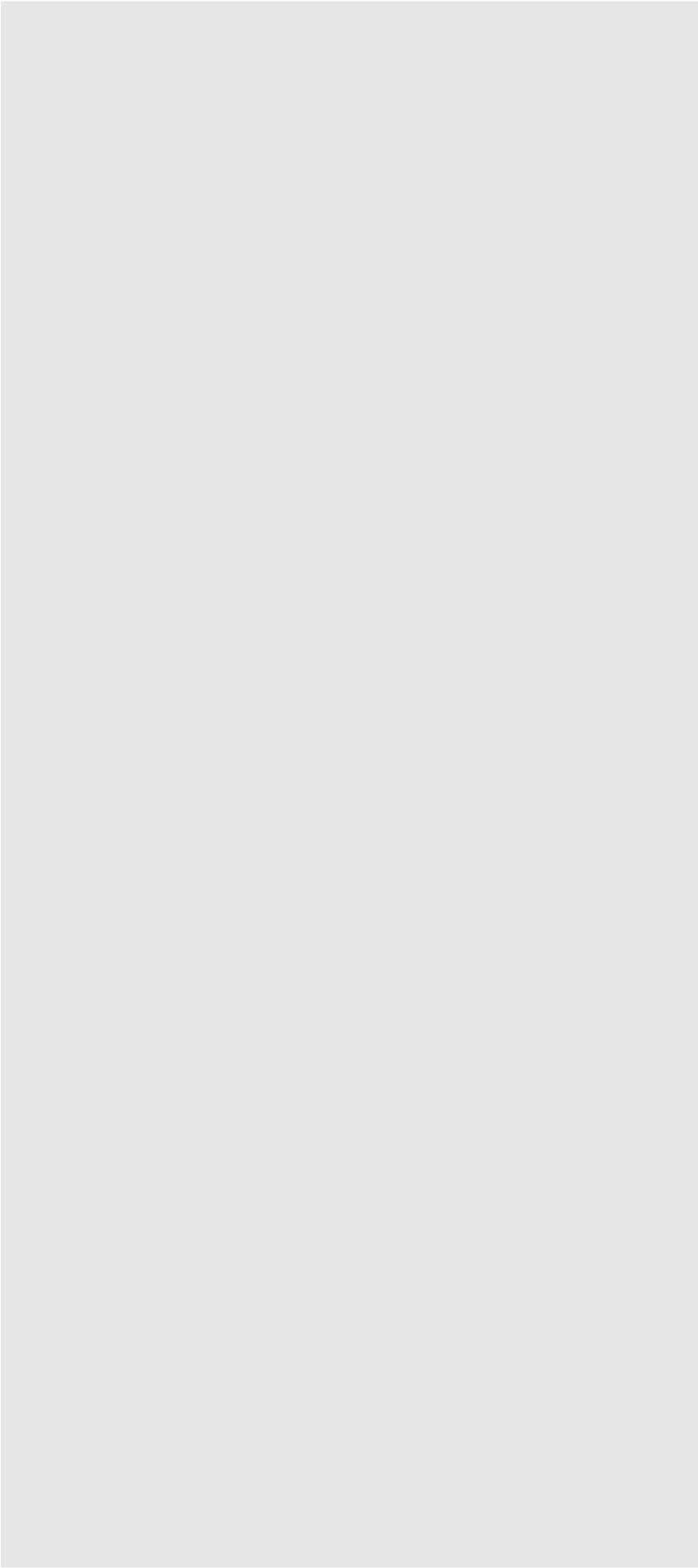
VOORWOORD

We leven in een ongemeen boeiende periode, zeker vanuit een nieuwsecologisch oogpunt. Aan de ene kant is er de ongebreidelde bloei van het Internet als nieuwsbron en het ontstaan van allerlei nieuwe vormen van journalistiek zoals 'civic journalism' en populaire informatieve weblogs. Journalisten, die op zoek gaan naar alternatief nieuws, op welk domein of over welke regio ook, vinden hun gading bij gespecialiseerde nieuwssites of kunnen snel informatie bekomen via het Internet. Aan de andere kant is er sprake van een nog toenemende concentratie van een aantal zeer grote, wereldwijd actieve nieuwsleveranciers, die op alle mogelijke terreinen hun machtspositie willen consolideren en verder uitbouwen. In deze wereld van het onmetelijke Internet en van gigantische media- of nieuwsconglomeraten zoals Reuters of AP lijkt er geen plaats meer te zijn voor de oudere alternatieve spelers, die in de jaren 1960 en 1970 werden opgericht.

In deze Working Paper richt Stijn Joye zijn aandacht op één van die belangrijke initiatieven, m.n. Inter Press Service (IPS). Op basis van onderzoek in een Vlaamse nieuwsomgeving komt Joye tot een genuanceerde conclusie over het blijvende belang van dit kleine agentschap.

Het onderzoek waarop deze WP is gebaseerd, werd eerder al in kortere papers gepresenteerd op internationale wetenschappelijke congressen. Op het congres van de International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) te Caïro, Egypte, werd Stijn Joyes paper *Raising Awareness in a Digital Society: The case of IPS Flanders* bekroond met de voor jonge onderzoekers prestigieuze *IAMCR Prize in Memory of Herbert Schiller* onder voorzitterschap van Graham Murdock.

Daniël Biltereyst en Sofie Van Bauwel



¹ This paper was presented in an earlier and shorter version at the 2006 annual conference of the *International Association for Media and Communication Research* (American University of Cairo, Egypt) and at the 2006 international conference *Internationalising Media Studies: Imperatives and Impediments* (University of Westminster, London)

