

## Contributors

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# The News Media and One World

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*Abstract* There is a serious question whether people in the United States get adequate news to permit them to make intelligent decisions on international issues. In the press of the Northwest in the years following the Vietnam War there was probably less foreign news available than in the isolationist thirties. Since the end of 1979 the Iranian hostage issue and Afghanistan have dominated the national news, but there still is a dearth of world news not involving drama and confrontation. The institution of a free press is above challenge, but our media could be improved by constructive criticisms and pressures. Other measures to improve the situation include symposiums and commentary on world issues suitable for the local media.

There is no question that the world has grown more interdependent since World War II. Civilization could be destroyed in a few hours in a major nuclear war. The oceans and the air are threatened by industrial wastes unless they can be controlled through world cooperation. Industrial countries are dependent on a small group of developing countries for energy. Farmers in the United States are drastically affected by changes in world agricultural prices, while the poor in developing countries may starve if food prices are too high. News events relating to this interdependence can be brought instantaneously to the living rooms of Americans. Yet serious questions remain whether the media's coverage of news reflects this growing interdependence, and whether many people in democracies, such as the United States, have adequate news to

permit them to make intelligent decisions on international issues that affect their lives and the lives of others.

Particularly in the years following the Vietnam War American news media have turned toward domestic rather than foreign news.<sup>1</sup> During these years citizens of the United States probably had less foreign news available in newspapers than they did in the isolationist thirties, and foreign news received about half as much front page attention as it did in the thirties. There is a question whether TV news compensated for this because of its limitations, which are recognized by its own reporters. The media are geared for reporting drama and crises. At the end of 1979, when Iranian radicals seized American Embassy hostages and Russia resumed the Cold War with the invasion of Afghanistan, foreign news on these events suddenly increased and dominated the front pages and TV news programs. International politics was hardly mentioned in the 1976 and 1978 elections, but Cold War issues promise to dominate the political campaign of 1980.

Many writers in recent years have addressed the important issue of news being choked off at its source. "There are now fewer than 30 countries where the press functions without major restrictions."<sup>2</sup> The other question of whether news media are devoting enough attention to important world issues, including those not involving confrontations, may be more important. This study concentrates on this latter issue by examining the volume of foreign news coverage in the U.S. media and the space and editorial limitations of different media in covering world affairs.

### Press Coverage of Foreign Affairs

The press is the most influential medium of policy makers. Officials pride themselves at staff meetings on having read the latest news article on their special subjects. Much of the State Department's political reporting from abroad incorporates news reports and reflects checking out of news stories. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* devote 30 to 40 percent of their first sections to foreign news, and these newspapers are read by high officials every day. In addition, the policy makers have access to the Associated Press, United Press, Reuters, and the U.S. Government FBIS news tickers with detailed reports on developments in most countries of the world. Many reporters cover the

White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, and Congress. In addition, TV teams and radio announcers report on interviews with leading officials. These reports are read, clipped, transcribed, and summarized for key policy makers in the government.

For the general public it is debatable whether the press or TV is the most important news medium, but all agree newspapers are still a major source of news. The Advertising Research Foundation after a careful study reported some years ago that on the average weekday 77 percent of U.S. adults read a daily paper, and that on the average these readers spent 34 minutes per weekday with each paper they read.<sup>3</sup> Most readers however, after the Vietnam War, find very little on international news.

Sampling the foreign news content of the press reveals that a few major newspapers on the East Coast carry much more foreign news than the rest of the American press. For example, two of the most prestigious and influential East Coast newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* carry about 30 to 40 percent foreign news in their first sections of 16 to 30 pages.<sup>4</sup> Foreign news as a percentage of total news or nonadvertising material in all sections of U.S. newspapers averages only 3 percent.<sup>5</sup> (This figure does not include news of international importance originating in the United States involving foreign affairs such as news on military strength and speeches about foreign policy.) Papers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Portland Oregonian* are above average in foreign news coverage while certain small dailies have virtually no foreign news.

