

CAPITALISM for Sale

The Toronto Stock Exchange, the Montreal Stock Exchange, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the price of Gold and the Canadian exchange rate — these are the subjects of the Standard News Indices (SNI) as they are found in Canadian network television news. Each is a regular, routine feature of our nightly newscast; each is also a finely crafted promotional pitch designed to move the merchandise, otherwise known as capitalism, into the ideological marketplace.

Presented with the task of unraveling the complexities of the SNI and the seamless world of economic discourse they present to us each evening, one must look beyond the indices as mere suppliers of economic 'information' to their status as constituents for the symbolic sphere governing consumption.

We come to the SNI as social readers, actively participating in their production of signification. And yet, as indicators of the daily fluctuations on the currency, stock, and precious metal commodity markets, the SNI's mode of address speaks only to those people possessing a direct material stake in what the indices have to say. As members of this society we are all affected by what SNI claim to stand in for, but this rationalization hardly justifies their inclusion when, for example, a mere 9.4% of the adult Canadian population is concerned with the daily activities of the composite stock index.

Even that number, provided by the TSE, is misleading because it infers that all investors use the daily indices on a daily basis. Certainly for those investors classified by economists as 'passive', daily stock market information is largely ignored. Furthermore your unaverage average stock owners are probably only interested in their own particular investments and prefer to get their information from their brokers, financial newspapers and specialty newsletters.

Thus in order to analytically determine how ideological themes operate through SNI, let us consider the 'cultural picture of the world' that emerges from the individual indices. When examining the functioning of SNI within ideological discourse, we should dispense with any notion of a 'ruling elite' imposing signifying practices from above with the conscious intent of 'duping the masses'.

In its place, we can conceive of a view of ideology acting through a number of legitimating mechanisms basic to the discursive practices of everyday life. Contained in SNI are the signifying elements of consumption as they are reproduced in the codes structuring the range or horizon of the preferred meaning presented by the indices.

Ideological assumptions and prescriptions are thus amplified by the indices in particular ways to create a specialized system of meaning that works to sell the social order as a commodity.

The language of the SNI connotes the dictates of the marketplace, thereby serving to naturalize the manner in which we apprehend the world of capitalism. The indices signify that the marketplace exists in relation to its own set of unified laws, thus the indices 'explain' (and therefore legitimize) the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectified meanings.

Thus the daily fluctuations of the stock market become part of our everyday experiences. As a source for the objectified facts basic to our common-sense constructions, indices provide ordered knowledge of economic variables, thereby allowing us to internalize what they claim to represent. In this way a world reduced to conceptual categories is made to appear meaningful.

While the existing institutional relations are transitory, historical phenomena, they are represented by the SNI as if they were somehow inevitable or natural, and outside the constraints of time. Because SNI possess neither a history nor a mark of authorship, they are fixated as inert facticity, consequently their ideological elements are camouflaged.

By establishing the dominant inference as a literal visual-transcription of the economic order, the world of human economic practices undergoes a process of commodification which forces us to apprehend that world through the reified terms of the SNI. In fact, their very 'taken-for-grantedness' within the newscast acts as a hindrance to a critical examination of the social relations that determine them.

The information, as it is presented, is decontextualized. It is essentially meaningless for the majority of viewers, yet the very inclusion of SNI effectively serves to blur or gloss-over what are economic class interests by creating a false sense of participation. Thus the discourse presented by the SNI serves as hegemonic function by further mystifying power relations within the larger society, purporting as it does to speak to all when in fact its meaning is not likely to transcend latent class boundaries.

One news producer admitted that "probably only five to ten per cent of the audience is able to analyze the data we provide." A news editor for *The National* insisted that the need for indices was "based on instinct," but he had "no idea who uses them." Question: What are the present indices saying to us about our society and its priorities?

Given that millions of Canadians are unemployed or underemployed, live below the poverty level, and are concerned about acid rain, and are in Third World countries and the danger of nuclear war, why is there no regular provision of statistical information catering to these interests in our nightly news?

According to news editor for *The National*: "In a twenty-two minute broadcast, time is the major restraint. Right now we don't have the room to accommodate any more (indices) than the ones we've got." While the CBC pointed out that there has been in the past a considerable amount of internal debate at the corporation concerning the possible implementation of alternative indices, at present they insist "there's not enough time for social indexes, and anyway, there's no easy electronic way to do them."

There was an unwillingness on the part of the networks to conceptualize the implementation of indices other than those which fall within the established parameters of purely economic concerns. Global TV responded by admitting that since the gold index 'stabilized' in 1984, it has "not been such a great indicator. Platinum would be much better . . . It's highly volatile due to the situation in South Africa." Also suggested were a Real Estate Index, a Crude Oil Index and a Bond Market Index to "tell you where interest rates are going and also the economic strength of Canada."

But what types of indices would be of greater relevance to the interests of the majority of Canadians? This question, first posed by Peter A. Bruck, director of Carleton University's Centre for Communication, Culture and Society (CCCS), has provided the impetus to keep him and a team of researchers busy organizing to change the SNI. They have assigned to themselves the task of translating critical research into opportunities for a critical social practice.

A number of alternative indices, many still in the idea phase, are already being examined. An Under/Unemployment Index has been proposed as a daily update on the crisis of the labour market and its failure to provide adequate work opportunities for millions of Canadians. Similarly, a National Poverty Index could be included as an index showing in composite form the number of Canadians living below the poverty line, set in relation to the number of Canadians living in opulent affluence.

UNRAVELING THE STANDARD NEWS INDICES

Statistically more ambitious is the Inequality Index, a daily indicator of the changing spread in earnings between Canadians who make a living through wages and those who make a living as owners of stocks and capital. Another idea is the Ecology/Environmental Poison Index (regional and national) which would be a daily composite index on the acreage of lasting deforestation and soil erosion in Canada, and the changes in levels of dioxin and other lethal poisons in foods and waters.

Other proposals include a Global Starvation Index (a weekly update on the areas in need of the greatest amount of assistance), and a World Militarization/Development Index (a weekly indicator on the ratio between world military spending and development spending).

The CCCS research unit is currently seeking people who are interested in contributing to the development of alternative news indices (ANI) such as these ones. Plans are underway to hold a national conference. In the meantime, the endorsement of more than one hundred church, labour and popular groups and organizations has been solicited.

The initial response to the project at this level has been enthusiastic. By making the commodification of social relations the target of analysis, the approach allows for the creation of the space required for interested groups to initiate a wide ranging critique of the established media system.

The next step the unit plans to take is the development of a critical media analysis package to facilitate the implementation of media literacy programs for those groups wishing to assist in the production of ANI. Once the proposals are fully worked out and discussed at the grass-roots level, they will be forwarded to the television networks for consideration.

The adoption of the ANI would be a first step towards the networks' news programs dealing with fundamental social inequalities in a serious way.

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