

RAISING AWARENESS IN A DIGITAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF IPS FLANDERS

Stijn Joye
Working Group Film & Television Studies
Ghent University, Belgium

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

Daya Kishan Thussu¹

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ABSTRACT

The digital era created a new gateway for alternative media and consequently gave birth to various new players on the market. This study's objective was to determine the surplus value of Inter Press Service (IPS) and its online daily news service in Flanders, Belgium. Being a crank in the field of international communication and news agencies for over 42 years, IPS still turns out to be a useful and necessary supplement to the mainstream news offer. However, the quantitative survey among newspaper editors and journalists also indicates that if the alternative agency wishes to maintain its unique role of sensitising the audience and bridging the information gap between North and South, a faster and more professional service is vital for the Flemish journalists.

This paper analyses the position of an alternative news agency in the Western news market of the digital 21st century and its mission to open the world of news to all.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the time of this study in 2004, the non-profit news agency Inter Press Service (IPS) was celebrating its fortieth anniversary. At an age of 40 people tend to reflect upon their existence, their achievements and what the future has in store. Precisely these kind of ‘philosophical’ considerations are the basic research topics of this paper about IPS. The digital era created new gateways for alternative media and consequently gave birth to various new players on the news market. At the same time, the duopoly Reuters – AP strengthened its dominance over the traditional sector of news agencies and hard factual news became the dominant output of newspapers and television channels. These trends forced IPS and other alternative news agencies to re-evaluate their core mission and surplus value: 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?

¹ Thussu, 2002: 252.

Or in other words, does the digital (news) world of today still take a traditional news agency as IPS into account?

Furthermore the anniversary of IPS marked four decades of international communication. It can easily be argued that things changed drastically during this short period of time with the emergence and overwhelming proliferation of digital media as the most recent and prominent evolution in the field of international communication. However did things *really* change for an average alternative news agency like IPS? Surely, the context and ecology of news services altered in a stunning way, but can we distinguish any changes in the daily practice and the very reason for existence of the agency? In this paper we will argue that this is not always the case. After all, IPS is still trying to fill the information gap, be it now in a more global manner. And recent studies indicate that the major Western news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press (AP) and Agence France Presse (AFP) to name the most important ones) continue to dominate the international news flow while the media coverage of the so-called Third World or Less Developed Countries (LDC) still raises serious problems. Moreover, the same research suggests that these well known imbalances persist in the digital era, only in a more intensive way, hence the bare existence of the concept 'digital divide'.

To sum up, can we find arguments that **legitimize** the existence of IPS keeping in mind the tremendous daily amount of words produced by Reuters and AP, the widespread presence of the Internet in the developed world and the diminishing need for foreign news? Based on *theoretical* assumptions and grounds, we will try to prove that alternative news agencies continue to play an essential and necessary role within the international news agency market. Remains the issue of the everyday practice. Do *empirical* data subscribe this theoretical position? In order to adequately answer this second question, we analysed the situation of IPS in Flanders, Belgium. The research presented in this paper was conducted 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.

II. THEORY AND PRACTICES OF NEWS AGENCIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Let us start this chapter with briefly introducing our main protagonists: Inter Press Service and its Flemish associated body IPS Flanders². According to its corporate website IPS is civil society's leading news agency, giving a voice to the voiceless on the principle that another communication is possible (www.ips.org, 2006). The agency 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).

