

Covering (Up) the Coup: Journalism at its Worst

By Isabel K. Macdonald

The National Association of the Haitian Media (ANMH) has a longstanding relationship with Freedom Network (RL), a CIDA-funded Canadian NGO whose staff includes CBC and Radio Canada journalists. [See pp.26-33.] According to CIDA, its funding of RL sowed the seeds of “professional journalism,” which is a supposed cornerstone of the Canadian government’s promotion of “democracy” in Haiti. Thanks to CIDA, Canada is pushing the kind of “professional journalism” needed for “democracy” by supporting the Haitian equivalents of Conrad Black.

Media Owners help lead anti-Aristide Movement

The integration of the media elite into powerful private and governmental institutions

“circumscribes the ability of the news media to be analytically detached from the elite persons and organizations they report on.”¹

This elite integration was particularly pronounced in the case of the relationships between powerful news sources from the anti-Aristide movement and the Haitian commercial media. Instead of simply being closely integrated through interlocking directorates and management, powerful news sources and media owners in Haiti were sometimes one and the same person!

Leopold Berlangier:

For example, Leopold Berlangier boasted that he is both a “civil society activist and a media man.”² Berlangier is the director and a main owner of Radio Vision 2000. Berlangier, who is a prominent ANMH member, was also on the G184’s steering committee. The ANMH, he said, provided a space for “cooperation, decision making, [and] enabling the different commercial media outlets to forge agreements.” This allowed ANMH to exercise a “very strong impact on public opinion.”³ [Editor’s Note: A co-owner of Vision 2000, Reginald Boulos, was a leader of the Group of 184 (G184), see pp.50-53. Berlangier was also president of a promi-

nent right-wing think tank called the New Haitian Foundation (NHF), which—like ANMH—was a member of the G184. The NHF and G184 were both funded by CIDA.⁴]

Richard Widmaier:

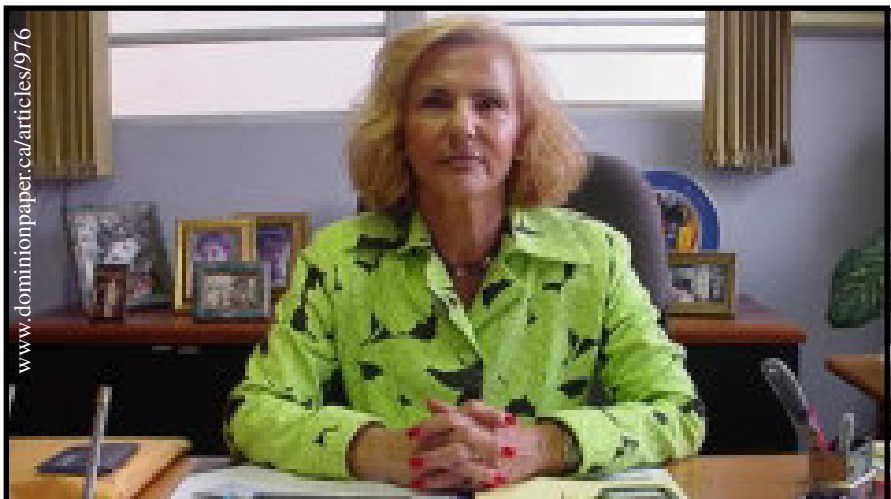
According to ANMH co-founder, Richard Widmaier, this influential media owners’ association was forged as “a common front” to “defend our common interests” from “assaults against the press” by Aristide’s government.⁵ Widmaier, the director of Radio Metropole, said these assaults included an ultimatum from Aristide’s government telling radio companies to pay their long overdue taxes.

Widmaier was also involved in ANMH’s late-2003 decision to bar

Aristide from Haiti’s airwaves. “[W]e decided,” he said, “to put an embargo on all communications coming from the National Palace and from the President.”⁶

Anne-Marie Issa:

ANMH media owners admitted that their support for overthrowing the democratically elected Haitian government guided their journalistic practices. ANMH’s priorities were rationalized with the same rhetoric used by anti-Aristide activists. For instance, the owner and director of Radio Signal FM, Anne-Marie Issa—ANMH’s vice president and a member of both the Steering Committee and the Communications Committee of the G-184—informed me that prior to the 2004 coup, ANMH en-



Media Owner Anne-Marie Issa: Embedded in Haiti’s 2004 Coup Process

By Richard Sanders

Following Aristide’s forced removal from Haiti on February 29, 2004, Issa played a very prominent role in empowering the illegal dictatorship that replaced Aristide’s popularly elected government. Aristide’s kidnapping was quickly followed by an unconstitutional process initiated by the U.S., Canadian and French governments that led the invasion and occupation of Haiti. These foreign powers set in motion a process whereby an unelected regime took the reigns of power in Haiti. Instrumental in this illegal process was the creation

of a handpicked “Council of the Wise.” This Council, which included Anne-Marie Issa, then selected Gerard Latortue as Haiti’s new Prime Minister, and he in turn chose thirteen cabinet ministers who ran the reign of terror that lasted for more than two years.

