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ABSTRACT

Research conducted during the past 20 years reveals that, except for the "New York Times," "Christian Science Monitor," and "Wall Street Journal," United States daily newspapers are not known for outstanding international news coverage; that European, English, Canadian, Latin American, and Asian newspapers use disproportionately larger amounts of international news than their American counterparts; and that the United States is covered much more thoroughly in the press abroad than foreign nations are reported in the United States press. In trying to account for these facts, it may be seen that in the United States international news coverage and usage are: often determined by considerations of international diplomacy, national government and military policies, and historical-cultural heritage; often crisis oriented; often affected by censorship policies and image building activities of other countries; affected by a dwindling corps of adequately trained correspondents abroad and by globally blind editors cemented to their swivel chairs stateside; and guided by an American public not generally noted for being cosmopolitan or well informed on world affairs. (JM)

# International News in United States Media: Myths, Stereotypes and Realities

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# International News in United States Media: Myths, Stereotypes and Realities

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With the continual outpourings of messages warning of, or calling for, a McLuhanesque "global village," it is tempting to assume that the highly-developed United States mass media are providing greater quantities of international news with more in-depth and fairer treatments; that the American public, surrounded by mass media, is becoming critical followers of international affairs. However, this is not the picture that emerges from looking at research conducted during the past twenty years.

The research tells us that United States daily newspapers, despite their much larger news volumes, are not known for outstanding international coverage, the New York Times, Christian Science Monitor and Wall Street Journal being exceptions. Available content analyses have shown that European[1], English[2], Canadian[3], Latin American[4] and Asian[5] newspapers use disproportionately larger amounts of international news than their American counterparts, and that the United States is covered much more thouroughly in the press abroad than those areas are reported in the United States press.[6] Some of the researchers confirmed the seemingly obvious point that the United States is seen as a major news source--as a giver, rather than receiver, of news--because of its Big Power status (many of its actions affecting other world regions),[7] and because of its pervasive, worldwide network of news agencies. Others, Lynch[8] and Alfonso[9] among them, have concluded that newspaper accounts of foreign affairs are colored by philosophic, moral and political perspectives prevailing in the nations where

the paper is published, and still other researchers have shown that foreign news in United States newspapers often deals with crises, the bizarre or outlandish or the East-West struggle.[10]

In this paper, I would like to consider five factors which might account for the state of foreign news coverage in the United States mass media. Asian examples will be used to support the points made.

1. International news coverage and useage are often determined by considerations of international diplomacy, national government and military policies and historical-cultural heritage.

There are research studies that support this statement. Davison, after interviewing a number of foreign correspondents, implied that international diplomacy is a major determinant of what foreign news is reported. Correspondents told Davison that diplomats often use them either to change a nation's image or to communicate with another country.[11] In another study, Lynch and Effendi showed that New York Times editorial treatment of India increased favorably as United States relations with India were improved.[12] An impressionistic analysis of United States media coverage of the People's Republic of China before and after Nixon's visit to that country in the early 1970s would reveal similar findings. Certainly there was an aboutface in US media coverage of China after the visit; e.g., there were fewer stories of the "yellow peril" type, and many newspapers for the first time, referred to the nation as the People's Republic of China, instead of Communist China, Red China or the Commies.

Pointing out that the press is an instrument for the expression and promotion of national perspectives in international relations, Alfonso concluded that the attitudes of US dailies when reporting Philippine events

reflected a desire similar to that of the American governmental, military and industrial sectors--to preserve the status quo in the Philippines. In fact, according to Alfonso, Philippine news seldom appeared in United States newspapers until riots rocked Manila in 1970--disturbances so serious they could not go unreported.[13] In an analysis of the coverage of the Tonkin Gulf Incident in Time, Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report, another researcher found that news stories of this important event were always written to protect United States interests.[14]

