

International Coverage

H. DENIS WU

Boston University, USA

International coverage has been a focus of scholarly and professional attention because it is a highly distinct category of news that tends to be processed and prepared by specially trained professionals and has its special gathering and distribution means, challenges, and can potentially yield deeper and wider impact than any other news categories. The influence of international coverage can range from war to peace, from global quagmire to synergistic cooperation, and from ecological fallout to sustainable environments for all global citizens. No other news genres can wield such a large-scaled, yet profound, influence on so many aspects of human lives.

International coverage here is referred to both news and analysis from traditional media such as newspaper, magazine, TV, cable news, satellite, and radio; it can also come from a great variety of media outlets and platforms on the Internet and via personal communication devices such as smart phones and tablets. The aforementioned vehicles upon which international coverage is carried and distributed might not matter as much as the perspectives, preferences, or approaches with which the content is prepared, processed, and packaged. One would not argue against the higher quality of a story about a given country from *The New York Times* than a piece of fake information about that country made up by bots on Twitter. Regarding international coverage, there are shared attributes, patterns, and issues among all channels from which people receive information beyond national borders and stories generated from locales all over the world. What follows aims to provide an introductory synthesis of major topics pertaining to this distinct information category while leaving out specific technicalities and involved technologies for international coverage.

One of the fundamental concerns about international coverage is that the real world becomes entirely mediated and, inevitably, is presented in a distorted, deficient way, and also can be affected by involved people and entities such as media firms, organizations, and governments. For those audiences who may not have alternative—or direct—ways of knowing anything outside their home towns by themselves, and who virtually have to rely on the media for keeping up with the world, this fact could sound quite troubling. The gathering, production, and distribution of international coverage involve a slew of crucial, decisive factors. For one thing, there are multiple layers of collecting, selecting, sifting, and packaging international news, all of which make instantaneously and comprehensively presenting important new facts about the world—with such geographical vastness and great cultural diversity—nearly impossible. News professionals' knowledge, language skills, judgment, personal and collective bias, value system, ideology, and news organizations' economic as well as political considerations also can

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generate profound barriers to identifying, gathering, and presenting substantive, impartial, and balanced coverage of foreign countries. The aforementioned factors are related to individuals and media entities that process and distribute information about the world. Individual foreign correspondents, the media they work for, and other concerned entities, therefore, become critical. Scholars of international communication—the field to which international coverage scholarship usually belongs—unveiled the traditional dominance of Western correspondents and news agencies such as Associated Press, Agence France Presse, and Reuters in this news category in the twentieth century. The traditional influence might be facing challenges from other emerging national agencies such as the Xinhua and social media in the twenty-first century.

In the past six decades the classical studies that employed content analysis to examine news outputs from different parts of the world uniformly indicated that there are dramatically different versions of the same world presented to audiences in different parts of the world (Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2012). This troubling phenomenon continues today. For example, European media tend to focus more on Europe, North America, and the Middle East, while East Asian media are more likely to cover China, Japan, the Koreas, and so forth. Geocentric tendency and regionalism sometimes were used to explain the found pattern of international coverage in different parts of the world; in other times, other factors emerged and dominated international coverage. There are other unveiled determinants of news, which often include cultural proximity, geographic distance, language, ideology, economic clout, population, military power, race, and geopolitics. Generally speaking, the more similar and closer the host and guest countries are, the more news the guest country would generate in the host country's media. These factors may exert their individual and combined influence on the amount and the fashion in which different countries of the world are covered, and their impact truly depends on the subject matter, specific situation, and unique timing, making generalizing the determinants of international coverage rather challenging.

However, it is safe to conclude that immense variance of international coverage about identical events is the norm and that agreement of viewpoints about international affairs among the world's media is the exception. Numerous empirical studies discover that single world issues or events—for example, the Olympic Games, earthquake, or war—are often drastically different in their coverage across countries. Audiences from different countries may get totally dissimilar stories and opposite perspectives from reading and watching coverage of the same events.

Another important finding of the analyses of international coverage is the uneven coverage of the world's countries. The majority of international coverage has been centering on world powers. Many emerging countries, mostly in the Global South, are far less likely than the developed Global North to be covered by the world's elite media and leading news agencies. Therefore, insufficient coverage about emerging countries is one issue that has been repeatedly pointed out and remains a thorny concern. Furthermore, when these countries are covered in the media of other countries, odds are that the topics of the stories tend to focus on something negative or disastrous. Observers lamented that only when negativity happens did these countries get covered in the news.

“Coups and earthquakes” were coined to capture the recurring themes of the coverage pertaining to the Global South. Moreover, dominant news flow patterns (North to South) and the lack of South–South and South–North flows infuriated nonelite nations. These lasting concerns led to heated debates between developed and developing nations on the role of journalism, national development, and free flow of information across national borders in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 1950s (Galtung & Vincent, 1992). The representatives from the nonelite nations formally called for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the late 1970s and all the issues and recommendations were compiled in a Sean MacBride-chaired UNESCO report (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980).

