

A world apart

Global news in the U.S.-media pre- and post-9/11

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The terrible events of September 11, 2001 radically altered the way Americans view their role in the world, as America's global position suddenly moved to the center of the public agenda. Entrenched assumptions on a host of issues, ranging from global interdependence and immigration reform to intercultural understanding, were all open to change. How did a public which has become increasingly introspective since the end of the Cold War become receptive to the idea of supporting not one but two major wars within the following two years?

The first step toward understanding public opinion about foreign affairs is to understand what information the public is receiving about the rest of the world. Therefore, we undertook a systematic content analysis of international news coverage in the post-9/11 era.

Study Procedures

Using a study of television news that we conducted in 1999 as a baseline, we examined the media's treatment of global news immediately after September 11, 2001 and again six months later, when the intense focus on the war on terrorism had diminished and a different international crisis dominated the news. We defined global news to include coverage of events occurring in countries outside the United States, the activities of international organizations, and U.S. foreign policy. We compared broadcast and cable network television news coverage; **Associated Press** wire reports, which form the backbone of foreign news coverage in many local papers; and editorials and op-ed articles in the **New York Times**.

We examined two month-long time periods - the month following the attacks (September 11 through October 10) and the month of March 2002, six months after the attacks, a period in which foreign news was dominated by the upsurge of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians. We examined these two different periods to clarify which elements of the immediate post-9/11 coverage were transient and which might prove lasting.

We analyzed all foreign and international news on the **ABC**, **CBS** and **NBC** evening newscasts, and their cable news equivalents, **AWolf Blitzer Reports@** on **CNN** and **ASpecial Report** with **Brit**

Hume@ on the **FOX News Channel** (hereafter **AFOX@**). We also sought to examine print coverage that reaches a national audience.

We chose the nation's leading wire service for national and international news - the **Associated Press** - as the most reliable indicator of the foreign news seen by readers around the country who don't have access to articles filed by the shrinking number of foreign bureaus maintained by major daily newspapers. Finally, as a point of comparison for the mass media coverage, we examined the more sophisticated agenda-setting discourse that takes place in the editorial pages of the **New York Times**.

Key results at a glance

Television

Pre-9/11

- In 1990 and 1991, one-third (33 percent) of all news came from abroad.
- Between 1992 and 1995, foreign news coverage dropped to 28 percent of airtime.
- From 1996 until September 11, 2001, coverage dropped to just over one-fifth (22 percent).

Post-9/11

- From September 11, 2001 through December 2002, international news rose to 29 percent of airtime.
- One-third of all stories (33 percent) concerned Afghanistan.
- Over two-thirds (68 percent) of all coverage went to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority.
- No other country averaged as much as one story per week per network.
- Seven out of 10 stories focused on conflict and destruction (70 percent).
- Only one in ten stories focused on diplomatic efforts (nine percent).
- Among calls for action on international problems, the U.S. was called on to provide a solution a majority of the time (51 percent).
- The U.S. was urged to use military force ten times as frequently as it was called on to engage in diplomacy (69 percent v 7 percent). This ratio was the same for both September 2001 and March 2002.
- The U.S. was urged to act unilaterally three times as often as multilaterally.
- When U.S. foreign policy was evaluated, two thirds of evaluations were critical (66 percent).
- Israel was criticized 77 percent of the time and

the Palestinians 83 percent of the time.

The Associated Press

- Afghanistan accounted for only one-fifth of the nations covered (20 percent)
- Conflict and disaster accounted for fewer than half of the topics covered (46 percent).
- Diplomacy was the focus in 12 percent of stories
- Among calls for action on international problems, the U.S. was called on to provide a solution only 18 percent of the time.
- When solutions were articulated, diplomacy was favored more and military action less than on television (30 percent and 31 percent respectively).
- There were proportionally fewer evaluations of government policy than on television news; however most evaluations were still negative.

The New York Times

- Israel and the Palestinian territories accounted for 44 percent of international coverage Afghanistan accounted for 16 percent.
- Among calls for action on international problems, the U.S. was called on to provide a solution 55 percent of the time.
- When solutions were articulated, diplomacy and non-military aid outpaced military action by 42 to 28 percent.
- The New York Times was less critical of government policy than television or the Associated Press and significantly more supportive of its responses to terrorism immediately after 9/11.

Discussion

Television is still the primary news source for most Americans. As such, the framework it has created for understanding international events is troubling. Throughout the 1990s, Americans were shown a world that was brutal, chaotic and of little relevance to their concerns. If the United States must intervene, it should do so militarily, and on its own.

Our study found that network evening news coverage made little effort to convey the economic, ethnic historical, political and social dimensions to international problems – or the importance of diplomacy and international cooperation.

These trends continued after 9/11 and were amplified by America's need to defend itself from foreign attack. Although the volume of foreign news increased, its breadth diminished. Even after the U.S. had secured a stunning victory over the Taliban, television avoided delving into the

ethnic, political and social ramifications that have subsequently beset Afghanistan. Rather, the focus shifted to new arenas of conflict and disaster, and military action remained the most popular solution when solutions were discussed. (Our study preceded the debate over war with Iraq, which further intensified these trends).

The parochial qualities of foreign news coverage – intense but fleeting interest in a few flash points directly affecting the U.S. – provides Americans with little sense of the long term nature of international problems or commitments, or the importance and value of diplomacy and international cooperation.