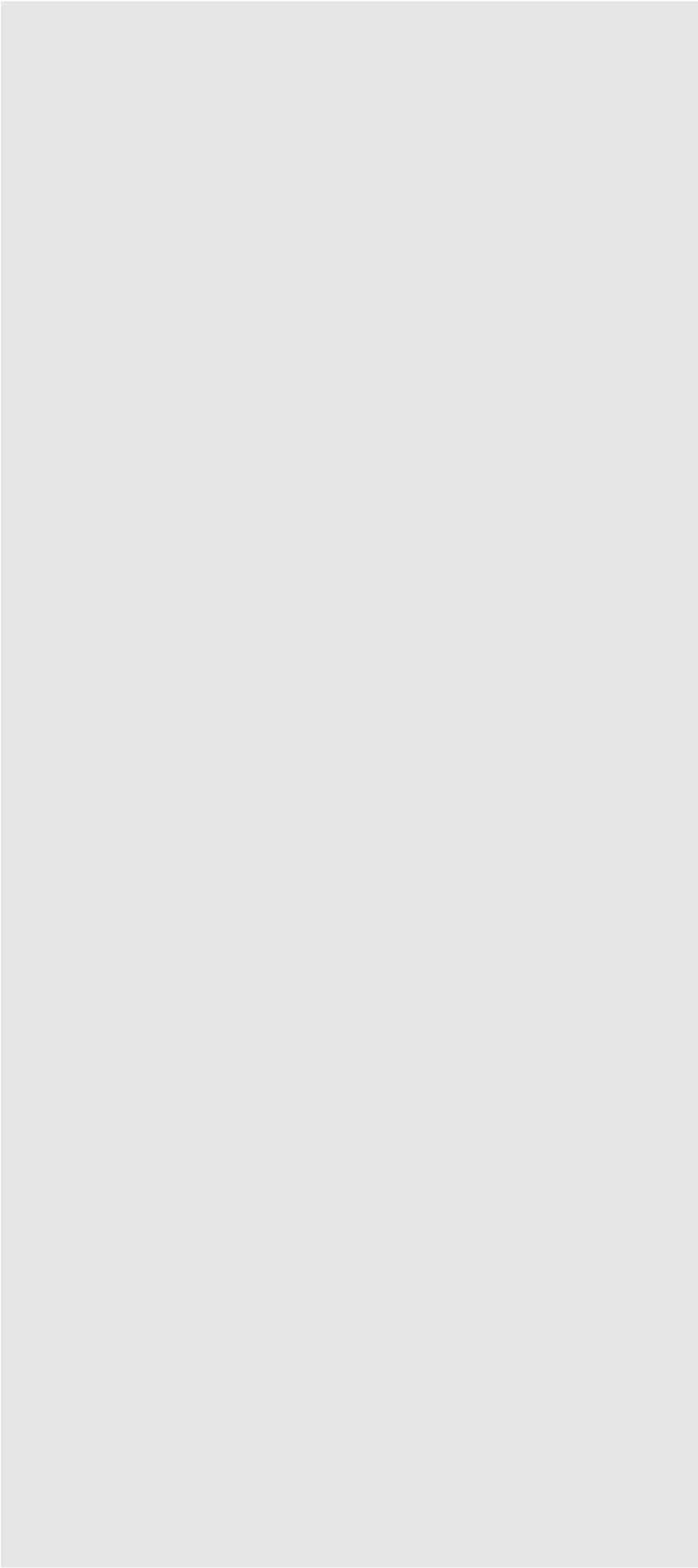
INTRODUCTION¹

“An alternative to corporatized global communication is a moral imperative and a necessary democratic requirement.”

Daya Kishan Thussu (2002: 252)

When overlooking the history of international communication and news agencies, it is not hard to distinguish the successive transformations triggered by technological innovations. The telegraph, telephone, satellite and the Internet, all created new challenges and opportunities for the news agencies ambitious to be present at a global basis. The actors, however, were less subject to change with a select number of (Western) news agencies maintaining a worldwide control and dominance over the international news flow. The critique against this unbalanced situation was particularly fierce during the roaring sixties and seventies, but apparently suffered from a *compassion fatigue* the following decades. A critical impasse that lasted till the emergence and overwhelming proliferation of new digital media, which gave the alternative news sector its long awaited second breath with initiatives like Indymedia and OneWorld. Harshly resisting the ravages of time, the non-profit news agency Inter Press Service (IPS) remained a constant factor in the history of resistance and alternative news agencies.

At the moment of this study in 2004, IPS was celebrating its fortieth anniversary. When turning forty, people tend to reflect upon their existence, their past achievements and the promises the future still seems to have in store. Precisely these kind of ‘philosophical’ considerations are the topics of interest in this paper on IPS. As acknowledged by numerous scholars, the digital age created new gateways for alternative media and consequently gave birth to new sources of competition in the supply of news. Keeping in mind that at the same time the duopoly Reuters-Associated Press (AP) strengthened its reign over the international news sector, that news media seem to encounter a diminishing need for foreign news among their consumers and that hard factual news became the dominant output of newspapers and television channels, our *modern times* also forced IPS and other alternative news outlets to re-evaluate their core mission and surplus value. These considerations grasp the very core of this paper: does a traditional alternative news agency claiming to be an “*independent voice from the South and for development*” (www.ips.org, 2006) have a ***raison d’être*** in the Western news market of the 21st century? Can we find theoretical and empirical evidence to subscribe its reason of existence? And if so, how did IPS adapt to the new practices and changing economic, social and technological conditions? Or in other words, is the digital (news) world of today still in need of a traditional news provider like IPS?



² Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, hence the linguistic affinity to the Netherlands. Together with the French-speaking Wallonia, bilingual Brussels and the German-speaking regions it constitutes the federal state of Belgium.

To adequately answer these questions, we conducted an extensive literature review and analyzed the situation of IPS in Flanders, Belgium. The research presented in this paper was carried out in November 2004 and was ordered by IPS Flanders. Editors and journalists employed on a permanent basis of all mainstream Flemish newspapers were inquired by a quantitative survey about their opinion on and perception of the IPS Flanders news agency and the online daily news service, which is the agency's core activity. Based on *theoretical* assumptions and *empirical* findings, this paper argues that alternative news agencies continue to play an essential and necessary role within the international news agency market and our Western democracy.

THEORY AND PRACTICES OF NEWS AGENCIES IN THE 21st CENTURY

Going into the wide-ranging academic literature on news agencies and international news, the unprejudiced reader is quite fast made acquainted with some *usual suspects*: early research results and hypotheses that tend to be continuously reconsolidated in later studies. In short, the major Western news agencies (Reuters, AP and to a certain degree Agence France Presse (AFP)) dominate the international news flow while the media coverage of the developing world raises serious problems with a biased focus on violence, conflict, natural disasters and politics (Giffard, 1998). Imbalances that have been characterizing the international news agency sector from its very beginning, deeply rooted in historical, political and economic realities. This situation of inequality persists in the digital era, only in a more intensive way, hence the bare existence of the concept 'digital divide'. Before exploring the characteristics of the international news sector into more detail, a few brief words on our main protagonists: Inter Press Service and its Flemish associated body IPS Flanders².

