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Jubilee year 1991: Switzerland as others see it

A not-quite-perfect picture

The 700-year jubilee of the Swiss Confederation was a good opportunity to draw the attention of the foreign press. Something could finally be done about the fact that Switzerland features so rarely in the world's media. The Co-ordination Commission for the

Heidi Willumat

Presence of Switzerland Abroad asked the Swiss National Tourist Office to prepare 64 press releases on all the various facets of Swiss society. These were distributed to the media in 129 countries in March 1991 and were intended as the raw material for forging a deeper understanding of Switzerland. Zurich University has selected for analysis 4,649 articles from about 10,000 appearing throughout the world. The main focal points are the economy, history and politics and the 700-year jubilee.

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On tourism. This only interests countries where people can afford to visit Europe. Thus, 59% of Japanese articles on Switzerland had tourism content. This was followed by North America and our neighbours. Surprisingly the Netherlands topped the list with 71% of all articles touching on tourism. Africa and the Middle East were at the bottom end of the range. Switzerland's tourism industry was almost always judged favourably by the Japanese and North American press, while its close neighbours were more reserved.

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On the economy. The publications of our neighbours, the rest of Europe and North and South America devoted less space to this than those of the rest of the world – in part for competitive reasons. But no one gave Switzerland bad marks on this score. The favourable image consists mainly of high quality, efficiency and good publicity. "Known all over the world" was the most frequent qualification – followed by the slightly more ambiguous "powerful".

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On politics. Switzerland's image seems to be in serious danger here. Foreign journalists find it very difficult to understand Switzerland's complex political structures, let alone to describe them. Added to this were inner tensions (some of them provoked by the 700-year jubilee itself) and foreign policy problems – especially about European integration. The international press echoed the divisions amongst Switzerland's population very well. There seemed to be little confidence in Switzerland's capacity to integrate – although the problem diminishes with distance. Except with Japan, whose visitors to Switzerland had negative impressions about Switzerland's relations with the rest of Europe. Interesting were the sources used. Journalists writing on this delicate subject tended to feature declarations by Swiss people they met rather than to venture their own opinions.

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On the typical Swiss. People who live in such an ideal country were generally described in fairly ideal terms. And this is largely how the Swiss see themselves in comparison with others, although there has been an increase in self-pity recently. It would be interesting to delve more deeply into the whys and wherefores of Switzerland's loss of image abroad. The list of positive Swiss characteristics is interesting: openness to the world comes at the top, followed by hospitality, progressiveness, orderliness, industriousness, peaceableness and reliability. Further down, however, are zest for life, tolerance and eloquence. The image of a Switzerland ready to help and a miserly Switzerland balance out. The dark side of openness to the world is self-satisfaction, but virtually nobody disputes that the Swiss are orderly and industrious.

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On national myths and symbols. In both illustrations and text we meet stereotype descriptions of the beauties of the landscape. There is much sense of the linguistic and cultural variety of the

country, though rather less of federalism. The personality of William Tell is ever-present, as also the ancient cantons as the cradle of the Confederation – and the crossbow as a symbol of quality. In a word, Switzerland is a happy country



William Tell – one of the guiding spirits of "Switzerland the fortunate". Shown here in a printing by Ferdinand Hodler. (Photo: SNTO)

flowing with milk and honey. This cliché probably comes from the fact that the foreign press saw the 700-year jubilee in the past and future tenses – rather than the present. It also reflected the wish of the Swiss National Tourist Office, which organised the press campaign, to show Switzerland's tourism advantages by providing a rich pictorial documentation. ■