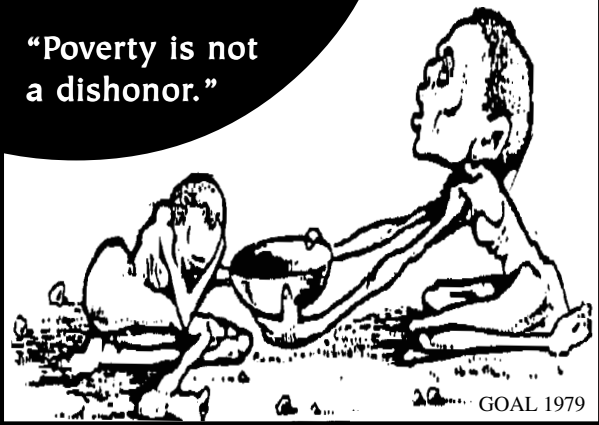
The “Council of the Wise” embedded with ANMH vice-president Issa, remained in place throughout the coup-installed regime’s two year rule.

Another member of the Council was Danielle Magloire, who then worked for CIDA-funded groups in Haiti. (See p.49.) Magloire now works for the Canadian government’s Rights and Democracy. (See pp.44-47.)

Haitian Proverb:

“Malere pa dezonè.”

“Poverty is not a dishonor.”



sure that their journalists attended all anti-Aristide demonstrations and covered them “correctly.” This, she said, was because they thought the “civil society” initiative was “a noble cause. It was our own way as the media to combat the dictatorship.”⁷

Issa herself said that she constantly met with the organizers of anti-Aristide protests.⁸

Haitian Journalists work within the Opposition

Routine coverage of anti-Aristide events by Haitian reporters eventually helped blur the social and cultural lines between journalists and their news sources. Journalists who accompanied G184 media events were housed and fed with the anti-Aristide activists.⁹ As a former Radio Vision 2000 journalist put it, “we were really not apart.”¹⁰ Their ideals and values became one.

Romney Cajuste, an ANMH journalist on the anti-Aristide protest beat, also said the movement against Aristide was a “noble cause.” It was, he said, “the only way to convince the international community that Aristide needed to go.”¹¹ Following the 2004 coup, Romney became a “fixer” helping Canadian journalists make connections with anti-Aristide news sources.

Haiti’s media owners and anti-Aristide protest organizers constantly crossed paths at forums and seminars. The former president of a U.S.-funded, anti-Aristide students’ group, the FEUH [a G-184 member], boasted that “we are now friends” with the journalists, and sometimes with media owners, such as Berlanger.¹²

Canadian Media within CIDA milieu

Canadian journalists in Haiti kept with the observed tendency of newswriters to identify “legitimate” non-official sources through their own personal and professional networks, and through the mediating forces of their own (typically white, middle class) social position and values. These journalists’ social networks included a heavy representation of individuals from the Canadian foreign policy establishment. Canadian officials there-

fore played an important role in helping journalists identify “legitimate” news sources. Guy Fillion, a Radio Canada journalist employed in Haiti by the CIDA-funded Freedom Network (RL), had a high regard for ANMH. This perspective, he explained, came from RL which enjoyed a close partnership with ANMH. Fillion saw ANMH as “pro-Haitian...pro-neutral journalistic people.”¹³

Similarly, Canada’s ambassador to Haiti was one of those consulted by CBC TV reporter Neil Macdonald to determine that National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) director, Pierre Esperance, was Haiti’s most credible human rights source. [See p.37.] He held this view despite the fact that scandal had forced NCHR to change its name. Macdonald also thought Canada’s government was one of the world’s most authoritative sources on conflict resolution. His most trusted sources for background information in Haiti were in Canadian diplomatic circles, especially CIDA: “I know these people and I have a lot of respect for them,” “they are remarkably well informed.”¹⁴

Similarly, when *Montréal Gazette* journalist Susan Montgomery did a story about women’s rights in Haiti, her main source of organizational contacts was her husband, who worked for Equitas—a CIDA-funded organization. His contacts put her in touch with CIDA-funded groups in Haiti, that gave her the impression that Aristide was unpopular. She said, “they wanted Aristide out of there...so you just started to think, well, then, I guess, you know, people want him out of there.”¹⁵

ANMH’s “Lies”

Spread by Foreign News

One deputy bureau chief at a major international newswire agency said their staff reporter in Haiti “relied heavily on Radio Metropole.”