What is surprising is that a few studies indicate that during the isolationist 1930s there was about the same proportion of foreign news coverage in the U.S. press that there was in the years following the Vietnam War, but much more emphasis on foreign news. As might be expected the high points of foreign news coverage were during World War I and World War II. A detailed study of the percentage of front page news of the *New York Times* indicates that about 37 percent of the front page was devoted to foreign news during World War I and 52 percent during World War II. However, during the 1930-35 era about 29 percent of the *Times* front page was devoted to foreign affairs, while in 1970 the percentage dropped to 23 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Dixie Ehrenreich made a detailed study of the news content of five leading Northwest newspapers in the period 1935-1939 and concluded that:

Foreign news and diplomatic maneuvers got headlines repeatedly. Readers of this news were neither innocent dupes nor victims of Roosevelt's duplicity because they were remarkably well informed by their editors. . . .

The 1930's probably were the most tumultuous decade to date in the 20th Century. The newspapers related the tumult with no effort to moderate, homogenize, or soft-pedal. They tell of the brutality toward the Jews, of the Chinese-Americans picketing ships bound for Japan, laugh at Mussolini's proclamation that Italians are Aryans, tremble with Austria, Czechoslovakia and China.

She notes in her conclusions that even the isolationist Hearst newspapers consistently opened editorial and feature pages to columnists and officials with differing points of view.<sup>7</sup>

A follow-up of the Ehrenreich study was made by taking a random sample of about 150 editions of the five major Northwest news dailies that she analyzed. The front pages of these newspapers of the 1935-1939 period carried about twice as much foreign news on their front pages as they did in the 1975-1977 period. For the 87 editions analyzed as a whole there was about 8 or 9 percent foreign news compared to 91 to 92 percent domestic news and features in both periods, but since the print was smaller, the actual number of words devoted to foreign developments in the 1930s was 10 to 50 percent greater.

As indicated above, the Northwest press of the late 1930s featured stories of that violent era which were harbingers of World War II. In the last few years of this decade the press has featured stories on violence in the Middle East, terrorist action, and more moderate news about developments in China. Since the American press tends to emphasize stories about Western Europe,<sup>8</sup> one reason for less emphasis in the Northwest press on foreign news today than there was in the 1930s may be that there was less international violence to report in Europe.

On the other hand, although international organizations are much more active today, international cooperation usually takes place in less dramatic fashion and seldom makes the front pages or even the back pages of most of the Northwest press. Seldom if ever are stories featured on international monetary reform, increasing aid to development by the World Bank and other institutions, or the low-key peacemaking efforts of UN Secretary General Waldheim in Cyprus. A prominent world leader seeking press attention may generate major media coverage for his peacekeeping efforts, as did President Sadat at the end of 1977 and

Secretary Kissinger after the 1974 Mideast War, but such efforts are rare, and most international officials get virtually no media attention.

One reason for a major gap in reporting of constructive news about the work of international organizations, is that reporters naturally focus on the drama, the conflicts, and the bad news of international affairs. Wars take over the front pages.<sup>9</sup> International moves to lessen tensions receive virtually no attention unless they are carried out in a tense crisis situation. Hundreds of international meetings to iron out differences on trade, monetary issues, aid problems, and other problems of an interdependent world get no coverage in the U.S. news media. Even the UN sessions get very little attention in the press outside minimum coverage in the *New York Times*. Outside New York City the big stories on the UN in recent years were the sharp attacks by Ambassador Moynihan on the United Nations during the year he was ambassador to the UN and occasional statements of Ambassador Young that were at variance with State Department positions. One official ruefully told me in the summer of 1977 that Ambassador Young was getting more publicity for UN affairs than any previous ambassador, but for the wrong reasons. His eventual resignation was brought about directly and indirectly by critical media reports.

