Our news and their news
The role of national identity in the coverage of foreign news

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical assumption of this paper is that when a foreign news item is defined as ‘ours’, then journalists’ professional practices become subordinate to national loyalty; when an item is ‘theirs’, journalistic professionalism comes into its own. Thus, the article argues that there is an inverse relation between professional news values and the national identity of the journalist and the journal’s editors. Expressed as a rule, we would say that the more ‘national’ the report is, the less ‘professional’ it will be, i.e. the closer the reporters/editors are to a given news event in terms of national interest, the further they are from applying professional news values.

This claim is presented in the form of a flow diagram and is investigated using qualitative content analysis of the coverage of four events in three different countries (the USA, Britain and Israel). The four events, which were all presented as foreign news, were defined as political violence based on an observational definition.

The theory which is empirically tested and presented in this article can help us to understand the coverage of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and further our understanding of how events were, and still are, covered as foreign news in general, and, in particular, how political violence is covered as foreign news.

KEY WORDS: foreign news, gatekeepers, national identity, political violence, terrorism

Introduction

Following the accelerated technological development of the 1990s, which left its mark on the world communication map, and the changes in the global economy and international relations, a question has arisen which this article seeks to answer. The question relates to whether these changes have affected foreign news coverage or whether the criteria applied by the ‘gatekeepers’, i.e.
the correspondents, news agencies and news editors, in their selection and presentation of foreign news have remained the same.

In attempting to explore this question, the study examines the case of political violence as foreign news. Political violence should be very useful in helping us to answer this question, since it provides the best examples of what news theories consider the essence of news, in general, and foreign news, in particular. Thus, if the developments in media technology and the changes in international relations, economics and the professional training of western journalists override journalist and editor identification with their own nation state, then we should find similarities in the coverage (selection and presentation) of stories involving political violence, by the western (elite) media.

However, if a journalist applies a national frame of reference to an event involving political violence, then the coverage of the event (if it is covered at all) will vary accordingly.

Moreover, before journalists submit their reports on political violence in the international arena, they first define whatever has happened either as a specific type of political violence, e.g. war, terrorism, political assassination, rioting or violent demonstrations, or as violence with no political characteristics, e.g. a bomb explosion, violent clashes, etc. Once a journalist has defined what has happened as a specific type of political violence, a second definition is immediately required, when the journalist must decide whether the war, etc., that s/he is covering is ‘our war’ or ‘theirs’, ‘our terrorism’ or ‘theirs’, etc. Thereafter, professional norms become subordinate to the national identity of the reporting correspondent. The journalist’s definition of an event – as ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’ – determines whether the event is selected by the journalist and editor as news and how it will be covered (the suggested flow of decisions by the journalists and editors appears later as a flow diagram).

In order to substantiate the suggested flow of decisions, a qualitative content analysis was carried out of the coverage of four events in three countries in which these events were classed by the researcher as foreign news. The three countries were the United States, Britain and Israel. The four events were categorized as ‘political violence’ based on three factors: (1) the nature of the event (2) its aim and (3) who was targeted.

First, I wish to present two viewpoints on the question of how foreign news is defined and covered: (a) the view which sees foreign news as a product of journalistic professional definitions and internal (media outlet) constraints; and (b) the view which sees foreign news as a product of external factors – political, economic and technological.

Regarding the main question of this article, I will explain why these viewpoints do not offer a complete answer to the question of why foreign
news coverage did not change despite the multiple, far-reaching changes of the late 20th century.

The empirically tested theory discussed here can help our study of the coverage of September 11 and subsequent events (the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and aid us in understanding how events were and still are covered as foreign news and, specifically, how political violence is covered as foreign news.

A brief examination of news definitions of political violence and terrorism is followed by a presentation of the research question and an analysis of the method and findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

**Theoretical framework and literature review**

**Globalization and foreign news flow**

As a result of globalization trends and the emergence of supranational or global media corporations, conflicting claims have arisen regarding the effects of world media flow. According to cultural imperialism proponents, the flow is in one direction while, global culture advocates argue, the flow is in several directions (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991). Whatever the case, the broad consensus among researchers since the 1980s is that because of developments on the world media map and the growth of new media technologies, a reassessment of foreign news flow is needed (Stevenson and Cole, 1984a; Fenby, 1986; Gonzenbach et al., 1992). Apparently, while news organizations use new technologies to communicate information, they nevertheless tackle foreign news from a local angle (Fenby, 1986). Other researchers support this claim (Stevenson and Cole, 1984a, b; Stevenson and Gaddy, 1984; Sreberny and Stevenson, 1999; Chang and Lee, 1992; Caliendo et al., 1999; Nossek, 2000; Golan and Wanta, 2003).

