

GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE AND US NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF CANADA AND MEXICO

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Abstract / This case study examines the influence of geographic distance on news coverage of Canada and Mexico in 13 newspapers across the US from 1990 to 1996. The number of news stories about Mexico is found to be highly related to the distance to either the Mexican or the Canadian border. Yet the correlation between news stories about Canada and geographic distance is not statistically significant. When the total space is controlled, the correlations between distance and coverage about both countries turn out to be highly significant.

Keywords / Canada / geographic distance / international news / Mexico / US newspapers

Introduction

Are news editors more likely to publish news about foreign countries that are physically closer than those that are more distant? The factor of geographic distance in determining international news coverage has been investigated in a great number of studies. Findings in general suggest that geographic distance correlates negatively with the amount of coverage one country receives in another country's press.¹ In other words, the more distant a country is, the less it will be covered.

However, studies of international news flow in the past few decades seem to neglect the existence of differences embedded in distinct regions of a nation (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1973). As Cassara (1993: 2) points out, 'research on international news flow has traditionally looked at nations as homogeneous units, overlooking the inner structures of societies'. In a large and notably diverse country like the USA, it is hard to imagine that the news media in each region of the country would provide their audiences with an identical picture of the world. Furthermore, it is unlikely that regional newspapers would provide the same news menu as some elite newspapers like the *New York Times*, which often gets selected as a study sample to represent the US press.

Thus, this study is intended to investigate the impact of geographic distance on 13 American newspapers' coverage of two nations adjacent to the USA – Canada and Mexico – to see whether the prediction of the influence of geographic distance on international news coverage holds under domestic circumstances. To address the issue of heterogeneity of the country and to compare

potential difference of news coverage,² the study purposely selects newspapers published in each region of the USA. The unique geographic positions of Canada and Mexico, bordering the USA to the north and the south, respectively, allow us to conduct a unique case study of the influence of geographic distance on news coverage.

Literature

A handful of communication scholars (e.g. Ahern, 1984; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Hester, 1973) point out that extrinsic factors generate a tremendous impact on international news flow. The extrinsic factors, tested by many researchers, are often operationalized as international trade volume, country size, population, political relations, cultural ties and geographic distance between countries. That geographic distance is focused on in this case study is based on a couple of reasons. For one thing, these extrinsic factors, except geographic distance, are national-level characteristics – it makes less sense to operationalize these factors at a regional basis. In addition, an earlier study conducted by Cassara (1993) has found little evidence to support cultural and economic ties as important factors in influencing international news coverage in six US regional newspapers.

The proposition that geographic distance determines international news coverage has been supported by a number of studies. For example, MacLean and Pinna (1958) discovered a negative correlation between geographic distance and news interest in a case study of Italy. They found that audience as well as news editors might unconsciously prefer international news related to those foreign countries with closer proximity than others that are comparatively more distant. Dupree's (1971) study, probably the first empirical research to test the influence of geographic distance on news stories, found a negative correlation between distance and number of stories, although the result is not statistically significant. Hicks and Gordon (1974), using a sample of international news published in 'rest days' from New Orleans's *Times-Picayune* and three Israeli newspapers, found no evidence of relationship between physical distance and international news flow.

The prediction power of geographic distance was found to be rather inconsistent among three newspapers' coverage of elections held in foreign countries, according to Rosengren's (1977) study. Geographic distance exerted more influence on news coverage in *Neues Deutschland* (former East Germany) and *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden) than in *The Times* (UK). In effect, geographic distance hardly plays a role in predicting election coverage in *The Times*. Therefore, the influence of geographic distance on international news coverage was not completely supported until Adams's (1986) study. Assessing US network television coverage of natural disasters around the world, Adams indicated that geographic distance is one of the three most important factors in deciding the amount of newscast time devoted to each natural disaster.

Chang et al.'s (1987) study took one step further to test the influence of geographic distance. All of the events covered by the *New York Times* and three US television networks were examined and compared with the events listed in

Keesing's Contemporary Archives: Record of World Events. Their findings suggest that geographic distance cannot predict news coverage in the *New York Times*, but functions well in separating the events that get covered or not by the three major television networks. Television networks, relying more on high-tech equipment to transmit audiovisual content, seem more likely than newspapers to be constrained by geographic distance.