An alternative voice from and for the developing South

IPS is commonly considered to be an alternative medium on the grounds of mobilizing information and news of events ignored or marginalized by mainstream media (Atton, 2002: 128). The agency earned the alternative label thanks to its non-mainstream copy which stresses counter-hegemonic discourses, highlights development issues and is appraised for its inherent progressive nature promoting social change.

Founded in 1964 by young Italian freelance journalist Roberto Savio and Argentinean student political sciences Pablo Piacentini, IPS carried from the early start a message of **resistance**. Troubled by the imbalances in international reporting, the non-profit cooperative of journalists wanted to build an 'information bridge' between Europe and Latin America (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992:

³ The concept of a '*New World Information and Communication Order*' was introduced on the UNESCO-fora in the mid 1970s by the group of non-aligned countries and was embedded in the growing demand for a new international economic order (NIEO) and more self-reliance by these young independent states.

⁴ In 2005 *IPS Europe* was founded, a non-profit organization that coordinates the activities of IPS in Europe.

⁵ In 2003 IPS Flanders produced 1700 articles of which the Dutch newspapers clients published 381 (22.4%) and the Flemish 226 (13.3%) (IPS Flanders, 2004: 4-5).

31). The agency steadily grew to early adulthood in the close shadow of the well-known NWICO-debates³. In the seventies IPS managed to successfully improve the horizontal communication between developing countries after which it searched to brush up the South-North flow in the 1980s. To accomplish this, IPS established a network of affiliates in Europe, namely in Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.⁴ Today, the IPS-network consists of some 400 journalists and reaches daily more than 200 million readers on a global scale (www.ipsnews.be, 2006). It has gained widespread recognition for its characteristic journalistic output on human rights and democratization, environment, education, development, international finance and politics, global governance... with a persistent focus on the South. Over the years the agency broadened its mission covering “*the objectives of balanced geographical, ethnic and gender representation*” (www.ips.org, 2006) embedded in the desirable ideal of democracy. Adapting to the contemporary globalized society, IPS focuses on global issues and global interdependence to such extent that a close observer of the agency, Anthony Giffard (1998: 1) calls IPS “*the world’s leading provider on information about global issues and the largest purveyor of news about the developing nations*”. Keeping in mind the fierce competition on the international news market, this is a commendable merit but at the same time a heavy burden to carry.

In December 1986, Belgian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (a.o. NCOS, Broederlijk Delen, etc...) combined their forces to establish a Flemish affiliate which was from a linguistic and institutional point of view closely tied to the more experienced Dutch IPS-service. This intense relationship sadly became a *liaison dangereuse* for the Flemish non-profit organization when enduring financial problems of IPS Netherlands forced the agency to pull the plug in 1994, leaving IPS Flanders in the cold. After putting the news service on hold for some months, IPS Flanders was brought back to existence and nowadays it ironically provides a news service for the entire Dutch-speaking regions: Flanders and the Netherlands.⁵ In 2006 the editorial staff consists of three part time journalists and a pool of four freelancers, all stationed in Brussels and mostly translating a representative selection from the IPS World Service combined with own journalistic copy. To spread the IPS message optimally, this small crew closely cooperates with other alternative ventures including OneWorld and Mo* Magazine. Like its big brother, IPS Flanders has always been balancing on a thin financial line. Over the years it lost some important clients but nevertheless managed to build up a sound and loyal client base. Apart from the daily press, subscribers include portal websites, specialized magazines and NGOs (e.g. Oxfam). Nowadays the agency receives substantial financial support from the Flemish government.

To conclude this section on IPS and its subsidiaries, it could easily be argued that the agency retrieves a large part of its right of existence from the steadfast **dominance** by the Western news purveyors over the international news sector (Pietiläinen, 1998; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004: 34). Although in sheer numbers the major Western news organizations (the ‘Big Five’: Reuters, AP, AFP, UPI, and TASS) got reduced over the years to the ‘Big Three’ and later on the duopoly Reuters - AP,

the contrast with the lack of useful information sources for and about the developing countries did not fade away. On the contrary, to quote Daya Kishan Thussu (2004: 47), “*the overall information gap between North and South grows and defies attempts at containment*”.

The Usual Suspects: Criticism and Control of the International News Flow

In his seminal work ‘*Culture Inc*’ the late Herbert Schiller (1989) noted that there is no equal exchange of ideas and information in the global news environment, henceforth leading to the occurrence of an information gap (cited in Harrison, 2006: 37). Precisely these imbalances between the North and South (e.g. Graubart, 1989; Mowlana, 1993; Kim & Barnett, 1996; Rantanen & Boyd-Barrett, 2004) gave rise to the NWICO-debates fuelled by the non-aligned countries in the mid 1970s and ultimately led to the establishment of the so-called alternative voices like IPS, Gemini, NANAP, PANA(Press), etc ... All striving to ensure greater balance in news flows and adequate representations, but all struggling to survive due to a lack of sufficient funds (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992). Looking back, none of these agencies really posed a serious challenge to the dominant Western news services nor acquired significant credibility “*with the possible exception of Inter Press Service*” (Rampal, 2002: 113).

The dominance of a few major news providers is not merely restricted to a question of size or a quantitative imparity, but as numerous scholars (e.g. Masmoudi, 1979; Thussu, 2004) have argued, the discussion also bears an important **symbolic dimension**. In their pioneering work Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge (1965) identified twelve factors which define the intrinsic news value of an event. Later international studies (e.g. Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985; Stevenson & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995) showed that these factors haven’t lost any of their significance (for an overview see Harcup, 2004: 30-39). All countries are apparently not created equal to be news. Western news suppliers do not devote much newsworthiness to the countries of the developing world (e.g. Reeves, 1993; Kamalipour, 2002) and even if doing so, research proved that the media coverage is geographically biased, unfair, and focused on spectacular events, elite persons, hard facts, violence and conflict, etc. the so-called ‘spot’ news (Biltreyst, Peeren & Van Gompel, 1999; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004). The major agencies’ reporting tends to be framed by the prevailing social, political and economic orientation of the West (Giffard, 1999: 340). In a nutshell, the Western control over the international information flow results in “*an inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal of developing countries*” (Rampal, 2002: 111).

