RAISING AN ALTERNATIVE VOICE

ASSESING THE ROLE AND VALUE OF THE GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE NEWS AGENCY INTER PRESS SERVICE

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Abstract

Inter Press Service (IPS) is widely considered to be distinctly different from the conventional news agency. Research on this alternative news agency has mainly focused on the IPS news to underwrite this statement, but much less attention has been paid to the broader production context. Drawing on the findings of twenty-six semi-structured in-depth interviews, this article explores the value and role of IPS in the digital news market of the 21st century as perceived by staff members, stakeholders and independent scholars. In general, interviewees argue that IPS and its news copy are a useful and necessary addition to mainstream news media, as well as a crucial source of information and a partner for the global civil society. However, the study also indicates that IPS will need to face a number of professional, organisational and financial challenges if the news agency aspires to continue its unique role of sensitising the public and bridging the information gap between North and South.

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In his seminal *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, the late Herbert Schiller (1989) stated that there has never been an equal exchange of ideas and information in the global news environment.[1] One frequently criticised element of this is the existence of an information gap between what is commonly referred to as North and South, or the developed and underdeveloped/developing world, respectively. Over the years, several initiatives have been taken to address this gap and to present an alternative to dominant, mainly Western news providers. This article reflects on one such alternative voice, Inter Press Service (IPS), that has been supplying "a service of independent news focusing on the developing world" (Boyd-Barrett 2008, 61) for over four decades now. While academic research on IPS has mainly focused on the characteristic news copy to assess the agency's role within the international news market, much less attention has been given to the broader production context of such alternative news content. Drawing upon the results of a qualitative research project, this article reflects on the actual and future roles of IPS as a global alternative news agency. At the heart of this research project is the belief that news actors such as IPS hold a valuable liberating potential as they play "an important part in maintaining the flow of ideas and information upon which choices are made" (Manning 2001, 1).

After a short review of the literature on international news and news agencies, we go into the role of IPS as a news agency working within a global news context. The main part of the article presents the results of a study involving twenty-six semi-structured in-depth interviews with IPS staff members, stakeholders and scholars working in the field of international news agencies and development communication.

International News Agencies: Control, Critique and Public Role

The field of international communication has generated a rich body of critical research on international news dissemination and news agencies. In its attempt to unravel power relations and explore structural and symbolic inequalities, international news agency research has provided evidence for the transnational patterns of blind spots and overrepresented regions along with a distorted representation of the developing world (see Cottle and Rai 2008). One of the key results is that for Western news media, countries of the developing world are low on the level of newsworthiness, given the fact that most attention is devoted to events occurring in neighbouring countries or the Western hemisphere, or to events related to the home country (Stevenson and Cole 1980; Reeves 1993; Kamalipour 2002). In addition, when covered by Western news media, the developing world is mainly reflected to the rest of the world in terms of dominant news values of negativity and unexpectedness with a focus on violence, conflict, natural disasters, or on politics and elite actors (Giffard 1998a; Rauch 2003; Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett 2004; Harrison 2006). This biased focus results in "an inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal" of developing nations (Rampal 2002, 111), what may lead to negative perceptions by the (Western) public (Golan 2008, 42). On a structural level, research has identified several latent and manifest imbalances which are deeply rooted in a historical, political and economic logic (Boyd-Barrett 1980; Graubart 1989; Mowlana 1993; Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett 2004; Boyd-Barrett 2008) and which have resulted

in an unequal information exchange in the global news environment (Schiller 1989). Powerful (Western) news agencies such as (Thomson) Reuters (UK), Associated Press (AP, USA) and to a lesser extent Agence France Press (AFP, France), have a *de facto* monopoly on the international news flow, allowing them to set the world's news agenda. Global news is accordingly framed by the prevailing social, political and economic orientations of the West (Giffard 1998a).