Given the unsatisfactory pattern of news coverage and uneven flow of international news between the North and the South, many scholars and policymakers aimed at improving the situation and to serve the *whole* world’s audiences better. In addition to the NWICO, which faced boycott from the United States and the United Kingdom (who objected to it on the grounds of the freedom of expression and the press), contraflows and shared news pools were two examples of such endeavors to counter the prevailing force of international coverage. The first endeavor is intended to improve the flow of news from the South to the North, increasing the awareness and self-recognition of the emerging world. The second one is to enhance cooperation among news professionals and media (particularly in the South), increase the horizontal flow (e.g., news transmission between countries in the African continent), and also reduce reliance on the dominant Western news agencies for news copy and visuals. Despite good intentions and ingenious creation, many unforeseen political, professional, and economic obstacles emerged, and subsequently, the impact of these endeavors has been somewhat limited in the twenty-first century. Most cases turned out to dispense protocol news or flat-out propaganda. One of the few successful contraflow cases is Al Jazeera, whose newscast regularly reaches audiences outside of its base in the Middle East.

From the end of the Cold War era, many keen observers in both academia and the professional world witnessed a gradual, steady decline of international coverage carried by the media (Utley, 1997) compared to other news genres. The evidence came from empirical examination of news space and footage devoted to covering foreign countries. This recent trend stands in sharp contrast with early twentieth-century newspapers, where significant number of news stories were about foreign countries and international events. A number of factors could be identified which contribute to this decline of international coverage. These are all interconnected. For one, the production of international coverage is much more costly than that of domestic news, particularly commentaries and lifestyle news. Media insiders also argued that the audience of international coverage is scant, which leads to low ratings—so disinterested readership of international news is to blame. Yet another view of this issue argues that the interest of international news needs to be cultivated and international coverage should better resonate with audiences. In other words, the more interest-inducing the international news, the more readers would choose and consume international news. In a nutshell,

this scenario may sound like a chicken-and-egg conundrum, but the lesson is that the minuscule coverage about the world is bad for average readers.

Along with the shrinking newshole came the reduction of foreign correspondents in virtually every news outlet. Compared to other types of news, international news needs far more resources to be produced. From setting up foreign bureaus, obtaining access to other countries, recruiting experienced and specialized reporters to cover unfamiliar—sometimes dangerous—locales, every step of international coverage needs more manpower as well as conscientious, unwavering commitment from management. Recently, in an effort to save money, more and more part-timers, freelancers, and local stringers have been used to replace full-time foreign correspondents. To scholars familiar with foreign correspondence, this trend constitutes a double-edge sword. Traditional foreign correspondents are described as sharing similar backgrounds, higher education, and profound on-the-job training (Hess, 1996), and it is unclear whether and to what extent the new coterie of today's workforce is fully prepared for the complexity and challenges their jobs may incur. For one thing, the fact that international journalists may face far more traumas, obstacles, and adversities on their jobs than their domestic colleagues should justify longer immersion and better preparedness. The Internet's impact on international reporting is also worth special attention. Reporters are able to check out information sources that would otherwise be unavailable to them, and thanks to the Internet's immediacy and transparency, they are under greater pressure to be competitive and are more likely to update their stories. Also, because of social media, sources of international coverage have been diversified—amateur footage from YouTube and personal smart phones often can be seen on mainstream media. This practice can both enhance and deteriorate the quality of international news. One major concern of utilizing impersonal sources via social networks for international coverage is accuracy, truthfulness, and verifiability of the content.

Because of the lack of audience interest, media executives argued, the newshole devoted to covering international affairs and foreign countries is shrinking significantly. This trend is alarming and at odds with the pace of globalization and the need for the public to be knowledgeable about the world. As different parts of the world become intricately interconnected, one cannot truly separate domestic from foreign news any more. The April 2011 earthquake in Fukushima, Japan, is a vivid example. Not only was this a dangerous natural disaster, it had a rippling effect on economic activities and local companies. One of those companies was General Electric, which built the nuclear power plants in Fukushima. If its design were at fault, its business and stock price potentially may have been affected. It is highly likely that events like this, taking place outside the United States, may affect the economic and political aspects of a locale inside the United States. Consequently, journalistic critics have advocated domestication of international news and called for more news that can provide the link between international news and local interests, boosting readership and, at the same time, media's investment in increasing and improving international coverage.

There has been a significant body of literature that deals with how news flows from one part of the world to another and explains the disparity of coverage among the world's countries. News flow research resulted in not only uncovering underlying forces in the coverage of certain incidents, such as economic determinism (Wu, 2000), world

systems theory (Chang, 1998), and cultural affinity, but also in pointing out specific predictors, such as the population and military spending of a country. The nexus between the country that is being covered (guest country) and another country whose media coverage is being examined (host country) also matters a great deal. The nature and magnitude of interaction can derive from the involved countries' diplomatic relation, colonial background, shared language and religion, economic ties, or even immigration and tourism.