In addition to the material and symbolic dominance of global news by a few world powers, several scholars have identified a significant decline in foreign news (Hallin, 1996: 255; McLachlan & Golding, 2000: 78-79; Thussu, 2004: 47) followed by a drop in the public interest in foreign news. In this respect Claude Moisy (1997: 79), the eminence grise of the international press and former AFP-

chief, noticed quite rightly that an “*amazing increase in the capacity to produce and distribute news from distant lands has been met by an obvious decrease in consumption*”. This remarkable paradox has its origins in a new **news ecology** that is hardly favorable for IPS and its likes. This concept refers to the context in which news media operate since the past 25 years, that is an environment of rapid technological change, media concentration, internationalization, and “*the consequent increased commercialization and competition which have affected the packaging and selling of news and arguably the nature of news reported*” (Harrison, 2006: 15). From multibillion mergers to online newspapers, the news sector adjusted to this new digital ‘ecology’ in every conceivable way. Harrison (2006: 70) further argues that these evolutions did not only affect the way mediated news is produced but also how it is consumed.

Finally when discussing, and in the long run evaluating the surplus value of IPS, or any other alternative news service, we have to take these contextual factors into account. Furthermore, IPS and associates have a hard time making themselves commercially viable (Musa, 1990; Giffard, 1998). Most alternative agencies are operating on a shoestring budget and survive by the grace of funding by Western aid agencies, NGOs and UN organizations, ultimately acting more like a pressure group for Southern concerns rather than like a professional news agency (Thussu, 2004: 57). These contextual factors and particularly the enduring financial problems have undoubtedly an impact on the operation, staff and output of the agency. On the other hand, the same holds true for the newspapers, the agencies’ main clients. Due to a downfall of the advertising revenues and soaring paper prices, many newspapers find themselves in a precarious financial situation (Giner & Sussman, 2003: 1). Moreover it cannot be ignored that agencies like Reuters or AP also provide good journalistic items about the classical IPS subjects. These facts combined sometimes lead to a harsh cost-benefit analysis at editorial offices with IPS as the frequently unwilling victim of the affair.

Creating Awareness: IPS, Democracy and the Civil Society

By giving a voice to the voiceless on the principle that another communication is possible, IPS claims to be civil society’s leading news agency (www.ips.org, 2006). In our opinion the surplus value of alternative news agencies such as IPS could not be better summarized than in these two words: *another communication*. As argued earlier, the structural and symbolic domination by a few Western agencies reduces the range and diversity of news available to the unaware consumer (Harrison, 2006: 92). When paying attention in its own characteristic style to the forgotten or ignored stories of the Third World, IPS represents an essential supplement to the mainstream media (Garrigues, 1994: 16). It resists the global corporate ideology “*by encouraging a pluralism of voice in the international news exchange*” (Giffard, 1984: 56), disseminating alternative analyses and visions generally neglected by the mass media (Herman & McChesney, 1997). As Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992:

35) clearly illustrated, IPS managed to develop an alternative framework for looking at the world and selecting news with the focus on processes rather than on 'spot' news. In other words, the hallmark of the Rome-based agency is exactly this diverse and in-depth journalism. A diversity defined by content, sources used and propelled by an all-embracing mission to help create a better balance and flow of international news, with particular regard to the developing countries (www.ips.org, 2006).

The mission carried out by IPS however does not only stand solid ground regarding the world of communication, but has (arguably more relevant) implications on a broader societal level. A news agency's contribution to a **democracy** is after all not merely restricted to distributing a daily amount of news facts and items, its "*content represents a strong influence on Western readers' knowledge of and attitudes toward global events and issues*" (Rauch, 2003: 87-88). Lewis (2006: 305) among others points to this democratic value of news. In his vision "*news, more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate*". A by the news media well-informed citizenry is namely a *conditio sine qua non* for all democratic societies. Considering this, the IPS mission statement not coincidentally stresses the dedication to promote "*a global communication strategy that aims to bring together civil society, policy makers, and the media at national and international levels*" (www.ips.org, 2006). It is no surprise then that IPS, unlike most mainstream agencies, does not tend to overlook civil society organizations as potential news sources (Rauch, 2003: 98). Inter Press Service's fundamental reason of existence lies in this contribution to democratic processes and in challenging the established mainstream media. By shedding rare light on global inequalities and injustices, IPS aspires to raise the necessary awareness and ultimately evoke a sense of commitment, fostering an increased participation in economic, social and political life. The quality of public debate and available information is after all the crucial factor in creating a rich democracy (Ramonet, 2005).

THE AGE OF THE INTERNET: OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

In *tempore non suspecto* scholars as David Lerner (1958) or Wilbur Schramm (1964) urged that mass media would be a catalyzing agent in the development of the Third World, leading the way to prosperity and 'a wider world'. The innovation and adoption of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) was attended with the same optimistic beliefs and aspirations. Advocates of the information society viewed the ICTs as a strong facilitator of democracy, offering commercial and cultural advantages to *all* (Sosale, 2003: 378). Unfortunately for the believers, history painfully illustrated that ICTs promoted inequality (Musa, 1990) between societies instead of stimulating the emergence of one *global village* as Marshall McLuhan once had foreseen. For those who have access, the "*digitization and the new media have led to an unprecedented democratization of international communication and [their] empowerment*" (Chalaby, 2005: 31). For the numerous

others, it has led to a disenchanting digital divide. This digital gap and differences in technological possibilities keep the one-way information flow going (Ayish, 1992: 409-507).

Rethinking the 'Digital Divide'?

In the last decades, 'digital' and 'ICTs' have not only become the ultimate buzzwords in economic and societal spheres, but also received a lot of academic attention as well. While some scholars have stressed the importance of the new digital technologies in reviving the democracy and fostering global development, numerous others have been working from the concept of **digital divide**; the unequal distribution of skills, capabilities and access regarding IT resources which are concentrated in the hands of a few Western affluent countries (Drori & Jang, 2003: 145).