This world information order has been the subject of much debate, especially during the 1970s when the concept of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was introduced on the UNESCO-fora by the group of non-aligned countries. This call of the developing world was embedded in the growing demand for a new international economic order (NIEO) and more self-reliance by the newly independent states. The debates addressed issues of information dependency and "were important as they explicitly tied the information imbalances and consequent negative coverage of the developing world with the activities of major international (Western) news agencies" (Tomanić Trivundža 2006, 23). Consequently, dependency theory and critical studies of (media) imperialism informed the discussions on the international arena of UNESCO (Ayish 2005, 15-17). In 1980, these debates cumulated in the publication of the seminal MacBride Report. Amongst others, the report proposed a number of recommendations to address the imbalanced news flows such as state-backed Third World news purveyors and the funding of news agencies in the South (MacBride 1980; Splichal 1984). Following its publication, the report was heavily criticised in the West and finally resulted in the UNESCO-supported International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), albeit no major changes in the balance of (news) power were achieved (Hannerz 2004; Ayish 2005). In the next decade, the NWICO debates eventually faded into insignificance under pressure on UNESCO by the USA and the UK, and a shift in the focus of debate within UNESCO to such areas as telecommunication (Thussu 2005, 50-52). The efforts of NWICO and the MacBride Report, however, stayed alive on the agenda of an emerging global civil society, arguably driven by the fact that "while the world might have changed tremendously, many issues dealing with media and communication imbalances and inequalities persist" (Biltereyst and Leye 2005, 56). Though its reception was thus particularly tumultuous and controversial, Biltereyst and Leye (2005, 55) concluded that the MacBride Report and its legacy "underscored the idea that information and communication is a vital, liberating resource for economic, social and cultural emancipation." As for the global news market, this idea was best embodied by alternative voices such as Gemini, the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP), PANA (Press) and IPS that were set up in the 1960s and 1970s. These initiatives had in common the goal of ensuring a greater balance in international news flows; the objective to strive for realistic representations of developing countries; as well as a continuous struggle to survive due to a lack of sufficient funding (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992; Hannerz 2004, 41). In retrospect, none of these agencies really posed a serious challenge to the dominant Western news order, nor acquired significant credibility with the possible exception of Inter Press Service (Rampal 2002, 113; Boyd-Barrett 2008, 61). Over the years IPS has acquired authority and expertise as "the world's leading provider on information about global issues and the largest purveyor of news about the developing nations" (Giffard 1998b, 1). In contrast, Gemini has for some time

become part of a broader non-governmental organisation (NGO) (Thussu 2004, 57), while NANAP is now operating as the Internet-based NAM News Network, a joint project of the 114 member states of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Nowadays, all news agencies, alternative as well as mainstream, face a completely different news ecology than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s when most alternative voices were founded and the desirability of a new world information order was discussed. In the past three decades forces of globalisation, commercialisation, competition, and rapid technological developments have profoundly transformed the international news market (Harrison 2006, 68). News media have entered the age of hyper-commercialism (McChesney 2004) or infotainment (Thussu 2007). Harrison (2006, 15) further notes that these changes "have affected the packaging and selling of news and arguably the nature of news reported" hinting at the rise of soft news, lifestyle and consumer journalism. In addition, most Western societies have encountered a decline in the amount and quality of foreign news reporting "especially about and from the developing world" (Thussu 2004, 47). Commenting on these developments at the end of the 1990s, former AFP-chief Moisy (1997, 79) noted that an "amazing increase in the capacity to produce and distribute news from distant lands has been met by an obvious decrease in consumption." In other words, the contemporary news sector does not appear to be very favourable for an alternative news agency such as IPS that rarely distributes soft news and mainly focuses on development issues and distant events occurring in the developing world. When assessing these global tendencies, scholars and critics moreover refer to the democratic value of information as "news, more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate" (Lewis 2006, 305). Journalism is assigned the "real and imagined power to affect systems, actions or events" (Hartley quoted in Rauch 2003, 101) and news agencies are considered to be key agents in this process since they can set the agenda for public debate by determining which issues will be distributed as well as setting the standard of content and form of news. Rauch (2003, 87-88) has argued that the "content [of a news agency] represents a strong influence on Western readers' knowledge of and attitudes toward global events and issues." International news is generally believed to act as a crucial mechanism of the extension of people's horizon (Tester 2004). By consequence, the enduring global domination of a few Western agencies has been criticised for reducing the range of news topics covered (Harrison 2006, 92) and for nurturing a homogenised public discourse. It appears that "fewer major news providers are informing more people and […] doing so from fewer sources" (Paterson 2001, 79 and 84-89). By paying attention to non-mainstream topics, alternative news outlets such as IPS thus represent a necessary addition to mainstream media. These alternative news actors encourage a pluralism of voices in the international news exchange (Giffard 1983, 56) and are "exercising a right to communicate that is closely connected to all other fundamental human rights and is part of a broader struggle for social change" (Fenton 2006, 357). As Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992, 35) have illustrated, IPS has successfully managed to develop such an alternative framework for covering the world. In general, IPS strives to keep the voices and concerns of the poorest on the news agenda.