IPS is a child of the roaring sixties. In 1964 young Italian freelance journalist Roberto **Savio** and Argentinean student political sciences Pablo **Piacentini** wanted to establish an 'information bridge' between Europe and Latin America (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992: 31). IPS was set up in Rome as a non-profit international cooperative of journalists. Steadily grown to early adulthood in the shadow of the famous NWICO-debates³ and eventually (too?) closely associated with it in the seventies, IPS managed to successfully improve the horizontal communication between developing countries. When IPS was searching to brush up the South-North flow in the 1980s it established a network of affiliates in Europe, namely in Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.⁴ Through the years, the IPS-network has gradually build up its expertise and has gained widespread recognition for its characteristic journalistic output on human rights and democratisation, environment, education, development, international finance and politics, global governance... with a persistent focus on the South. In the contemporary globalized society IPS focuses on global issues and global interdependence to such extent that a close observer of the agency, Anthony **Giffard** (University of Washington) calls IPS "*the world's leading provider on information about global issues and the largest purveyor of news about the developing nations*" (Giffard, 1998: 1). Keeping in mind the fierce competition on the international news market, a commendable merit but at the same time a heavy burden to carry.

Following the inspiring example of the Dutch IPS-service, Belgian NGO's (a.o. NCOS, Broederlijk Delen ...) combined their forces to establish IPS Flanders in December 1986. From the very beginning the agency was closely tied to IPS Netherlands from a linguistic and institutional point of view. This intense relationship and cooperation sadly became a *liaison dangereuse* for the Flemish agency when enduring financial problems of IPS Netherlands

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.

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.

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 by an ironical swift of history it nowadays provides a news service for the entire Dutch-speaking regions; Flanders and the Netherlands.⁵ The agency is stationed in Brussels and mostly translates a representative selection from the IPS World Service combined with own journalistic output. In 2006 the editorial staff consists of three part time journalists and a pool of four freelancers. This small crew closely cooperates with other alternative ventures including OneWorld, 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 loyal client base. Apart from the daily press, subscribers include regional websites, specialised magazines, NGO's (e.g. Oxfam) ... Nowadays the agency gets financial support from the Flemish government.

Parallel to the evolution of IPS and its subsidiaries, one fact remained unchanged during this period: the **dominance** of the Western news agencies over the international news flow (Pietiläinen, 1998, Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004: 34). Although in sheer numbers the dominant 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**, "*the overall information gap between North and South grows and defies attempts at containment*" (Thussu, 2004: 47).

The Usual Suspects: analysing the international news flow

In his acclaimed work '*Culture Inc*' (1989) the late Herbert **Schiller** 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). Since its very origin, the international news agency market has always been characterized by a number of harsh imbalances, deeply rooted in historical, political and economic realities. 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 famous NWICO-debates fuelled by the non-aligned movement (NAM) in the mid 1970s and eventually to the establishment of the so-called alternative voices like IPS, Gemini, NANAP, PANA(Press), ... 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).

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).

We already briefly referred to the structural dominance of a few major news agencies but as numerous scholars (e.g. Masmoudi, 1979, Thussu, 2004) have argued, the imbalances are not merely restricted to a question of size or ‘material’ parameters. The discussion also bears an important **symbolic dimension**. In 1965 Galtung and Ruge identified twelve factors which define the intrinsic news value of an event. Later international studies (e.g. Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985; The ‘*News of the World*’-project, Stevenson & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995) showed that these factors haven’t lost any of their significance (see Harcup, 2004: 30-39). Western news agencies still do not attribute much newsworthiness to the countries of the developing world (e.g. Reeves, 1993, Kamalipour, 2002) and even if doing so, research (e.g. Biltreyest, Peeren & Van Gompel, 1999, Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004) proved that the media coverage is focusing on spectacular events, elite persons, hard facts, violence and conflict, ... the so-called ‘spot’ news. To conclude, the Western information dominance results in “*an inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal of developing countries*” (Rampal, 2002: 111).

In our opinion it is precisely on this symbolic dimension that alternative news agencies like IPS can and do make a noble difference. The domination by a few 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 and their broader contexts, IPS is an essential supplement to the traditional media (Garrigues, 1994: 16) “*by encouraging a pluralism of voice in the international news exchange*” (Giffard, 1984: 56). As recognised by among others the European Commission, the hallmark of IPS is exactly this unbiased and in-depth journalism. Referring to its mission, IPS wishes to help create a better balance and flow of international news, with particular regard to the developing countries (www.ips.org, 2006). IPS managed to develop an alternative basis or framework for news selection with the focus on processes rather than on ‘spot’ news (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992: 35).