In addition to the above studies that directly address the influence of geographic distance on news coverage, a cluster of research³ discloses the prevalence of regionalism in governing the selection of international news. Despite using various statistical techniques and distinct samples, these studies suggest that news professionals tend to select and/or exchange international news that originates in the same region where the news medium is located. This finding does not necessarily support the hypothesis of geographic distance's influence (because distance is not directly computed and examined in these studies), yet it provides a basis for the researcher to address the differences among various regions in the USA.

In essence, the findings of past studies that investigated geographic distance's influence on international news coverage are not consistent with each other. This inconclusive finding is probably due to different media samples, dissimilar definitions and operationalizations of geographic distance, presence of other examined factors, and distinct sample periods. Among the discrepancies existing in the studies that lead to such confusing results, the estimation of geographic distance, central to the present hypothesis testing, is very problematic in most research. Few studies actually estimated the geographic distance between countries. Chang et al.'s (1987) study, for example, used a somewhat insensitive dichotomous scale (0 represents any country in the American continent, 1 for those countries outside the American continent) to measure the physical distance between the US and other countries. Even a couple of studies that used the actual distance between national capitals to represent the geographic distance pose significant questions as well.⁴ The present study intends to address this crucial problem.

Method

This research project utilized two sources of data to test whether geographic distance influences the coverage of Canada and Mexico. The first set of data is the number of news stories published in 13 different newspapers from various regions across the USA. The second part is information about actual geographic distance between the cities where the newspapers are selected and the nearest border point where the US territory adjoins Mexico or Canada. The sample of newspapers was selected with two principles (or limits): (1) the given newspaper has an on-line version of its publication available at LEXIS/NEXIS, a commercial, on-line information service; (2) in addition, the chosen newspaper can represent each of the respective regions of the USA – West Coast, Mid-Atlantic, South, Midwest, Rocky Mountains and New England – so as to obtain enough variance of geographic distance to either Canada or Mexico in the sample. With these two criteria, 13 newspapers across the nation were selected.⁵

The number of news stories relevant to Canada or Mexico from each chosen

newspaper was retrieved from LEXIS/NEXIS. Year is the unit of analysis because it is far more stable than monthly or daily outputs. Yearly outputs should be less likely to be affected by disruptive incidents or overheated issues, which often linger for a long period of time and cause sample bias. According to the LEXIS/NEXIS manual, most newspapers did not go on-line until early 1990; 1990 was then decided to be the starting year for sample selection. The sample period ends in December 1996. All of the on-line version news stories from the 13 newspapers dated during the seven-year period are included in the sample.

The strategy for determining the number of news stories about Canada and Mexico reflects pragmatism and some compromises. An initial finding disclosed that news stories from or about Canada usually do not have 'Canada' in the datelines or bylines;⁶ therefore it was virtually impossible to locate all of the news stories that are related to Canada or Canadians by dateline search. As a result, a broader definition of Canadian or Mexican news was adopted. As long as 'Canada/Canadian' or 'Mexico/Mexican' appeared in headline or lead, or 'Canada/Mexico' existed in the dateline, the given story was incorporated into the sample. In other words, this sample contains almost everything that is related to either country in each newspaper.

This broad definition of international news also stems from a theoretical consideration – selecting foreign news only (news with foreign dateline) will miss much important international news that gets 'localized' or 'domesticated'. Yet, admittedly, the on-line news retrieval strategy adopted here has some unavoidable limitations. For one thing, this search strategy cannot completely rule out the stories that contain the keywords in the headlines or leads but report nothing about these two countries. Cuisine evaluation about local Mexican restaurants or news from New Mexico had been spotted by the researcher when screening the news stories selected by LEXIS/NEXIS. However, based on a random observation, very few news stories selected are not what we searched for. Therefore, bowing to the limits of financial and human resources (a large-scale content analysis like this project would have been prohibitive), this computer-assisted content analysis probably might be the best and most efficient solution.

Geographic distance in this study is defined as the physical distance between the city where the newspaper is published and the nearest border point that adjoins Mexico or Canada. The conventional definition of geographic distance between nations that uses the capital city as the representative point of a nation was abandoned because it neglects the colossal territory and the tremendous diversity of different regions of the USA. For instance, the distance from Seattle to Ottawa, Canada, is hundreds of times longer than that to its nearest Canadian border, less than 100 miles north of the city. The geographic distance between any city and the nearest point adjacent to Mexico or Canada was estimated based on a detailed road map of the USA published by the American Automobile Association (AAA). The line between the city and the nearest border point was drawn and then calculated with a standard ruler. The unit used to measure the geographic distance is 1 centimeter (0.39 inches) on the AAA map.