Certainly there has been abundant evidence in recent years to indicate that the United States military, Central Intelligence Agency[15] and other organizations have determined how American wartime activity was reported. In his excellent book, The First Casualty, Phillip Knightley, stating that news coverage of war is generally based on the national orientations of the correspondents, showed that Dunkirk was reported by Western correspondents as a victory, not withdrawal; that Chiang Kai-shek's World War II regime was portrayed as the opposite of the massively corrupt, brutal or inefficient government that it was, and that American reporters, to prove their patriotism in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, "got on side and went along with the United States military's view of how the war should be reported."[16] Knightley said that in the struggle to defeat Japan, the main purpose of news was "to render the greatest possible aid to the American war effort. Truth and objectivity would have to yield to a wholehearted patriotic participation in the conflict."[17] As a result, war correspondents traditionally have assumed added roles of propagandist, fighting soldier, and in some cases, intelligence agent; in the process, they have often dehumanized the enemy in their stories, creating racial stereotypes that have endured, romanticized and sterilized war, omitting the misery, atrocities and other realities, and become themselves so emotionally involved that they could

see the war only through the eyes of the military. The result has been that myth has triumphed over reality in most war correspondence, Knightley said. Even in the coverage of television's first war, Vietnam, it took many years--and lives--before reality got an edge over myth.[18]

Finally, a nation's historical and cultural inheritance often decides the stress given foreign news in its press. This can be seen in many newly-emergent countries which continue to report lavishly on their former colonialists. In the United States, with its Anglo Saxon heritage, mass media still devote a major portion of their foreign news budget to Western Europe; in fact, the largest corps of United States foreign correspondents is stationed in England and France.[19]

2. International news coverage and useage by the United States mass media are often crisis-oriented.

This should not come as a surprise; Western reporting historically has played up the violent, disastrous, in short, bad news. The complaint, however, comes from developing nations which, having guided their own mass media toward reporting positive governmental goals, do not appreciate Western media harping only on their bad news. The complaint has some justification as pointed out by Besa and Woollacott. Besa, in a study of the coverage of post-martial law Philippines in three international magazines, showed that whereas the British and Hong Kong periodicals concentrated on New Society developmental programs, especially those of an economic nature, the United States magazine gave the most play to the Muslim conflict in Mindanao.[20] Woollacott reported that "in the Philippines, few (Western) reporters visit model land reform projects in Luzon, but hundreds have gone down to Mindanao to cover the war between Muslim secessionists and the Government army.... With China, there is concentration on the succession question and the possibility of serious conflict after Mao's death."[21] As a Filipino information

official told Woollacott, "It is as if Western reporters feel their job in any developing society is to identify that society's weakest points and biggest problems and then make them worse by exaggeration and unremitting publicity."[22] The same complaints have been voiced by other Asian governments, especially those, more recently, of Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh and India.

Perhaps there is some truth in Woollacott's assessment that the crisis reporting results from the "West's deep disillusion with nearly all post-colonial societies, as well as the Western assumption that the West is still the ultimate arbiter of the rest of the world."[23] It is more likely, however, that the crisis reporting relates more to Western news values, developed arbitrarily decades ago by editors who believed they knew what the public wanted. It is also probable that because of limited personnel, resources and time, the correspondent finds it more convenient to report crises than to carry out time-consuming in-depth analyses of national development programs. These should not be interpreted as apologies for reporting bad news in another man's country, but rather as the reality of foreign correspondence.

3. International news coverage and useage by the United States mass media are often affected by censorship policies and image-building activities of other countries.

Today, as never before, numerous countries--especially those of the Third World--are able to control the national images they wish to portray to the rest of the world. You ask: Why should this prove worrisome to nations of the West which have engineered their own image-building for generations? Because, in the present situation, Western societies and their mass media have become victims of a type of international extortion,

being pressured economically and politically to enhance images and push policies of other nations in the Western press. In many nations, censorship laws applicable to foreign correspondents have been recently strengthened, so that when the foreign press is considered to be too critical, or is thought to have outlived its usefulness as a promoter of those nations' policies, it is thrown out. Within the past year in Asia, whole corps of foreign pressmen were expelled from Vietnam, Khmer Republic, Laos, Bangladesh and India, leaving only six nations in Asia--Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Pakistan--where foreign newsmen can enter freely and operate without serious hindrance.[24] A result has been that whereas heretofore, there were China watchers stationed in Hong Kong, today there are, additionally, Indochina watchers in Bangkok[25] and India and Bangladesh watchers in Karachi, a less than ideal manner in which to conduct foreign correspondence work.