New media produce new divides and various divides exist for different problems. The digital gap is frequently considered to be a pure technical divide, primarily defined in terms of access to infrastructure and technical skills. However, in recent years scholars have successfully argued that the divide has important implications for human interaction, power relationships and social inclusion (Loader, 1998 cited in Stewart et al., 2006: 735), thus not ignoring aspects of culture and society. The notion itself has evolved from a technically based understanding to a concept encompassing "*physical, digital, human and social resources and relationships*" (Stewart et al., 2006: 735). In addition, we can argue that there is also an increasing demand for a rethinking of the concept in a *semantic* sense. At international conferences, scholars from developing countries repeatedly urge not to use terms as 'gap' or 'divide' because of their inherent negative connotation. Instead they advocate an approach emphasizing the process of coming towards each other and acknowledging the efforts made in the developing world. Or in other words, stressing the *bridge* instead of the *gap* between the information poor and information rich. As the global digital divide is "*usually thought about, measured and acted upon, on the basis of a crucial assumption that reflects developed-country realities rather than the conditions prevailing in [...] most developing countries*" (James, 2005: 122), this discussion is closely related to a broader and older academic debate on the use of dual categories such as North-South, developed-developing, First World-Third World and others, which "*often imply undue similarities and obscure obvious differences between regions*" (Rauch, 2003: 101). These simplifying binary oppositions or broad generalizations obviously do not cover reality as such, but are however frequently used by news agencies, including IPS (Rauch, 2003: 97).

Despite all debate on the use and value of the concept, in everyday practice the digital divide remains a momentous impediment for development around the globe. Experts like Everett Rogers (2001: 100) even argue that the digital access-divide may at some near future date evolve into a more problematic learning- or content-divide. News media are just one of the social and cultural capital to

overcome this barrier to digital exclusion and democratic participation. As eloquently stated by Hartley (1996: 232), journalism has the “*real and imagined power to affect systems, actions or events*”.

ICTs in the World of News

The digital media once again changed our traditional notions of time and space. Although ICTs also altered the world of journalism in a drastic way, the news media have been rather slow to develop distinctive forms in response to the new contexts provided by the Internet (Matheson, 2004: 443). Technological revolutions such as the Internet have brought new opportunities for the development and expansion of the news genre (Harrison, 2006: 149). Web logs, e-zines, rss feeds, 24 on 24 satellite channels, online newspapers, etc ... the present-day news consuming audience is offered a large choice. Being universally characterized as a revolutionary medium the Internet affords greater access to news media (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004: 34) and facilitates news consumption (Harrison, 2006: 14). On the production side the Internet holds the potential for global audiences and represents a fast but relatively cheap distribution network to bypass for example the mainstream news reporting (Atton, 2002). As Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett (2004: 36) rightly argue, the Internet reduces the costs of gathering and dissemination of world news but it is also the source of more competition. Another issue of discussion is about the quality of information offered on the web. Emerging and established news initiatives have to deal with a glut of information available, leaving credibility as the (costly) key source of power and influence (Rampal, 2002: 114).

How are these developments related to IPS? A new technology means new opportunities and challenges for the ‘old media’ (Ahlers, 2006). In the case of news media, various **new players** made their appearance on the international market. The most cited example is without a doubt Indymedia, the worldwide network of independent websites run by volunteers (Mamadouh, 2003: 482). Other initiatives include OneWorld Online, Commondreams, Out There News, etc ... It is difficult to speak of competition since IPS and these ‘*new kids on the block*’ share much of the same goals and beliefs, and several studies revealed that online media complement, not replace, traditional media in achieving such goals as to foster political discussion, civic messaging and participation (Shah et al., 2005: 531). But looking from a commercial point of view, Indymedia and other Internet based actors are practically cost-free news sources (Platon & Deuze, 2003: 336-355) while newspapers have to pay a substantial contribution to use the IPS news wire. Unfortunately for IPS, precisely the kind of information the agency is appraised and known for is now widely and directly available on the Internet (Giffard, 2001).

However, we should not leave unmentioned that an important share of the media use is not digital (yet), in addition to the enormous amount of people not having access to the Internet in both

⁶ In 2005 the worldwide Internet penetration rate was 15,2% (www.internetworldstats.com).

⁷ The *World Summit on the Information Society* (Geneva & Tunis) was organized by the UN and ITU in 2003 and 2005 to formulate a common vision and understanding of the global information society. Its aim was to facilitate the effective growth of the information society and to help bridge the digital divide. The outcomes of the WSIS debates however were criticized for their “*overt technological determinism, resonating modernization thinking*” (Leye, 2006).

developed and developing countries.⁶ So newspapers remain a significant outlet for the 'old school' alternative news agencies like IPS. Moreover, IPS had the right reflex of perceiving the Internet not as a sole threat to its traditional services but even so as a "*means to advance its mission to promote understanding among the world's peoples*" (Giffard, 1998: 8). The agency streamlined its existing services with a digital upgrade and offered new applications as the daily online news service, a weekly e-zine, online databases, etc ... to complement its 'core business' and to better achieve its enduring mission of "*producing independent news and analysis about events and global processes affecting the economic, social and political development of peoples and nations, especially in the South*" (www.ips.org, 2006).

Besides the more technological aspect of the carrier, the proliferation of ICTs also influenced the message of IPS. The agency was for instance closely involved in the recent *World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)*⁷ and thereby confirmed its ambition to raise awareness by sensitizing and critically informing the Western audiences about the global problems regarding ICT and knowledge societies. IPS (the news agency and its other services IPS Projects and Telecommunications) is one way of helping to remove "*barriers to universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to information*" (WSIS Tunis Commitment, 2005) and knowledge. Or to rephrase it: removing the barriers to information dissemination in order to bridge the digital divide. Indeed, essentially the same grievances addressed during the NWICO-debates in the mid-1970s but 'digitally remastered' for the new millennium.

IPS, Activism and the Internet

'Free' and 'independent' news initiatives contain a liberating potential in a sense that they "*are usually regarded as playing an important part in maintaining the flow of ideas and information upon which choices are made*" (Manning, 2001: 1). The alternative news ventures constitute a significant part of the flourishing network of global activism. An emergent form of this activism is increasingly defined by its reliance on Internet strategies. Indymedia for instance is considered to be an institutional exemplar of contemporary Internet-based activism (Pickard, 2006: 317) while 'old' news media like IPS started to offer its journalistic output on the Internet. A remarkable initiative in this respect is the in 2006 founded and Internet-based NAM News Network, a joint project of the 114 member states of the well-known Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). NAM wishes to revitalize its old dream of establishing a valuable alternative for the Western news dominance. From NANAP to NAM News Network, it took nearly 30 years and a brand new technology called the Internet, a medium that opened spaces for democratic engagement and contributed to the building of a global civil society (Couldry & Curran, 2003: 227-241).