International conflict and controversy, but not cooperation, therefore get attention in the media and tend to present an image of world turmoil rather than interdependence and cooperation. When the world enters a period of relative peace, as it did in 1977, the media, particularly the smaller newspapers, tend to concentrate on national and local affairs and ignore important and less dramatic developments. Even in the Washington, D.C. press there is relatively little media attention to the good news of international meetings noted above. Outside New York and Washington, D.C., there is very little reporting of foreign news, good or bad, unless it is dramatically bad such as a war.

Aside from the tendency noted above not to report good news, what are other possible reasons for the press's lack of attention to foreign news? The reasons are not physical. The international news services prepare a flood of material every day on world developments and transmit them to newspapers throughout the United States. Some of the larger papers have access to full coverage by several news services. All but the smallest village press subscribe to at least part of Associated Press or United Press ticker material. Even a large city newspaper,

however, will use probably less than 10 percent of the foreign news material received. In modern presses of even small newspapers, the news is transmitted on tapes that can be inserted directly into the printing system without retyping. Moreover, the best columnists on foreign affairs are available for a few dollars for the small circulation newspapers.

When Northwest editors are questioned on the lack of foreign news in their paper, the answers are predictable. They will explain that their primary function is not to educate the public, but that they are engaged in a competitive business enterprise that depends on readers and subscribers for its existence. They must, therefore, provide people with news that interests them and that they want to read. They will admit that their aim is also to provide the public with significant news, but they assert that their readers put "Dear Abby," the comics, and local news at the top of their reading priorities, and that international news is near the bottom of the list. The few editors I have challenged on this have not been able to document their case. One editor provided me with a survey of readers of his newspaper that in fact showed that regular readership of local, national, international, and regional news was well ahead of "Dear Abby" and the comics. This newspaper carried one of the smallest amounts of international news among those examined.

In the last analysis the press carries what editors think is news, and the above defense of their decisions leaves a number of questions unanswered. Why is it that the highly successful *New York Times* and *Washington Post* carry as much as ten times as high a proportion of foreign news as city newspapers west of the Appalachians or on the West Coast? Why did newspapers in the isolationist 1930s keep the public better informed on international developments than they do in the 1970s? Where are the data that prove that the public is not interested in important developments in foreign affairs? Why do the successful national weekly newsmagazines and the national TV news programs carry a much higher proportion of foreign news than the average newspaper?

Mr. Gloede in a recent article points out that the Knight Ridder group is expanding its foreign news bureaus from one in Toronto by adding bureaus in London, Peking, Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Mexico. The Vice President of Knight Ridder explained that they are doing it because "foreign news is so obviously crucial to our readers—not in some esoteric academic way—it really is important to

the way their lives go on in the country." The *Chicago Tribune* recently has expanded from three foreign bureaus to six, plus roving reporters. *Tribune* foreign desk editor Michael McQuire stated, "I don't think ever before in American history has international news crashed deeper into the American home—and into the American pocketbook." He adds that we have to rely more on the rest of the world, and a lot of Americans are wondering what is happening out there.<sup>10</sup>

It may be that other newspaper editors are overlooking stories of importance and interest to the public. The press is sensitive to criticism and the above should not be interpreted as a challenge to the institution of a free press. However, just as press criticism changes public policy, perhaps criticism of the press can change its policies.

### Do TV and the News Weeklies Fill the Gap?

In the past twenty years TV has assumed the role of providing most of the news for the American public. About two-thirds of those polled state that they get most of their news from TV compared to about 50 percent from newspapers, 20 percent from the radio, and 5 percent from news-magazines. Moreover, most people give higher credibility to TV.<sup>11</sup> The TV networks have claimed an audience of 50 million for their newscasts, compared to 62 million who subscribe to a newspaper.<sup>12</sup> Both TV and the press are extremely important and probably reinforce each other. People who watch TV news tend to spend more time reading newspapers than the people who don't watch TV news.<sup>13</sup>

In the average nightly newscast the general public is exposed to about 6 minutes of foreign news, which includes about the same number of words as one to two columns of a newspaper. This is less foreign news than the small amount presented by the average newspapers. The TV with its excitement and pictures, however, can have a greater impact.