In other efforts to obtain favorable coverage in the Western press, governments have resorted to threats, intimidations or the staging of extravagant pseudo-happenings. For example, Idi Amin had threatened to expell all British residents from Uganda because the British Broadcasting Corporation had aired a show critical of his administration; the Chinese had threatened to cancel an $800,000 exhibit of French technical goods in Peking because of official reaction to the 1973 French film, "The Chinese in Paris."[26] In 1974, the New York Times was warned by the Chinese that if it continued to carry Taiwan advertisements, it could forget about having a bureau in Peking. The Times refused to be intimidated, but the Japanese press, receiving similar pressures, relented. Arab nations have taken to blacklisting Western firms that have sponsored television shows favorable to Israel, and countries such as North Korea and North Vietnam have offered huge sums of money to foreign newsmen for their services.[27]

Other governments have flown in Western newsmen--and academicians and politicians, I might add-- and wined and dined them in the hopes of obtaining a favorable foreign press. Finally, at least four developing nations--Jamaica, Zaire, Malaysia and the Philippines-- have made themselves newsworthy in the past two years by staging expensive pseudo-happenings such as the Ali boxing matches or Miss Universe pageant. The astronomical purses for the "gaudy Third World road show"[28] of Ali were guaranteed by the host governments; the money was probably well spent, judging from the voluminous number of stories filed by Western sports and travel reporters. The moral: If a nation wants to be covered thoroughly in the Western press, it should stage a pseudo-happening.

4. International news coverage and useage in United States mass media are affected by a dwindling corps of adequately-trained correspondents abroad, and by globally-blind editors cemented to their swivel chairs stateside.

Surveys conducted by Wilhelm and Kliesch since 1963 revealed that the number of United States foreign correspondents climbed to a peak in 1969, and has been dropping significantly ever since. In 1975, the number of fulltime correspondents abroad was 676, down 28 per cent from the 929 in 1969. They were concentrated in 54 nations, down from 64 in 1972. Europe continued to dominate the United States overseas coverage with 51 per cent of all American correspondents headquartered there. As indicated earlier, the largest concentrations were in England (101) and France (78), followed by Japan and Hong Kong. Asia was second to Europe in 1975 , with 23 per cent, or 160 United States correspondents. Two of every three US correspondents in Asia were in Southeast Asia, overwhelmingly in Hong Kong; one third in East Asia, mainly in Japan.[29] Grimes, seeking a rationale for the dwindling United States foreign press corps,

has said that the economic crunch facing many mass media organizations has made it less possible to send reporters abroad.[30]

As for the calibre of the US overseas press corps, perhaps we should quote from some of the correspondents themselves. Salisbury, for example, had called for greater sophistication in reporting, more thorough training of correspondents and development of larger staffs of analysts to cover China.[31] Grimes, on the other hand, has talked about the superficialness of accounts of foreign correspondents, dipping in and out of a nation, not staying much longer than is necessary to find out the name of the governmental leader. He said, "it can take years of intimate study--and a working knowledge of at least the principal local language--to understand what a country and its people are really like."[32] Of course, because of their diminishing numbers, and because their editors still expect them to dash off to cover the nearest crises, United States foreign correspondents find it virtually impossible to live up to expectations such as those set by Grimes. As one television correspondent wrote, "...to a modern TV correspondent, a base city is little more than a firehouse--a place from which to dash when crises flare."[33]

Finally, American editors who give the marching orders to the correspondents, have been key decision makers as to what foreign news is covered and used. Writing in the mid 1960s, Kalb said that American editors, enamored of World War II European datelines, have rarely given China a second thought, and that "reporters develop an uncanny sensitivity to what their editors think is news, and they have generally been ignoring China."[34] Levin, also discussing American editors, complained that, although modern communications systems have sped up transmission of news copy from abroad, they have also kept correspondents more closely tied to their home offices, and of course, their editors. He said that today "assignments have to

be approved in New York before a reporter goes after them. He is in touch with the network almost every day."[35] At times, the home office of a correspondent does not have sufficient information to make the decisions it does. When, in the mid 1960s, the editors failed to use Hong Kong as a listening post on the then-closed China, Kalb wrote:

> Unfortunately, editors back in New York have thus far failed to realize Hong Kong is a gold mine of information about China, and is easily the best substitute for on-the-spot reporting. They consider Hong Kong a convenient place for changing underwear between planes for Saigon, Jakarta or Vientiane, or for leaving wives and children while the reporters themselves go racing around the jungles of Kuching or the Plaine des Jarres.[36]

5. International news coverage and usage by United States mass media are guided by an American public not generally noted for being cosmopolitan or well informed on world affairs.