⁸ Study ordered by IPS Flanders and conducted under the supervision of Professor dr. Daniël Biltereyst (Ghent University). The survey consisted of a combination of open and closed questions. For previous research on IPS Flanders, see the 2003 evaluation of the e-zine 'IPS-Weekoverzicht' by dr. Biltereyst and dr. Lieve Desmet.

⁹ *De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Morgen, Het Nieuwsblad, Het Belang van Limburg, Metro, De Tijd and Gazet van Antwerpen.* These newspapers represent all ideological tendencies and major publishing companies of Flanders.

In conclusion, good scientific practices compel us to point to other, less optimistic visions on the liberating potential of the Internet as well. Related to the discussion about the concept of digital divide and the fast technological developments comprising the not uncontestable idea of an information or knowledge society, several critical voices have expressed concerns that with the rise of digital media actually *new* opportunities for *old* exploitation are occurring (Harrison, 2006: 37). In other words, it seems that while the content producers are zealously adapting to the new conditions, the apparently undisturbed structures of power remain in force. Echoing Oliver Boyd-Barrett's (2000: 10) concern that it is "*primarily the already established players who are best positioned to take advantage of the Internet*".

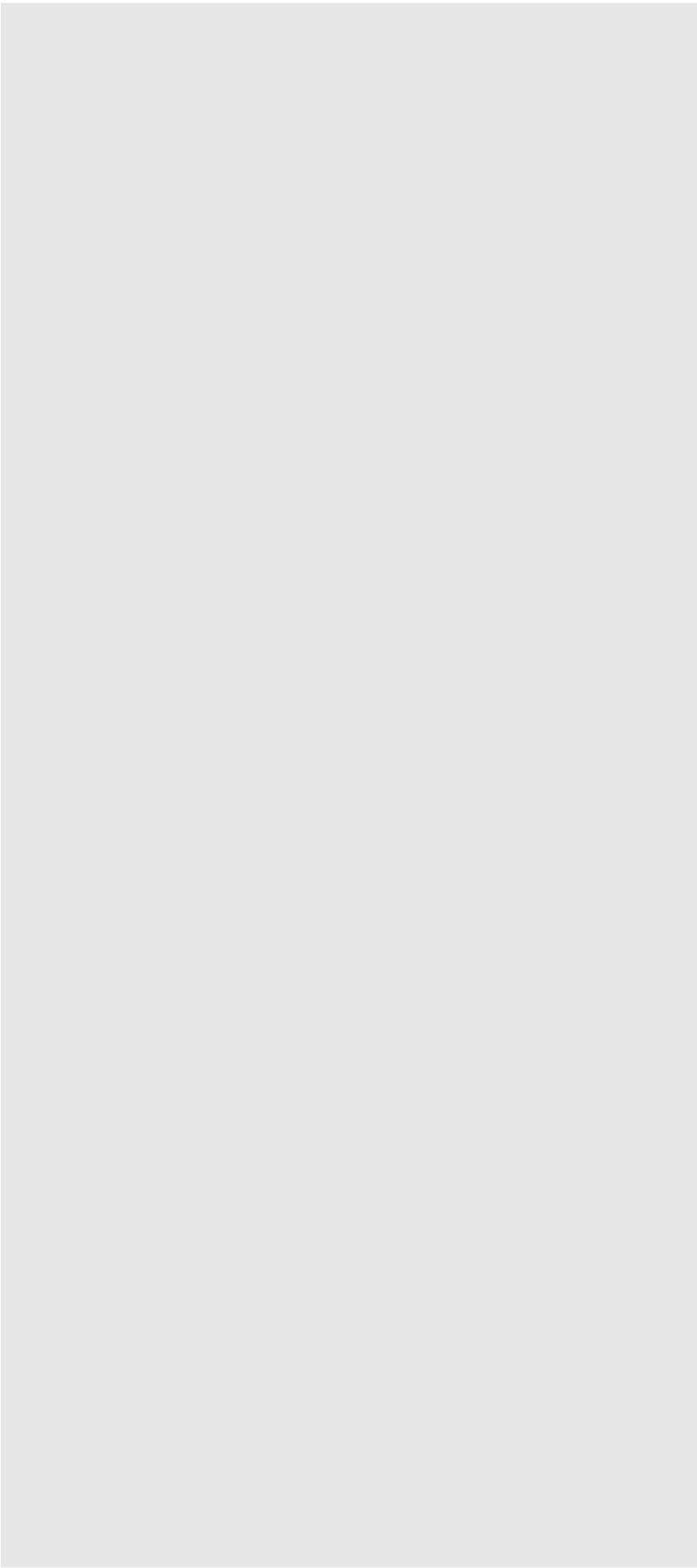
THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL: THE CASE OF IPS FLANDERS

In November 2004 we carried out an online quantitative survey⁸ among the editors and journalists of all mainstream Flemish newspapers⁹. Since our goal was to evaluate the surplus value and image of the IPS Flanders news agency and its core activity the online daily news service, we selected only journalists working on topics related to foreign news and international economics. These criteria led to an overall population of 52 journalists employed on a permanent basis of which 73% responded to the anonymous inquiry.

The main academic significance of the conducted research lies in the unique combination of two subsequent parts of the news production chain. Being a content producer in their own respect, the journalists and editors represent at the same time the core target group for the news agency. Without depreciating the importance of the news supplier, Tai among others states that "*of all the mediating factors affecting mass media content, the editors/reporters are the immediate decision-makers in determining what becomes news, domestic and global*" (Tai, 2000: 335). In more than one way, the perfect party thus to evaluate IPS Flanders.

Selecting and using the IPS Flanders news output

For the average newspaper, agencies are a principal source of copy. Since journalists do little editing of wire stories (Galtung & Vincent, 1992), their main task consists of selecting the news events. This gatekeeping process is driven by a number of professional judgements. First and most determining factor for the respondents to our inquiry is the topical value of the event covered by IPS Flanders. Recent and straight off items are clearly preferred. Only in second place the content is taken into consideration. When an IPS story is an obvious enrichment and supplement to the mainstream news offer, there is a great chance the item will be held back and eventually published. In the third place,



¹⁰ On a daily basis IPS Flanders reaches a maximum potential of 2.7 million newspaper readers (IPS Flanders, 2006, p. 1). The total population of Flanders amounts to 6 043 161 people (data for 01/01/2005).

the journalists value the newsworthiness. A cultural or geographical connection with Belgium or Flanders tied into the story is clearly favorable for selection. Newsworthiness is in other words strongly correlated with the proximity of the events reported. When the events have direct meaning and relevance to the Belgian or Flemish audience, the issue seems more easily to be marked as newsworthy. Finally some pragmatic considerations play a small role in the selection process such as the overall news offer of the day. This modest analysis clearly illustrates the harshness of some journalistic news values ‘discovered’ by Galtung and Ruge in 1965 and findings from later research.