Geographical concentration and stereotypical presentation of individual countries, cultures, and religions in international coverage also inspire interests in various academic fields. It is common to see that the majority of international news is concentrated on Western European and North American regions of the world, while sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America tend to be ignored by the press outside the two regions. In addition to continental concentration, some individual countries in many parts of the world can be absent in the media for long periods of time. The long-term trend of international news coverage can generate a tremendous impact on the awareness, understanding, and concern level about the issues, development, and problems that take place in the ignored countries or regions. Subsequently, policymaking of global elites and public opinion of the world are inevitably impaired by this deficient supply of information about the whole world. On the other hand, international media's sudden spotlight on a given location may also introduce another horde of issues. Often, parachute journalism and instantaneous, live reporting on unfolding events (Robinson, 2002) are being pursued by the media and these types of practice can result in dramatic shifts of public opinion, growing demand for governmental intervention, and subsequently, hasty and egregious decisions and actions. All of these scenarios have taken place in recent history (e.g., Bosnia, Somalia, and Syria) and have profoundly influenced international relations.

Despite positive prospects in the late twentieth century about the great potentials of the Internet that can unfetter the news landscape for the whole world, the online version of international coverage has not improved, diversified, or even increased to an extent that significantly differs from its traditional counterparts. The "echo chamber" phenomenon seems to be a common scene when traditional media set up their online versions to mirror each other under the same media conglomerates and social media postings tend to follow the lead of traditional media. Furthermore, the new space and platform have been inundated with personal opinion and unsubstantiated statements, which could mislead and misinform online news users and participants of social media. Early empirical evidence shows that the online version of international coverage presents a similar pattern of geographical concentration and is subject to a similar set of underlying forces (Wu, 2007), whereas social media's international "coverage" would still need to be inspected further.

In light of the discovered patterns of international coverage, not only should the media enhance their international coverage and fulfill their social responsibility by devoting more resource and investment to covering the world better, governmental and educational entities also can take respective actions to improve the situation. Media consumers should be cultivated so as to enjoy being truly informed about the world and to demand much more solid international coverage from the media. Consequently

media firms will strive to serve the consumer better—market forces can be the most effective incentive. Additionally, possible solutions can be gained from a constant monitoring system of international coverage in any given market by either the media themselves, nonprofit watch groups, or independently executed “fact tanks” in order to nudge and incentivize the media for more, better, and more balanced international coverage.

The current trend of international coverage on traditional and new media has not been adequate or sufficient and has not served the world well. Given this, we should always remind ourselves of the cognitive nescience of as well as affective association with the real world. Further, media users should constantly demand and push for more and better international news and promote the awareness of this issue in the public arena. The implications for the lack of agreeable, sufficient understanding among different parts of the world cannot be overstressed. Disagreements about the basic facts and subsequent dissensus about international accords and scientifically sound solutions to existing and future global crises can lead to grave consequences for all humans.

The swiftly evolving new media technologies and social media’s increasing influence and contribution to average users’ access, distribution, and network of international coverage should be included for future research. The ongoing developments and technological breakthroughs may result in more efficient information retrieval, gathering, and processing, for not only news professionals and content-providing entities, but also for average users around the world. This trend can certainly result in a higher penetration of international news and better understanding of the globe at an aggregate level; but it is unclear whether the quality, rigor, and balance of international coverage on these alternative sources can be unequivocally upheld. It is also worth monitoring whether solid, fact-based information—thanks to the Internet and other technologies that can make information retrieval and transmission both much easier and more difficult—can truly flow freely across national borders. Lastly, it remains to be seen whether and to what extent social media and information services (either automatic algorithms or artificial intelligence) can truly fill the void of mainstream media in providing international coverage. All of these aforementioned issues await empirically minded researchers to investigate.

SEE ALSO: African Journalism; Asian Journalism; Australian-Pacific Journalism; Development Journalism; European Journalism; Foreign Correspondents and Bureaus; Global Journalism; Global News Organizations; Latin and South American Journalism; Middle Eastern and North African Journalism; Newsroom Management; North American Journalism; Parachute Journalism; Propaganda; Publishers; Transnational Journalism; Wire Service Journalism

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H. Denis Wu is a professor of communication at Boston University. He has conducted research in international communication, media effects, and political communication over the past 20 years. An immigrant from Taiwan living in the United States, he pays close attention to international coverage and observes how different parts of the world are reported. In addition to his refereed articles appearing in respected journals such as *Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*, and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, he has coauthored three books: *Image and Emotion in Voter Decisions: The Affect Agenda* (Lexington Press, 2015); *The Media are Ill: The Symptoms and Solutions of Taiwanese News Environment* (Chuliu Press, 2014); and *Media, Politics, and Asian Americans* (Hampton Press, 2009).