Audience analyses carried out during the past decade have revealed that the American public, although inundated with mass media, is not very knowledgeable about international affairs. For example, in a study conducted in the early 1960s, Patchen found that only 10 per cent of the sample could answer correctly four internationally-oriented questions, two of which were: "Have you happened to hear anything about fighting in Vietnam?" and "Do you happen to know what kind of government most of China has right now?"[37] Adams et al, in a nationwide survey in 1969, found that 55 per cent of the sample heard about a minor international event for the first time from the survey interviewers.[38] Any academician who has given current events tests is aware of the dismal state of international affairs knowledge among students. In quizzes to my own upperclass reporting classes in the 1960s, I regularly received answers such as: Chow Mein is the lead-

er of North Vietnam; Mao Tse-tung is a "Pinesnake" in Vietnam with an airbase on it; Willy Brandt is a baseball player, etc.[39]

Other researchers, in an attempt to understand flaws of international news, have intimated that there is much evidence to show a strong relationship between the level of education and knowledge of world affairs.[40]

Why is the American public so ill-informed about international matters? A number of researchers and writers have come up with answers; Reisman suggests several:

> The major reason for this phenomenon is the fact that mass media predominantly reach the relative minority of the public who are already well-informed. The rest of the population does not have the informational background or interest to interpret any international action short of war....Tremendous obstacles face those interested in raising public information levels about world affairs. Not only do less-educated people rarely come in contact with any printed materials, even those pictorial magazines for people "who can't read", but there is good evidence that they tend to switch dials more often when an information program does occur on television or radio.... Face-to-face communication about news events reaches its apex in 'sharing' among those who are already at least partially informed.[41]

Davison believes the mass media are to blame for "most daily newspapers make little effort to interpret foreign relations in a manner that can be understood by a mass audience."[42]

Possibly another reason relates to the fact that American mass media, mainly self-supporting for content, have not felt the need to use cultural and news fare of other nations. This was brought to light by a 1974 UNESCO publication on television programming; the United States, which exports 150,000 hours of TV programs annually (mostly to Asia and South America),

imports only one to two per cent of its television shows.[43]

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In summary, perhaps one can glean what the future holds for international news coverage in American mass media from this quote by Woollacott:

> The great era of the Anglo-American foreign correspondent, a person as privileged in some ways as a diplomat, travelling around combining the role of adventurer, entertainer, reporter, and moralist, is coming to an end. But it is to be hoped that the rising tide of censorship and other restrictions will in time recede for inspite of all the excesses and stupidities of the Western press in Asia and Africa, there is nothing else to take its place.[44]

Footnotes

1 The Flow of News, Zurich: International Press Institute, 1953, p. 123.

2 James Hart, "Foreign News in U.S. and English Daily Newspapers: A Comparison," Journalism Quarterly, 43(1966), pp. 443-449.

3 Hart, "The Flow of News Between the United States and Canada," Journalism Quarterly, 40(1963), pp. 70-74.

4 James W. Markham, "Foreign News in the United States and South American Press," Public Opinion Quarterly, 25(1961), pp. 249-262.

5 See: John Hohenberg, Between Two Worlds: Policy, Press, and Public Opinion in Asian-American Relations, New York: Praeger, 1967, p. 485; George Tsai, "A Comparative Study of the Vernacular and the English Language Press in Taiwan," masters thesis, University of Missouri, 1969; Richard A. Garver, "Content of Korean Language Daily Newspaper," Gazette, 8(1962), pp. 307-309.

6 Nabil Dajani and John Donohue, "Foreign News in the Arab Press: A Content Analysis of Six Arab Dailies," Gazette, 19(1973), pp. 155-170; Ibrahim Abu Lughod, "International News in the Arabic Press: A Comparative Content Analysis," Public Opinion Quarterly, 26(1962), pp. 600-611; Markham, op. cit.; Hart, "The Flow of News...," op. cit.; Hart, "Foreign News in...," op. cit.