Inter Press Service: A History of Journalism for Global Change

Reflecting on the role and value of IPS implies reflecting on the issue of alternative media. Although there is no clear consensus as to what alternative media are, in this article we refer to Couldry and Curran's definition of "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power" (2003, 7). We further draw on the work of Atton (2002, 128) who states that one characteristic of alternative media is the mobilisation of information on events that are ignored or marginalised by mainstream media. In their analysis of global media, Herman and McChesney (1997) also refer to this role of disseminating alternative analyses and visions that are generally neglected by the mass media as a key feature of alternative media. In the case of IPS, sports coverage, celebrity or lifestyle news and up-to-date business news for instance are not the agency's main concern. Instead, IPS stands for a form of "journalism and communication for global change" (IPS 2009b). This mission statement translates itself into a non-mainstream copy that stresses counter-hegemonic discourses, highlights development issues and attempts to give "a voice to the voiceless" (IPS 2009b). IPS is widely appraised for its timely and in-depth coverage of development issues, global governance, gender issues and human rights, with a focus on analysis, alternative perspectives and local voices. According to Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992, 35) "this indeed is an innovative focus in the world media market."

Troubled by imbalances in international news reporting, Italian journalist Roberto Savio and Argentinean student Pablo Piacentini founded IPS in 1964. The agency started as a non-profit cooperative of journalists that aspired to build an information bridge between Europe and Latin America (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992, 31). In the 1970s, IPS was able to grow in the shadow of the NWICO-debates. Embodying the NWICO-ideal of a free flow and a wider and more balanced dissemination of information, IPS successfully promoted the exchange of information and news between developing countries. In the next decade, IPS aimed at improving the information flow from South to North and it established a global network of affiliates. This rapid worldwide expansion triggered a process of decentralisation that eventually led to the creation of five regional offices while the agency's headquarters remained in Rome. In 1994, IPS again changed its global organisational structure and legal status to become a non-profit, international NGO. Starting in 2000, the regional centres were incorporated and became autonomous and locally-owned entities, coordinating their activities with the others through the overarching IPS International Association (IPS 2009c). After some difficult years, a new management and editorial board were installed in 2003 and provided the forty-year-old organisation with new ideas and ambitions. Since then, a more commercially oriented IPS has consolidated itself as one of the leading news agencies on civil society and development issues, with a track record of continuous (online) growth. Today, IPS reaches an estimated 200 million readers on a daily basis and its copy is available in twenty-seven languages (IPS 2009a, 5). The IPS network consists of some 417 journalists of who seventy percent are permanently based in southern countries. Many of the staff writing and editing for IPS in the North are from developing countries while almost all of its journalists and editors in the South are from the country or region concerned (IPS 2009c).

Although IPS is commonly associated with a daily news service, the news agency is actually just one part of the IPS International Association. Next to its activities in the news sector, IPS's global communication strategy encompasses two more activities: first, dissemination and networking aimed at creating information bridges, and secondly, capacity-building to "increase media and communication literacy and professional skills of journalists and civil society actors" (IPS 2009f). Traditionally, IPS has allocated most of its resources towards its news service activities that account for about 66% of its total costs. In general, IPS is operating with a budget of some five million Euro and has three main sources of income: grants from donors, revenues from news sales and income from projects (IPS 2009d, 12 and 22). Income from the market is, however, not sufficient to be commercially viable, hence leading to a major dependence on grants and funding from donors that generally account for around half of the annual revenue. Thussu (2004, 57) has warned alternative actors of such growing financial dependence on a small(er) number of donors as they may ultimately act more like a pressure group for Southern concerns rather than as a professional news agency.