In addition to the material and symbolic dominance of the North, several studies show 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**, 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*” (Moisy, 1997: 79). This remarkable paradox finds its origins in a new ‘*news ecology*’ which is hardly favourable for IPS and its likes. This concept refers to the context in which news media operate since the past 25 years, that is a context 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** further argues that these evolutions did not merely affect the way mediated news is produced but also how it is consumed (Ibid., p. 70).

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: 8). Most alternative agencies survive by the grace of funding by Western aid agencies, NGO's and UN organizations, ultimately acting more like a pressure group for Southern concerns rather than like a professional news agency (Thussu, 2004: 57). Leaving this last remark out of consideration, reality clearly shows that the 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. 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 can not be ignored that agencies like Reuters or AP also offer 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.

The Internet: opportunity or threat?

In *tempore non suspecto* scholars as David **Lerner** (Lerner, 1958) or Wilbur **Schramm** (Schramm, 1964) urged that mass media would be a catalysing 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 (ICT) was attended with the same optimistic beliefs and aspirations. Unfortunately, history painfully showed that ICTs promoted inequality (Musa, 1990: 329) between societies instead of stimulating the emergence of one *global village* as 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).

It is obvious that ICTs altered the world of the news in a radical way. Technological revolutions such as the Internet have brought new opportunities for the development and expansion of the news genre (Harrison, 2006: 149). Weblogs, e-zines, rss feeds, 24 on 24 satellite channels, online newspapers ... 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 represents a relatively cheap distribution network to bypass for example the mainstream news reporting (Atton, 2002). As Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett (2004: 36) 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. New 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 can we relate these developments to IPS? A new technology means new opportunities and challenges for the ‘old media’. In the case of news media, various **new players** made their appearance on the international market. The most quoted example is without a doubt Indymedia, the worldwide network of independent websites run by volunteers (Mamadouh, 2003: 482). Other initiatives include OneWorld Online, Comondreams, Out There News ... It is difficult to speak of competition since IPS and these ‘*new kids on the block*’ share much of the same goals and beliefs, but looking from a commercial perspective Indymedia and other Internet based actors are practically cost-free news sources (Platon & Deuze, 2003: 336-355) while newspapers have to pay a 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 let us not forget that an important share of the media use is not digital (yet), in addition to the enormous number of people not having access to the Internet in both 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 offered new services as the daily online news service, a weekly e-zine, ... to complement its ‘core business’ and to better achieve its enduring goal 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).

Along the lines of the considerations expressed above and the much-discussed outcomes of the recent *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS)⁷, we believe that IPS can play an important role in the contemporary digital society. The agency can raise the necessary awareness by sensitising and critically informing the Western audiences about the WSIS-commitments (and implementation) and in a more general respect 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.

Final remarks: 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 their 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

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 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 Internet, the medium that opened spaces for democratic engagement and contributed to the building of a global civil society (Couldry & Curran, 2003: 227-241).

III. THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL: EVALUATING 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 (brand) 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.

Selecting and using the IPS Flanders news output

In order to look at this evaluation in its right perspective, the study briefly examined the criteria journalists use to **select** a news event covered by IPS Flanders. First and most determining factor is the topical value of the event. 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. Thirdly, the journalists value the newsworthiness. A cultural, geographical, ... connection with Belgium or Flanders tied into the story is favourable 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 news values 'discovered' by Galtung and Ruge in 1965 and findings from later research (cf. page 4 and 5).

Secondly, when writing an article, IPS Flanders is 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 delivers its output via the online news service, we can classify it under the first category.

⁸ Study ordered by IPS Flanders and conducted under the supervision of professor dr. Daniël Biltreyst (Ghent University). The survey consisted of a combination of open and closed questions.

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.