All of the raw data derived from these two sources were entered into

EXCEL, a spreadsheet program, and then analyzed with SPSS for Windows, a statistical program.

Findings

An overview of US newspaper coverage on Canada and Mexico from 1990 through 1996 will be helpful in obtaining a broader context for the study. First of all, based on Table 1, it seems that US newspaper coverage of Canada overall decreases during the period, while news about Mexico gradually gains more and more attention from newspapers across the nation. With the percentage figures that are derived from using the raw number of news stories about either country divided by the total number of news stories about both countries in the same year,⁷ the trend is even clearer. According to the same table, the percentages of Canadian news over the two countries combined dwindle throughout the years, except for the year 1996, in which the percentage rebounds 2.6 percent, whereas the percentages of Mexican news increase significantly the first six years in a row – from 44.9 percent in 1990 to 55.3 percent in 1995. The year 1992 seems to be a threshold, when the percentage of news about Mexico surpassed that of Canada.

The trend that the US newspapers have paid more and more attention to Mexico or the Mexican people in the 1990s is intriguing. Why have newspapers devoted more space to the southern neighbor than the northern one lately? Does this phenomenon reflect American readers' increasing interests and concerns in general or does this simply echo the increasing economic interaction with Mexico and the stalemate of the Canadian economy? According to the statistics from the International Monetary Fund (1996), trade volume between the US and Mexico increased dramatically and Mexico's GNP recently soared with an impressive rate. Meanwhile, coincidentally, both the population and the industries in the USA have moved southward to the Sunbelt since the early 1980s, and this mega-trend seems to have continued in the 1990s (De Vita, 1996; Deming, 1996). These factors appear to correspond with the expansion of

TABLE 1
Average Number of News Stories from 13 US Newspapers by Year

| Year | Canadian news | | Mexican news | |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| | <i>n</i> | % of two | <i>n</i> | % of two |
| 1990 (<i>N</i> = 7) | 418.29 | 55.1 | 340.71 | 44.9 |
| 1991 (<i>N</i> = 8) | 389.88 | 52.1 | 365.88 | 47.9 |
| 1992 (<i>N</i> = 11) | 480.00 | 49.2 | 571.73 | 50.8 |
| 1993 (<i>N</i> = 12) | 449.83 | 46.8 | 617.08 | 53.2 |
| 1994 (<i>N</i> = 13) | 414.31 | 45.0 | 609.92 | 55.0 |
| 1995 (<i>N</i> = 13) | 394.31 | 44.7 | 602.85 | 55.3 |
| 1996 (<i>N</i> = 13) | 379.92 | 47.3 | 531.00 | 52.7 |

TABLE 2
Average Number of News Stories from Each Newspaper

| Region | Newspaper | Canadian news | | Mexican news | |
|------------|---------------------------------|---------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| | | <i>n</i> | % of two | <i>n</i> | % of two |
| West Coast | <i>Seattle Times</i> | 203.29 | 60.4 | 130.43 | 39.6 |
| | <i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> | 157.71 | 35.4 | 284.29 | 64.6 |
| | <i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i> | 524.00 | 21.4 | 1954.60 | 78.6 |
| Midwest | <i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i> | 454.17 | 54.1 | 377.33 | 45.9 |
| | <i>Chicago Tribune</i> | 776.14 | 49.1 | 810.71 | 50.9 |
| | <i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> | 429.57 | 46.8 | 463.00 | 53.2 |
| | <i>Denver Post</i> | 199.67 | 35.6 | 360.33 | 64.4 |
| East Coast | <i>Boston Globe</i> | 315.57 | 64.2 | 178.86 | 35.8 |
| | <i>Buffalo News</i> | 584.20 | 79.8 | 148.00 | 20.2 |
| | <i>Washington Post</i> | 502.14 | 51.1 | 490.57 | 48.9 |
| South | <i>Atlanta Constitution</i> | 408.83 | 46.3 | 468.67 | 53.7 |
| | <i>Houston Chronicle</i> | 375.60 | 24.0 | 1173.20 | 76.0 |
| | <i>St. Petersburg Times</i> | 362.71 | 48.0 | 392.57 | 52.0 |

Mexican news in US newspapers. But the real, hidden reason behind this interesting phenomenon awaits exploration by media historians.