In order to situate IPS within the global market of newsgathering and dissemination, we can further refer to a body of academic research that has explored the differences between mainstream and alternative news agencies, particularly IPS. Scholars have typically found the agency's output "more diverse than mainstream agencies in terms of number of topics covered, datelines filed, and sources used" (Rauch 2003, 88). In 1985, Ogan and Rush identified the difference in substance, geographical focus and use of sources between IPS and major Western news agencies. A decade later and after analysing the IPS and AP news coverage on the 2000 *Group of 77 Summit*, Rauch (2003) concluded that both news agencies represent the South in a strikingly different way. While AP framed the event in a significantly more negative perspective by stressing disunity, neglect and controversy at the summit, IPS emphasised the Southern nations' cooperation, achievement and common goals. In addition, unlike most news agencies IPS does not tend to overlook civil society organisations as potential news sources (Rauch 2003, 98). Analysing the debates leading up to the 2003 USA-Iraq conflict, Horvit (2006) also found that IPS presented more non-Western viewpoints, but less balanced coverage than AP, AFP and Reuters. Another important body of comparative research is the annual content analyses of IPS conducted by Anthony Giffard and his team at the University of Washington. Over the years, these analyses of IPS copy have demonstrated more support for the agency's alternative orientation. A 1993 survey, for instance, found that IPS offered significantly more stories on culture, development, the environment, human rights, and social issues than AP or Reuters, whose filings showed more emphasis on crime, the military, politics, violence, and the coups and earthquakes that regularly attract mainstream news attention. In 1998, Giffard again compared the news service of IPS *vis-à-vis* AP and Reuters. Two-thirds of IPS copy carried datelines of cities in the developing world, compared to less than fifty percent of AP and Reuters reports. In addition, the actors and sources in IPS reports were twice as likely to be from the South as the North. Similar conclusions were drawn from a 2008 study regarding the coverage of the UN Millennium Development Goals. The results showed that IPS displayed a more diverse coverage in terms of news geography, gender and actors than AP and AFP (Giffard and Van

Leuven 2008, 29-35). Reddy and Izeboud (2003, 12) concluded that the "findings [from the Giffard reports published between 1999 and 2002] confirm IPS's unique editorial approach and its positioning as a complementary news agency to the transnational agencies." Nonetheless, further research by Giffard (2001) and others (Varis et al. 1977; Giffard and Van Horn 1992) has identified several geographical gaps in the IPS's coverage. Until recently, the Arab world, for instance, represented a black spot on the news map (see infra). As Giffard in his 2004 study correctly points out, these (content) comparisons of IPS to the major international agencies should, however, not suggest that IPS is in the same league in terms of volume and range of its coverage. IPS is, by comparison, a shoestring operation with a limited, but, clearly, defined set of news values and priorities. What the analyses do underscore is that "IPS, given adequate resources, can deliver better coverage of processes and events that are of vital interest to nations in the developing world than is available from the mainstream media. And for those in the North who want a different perspective on the news, IPS is a valuable alternative" (Giffard 2004, 29).

A Case Study of IPS

The current study aims at supplementing these content analyses with qualitative research. In 2007, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirteen IPS staff members (journalists and management), six stakeholders (civil society partners, donors and IPS board members) and seven internationally renowned scholars with expertise regarding alternative news media, international communication and media for development.[2] All conversations were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques and subsequently sorted according to three dimensions: editorial policy, organisational issues, and financial and human resources. Several respondents requested to be quoted anonymously, and as such, we will not mention names, but instead we will refer to the interviewees as displayed in Appendix 1.

In addition to these twenty-six interviews, we could also draw upon the results from a previous online survey among journalists (XX 2006). In 2005, thirty-eight Flemish[3] mainstream print journalists working on topics related to foreign news and international economics were asked to evaluate the local IPS affiliate and its online daily news service. In this article, the latter study[4] will only be referred to for the sake of background information.