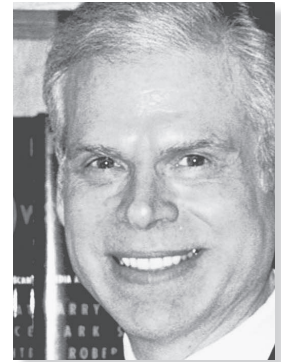
Political scientists such as Harvard's Thomas Patterson and the Annenberg School's Kathleen Hall Jamieson have argued that the media's increasingly negative coverage of domestic politics has led to growing public cynicism and disaffection with government. Though it is often said that Americans don't care about the rest of the world, it is reasonable to ask whether the negative tone of international news coverage has similarly negative consequences.

Government also faces a "Catch 22" in being pressured to act and then repeatedly criticized for whatever it does. Even if it is argued that government foreign policy is often flawed, the media court public disaffection by routinely portraying government as inept. This is not a predicament unique to the Bush administration. In a CMPA study of the way government is covered in the news, we found that President Clinton was subjected to a similar level of negative coverage on foreign policy.

The risks for any government in the way the media covers foreign policy also place an increasingly premium on spin control. With complexity, diplomacy and long-term engagement difficult to sell to a television news market bent on infotainment, attempts to manage news coverage only further the negative tone of coverage.

Television News Pre 9/11

The world grew more distant throughout the 1990s for most Americans, as foreign coverage on the network evening television evening news shows fell from 1/3 of the news agenda at the beginning of the decade, to only 1/5 by 2001. At the same time, television journalism's approach to international events increasingly resembled "when bad things happen to strange countries." The world outside the United States was only worth reporting when it was engaged in war or engulfed by natural disaster.



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The infotainment approach to foreign news coverage was further underscored by the episodic, superficial and brief manner in which international events and problems were treated. Little effort was made to increase the viewer's understanding of why such events occurred or how they fitted into a broader pattern of similar events.

Television news also did little to encourage viewers to see these problems as being of serious concern to the United States or to see themselves as being part of an international community of nations. There was scant coverage of American involvement abroad or U.S. cooperation with other countries in dealing with international issues.

Similarly, the United States was rarely seen as being the cause of international problems, and even more rarely seen as being able to offer solutions. Generally, when the United States was called on to intervene, it was to deal with humanitarian crises. Such interventions were almost always cast as unilateral rather than multilateral in character.

Television News Post 9/11

Surprisingly, 9/11 produced only a small increase in foreign news coverage, from 22 percent of all stories (pre-September 11) to 29 percent of all stories (post September 11). And with two thirds of all post-9/11 coverage consumed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, international coverage took on an even narrower focus than before. In the two months of news that we analyzed, no other country averaged as much as one story per week per network.

Predictably, war and destruction continued to dominate the news agenda, with seven out of 10 discussions dealing with armed conflict or natural disasters. But in contrast to the pre-9-11 foreign news coverage, the United States was now called on to intervene in these crises with much greater frequency. When an actual course of action was proposed, the solution of choice in a violent world was more violence. The U.S. was urged to take military action 10 times more often than to engage in diplomacy, even after the war in Afghanistan had wound down.

Though the U.S. was now cast as the principal actor on the world's stage, the script left little room for other players. The U.S. was urged to act on its own three times as often as in concert with its allies.

Despite the increasing demand for the United States to intervene in international problems, there was little support for the Bush administration's policies. Overall, two out of every three evaluations of the government were negative. The admin-

istration's response to the war on terror drew even worse notices, with three out every four evaluations critical.

Other news media post-9/11

Our study also looked at foreign news carried by the Associated Press wire service, which provides international coverage for many newspapers in the U.S., and in the **New York Times** editorial and op-ed pages, a crucible for elite policy discussion.

The picture that emerged was of America as a schizophrenic news society. The **Associated Press** was everything TV news wasn't, with a geographically wide and sustained approach to international issues and events. The straightforward, objective style of foreign news reporting placed a premium on locally based sources (who were often critical of the U.S.) rather than refracting international events through U.S. government sources. And unlike television news, the **AP** gave greater weight to diplomacy and less prominence to military action when solutions to international crises were discussed.

If the **AP**'s fact-driven approach to breaking news had a downside, it was that little attention was paid to analysis. A discussion of the causes of, or solutions to, an international problem occurred only once in every 30 stories.

Nevertheless, it would be hard to impeach the average American's grasp of international affairs if he or she were to rely only on the **Associated Press**. Unfortunately, few people would have seen more than a fraction of the 4000-plus **AP** stories we analyzed in the course of two months (a figure that excludes updated stories in the same news cycle). And we don't know what stories individual newspapers chose to publish.

The **New York Times** editorial and op-ed pages were, by contrast, as narrowly focused as television news – just not on the same international problems. While network news revolved around the war in Afghanistan and the war on terror, the Times focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As a forum for discussion of international crises by writers and experts of considerable influence, diplomacy and non-military foreign aid were far more frequently invoked in the Times than in the television news served to the masses. Similarly, Times opinion writers were far less likely to reach for military action as either a cause or a solution to international problems. In other words, there was a remarkable disjunction between the assumptions and projections underlying foreign policy debate in the Times – “we should proceed diplomatically” — and those presented to a mass audience on television — “we should send in the troops.”