Based on Table 2, it is apparent in every region that the amount of newspapers' coverage on either neighbor is negatively associated with the distance to the border. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the West Coast newspapers – probably because the three cities of the West Coast are on a geographically vertical line and because the West Coast is directly adjacent to foreign soil at either end. Table 2 also reveals that each newspaper devotes a strikingly different space to these two neighbors. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* has the largest amount of coverage on Mexico, almost 15 times the Mexican coverage devoted by the *Seattle Times*. In terms of percentage, the *Buffalo News* devotes the least space to Mexico. Regarding Canadian news, the *Chicago Tribune* has more items than any other newspapers in the sample, yet the *Buffalo News* has the highest percentage of Canadian news (over the Canadian and Mexican stories combined). Therefore, both the *Buffalo News* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune* are the most unbalanced newspapers when covering Canada and Mexico.

Table 3 presents a comparison of coverage of Canada and Mexico from newspapers that are relatively close to either the Canadian or Mexican border. It indicates that newspapers close to the Mexican border allocate more than three times as much space to Mexican news (77.3 percent) than to Canadian news (22.7 percent), while the newspapers published in the cities near the Canadian border devote just slightly more space to their northern neighbor (60.2 percent) than the southern counterpart (39.8 percent). This result indicates that there exists a higher 'pull' influence of Mexico over news coverage than the peaceful neighbor to the north.

TABLE 3

A Comparison of Average Number of News Stories by Two Groups of Newspapers

| | Canadian news | | Mexican news | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| | <i>n</i> | % of two | <i>n</i> | % of two |
| Canadian border papers ^a | 482.03 | 60.2 | 357.67 | 39.8 |
| Mexican border papers ^b | 449.8 | 22.7 | 1563.9 | 77.3 |

^a*Seattle Times, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Boston Globe and Buffalo News.*

^b*San Diego Union-Tribune and Houston Chronicle.*

According to Table 2, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* are the most balanced newspapers in terms of covering Canada and Mexico with equal numbers of news stories. Interestingly, the cities where these newspapers are based are not necessarily equidistant from both neighbors. Both Chicago and Washington, DC, are much closer to the Canadian border than the Mexican counterpart. Perhaps the *Washington Post*, often considered a national elite newspaper, virtually holds a national perspective on international affairs regardless of geographic filters, and does a good job covering the two neighbors evenly. Another possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that editors of these balanced newspapers are not influenced as much by their sense of geographic distance from these two neighbors, or they are constantly aware of the balance principle when dealing with international news about Canada or Mexico.

The central question of this article – does geographic distance have anything to do with US newspaper coverage of Canada and Mexico? – can be resolved with the findings presented in Table 4. First, we can find that the two geographic distance estimates are highly related to the raw numbers of Mexican news (distance to Canada $r = .5914$ and distance to Mexico $r = -.6113$) but not significantly related to the amount of Canadian news. Another interesting finding is that the raw number of Canadian news stories is positively related to the raw number of Mexican news stories (.3718). That is to say, if a newspaper devotes more space to Mexican news, more Canadian news is likely to be found in that newspaper as well.

Due to a concern that different newspapers could devote varied space to international news at large, it makes more sense to use the proportion rates to represent the news coverage about either country. The results show that both geographic distance estimates do have a remarkable impact on the news coverage of these two US neighbors (Pearson's $r = \pm .8043$ and $\pm .8462$, respectively). The more distant from Canada, the higher proportion of news on Mexico and the lower proportion of news on Canada. The same interpretation can apply to the distance from the Mexican border. Note that the distance from Mexico does a slightly better job in predicting the proportion of news about both countries (Pearson's $r: .8462 > .8043$).

Because the eastern USA does not adjoin Mexico, this raises our concern that physical distance estimated here might misrepresent or miscalculate the

TABLE 4

Correlation Matrix of Variables

| | Distance to Mexico | No. Canadian news | No. Mexican news | % Canadian news | % Mexican news |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Distance to Canada | -.8015** | -.2179 | .5914** | -.8043** | .8043** |
| Distance to Mexico | | .2125 | -.6113** | .8462** | -.8462** |
| No. Canadian news | | | .3718* | .2240* | -.2240* |
| No. Mexican news | | | | -.6970** | .6970** |
| % Canadian news | | | | | -1.0000** |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

All of the figures are Pearson correlation coefficients.

$N = 77$.

psychological distance that people in the East Coast feel and therefore distort the correlation estimates. For example, Bostonians and Minnesotans might share a similar geographic sense toward Mexico (it is 'somewhere down there'); but physically, Boston is farther away from Mexico than Minneapolis, which might generate some bias in our observations. Therefore, the data used in the following section excluded five East Coast newspapers (the *Buffalo News*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution*) to examine whether the results would be any different.