Newspaper	Belga	Reuters	AP	IPS	Bloomberg	AFP
De Tijd						
De Morgen						
Metro						
Gazet van Antwerpen						
Het Belang van Limburg						
De Standaard						
Het Nieuwsblad						
Het Laatste Nieuws						
Total	8	5	5	5	4	2

Table 1. Overview of subscriptions on news agencies

Remains the question of **efficiency**. In other words, how many articles of the news agency 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 quality 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. However, 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 sensitising the Flemish public to (foreign) issues which lack spectacular commercial value. In other words the agency is assessed to be a **useful** and **necessary supplement** to the mainstream news offer of the major international 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.

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

The table below 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 scored **6,4** on 10.

	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. Strengths and weaknesses of IPS Flanders (n = 38)

This overall positive evaluation can be retrieved in a number of intertwined aspects this primary user group of IPS material was inquired about.

Firstly the journalists consider IPS to be the most appropriate source for information about development issues, human rights, environment, the globalisation process and other cultures. On the other hand the major 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. When journalists are looking for news on Africa, Latin America and Asia, IPS is the number one source while Reuters, AP and AFP claim the Northern hemisphere as their exclusive news property (for a comparable analysis of the news services of IPS vis-à-vis AP and Reuters, see Giffard, 1998).

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. Recent (published) examples of such 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, ... (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.

A wind of changes

As usual, there are two sides to every question. The Flemish journalists also attribute some important shortcomings to the IPS news service (cf. Table 2).

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 sensitising 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 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 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. 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.

Referring to **Van Ginneken’s** third criteria of availability, IPS Flanders doesn’t entirely manage to come up to the journalists’ expectations.

First of all, for a journalist **timing** is everything. With regard to Reuters, AP or AFP, IPS and IPS Flanders don’t have a large team of journalists at their disposal making it impossible to deliver vast volumes of news stories and up to date news facts. ‘With the ink still wet’-news is as a result not always available from IPS Flanders. Unfortunately for the agency, that is precisely the kind of output journalists demand from a news agency. As **Manning** states that “*although accuracy and authority are certainly important, it is the rapidity with which information can be distributed that secures reputation and contracts*” (Manning, 2001: 57). 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, 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 changed the daily working methods since most IPS delivery to the end-users is now 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. 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'. 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 celebrates 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. In other words, IPS Flanders stands on the verge of a challenging future. The small agency will need to continuously improve and adapt its services to the digital information society and the overwhelming screen culture of our modern times. Providing more photographs could (or should) be the necessary next step in its 'evolution'.

IV. CONCLUSION

“I have to believe that a better informed world is more civilised, more compassionate, more ready to act and to help.”¹¹

Which role can a traditional alternative news agency play 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 major Western news agencies tend to concentrate more on economical, financial and hard factual news leaving aside vital issues of development, human rights, the globalisation process and others.

IPS can be considered as an important actor in the resistance to global trends of the Western domination. For those who want a different perspective on the news, IPS is a persistent and valuable alternative. As the case of IPS Flanders proves, journalists consider the agency and its output as a **useful** and **necessary supplement** to mainstream news media. The surplus value and strength of IPS precisely lies in the fact that it supplements the coverage and news flow 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 problems and an idle hope of ever becoming self-sustaining.

The dawn of the digital era has led to new challenges, threats and opportunities for news media. New alternative voices were founded while an established news agency like IPS used the innovative gateway to further upgrade its goal and mission to bridge the enduring information and knowledge gap. Recently some serious restraints popped up about the liberating value of the Internet. The lasting domination of the established 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 important information channels to the extent that they are seen as ‘agents of democracy’ (Allan, 1999: 3-4). Inter Press Services very *raison d’être* is contributing to and challenging democratic processes in an increasingly globalising world. By making the (Flemish) audience conscious of vital global inequalities and injustices, it wishes to promote and ultimately evoke a sense of commitment. Awareness as the first step towards action and comprehension.

¹¹ Kate **Adie**, chief news correspondent of the BBC. Quoted in Allan, 1999: 107.

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