Despite diverse backgrounds and interests, our respondents displayed a high level of agreement regarding the different issues discussed during the interviews. Before addressing the three dimensions outlined above, we have asked our respondents to briefly reflect on the mission, public role and contemporary value of IPS. A common theme that emerged from this first general inquiry is that despite the current proliferation of multimedia sources, it is for Western publics very hard to find diverse and alternative views on the world news, especially news from non-Western parts of the world. Our respondents considered IPS to be the only news network of global scale that provides this kind of valuable and necessary information both systematically and by traditional means as well as by new media channels. A standard phrasing that was used by several interviewees to grasp this democratic value was "if IPS did not exist, it should have been invented." Several respondents argued that the mission of IPS as defined in 1964 (giving a voice to the

voiceless and challenging the international information order) is even more relevant in the current age of media conglomerates, commercialisation and infotainment than it was more than four decades ago. Looking forward, "Scholar 5" believed that "there is undoubtedly a future for organisations such as IPS that can provide news from an alternative perspective as this has always been valuable and will remain so." Our respondents thus looked upon IPS as successfully fulfilling its public role and mission by sensitising Western publics to (foreign) issues and regions that lack spectacular or commercial (news) value. In other words, the agency is assessed to be a useful, relevant and necessary addition to the mainstream news offer. According to staff members and scholars, this democratic and valuable mission statement is most visibly reflected in the news output and the overall editorial policy.

Editorial Policy

IPS news service has received wide appraisal for its coverage that highlights development issues and seeks balanced geographic representation. Typical IPS output can be described as displaying an original point of view, presenting an alternative focus on current affairs and paying attention to background information. According to "IPS Staff 5," a classic IPS story aspires to be "global with local flavour or local with a global slant." Other positive aspects raised by the interviewees include the wide network of local correspondents, the geographical wide coverage and the editorial guideline to tell the story underneath the news story. This overall positive attitude towards IPS's news copy is consistent with findings from the journalist survey (XX 2006) and bi-annual client and users surveys conducted by IPS in 2005 and 2007. Nevertheless, this much appraised news copy is at the same time perceived as a weakness. Let us illustrate this remarkable paradox with some brief examples.

While according to "Scholar 4" it is precisely thanks to this "distinctly different news agenda" that IPS has managed to survive despite continuous financial constraints, "Scholar 7" and other critics such as Rauch (2003) and Giffard (1998b, 8) argue that "the kind of background news that IPS provides, while useful and important, is not particularly attractive to market-driven commercial media" and eventually leads to enduring financial constraints. When discussing the other dimensions, we will further reflect on the commercial value of IPS's unique news agenda (see infra).

Other critical voices among our respondents referred to the geographical reach of the news output as a second example of this contradiction. IPS takes pride in its global network of local correspondents and stresses its wide journalistic focus on the global South. At the same time, some interviewees, including staff members and journalists, noted that certain regions have been historically neglected or not considered to be a key region in terms of allocated human resources and editorial attention. They mentioned Russia and the former USSR, certain Asian and Arabic regions, and to some extent even North America as contemporary blank spots in the IPS news map.

A third and arguably more important issue concerns the political orientation of IPS and its impact on the editorial product. Although previous research found the news copy to be both critical and balanced (cf. for instance Ogan and Rush 1985), several respondents and particularly journalists (see XX 2006) find the overt

Southern and development focus often difficult to relate to Western journalistic values of objectivity and professionalism. Until late 2006, the corporate website stated that the content of IPS was "written and edited from the perspective of the developing world" (IPS 2006). Since its inauguration in 2003 and to its credit, the new management has taken several initiatives to deal with this dual and often conflicting image, both on organisational (see infra) and editorial level. Concerning the latter, the newly appointed editor-in-chief has set up a rigorous system of quality control, and since then "potentially biased stories have already been removed from the wire" according to 'IPS Staff 5'.

A fourth remark concerning the copy involves the speed of the news service. In times when production and consumption of news is getting faster and faster, "IPS Staff 12," for instance, regrets that IPS is "not breaking the news" and other interviewees, particularly those staff members and stakeholders working within Western media markets, commented in the same way. Unfortunately for IPS, that is the kind of service that journalists require from a news agency (XX 2006). Manning (2001, 57) concluded that "although accuracy and authority are certainly important, it is the rapidity with which information can be distributed that secures reputation and contracts." On the other hand, most scholars and IPS management members argued that this is precisely an essential part of IPS's distinct profile that allows the agency to focus on the aftermath and background of events. In addition, some staff members and stakeholders overtly doubted that IPS has the financial and human resources to provide up-to-the-minute coverage of events (see infra).