In a media saturated environment IPS Flanders is nonetheless just one of the many news sources journalists can rely on. Inquired about their use of the different news sources, Flemish journalists prefer the Internet followed by the national news agency Belga, the major international agencies (for an overview see table 1) and finally news output from other (foreign) newspapers and from television channels. Since IPS Flanders mainly delivers its output to the end-user via the online news service, we can classify it under the first category.

TABLE 1 *Overview of subscriptions to news agencies*

Flemish newspapers	Belga	Reuters	AP	IPS	Bloomberg	AFP
<i>De Tijd</i>						
<i>De Morgen</i>						
<i>Metro</i>						
<i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>						
<i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>						
<i>De Standaard</i>						
<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>						
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>						
Total	8	5	5	5	4	2

Remains the question of **efficiency**. How many IPS articles actually manage to ‘survive’ the famous gatekeeping process? In this respect it is important to point out that in Flanders the above-discussed tendency of decline in the amount of foreign news covered, manifests itself particularly in the so-called tabloids and popular newspapers, less or almost not in the broadsheet newspapers (Biltreyst & Joye, 2005: 160) which constitute most of the IPS Flanders client base.

In 2005 IPS Flanders produced approximately 1550 articles of which **18.4%** (or 285 items) were eventually published by the Flemish newspapers with a subscription.¹⁰ This represents a considerable increase of 45% compared to the number of items published in 2004 (IPS Flanders, 2006: 1-3). The underlying reasons therefore are the improvements made to the news service following this evaluation and the fact that the agency was able to attract two new subscribers. In addition, the survey also pointed out that the journalists regularly use IPS news items as background

information for other articles. This secondary use is for obvious reasons not included in these official figures so we can conclude that the actual use of the news service is in reality clearly higher than the percentage of 18.4.

Defining the surplus value

The results of this study reflect the apparently timeless motives why Savio and Piacentini founded IPS forty years earlier: to fill the information gap and to open the world of news to all by creating a better balanced flow of international news. The Flemish journalists look upon IPS Flanders as successfully fulfilling these goals by sensitizing the Flemish public to (foreign) issues that lack spectacular commercial value. In other words, the agency is assessed to be a **useful** and **necessary supplement** to the news offer of the major mainstream news agencies. To concretize it, the Flemish journalists appreciate the original point of view, the alternative focus on current affairs, the provided background information and even the practical aspect of receiving Dutch-language versions of the IPS news stories.

TABLE 2 *Strengths and weaknesses of IPS Flanders (N = 38)*

	Criteria	Score on 10
1	Alternative perspective	7.65
2	Background information	7.57
3	Reliability	7.00
4	Professionalism	6.55
5	Objectivity	6.50
6	Relevance	5.75
7	Usability	5.65
8	Newsworthiness	5.50
9	Timing	5.45

Table 2 gives an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of IPS Flanders as evaluated by the journalists. When assessed on the overall quality of the news service, the agency received a mark of 6.4 on 10. This overall positive evaluation can be retrieved in a number of intertwined aspects this primary user group of the IPS material was inquired about.

Firstly the Flemish journalists consider IPS to be the most appropriate source for information about and background to development issues, human rights, environment, the globalisation process and

other cultures. On the other hand the major world news agencies are the dominant source for the hard factual news about international affairs, economy and military conflicts. The same distinction between IPS and the Western news organizations can secondly be found on geographical grounds. While IPS seeks balanced representation in journalism, the Flemish journalists find the agency particularly useful for their coverage of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Reuters, AP and AFP claim the Northern hemisphere as their exclusive news property. This sharp **contrast** between mainstream and alternative news agencies has been the subject of earlier research within the field of international communication. Already in 1985 Ogan and Rush identified the difference in substance, geographical focus and sources. Giffard (1998) came to largely the same conclusions when comparing the news service of IPS vis-à-vis AP and Reuters. A couple of years later and analyzing the IPS and AP news coverage on the Group of 77 Summit (Cuba, 2000), Rauch concluded that the agencies represent the South in a strikingly different way. While AP framed the event in a significantly more negative perspective by stressing the disunity, neglect and controversy at the summit, IPS emphasized the Southern nations' cooperation, achievement and common goals (Rauch, 2003).

To summarize, the IPS news wire offers alternative, 'mind-expanding' and occasionally surprising stories about events and global processes not or unsatisfactory covered by the mainstream news organizations. According to Boyd-Barrett (2003: 376) it is precisely thanks to this *distinctly different* news agenda that IPS has managed to survive despite continuously facing financial constraints. Recent (published) examples of such IPS-subjects include the aftermath of the tsunami in South-East Asia, the trade in children in Western Africa, the reformation of the UN, the struggle against AIDS in the developing countries, etc ... (IPS Flanders, 2006: 4-5). The perception of IPS Flanders as shaped by the journalists is to a high degree a remarkable blue-print of the primary objectives and overall IPS mission. This perception is strongly correlated with the journalists' overall knowledge of the agency. At the moment of the survey, IPS Flanders obtained a general awareness of 90% among the editors and journalists and 84% in particular for its mission and goals.

Service improvements

As usual, there are two sides to every question. Thanks to a steady and clear 'corporate' view, IPS managed to be a valuable crank in the field of international communication during the past 42 years. However, the survey among newspaper editors and journalists indicates that if the agency wishes to maintain its unique role of sensitizing the audience and bridging the information gap, a **faster** and **more professional** service is vital for the Flemish journalists. To meet the high standards of contemporary journalism, IPS can't simply lay back and rely on past merits or overall reputation. It needs to continuously look forward and adapt its service to a rapidly changing news market driven

by technology as it appropriately did with the introduction of a daily online news service. In the survey, the journalists pointed out to some shortcomings that require improvement.