In hindsight, this anonymous newswire agency boss reflected that the ANMH stations—owned as they were by heavy-handed G184 activists—regularly disseminated “lies...[and] propaganda.” It was “nuts” from the perspective of “reporting the truth” for foreign newswires to rely on ANMH reports. “Suddenly it made me wonder if we could trust any of what we’d been reporting.”¹⁶ [See “A Case Study of ANMH Lies,” p.37.]

This news wire’s reports formed a basis for much of the Canadian news coverage in Haiti prior to the 2004 coup. And, when Canadian journalists arrived in Haiti during the coup, they relied directly on ANMH stations.

Three of the four Canadian journalists I talked to said they relied on ANMH radio sources, like Metropole and Signal FM.¹⁷ Even the wire service whose deputy bureau chief saw ANMH as a bastion of “lies,” said they relied extensively on the G184-affiliated stations like Metropole.¹⁸

Techniques of ANMH’s Information Warfare

The opposition to Aristide’s government used a media strategy that included generating positive publicity for themselves and their events, while creating negative coverage of Aristide’s government and his supporters. Their deceptive techniques included:

Boosting anti-Aristide demos

Demonstrations against Aristide in late 2003-early 2004 became a staple for journalists at ANMH radio stations. For example, Boulos’s Vision 2000 sent journalists to every anti-Aristide demonstration, “no matter how small.”¹⁹

Despite ample resources, anti-Aristide organizers often failed to bring out a decent crowd. However, the ANMH media helped paint such failures as successes. Sony Bastien, an ANMH member who co-owned Radio Kiskeya, explained, “we always support” anti-Aristide demonstrations, and

“sometimes we advance fantastical numbers.”²⁰ For instance, he said,

“a group has 10 people but they want you to say 2000 or 300,000, if you say 10....you can make enemies....so it’s better not to talk about [numbers].”²¹

He added though that it was acceptable to allow protest organizers to say how many attended their protests.

An anti-Aristide protest organizer and spokesperson for GRAFNEH, another U.S.-funded students’ group, reported that at a demo in January 2003, “we were 20,” but when calling the radio, “we said we were thousands.” If they had “hundreds in the street,” he said, the media would report “hundreds of thousands.”²²

Paying protesters

Remy Mackensen, a journalist with ANMH’s Radio Galaxie, said his cousin—who worked in a factory owned by G184 leader and ANMH-linked media mogul, Andy Apaid—was paid more than double her salary to attend an anti-Aristide protest.²³

Exaggerating the “rebels”

Evans Paul, spokesperson for the anti-Aristide “Democratic Convergence,” was identified by “rebel” spokesman, Winter Etienne, as a “rebel” financier. Paul described the “rebellion” as a “simulated armed movement” and confided that they could not actually have captured Port-au-Prince in late February 2004. They deliberately exaggerated their threat with international journalists, in order to force Aristide out of power. As Paul said, they relied on “teledyol,” which is Kreyole for a rumour that spreads via gossip.²⁴

Leaders of the armed campaign with whom I spoke—Etienne, Guy Philippe and Jodel Chamblain—emphasized that the rebels were few and did not have many weapons.²⁵ Jean Robert Lalanne, a politician and owner of Radio Maxima, said he accompanied the “rebels” with the aim of “tricking the media.”²⁶ Lalanne said “we gave ...[foreign journalists] the impression that we were stronger than we were.”²⁷ He also proudly admitted contributing



Haitian Proverb:

“Si travay te bon bagay, moun rich la pran-l lontan.”

**“If work were good for you,
the rich would leave none for the poor.”**

weapons, including 13 M1s and six or seven automatics.

Similarly, Sony Bastien, an ANMH member and owner of Radio Kiskeya stated that they had

“no interest in saying what quantity of people were armed...it was part of a strategy of psychological warfare.... [W]e wanted Aristide to leave.”²⁸

Romne Cajuste, a journalist with ANMH stations (Vision 2000 and Metropole), said “sometimes one sensed that” the rebels “were amplifying information.... We permitted ourselves to repeat information uncritically.”²⁹

Special ad rates or free

Michel Soukar, a member of the G184’s Steering and Communications Committees and a journalist at Issa’s Signal FM, referred to G184 protesters as “our brothers” and explained that they received special ad rates, or complete fee waivers, from the ANMH media.³⁰

Excluding Aristide and ignoring his supporters

In late 2003, the ANMH announced it was banning President Aristide from its member stations’ airwaves.³¹ Some, including Vision 2000, stopped diffusing Lavalas events altogether.³²

Haitian media owners typically ignored demonstrations by Aristide’s supporters and instructed reporters to steer clear of them for security reasons.