A final comment related to the news copy and IPS's public role touches upon technological innovations and structures of power in the digital news environment. Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the one hand have created new opportunities for the development of the news genre (Allan 2006) while on the other hand opening spaces for democratic engagement and contributing to a global civil society (Couldry and Curran 2003), news media have been rather slow to develop distinctive forms in response (Matheson 2004, 443). In recent years, IPS is steadily transforming itself from a text-based news wire into a multimedia actor. It has been developing a wide range of multimedia services such as a daily online news service, a weekly e-zine, podcasts, blogs and image databases along with a rapidly increasing web presence and experiments in providing content for mobile phones. These new applications complement and extend the news services for traditional media and allow IPS to attract more people with a richer flow of information. Confirming academic literature, our respondents however attributed the fast proliferation of ICTs and particularly of the Internet a dual role. On the one hand, it represents a fast and relatively cheap distribution network to bypass mainstream news reporting. On the other hand, as Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett (2004, 36) have argued, the Internet is also a source of more competition. The field of alternative media has witnessed the rise of a whole range of Internet-based initiatives developed by grassroots organisations and social movements. Our interviewees referred to Indymedia, Ourmedia.org and OhmyNews as notable examples. Emerging forms of journalism such as civic journalism and the popular blogging phenomenon were also identified as relevant alternatives to the mainstream news offer. In fact, precisely the characteristic kind of news that IPS is generally associated with, is now widely, directly and at minimal costs available on

the Internet (Giffard 2001). However, scholars 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 appears that the apparently undisturbed structures of (news) power will remain in force. Research has provided evidence for this persisting dominant role of the same major agencies in disseminating online news (Paterson 2001). According to "IPS Staff 4," this is however "the key incentive" for IPS to continue developing its online activities and presence.

Organisational Issues

A second topic discussed during the interviews dealt with issues regarding IPS's organisational structure (and culture) in relation to its public role, and on the other hand (potential) partnerships with civil society actors as well as other media.

A recent landmark in the history of IPS has been the year 2003. Many staff members and stakeholders referred to 2003 as a defining year for IPS regarding its organisational structure, commercial activities and operational status. With the appointment of a new global management team and editor-in-chief and the subsequent implementation of a new editorial policy, significant progress was achieved in strengthening the news service. Regarding IPS's public role and identity, several respondents however identified a lasting tension within the organisation. IPS has a long history of being active on two distinct fields: IPS is a professional news agency as well as a media for development player, a communication NGO. Opinions on this matter differ widely. Some perceived it to be a fundamental problem, others as a slumbering tension within the organisation, and even more people considered it to be just one of the many elements of IPS's unique identity. This issue resonates back to earlier concerns raised by voices from inside and outside the organisation. As one respondent of our research project has formulated it: "IPS is often suspended between very different worlds which it is trying to serve all at once, but this is a balancing act IPS needs to achieve" ("IPS Staff 3"). Looking at the issue from the scholar's outsider perspective, Rauch (2003, 90) has argued that the pro-development agenda of IPS has "cast doubt on the balance, objectivity, and accuracy of IPS coverage, which was seen by some as incompatible with the values and practices of Western journalism" and may have limited its market potential. The 2004 survey of journalists and editors also indicated a possible inconsistency between IPS's two main roles (XX 2006, 35) and as mentioned above, the issue was frequently brought up during the 2007 interviews. Staff members involved with editorial work rightly stressed the professional and independent nature of their work, but a large majority did admit that additional external communication would be helpful in conveying this to the general public and IPS's clients, particularly journalists. Others, including management members and all stakeholders, emphasised the undeniable link between both identities in terms of shared ideals and public mission. They did not speak of conflicting interests but rather of a valuable synergy between IPS's two roles. In their view, the NGO-identity differentiates IPS from other news agencies and creates opportunities to build alliances that others do not have. IPS should thus be conceived as a news agency "with something more" ("IPS Staff 13"). On the management side, the coexistence of IPS's double identities has nevertheless been carefully monitored. As several management members have stated, it is quintessential that the journalistic independence cannot be compromised by any activity of

the NGO, but on the other hand they acknowledged the forces of synergy between the news agency and the NGO-driven component.