Journalists rely upon three criteria to select news sources: authority, credibility, and availability (Van Ginneken, 1998: 88-89). Concerning authority and credibility, IPS Flanders has to contend with some restraints from an important minority of the journalists. As it once focused exclusively on the Third World, IPS gradually offered stories about trends that are increasingly common to countries from both the North and South. The content of IPS is however still *“written and edited from the perspective of the developing world”* (www.ips.org, 2006). Some Flemish journalists often find this to be a disturbing bias. In the opinion of these seven journalists, IPS Flanders remains too much a **spokesman** for the South’s point of view. Although previous research found the news copy to be both critical and balanced (Ogan & Rush, 1985), this is a political orientation that IPS has never tried to hide (Giffard, 1983: 21) but that is at the same time difficult to associate with good journalistic practices of objectivity and professionalism. The agency’s ideals have in other words *“cast doubt on the balance, objectivity, and accuracy of IPS coverage”* and may have limited the market potential (Rauch, 2003: 90).

Referring to Van Ginneken’s third criteria of availability, IPS Flanders doesn’t entirely manage to live up to the journalists’ expectations. First of all, for a journalist **timing** is everything. With regard to Reuters, AP or AFP, IPS doesn’t have a large team of correspondents at its disposal making it impossible to deliver vast volumes of news stories and up to date news facts. ‘With the ink still wet’ news as a result is not always available from IPS Flanders. Unfortunately for the agency, that is precisely the kind of output journalists demand from a news agency. Manning (2001: 57) states that *“although accuracy and authority are certainly important, it is the rapidity with which information can be distributed that secures reputation and contracts”*. Even though the IPS news service *“does not aim to provide up-to-the-minute coverage of events as is the style of traditional news agencies”* and tries to *“provide timely, in-depth coverage of relevant events”* (www.ips.org, 2006) occurring around the globe, the journalists strongly suggest the agency should in addition focus more on the events of the day happening in the developing South and increase the speed of the news service.

Secondly the Internet radically changed the daily working methods since most IPS delivery to the end-user is nowadays via online media. As journalists nowadays are dealing with bulging mailboxes, the daily news service of IPS has the disadvantage of sometimes drowning in the glut and being ignored. Moreover, the study shows that the messages of IPS Flanders simply don’t catch the eye, are (however rarely) not even received and often need editorial adjustments before they can be used. This demand for ready-made items has obtained a nearly sacred status in the contemporary newsroom since the increased pressure to meet deadlines rigorously restricts the journalist’s space for comprehensive analysis (Bennett, 2003: 192). In addition, about 40% of the journalists sometimes doubt the immediate usability and relevance of the kind of news stories covered by IPS Flanders.

It is obvious that this is a story of 'sometimes', 'some' and 'often'. Alleging in defense of IPS Flanders, we should take into consideration that the nature and quality of international news coverage is subject to local influences including organizational factors and corporate characteristics such as size, structure and resources (Lowrey et al., 2003: 41-43). As noted above, the not so bright financial situation of the agency and the resulting limited possibilities regarding personnel are two key determinants here. Nevertheless if IPS Flanders aspires to be a truly professional news agency, the news offer requires to be more carefully tailored to the needs of the clients.

The near future

In 2006 the Flemish affiliate celebrated its twentieth anniversary. What the future has in store for IPS Flanders is difficult to determine, however the journalists distinguished three important evolutions IPS Flanders needs to keep a close eye on. In the first place the agency will need to jack up its financial capacity if it wishes to keep in pace with developments in the international news market. Secondly they see an increased importance of the own newsgathering by the newspapers in order to cut back on expensive news agency subscriptions. And finally the daily news service of IPS Flanders will have a tough rival with the Internet and other online news sources at the editorial offices.

CONCLUSION

"I have to believe that a better informed world is more civilised, more compassionate, more ready to act and to help."

Kate Adie, chief news correspondent of the BBC (Cited in Allan, 1999: 107)

Setting out from the assumption that information is a decisive resource for the political and cultural action of publics around the globe (Jensen, 1998: 9), this paper tackled the issue of the role to be taken on by a traditional alternative news agency in the digital Western news market of the 21st century. Despite competition from new players and old 'colleagues', IPS and its subsidiaries like IPS Flanders still manage to fill in a troublesome niche in the world of international news dissemination. A niche that is apparently widening as the world's largest news wholesalers tend to concentrate more on economical, financial and hard factual news leaving aside less appealing issues of development, human rights, the globalisation process and others.

IPS can be regarded as an important actor in the global resistance to a Western knowledge monopoly. Contributing to a more democratic news system, IPS is a persistent and valuable

alternative with the potential to foster social change. As the case of IPS Flanders proves, journalists consider the agency and its output as a **useful** and **necessary supplement** to mainstream news media. While not flawless on its own behalf, the surplus value of IPS precisely lies in the fact that it supplements and questions the coverage offered by the Western news agencies. But as Giffard (1998: 8) rightly makes the necessary differentiations, “*the kind of background news that IPS provides, while useful and important, is not particularly attractive to market-driven commercial media*” leading the way to enduring financial constraints and a potentially idle hope of ever becoming self-sustaining. In addition to these financial restraints and their undeniable implications on the output, staff, etc. of the agency, we need to acknowledge that although IPS has managed to secure itself an important (niche) position within the international news world, the alternative agency is still facing a practically unassailable domination by the Western news agencies, structural as symbolic.

The digital era created an additional source of political information and a sphere for public expression (Shah et al., 2005: 532) while for the news media it has led to new challenges and opportunities. New alternative voices were founded while an established actor like IPS used the innovative gateway to further upgrade its service and goal to bridge the enduring information and knowledge gap. Recently some serious restraints popped up about the liberating value of the Internet. The lasting supremacy of the traditional news providers has led to a situation in which question marks are being placed “*over the extent to which the Internet will be able to offer genuinely alternative views to consumers and contribute to knowledge about local and international affairs*” (Harrison, 2006: 205). Old habits clearly die hard.

Many scholars and politicians regard news media as the most vital information channels to the extent that they are seen as ‘agents of democracy’ (Allan, 1999: 3-4). Inter Press Service’s very *raison d’être* is contributing to and challenging democratic processes in an increasingly globalizing world. By helping the audience to adequately assess world events and global power structures, it wishes to promote and ultimately evoke a crucial sense of awareness. Creating content, creating commitment: the first steps towards participation and more (global) understanding.

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