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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE NEWS AGENCIES

by

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National Agencies

1. Every sovereign State has need of a national news agency, based on the co-operation of all the newspapers in the country. No real flow of news between a country and its neighbours is possible without such a service. Moreover, national agencies form the most effective link with the world news agencies and through them, with the rest of the world.
2. If a country lacks a national agency, there will be only an imperfect flow of news between that country and the rest of the world. Moreover, the world agencies and the national agencies maintaining an international service will be limited under such conditions to selling their services to one major newspaper, or a few major newspapers in the country concerned. This is wrong in principle, since the news of the world should be freely available to all peoples in all countries, and not be restricted to the readers of the most affluent newspapers in a country.
3. Essential to a strong national news agency is a strong daily press, all of whose members are prepared to co-operate faithfully in gathering domestic news, share the cost of a world or international service and sell their national agency's services to all newspapers and broadcasting organizations in the country, regardless of politics or creed. Only by observing these principles will a national agency command respect in its own country and in the rest of the world.

Regional Co-operation

4. National agencies within a region can strengthen their national and international position by observing the principle, accepted some years ago by most of the smaller European agencies, whereby each agency freely exchanges its domestic news with other agencies in the region. Each agency is required to pay only the transmission costs of the news it receives, on the grounds that there is no need to pay for the domestic news of neighbouring countries or of countries with similar interests. In the long run, the news agencies of a region might consider

(*) Documents in this series were prepared by individual experts in a personal capacity. The data and views they contain are intended to serve as a basis for discussion at the Bangkok meeting.

the long-range possibility of forming a regional agency which would gather and exchange or sell news between regions in the same way as its member national agencies deal with domestic news among themselves.

European example

5. Group '39 provides a useful example of regional co-operation by national news agencies. At the outbreak of World War II, the managers of news agencies of seven smaller European countries not yet involved in the conflict met and came to the conclusion that since their domestic news would henceforth be distributed abroad largely through the news agencies of belligerent countries, there would no longer be a guarantee of objective distribution.

6. To overcome this problem, the seven news agencies concerned jointly leased a European radio circuit for several daily Hellschreiber emissions of 20 minutes each or longer. The cost of a 20-minute emission was less than US \$ 7. This co-operative regional agency became known as the "Hell-Commune" and its emissions were receivable throughout Europe. The agency had no office and no manager or other staff except a book-keeper, who recorded the very low operating costs and divided them among the participants according to the number of words each had sent to the transmission centre in Amsterdam for redistribution. Many European agencies, as well as the world agencies, were subscribers to the Hell-Commune.

Principles of Co-operative Agencies

7. A co-operative agency of newspaper publishers has an important advantage over a private commercial enterprise in that its statutes guarantee the interests of the smaller and larger newspapers alike, regardless of politics, religion or circulation. Its board of directors are elected from among the publishers themselves and represent all interests on a well-balanced basis. Its larger member newspapers are unable to outvote their smaller colleagues on any issue, not even in the matter of subscriptions, which might be based on the circulation of each newspaper concerned.

8. In view of the increasing importance of radio as an information medium, broadcasting enterprises might well be invited to participate from the start in the ownership and control of a news agency. It may be noted that for illiterate persons, radio is frequently the main source of news. The higher the rate of illiteracy in a country, the more interest will broadcasting enterprises have in disseminating news and the greater will be their contribution to a national news agency, both as sources of domestic news themselves and as subscribers. In one of the smaller European countries with a population of 11.3 million, there were 3.3 million newspaper readers and 3.3 million radio listeners. Following prolonged dispute between the press and radio concerning the amount of their subscriptions to the country's news agency, an arbitration committee ruled that the press should pay five-sixths and the radio one-sixth of the agency's basic running costs. The committee also decided that the radio should have one representative on the news agency's board of directors, as against seven from the press.

Photo Services

9. Pictures are often as "hot" or "hotter" in news value than dispatches and hence have great interest for newspaper readers as well as for an agency's revenues. National news agencies might well develop a photo service from the start and exchange it with those of other agencies within their region and abroad. In Western Europe, 16 press photo agencies have since 1951 exchanged their services through the European Press Photo Agencies Union (formerly the European Picture Union) and have now established relations with photo agencies in the Far East. In the United States and Europe, pictures are daily exchanged by telephoto in a matter of minutes. In addition, equipment is now available for the rapid, automatic transmission and blockmaking of pictures for newspapers and news agencies.

Telecommunications and Charges

10. By co-operating with other news agencies in their region, national news agencies would have a much better prospect of obtaining reductions in telecommunication charges and of promoting favourable relations with telecommunication administrations in their respective countries. National agencies require telecommunication facilities, at the lowest possible cost, to assure uninterrupted connexion by day and night with participating press and radio enterprise. In one of the smaller European countries, the national agency pays no more than \$100 per connexion annually for a comprehensive private teleprinter circuit with 100 connexions... and this network is certainly not provided at a loss by the local administration. The same agency also pays \$200 annually per connexion for an automatic telephoto circuit.

11. It may be noted that the European Alliance of News Agencies (a co-operative association of 17 European Agencies) in 1961 decided to explore the possibility of establishing a teleprinter network which would be leased and operated co-operatively by member agencies of the Alliance. At the same time, the International Telecommunication Union expressed the view that such an attempt to make more rational use of existing facilities would be more effective than to seek to secure, through ITU conferences, rate reductions for press dispatches.

Financial and Commercial Services

12. National news agencies might well develop from the start a financial and commercial news service for private subscribers, banks, stock-brokers and commercial and financial enterprises. Such groups are prepared to pay liberally for information of all kinds about the world's markets, if it is made speedily available to them. There is little point in reserving to a news agency's members in press and radio the kind of information which is of special interest to other groups.