TV news broadcasting has expanded rapidly with the scientific and electronic revolution which now permits pictures from overseas to make the evening news on the same day. The question is whether TV news reflects the interdependence of the world and what slant it gives to international news. The TV newscasts need interesting pictures which limits their coverage. Images left by Carter's January 1978 trip abroad are only superficial—gaffes by the translator in Poland, a servant swatting flies for Carter in New Delhi, new wealth in Saudi Arabia, a

hurried visit to President Sadat in Egypt, and a questionable visit to the Socialist opposition of Giscard d'Estaing in Paris. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and the news weeklies were able to give a much more satisfactory coverage and analysis of the many issues involved. However, on the dramatic trip of Sadat to Jerusalem in December 1977 and the media's subsequent interviews with President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin, the TV clearly comes out the winner.

Normally, the strict time limitations of the TV newscasts do not permit in-depth coverage of important news developments such as Sadat's peace initiatives. The few minutes each evening can not begin to analyze the backgrounds of conflict and issues among nations. TV news broadcasters compete with the entertainment programs, and they would prefer the drama of war in Lebanon or a plane crash in Southeast Asia to stories without pictures, or important negotiations without drama. Debate continues about the way TV covered the Vietnam War and whether it had a major influence on the American people and Congress and in forcing a withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Some of the top government officials are quite bitter about its role and the canceling of aid programs toward the end of the Vietnam tragedy.

The MacNeil/Lehrer half hour analyses of foreign affairs issues on public television and the documentaries, interviews, and special programs have made in-depth analyses of international issues to help make up for the superficiality of the nightly newscasts. The audience is much smaller for in-depth programs, but interviews with presidents, prime ministers, and key officials give the American public an amazing opportunity to develop a first-hand understanding of different points of view. Nevertheless, viewers who want to really analyze issues are often frustrated by having no record of such broadcasts other than a faulty memory. Moreover, it is often difficult to find out in advance who is to be interviewed on such programs.

The news weeklies appear to be making an effort to fill the gap left by most of the press and to meet the competition of TV by presenting more pictures and more interviews. Moreover, they devote about 40 percent of their space to foreign developments. The total circulation of the three major ones is about 9 million, a small fraction of the circulation of the dailies, but the news-weekly foreign news coverage is more prominently featured and easier to read.

The news weeklies, because of limited space, are much more selective

than the newspapers, and with their slick style tend to have more of an editorial slant. Thus they are more vulnerable to criticism on this score than the press. James McCartney, for example, characterized the year 1976 as the campaign year in which "junk news" came into its own. He cites Carter's *Playboy* interview where Carter said: "The traveling press have zero interest in any issue unless it's a matter of [my] making a mistake. What they're looking for is a forty-seven-second argument between me and another candidate or something like that. There's nobody in the back of this plane would ask an issue question unless he thought he could trick me into some crazy statement."

The only satisfactory coverage I was able to find on issues and particularly foreign issues during the campaign was from the campaign literature and from the TV debates. The debates were almost universally panned by the media, but it may be significant that they attracted large audiences. On Carter's 1978 trip to India he was heard to remark that the fly-swarming incident would probably be about the only India shot to make it on that evening's TV, and he was right.

Despite these limitations of TV as a news medium, it may swing the balance in making the American public more informed on international events than they were in the 1930s. Nevertheless, TV is much more susceptible to distortion because of a temptation to emphasize drama, confrontation, and conflict. The news programs often leave out the unexciting, undramatic good news that occurs when policy makers of many nations sit down to debate and reach agreement on complicated issues. Citizens of the United States see mostly images of international conflict and violence rather than interdependence and cooperation.