According to Kevin Pina, an independent journalist and founder of the Haiti Information Project, pro-Aristide rallies in late 2003-early 2004 were typically much larger than G184 events. The largest pro-Aristide demonstration that Pina documented on video—on February 7, 2004—had several hundred thousand participants. Pina said he was the only white journalist present at many pro-Aristide demonstrations. These protests, organized by the poor, could not finance the air-conditioned buses that were provided for journalists attending G184 demonstrations.³³

Canadian journalists reported that they were not even aware of pro-Aristide demonstrations.³⁴ This is an extreme example of the tendency for news—and journalists’ views of reality—to be defined through particular bureaucratic and professional pressures and routines that anti-Aristide news sources were extremely skilled at taking advantage of.

Accessing journalists

As soon as international journalists arrived in Haiti, the G184 rushed to their hotel to begin convincing them that Aristide was a “dictator.” This hotel “feeding frenzy”³⁵ spread word of G184 demonstrations. In contrast, a typical Aristide supporter, living on less than a dollar a day, was unlikely to even get through the door of such a hotel.

Presenting Aristide supporters as violent

When ANMH journalists *did* cover pro-Aristide events, they precluded any meaningful media access for organizers. The goal of journalists at ANMH's Radio Signal FM was to cover the "chimère's demonstrations...to inform the population that there was a risk [of violence].... Aristide's partisans are known to be violent and we described their violence."³⁶

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33. Kevin Pina, interview with author, February 22, 2006.
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35. Montgomery, Op. cit..
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Source: Excerpts, "Covering the Coup: Canadian News Reporting, Journalists and Sources in the 2004 Haiti Crisis," MA Thesis, Communication and Culture, York University, December 2007.

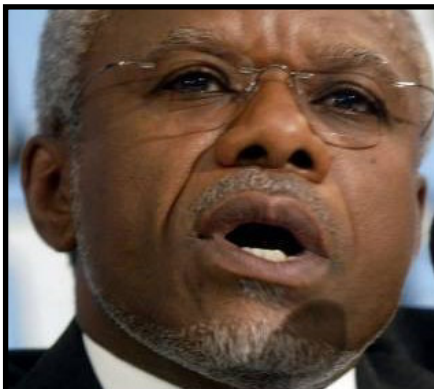
Case Study in ANMH Lies: The St. Marc "Massacre"

By Isabel K. Macdonald

Anti-Aristide news sources attracted the ire of at least one senior Canadian journalist when their claims turned out to flagrantly violate one of journalism's sacred goals—truth. The deputy bureau chief of an international wire service recalled being extremely exasperated when claims, often transmitted uncritically by the National Association of Haitian Media (ANMH) radio stations, turned out to be untrue. He recalled that "something would be reported on the radio and I'd run off to check it, and it would turn out to be a complete lie."¹

One such "complete lie" that was particularly influential in his realization that the ANMH stations were unreliable was a supposed "massacre" on February 10, 2004. This allegation was repeated as fact on several ANMH stations. The National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR)-Haiti—a CIDA-funded organization—claimed that 50 St. Marc residents were killed in a "massacre" instigated by Aristide's Prime Minister Yvon Neptune.

This allegation was used by the



Prime Minister Yvon Neptune was illegally jailed by Haiti's Canadian-backed regime based on bogus accusations made by NCHR, a CIDA-funded group organization.

U.S.- and Canada-backed "interim government" to illegally imprison Neptune for over two years without charge. The NCHR was never able to produce any evidence of a "massacre." The news-wire deputy bureau chief, who was in St. Marc that day, said "it was a confrontation that went bad."² However, it was definitely not a "massacre," said this senior wire services journalist, who reported that there were only three bod-

ies and recalled that "The first few days I chased numerous radio rumours.... I realized I wasn't going to be relying on radio ever again."³

By February 2004, the "rebels" escalated their media strategies in "a campaign of psychological warfare."⁴ They focused the international media's attention on Aristide's alleged abuses. "Rebel" spokesman Winter Etienne, said the "rebellion" was a means of destabilizing the government. They sought to incite Aristide's government to "make a great disaster" so the rebels could claim "it was no longer us who were the bandits—it was Aristide."⁵

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2. Anonymous, Op. cit.
3. Ibid.
4. Winter Etienne, interview with author, February 2006.
5. Ibid.

Source: Excerpts, "Covering the Coup: Canadian News Reporting, Journalists and Sources in the 2004 Haiti Crisis," MA Thesis, Communication and Culture, York University, December 2007.