7 For example, Markham, op. cit., and Hohenberg, op. cit.

8 Mervin D. Lynch and Atiya Effendi, "Editorial Treatment of India in the New York Times," Journalism Quarterly, 41(1964), pp. 430-432.

9 Herminia Alfonso, "Reporting the Philippines in the American Press: National Perspectives in International News," masters thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1971.

10 The Flow of News, op. cit.

11 W. Phillips Davison, "Diplomatic Reporting: Rules of the Game," Journal

of Communication, Autumn 1975, pp. 138-146.

12 Lynch and Effendi, op. cit.

13 Alfonso, op. cit.

14 Charles Armstrong, "A Content Categorization and Thematic Analysis of Newsmagazine Coverage of the Tonkin Gulf Incident," masters thesis, University of Tennessee, 1973.

15 See especially, Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

16 Phillip Knightley, The First Casualty, From Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, p. 355.

17 Ibid, p. 274.

18 See, Bill Greeley, "How Much Did TV News Learn from the War in Indochina? Wrapups Suggest: Too Little," Variety, September 3, 1975, p. 33; "TV's 'First War,'" Journal of Communication, Autumn 1975, pp. 172-199.

19 Ralph Kliesch in Overseas Press Club Directory 1975.

20 Amelita Besa, "Coverage of Martial Law in the Philippines in Three International News Magazines: A Content Analysis," masters seminar paper, Temple University, 1975.

21 Martin Woollacott, "In Search of Bad News," New Straits Times (Kuala Lumpur), September 2, 1975, p. 10.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 "Bangkok: US Listening Post," Parade Magazine, September 28, 1975, p. 29.

26 Barry Rubin, "International Censorship," Columbia Journalism Review, September-October 1975, pp. 55-58.

27 Ibid.

28 Time, September 29, 1975, p. 67.

29 Kliesch, op. cit. See also, John Wilhelm, "The Re-appearing Foreign Correspondent: A World Survey," Journalism Quarterly, Spring 1963, pp. 147-168; Wilhelm, "The World Press Corps Dwindles: A Fifth World Survey of Foreign Correspondents," Paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism convention, Carbondale, Illinois, August 22, 1972; Kliesch, "The Press Corps Abroad Revisited: A Fourth World Survey of Foreign Correspondents," Paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism convention, Berkeley, California, August 27, 1969.

30 Paul Grimes, "Reporting from Abroad," Honolulu: East-West Center, July 1972, p. 4.

31 Harrison Salisbury, "Covering the Communists," Dateline 1965, p. 22.

32 Grimes, op. cit., p. 2.

33 Eric Levin, "It Takes More Than a Trenchcoat," TV Guide, October 11, 1975, p. 10.

34 Marvin Kalb, "China: The Greatest Story Never Told," Dateline 1965, p. 24.

35 Levin, op. cit.

36 Kalb, op. cit., p. 26.

37 M. Patchen, The American Public's View of U.S. Policy Toward China, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1964.

38 John B. Adams, James J. Mullen and Harold M. Wilson, "Diffusion of a 'Minor' Foreign Affairs News Event," Journalism Quarterly, Autumn 1969, pp. 545-551; see also, John P. Robinson, Public Information About World Affairs, Ann Arbor: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1967.

39 John A. Lent, "Ill-Informed Students," Editor & Publisher, May 14, 1966, p. 7.

40 See, John T. McNelly, Ramona Rush and Michael Bishop, "Cosmopolitan Media Usage in the Diffusion of International Affairs News," Journalism Quarterly, Summer 1968, pp. 329-332; Alfred O. Hero, Mass Media and World Affairs, volume 4, Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1959.

41 John P. Robinson, "World Affairs Information and Mass Media Exposure," Journalism Quarterly, Spring 1967, pp. 23,30.

42 Davison, op. cit., p. 146.

43 Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis, "Television Traffic--A One-Way Street?" Reports and Papers on Mass Communication No. 70, Paris: UNESCO, 1974, pp. 12, 19, 30.

44 Woollacott, op. cit.