This study is not designed to present answers to the questions raised about the volume and distortion of foreign news, if there are answers. Perhaps no significant change in coverage and presentation is feasible. Nevertheless, those concerned about international cooperation should be aware of the problems. Particularly in a democracy, distortions of foreign news can have far-reaching effects. Foreign policy issues are often determined by political campaigns and pressures, and much of the general public and many intellectuals may have an inadequate or a distorted data base for judgment of these issues. For example, whether or not a new SALT agreement is approved depends on Congressional and public opinion about the Soviet threat. Perhaps the lack of an international data base on such issues in the Northwest explains why the

same electorate can send senators such as Senator Frank Church and Senator James McClure to Congress even though they differ about 180 degrees on foreign issues.

**Conclusions**

Only a small part of the press gives adequate attention to reporting foreign events. Fortunately, this part of the press services the Capital where policy making is concentrated, but the general public is shortchanged. The TV news programs give emphasis to items of international importance, but there is little analysis and programs tend to emphasize conflicts and confrontation rather than describing the many constructive developments occurring in international affairs. Other TV programs and the news weeklies help to make up for these deficiencies. Critics have pointed out these deficiencies in foreign news coverage by the media but have made few constructive suggestions. Following are suggestions to help give more emphasis to constructive developments in foreign affairs:

1. Teachers, researchers, and reporters can give more attention to the quantity and quality of international news coverage. In a democratic system evaluation and criticism can affect editors as well as government officials.
2. News services might consider selecting and making available the best of the news stories to libraries in a weekly summary. A weekly summary of such ticker material on foreign (and national) news might be sent over the news wires for use of libraries, universities, and other potential customers.
3. One of the major newspapers might publish a news weekly similar to the *Manchester Guardian* weekly, which carries its own news stories plus stories from *Le Monde* and the *Washington Post*.
4. More newspapers could carry daily schedules of TV and radio public affairs programs, such as interviews which are finalized too late to appear in the weekly TV guides.
5. Professors and students could volunteer short, interpretative articles on foreign affairs for their local newspapers written in plain English. Many newspapers would welcome such inputs.

Foreign News as a Percentage of Total News 1935-39 and 1975-77

Year	Entire Newspaper		Rest of Newspaper		Foreign News		Domestic News		Front Page		No. in Sample		Entire Newspaper		Front Page		Average Inches per Newspaper		
	In.	%	In.	%	In.	%	In.	%	In.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Inches	Average	
92	15,792	8	1411	—	77	—	74	—	2110	77	644	—	17	—	23	—	2110	77	644
92	25,648	8	2221	—	72	—	72	—	1929	74	26	9	18	—	26	—	1929	74	26
92	16,489	11	1976	—	63	—	63	—	1546	63	37	17	17	—	37	—	1546	63	37
99	57,929	9	5608	—	72	—	72	—	8226	72	28	43	69	—	28	—	8226	72	28
91	1,347	9	130	—	72	—	72	—	119	72	47	—	28	—	119	—	119	72	47
1975-77																			
90	20,173	10	2261	—	80	—	80	—	1020	80	263	—	19	—	20	—	1020	80	263
93	20,685	7	1563	—	89	—	89	—	2024	89	256	9	19	—	11	—	2024	89	256
93	15,253	7	1182	—	87	—	87	—	2703	87	413	9	20	—	13	—	2703	87	413
93	661	7	50	—	—	—	—	—	2248	78	630	5	20	—	22	—	2248	78	630
82	857	18	185	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
82	907	6	57	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
94	907	6	57	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
95	716	5	38	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
83	420	17	84	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
92	59,672	8	5420	—	84	—	84	—	7995	84	1562	44	78	—	16	—	7995	84	1562
92	1,356	8	123	—	84	—	84	—	102	84	20	—	20	—	16	—	102	84	20

Total Samples 69 to 94. Maximum estimate of margin of error ±10% at 5-10% risk.