The output generated from this sample (see Table 5) looks similar to the one with the full sample. Geographic distance still negatively correlates with the amount of news coverage, and the amount of Mexican news is still more related to geographic distance to either country's border than that of Canadian news. In addition, the correlation coefficient ($r = .4762$) between the amount of Mexican news and that of Canadian news is even higher. The difference, however, is that the correlation coefficients which represent the relationships

TABLE 5

Correlation Matrix of Variables (excluding East Coast newspapers)

| | Distance to Mexico | No. Canadian news | No. Mexican news | % Canadian news | % Mexican news |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Distance to Canada | -.9627** | -.1069 | .6933** | -.9443** | .9443** |
| Distance to Mexico | | .2529 | -.6399** | .9042** | -.9042** |
| No. Canadian news | | | .4762* | .1186 | -.1186 |
| No. Mexican news | | | | -.6893** | .6893** |
| % Canadian news | | | | | -1.0000** |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

All of the figures are Pearson correlation coefficients.

$N = 46$.

between distance and proportion of news coverage, as well as between distance and the amount of Mexican news, are higher. This indicates that the relationship between geographic distance and news coverage of Canada and Mexico is even stronger when the papers in the East Coast are eliminated.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this study first point out that news coverage about Canada and Mexico from various newspapers across the USA is by no means identical. Different newspapers devote a strikingly different space to international news. Moreover, geographic distance is found to be a significant predictor of the amount of news stories about either Canada or Mexico – the closer the newspaper to the country, the more coverage. Nevertheless, there are exceptional cases. A couple of quality newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* did an excellent job balancing the coverage about these two foreign countries.

That the amount of Mexican news has been augmented since 1990 and the newspapers close to Mexico devoted disproportionately more space to cover Mexico is an intriguing phenomenon. Based on our initial, random observation of the news stories in the period, news about Mexico seemed to be more diversified, more problem oriented and far more inviting to readers' debates. For example, they could pertain to the current economy of Mexico, the many issues regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), drug trafficking, influx of Mexican immigrants, travel information and/or Mexican cultures. Canadian news, however, centered mainly on sports and economic activities. Many stories from this northern neighbor of the USA probably do not smack of foreign flavor to Americans. Does the similarity between Canada and the USA play a role in news selection?

In addition, the finding that suggests a much stronger correlation between geographic distance and the amount of Mexican news is worth continuous monitoring. In the future, researchers might address a number of unresolved questions. Does Mexico yield more newsworthy events and issues than the northern counterpart? Is there a higher or more intensive level of interactivity between the USA and Mexico than with the northern neighbor? Does the increasing media attention on Mexico reflect reality or simply indicate a result of news professionals' or readers' preference toward Mexico over Canada?

The results of this study also demonstrate the potential danger of assuming the homogeneity of the news menu provided in any country, particularly in large countries like the USA. Different regions of any big country might have different concerns, interests and perspectives about the international community or could actually be involved with various foreign countries, all of which can result in distinct international coverage in local news media. Researchers need to be aware of this potential problem whenever a large country's media are investigated.

Lastly, the findings of this study raise the question of whether people's psychological cognition toward geographic distance could be greatly transformed (or transcended) with the unprecedented level of globalization and

advanced communication technologies. After all, modern communications and a conveniently connected transportation system around the world are supposed to alter the conventional definition of physical distance (Leyshon, 1995). Experts have claimed that time spent on commuting between any two spots on earth will be a new way of estimating actual distance. Nevertheless, what has been found in this case study seems to suggest that rooted factors that govern news selection and our world view (or mind set), such as geographic distance, are unlikely to diminish in the very near future.

Notes

1. Other studies found no relationship between distance and coverage. The literature is discussed in more detail below.
2. This study covers each of the six regions: West Coast, Rocky Mountains, Midwest, South, Mid-Atlantic and New England.
3. For example, Cooper (1988), Kim and Barnett (1995), Meyer (1989), Nnaemeka and Richstad (1980) and Skurnik (1981).
4. This method is not precise when the country is either big or the capital is not located in the central part of the country.
5. They are the *Seattle Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Diego Union Tribune*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Buffalo News*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), the *Denver Post*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune*.
6. Usually the dateline of, say, Toronto will be 'Toronto' or 'Toronto, Ontario' instead of 'Toronto, Canada' or 'Toronto, Ontario, Canada'.
7. This method avoids the bias that some newspapers simply devote more space to international news than others.

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