On another level, IPS is also tightly woven into a comprehensive network of NGOs and other civil society organisations concerned with global issues of development. Particularly through its online activities, IPS has succeeded in constructing multiple social and political relationships within the public sphere (Giffard and Van Leuven 2006). IPS currently plays an important role as a media and communication partner for various civil society organisations, likeminded donors and others. In recent years, the organisation has also been successful as a trustworthy "facilitator" ("Stakeholder 2") or intermediary between civil society and (mainstream) media. Next to partnerships with civil society organisations, IPS has developed video and broadcast activities in cooperation with multimedia organisations such as Telesur, AMARC, RAI 24 (the international channel of Italian RAI) and Al-Jazeera with whom IPS has established some strategic agreements.

A final organisational topic deals with the marketing efforts and brand awareness of the agency. The majority of the staff members and stakeholders pointed towards the limited global visibility of IPS as an important future threat to the agency. Despite a global presence and network of local affiliates, IPS suffers from limited (brand) awareness in large parts of the world. Illustrative of this was the fact that even scholars active in the field of international communication as well as recently joined staff members were not fully aware of IPS's global network and all of its activities. Previous research also signalled limited brand awareness within the key customer group of journalists (XX 2006). In the past, marketing goals were too narrowly defined in terms of maintaining sales. Although almost all interviewees urged IPS to increase its marketing efforts and allocate more resources to the marketing department, at the same time they made the necessary differentiations by stressing that these increased efforts will however not result in a commercially viable and financially self-sustaining IPS. This leads us to the final dimension of the research project: the financial and human resources of IPS.

Financial and Human Resources

In order to realise its mission and goals, each organisation must rely on sufficient financial and human resources. Related to our object of study, most alternative ventures operate on a shoestring budget and survive by the funding from Western aid agencies, NGOs and UN organisations. IPS is no exception to this rule as it mainly depends on donor grants that account for about half of its revenue (see supra). Related to this, "IPS Staff 3" signalled "an unequal geographic distribution of our donors." Most donors still originate from Europe and the USA, although opportunities arise in the developing world. Given its goals and mission, IPS should be capable of getting some of the rapidly emerging countries such as China, India, South Africa and Brazil on board as new core donors, and has been successful to date with Brazil and India. Reflecting on future threats and challenges, all respondents identified the limited financial resources as the key issue to be addressed by IPS. It is urged to keep a close eye on emerging (Southern) markets to further expand and diversify its services and income sources. Some scholars, however, foresee a decrease in the sales of IPS's news service as a growing number of media organisations cut in their expenses on foreign news coverage. In addition,

exchanges of information as part of partnerships or cooperation do not result in much financial gain while many (individual) users of IPS output use the service for free which indicates an uncharted marketing threat to the agency. One respondent, "Stakeholder 6," aptly summarised the financial status of IPS by noticing that "IPS receives a lot of appraisal for its service but only very little financial return." In short, our respondents argued that these enduring constraints have had and will continue to have a strong impact on the operation, staff and output of the agency. "IPS Staff 122," for instance, explicitly referred to the previously mentioned blank spots in IPS's global news map as a direct consequence of the limited financial and human resources.

Due to the recent growth of the organisation, IPS's human resources are also dangerously overstretched. Many IPS staff members and journalists expressed that they are overloaded with work. Moreover, following the agency's choice of working with a global network of local correspondents, IPS is confronted with particular challenges regarding its human resources management. Based on his experiences in the Middle East, "IPS Staff 7," for instance, referred to the continuing difficulty of attracting skilled local journalists who can write in flawless English. Particularly in the developing world, it is hard to attract these journalists as they are over-solicited by the major Western news providers and local news organisations with international ambitions such as Al-Jazeera. Competitive salaries are a crucial factor in persuading these skilled journalists to join the global IPS network.