6. Universities could support symposiums on foreign affairs issues. Such events often receive major coverage in the local news media.

Analysis and evaluation of the role of the media can give more insight into these issues and stimulate change. Newspapers have more power today because they are giving more attention to interpretative articles rather than straight news. There has been a great deal of attention in recent years to investigative journalism, such as the exposés of Watergate and Vietnam. More reporting that is less dramatic could also help make sense out of the confusion of today's world. James Reston, while acknowledging the contributions of investigative journalists, suggests: "It may be, however, that we need intellectual vigilance now more than barricade journalism, and particularly the gift of seeing, and seeing in time, trends that may affect the life of the world."<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. See for example Ernest W. Lefever, "The Prestige Press, Foreign Policy and American Survival," *Orbis*, Spring, 1976, pp. 207-26; Mort Rosenblum, "Reporting from the Third World," *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1977, pp. 813-35; Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Itiel De Sola Pool, "Government and the Media," *The American Political Science Review*, December, 1976, pp. 1234-241; Edward Jay Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), and *News from Nowhere* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); and Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971).
2. *The Manchester Guardian* (weekly), April 2, 1977, p. 20.
3. See *Editor and Publisher*, April 28, 1973, p. 60; Cary A. Steiner, *The People Look at Television* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); Robert T. Bower, *Television and the Public* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).
4. Foreign or international news as defined in this study includes news about foreign and international developments as well as about news of American agencies such as the Department of State, the Department of Defense, CIA, and the White House relating to foreign policy, military strength, and intelligence. Other analysts have defined foreign news more narrowly as news about, or originating in, foreign countries. Also, measurements are often taken of foreign news as a percentage of nonadvertising content instead of a percentage of the first sections of news in newspapers.

Results of measuring 1977 newspapers were checked against other studies including in particular Dan Drew and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Newshole Allocation Policies of American Daily Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly*, Summer, 1976; Andrew K. Semel, "Foreign News in Four U.S. Elite Dailies: Some Comparisons," *Journalism Quarterly*, Winter, 1976; and Raymond B. Nixon and Robert L. Jones, "The Content of Non-Competitive Vs. Competitive Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly*, 1957.

5. Dan Drew and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Newshole Allocation Policies of American Daily Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly*, Summer, 1976, pp. 434-35. The authors based their conclusions on a stratified random sample of newspapers in which 46 percent of the 149 managing editors replied to the questionnaire.

6. Christine Ogan and others, "The Changing Front Page of the New York Times 1900-1970," *Journalism Quarterly*, Summer, 1957, p. 341.

7. Dixie Ehrenreich, "Newspapers, Public Opinion and Neutrality, 1935-1959." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis at the University of Idaho, 1977, pp. 24-25, and page 3 of conclusions. The newspapers which were analyzed included the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, *The Portland Oregonian*, the *Idaho Statesman*, the *Lewiston Tribune*, and the *Spokane Chronicle*.

8. See George Gerbner and George Marvany, "The Many Worlds of the World's Press," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1977, pp. 52-61; and Andrew K. Semmel, "Foreign News in Four U.S. Elite Dailies: Some Comparisons," *Journalism Quarterly*, Winter 1976, pp. 732-33.

9. See for example G. Ray Funkhouser, "Trends in Media Coverage of the Issues of the 60's," *Journalism Quarterly*, 1974, pp. 533-38.

10. W. F. Gloede, "Some Newspapers Expand Foreign News Bureaus," *Editor and Publisher*, June 2, 1979, pp. 11-13.

11. "Opinion Roundup," *Public Opinion*, August/September, 1979, pp. 30-31.

12. Ben H. Badkian, "Newspapers: Learning (too slowly) to Adapt to TV," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December, 1973, p. 46.

13. *Editor and Publisher*, January 13, 1979, p. 9.

14. James Reston, *The Quill*, May, 1975.