Conclusion

Acknowledging that information is a decisive resource for the political and cultural action of publics around the globe (Jensen 1998, 9), this article reflected on the values and roles of a global alternative news agency as perceived by its staff members, stakeholders and independent scholars. Despite fierce competition and unfavourable contextual factors, it appears that IPS still manages to fill in a troublesome niche in the 21st century world of international news dissemination. Drawing on findings from previous studies and research presented in this article, IPS can be identified as being distinctly different from a conventional news agency, by content as well as by mission. It is perceived as being successful in challenging mainstream perceptions about the developing world and in promoting a more balanced international flow of information. The news agency and its characteristic news copy are considered a useful, relevant and necessary addition to mainstream (Western) news media as well as being a crucial source of information and partner for the global civil society.

Although we have encountered some conflicting opinions, our expert respondents from different backgrounds seem to hold a common idea about what IPS stands for. Most agreed with regard to the *unique selling proposition* of the news agency that was situated within its editorial qualities of providing the news behind the news in a refreshing, often daring, but always alternative way. This unique editorial perspective lies at the very heart of IPS and has survived several shifts in policy. However, for a significant minority of the respondents, in particular the media practitioners, IPS's editorial quality and objectivity are at times threatened by the dual identity of IPS as a news agency as well as a development player. Other identified tensions dealt with the speed of the news service, the geographic reach of the news coverage

and its blank spots, IPS's limited financial and human resources, and the agency's transformation towards a multimedia actor. Digital media have created new ways of distributing its alternative message, but at the same time they confront IPS with additional (alternative) competition as well as old power structures.

In conclusion, we can refer to Thussu (2002, 252) who states that "an alternative to corporatised global communication is a moral imperative and a necessary democratic requirement." News media are the most vital information channels in any society and even hold the potential to act as "agents of democracy" (Allan 1999, 3-4). This article argues that a fundamental and lasting reason for the existence of IPS as such an agent of democracy lies in its contribution to challenge the status quo in global news media (online and "offline"). IPS represents a valuable alternative with the (global) potential to foster social change. By raising an alternative voice in an increasingly homogenous (news) world, Inter Press Service fulfils a unique role of sensitising the public to global inequalities and bridging the information gap between North and South.

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Notes:

1. This article is based on a paper that was presented at the 2006 conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in Egypt where it was awarded the 'IAMCR Prize in Memory of Herbert Schiller 2006'.

2. Part of the research presented here was conducted for an independent evaluation of IPS, ordered by Oxfam-NOVIB in 2007 and completed by XX (XX University) and Maria Pia Matta (AMARC).

3. Northern Belgium or Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Together with the French-speaking Wallonia, bilingual Brussels and the German-speaking region, it constitutes the federal state of Belgium.

4. For more information, see XX 2006. In 2009, an undergraduate student of XX University conducted a similar evaluation of IPS Flanders. This follow-up study focused on online journalists, and its results confirmed the findings from the 2006 inquiry.

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Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Respondent	Country	Gender	Length of interview
IPS Staff 1	Scotland	Female	25min*
IPS Staff 2	Sri Lanka / USA	Male	30min*
IPS Staff 3	Belgium	Male	1h15min
IPS Staff 4	Uruguay	Male	1h07min
IPS Staff 5	Spain / Switzerland	Female	1h35min*
IPS Staff 6	India	Male	1h15min
IPS Staff 7	Egypt / Spain	Male	37min*
IPS Staff 8	USA	Female	40min*
IPS Staff 9	Uruguay	Male	1h45min
IPS Staff 10	Argentina	Male	40min
IPS Staff 11	Zimbabwe	Female	1h11min
IPS Staff 12	Philippines	Female	1h20min*
IPS Staff 13	Italy	Female	54min
Stakeholder 1	The Netherlands	Male	20min*
Stakeholder 2	Italy	Male	35min*
Stakeholder 3	France	Male	35min*
Stakeholder 4	Switzerland	Male	28min*
Stakeholder 5	The Netherlands	Male	20min*
Stakeholder 6	South Africa	Male	35min*
Scholar 1	UK	Male	21min
Scholar 2	UK	Male	25min
Scholar 3	The Netherlands	Male	20min
Scholar 4	UK / USA	Male	25min
Scholar 5	The Netherlands	Male	34min
Scholar 6	USA	Male	20min
Scholar 7	India	Male	38min

* This interview was conducted by telephone.