In addition to this research, which has explored the effect of these changes on the world map with respect to editing considerations, it is also worth considering other arguments and results relating to the limited impact of globalization. The reason is that one should not totally ignore the role of the nation state, which, although it has lost its status, still affects the environment in which the media institutions function – either through legislation or on a social and cultural level (Nossek and Adoni, 1996, forthcoming; Curran and Park, 2000). Furthermore, the effect ascribed to global networks and TV channels (known as the CNN effect) has, in fact, been identified as limited and dependent on administration policy: policy changes ultimately lead to alterations in news coverage and media impact alters according to the tenor of foreign policy (Livingstone, 1997).
The arguments relating to the absence of change in the nature of foreign news and the continuing presence of domestic editing considerations are, I believe, inextricably linked to the role of the nation state. Support for this is found in Tunstall’s (1977) early insights. Tunstall argues that despite the import and export of news and other communication products and because of the dominant position of American media organizations in the world, every country has three media levels: international, local-ethnic and national, which exist side by side. The national media is a kind of hybrid consisting of domestic news combined with international news which, according to Tunstall, will become the most important and dominant of the three levels.

**Foreign news – journalists and editors as local ‘gatekeepers’**

As with news theory, which is divided into groups such as news values and functional, critical and normative professional models (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Nossek, 1990), foreign news research also proposes several key arguments, which I will now briefly describe and analyze.

A basic concept in foreign news studies suggests that journalists and editors are responsible for news selection and refers to them as ‘gatekeepers’. Accordingly, journalists apply a set of norms to their professional practice. Journalists work for media organizations, which have their own priorities, operate in a network of other organizations and are part of a larger social organization, namely the institution of the media, which interacts with, and is affected by, other social institutions. Shoemaker’s (1991: 75) description of the process is the most comprehensive: ‘none of these actors – the individual, the routine, the organization, or the social institution – can escape that fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system’. In the case of foreign news, part of the process is also that a relatively small number of journalists act as the gatekeepers, coordinating the flow of foreign news (Cohen et al., 1995).

When we analyze how the gatekeepers function regarding foreign news coverage, we realize that the broader cultural-domestic environment that influences their professional work cannot be ignored. Normative professional theory sees this environment as one of the internal or external forces that shape the news. Accordingly, the journalist’s domestic viewpoint is inseparable from his or her professional norms and considerations. Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) seminal study was the first to point out that the news journalists deliver is shaped by a mixture of both internal and external constraints. ¹

In their study (also based on Galtung and Ruge), Westerståhl and Johansson (1994) highlight the relationship between news and ideology in news-reporting. Subsequent studies have also sought to map the features and
factors that render an event newsworthy. These studies suggest that a country’s local editing preferences call for coverage of countries sharing a geographical, political or cultural affinity (Rosengren, 1974; Chang and Lee, 1992; Sreberny and Stevenson, 1999; Wu, 2000). Thus, we find evidence of cultural filtering in the context of foreign news coverage (Stevenson and Cole, 1984a). Even Paterson (1999), who makes claims in his study for an external factor effect (the reliance of international broadcasting organizations on material from large news agencies greatly affects which news stories are broadcast), found that the bias in foreign news coverage produced by established broadcasting networks is usually consistent with the foreign policy of the network’s government. Studies of the coverage of terrorism in the foreign news support these observations of a domestic culture filter (Simmons and Lowry, 1990; Weimann and Winn, 1994; Van Belle, 2000). In fact, it is possible to refer to the prominence of ‘local’ (domestic) terrorism (Nossek, 1990).

According to normative professional theory, the domestic filter is considered as a professional requirement, which it is incumbent on journalists to apply when addressing their particular audience (Gurevitch et al., 1991; Cohen et al., 1995; Youichi, 1995; Nossek, 2000).

Critical approaches to the study of news also examine the question of domestic bias in foreign news coverage but see this as indicative of collaboration between the social elites in an effort to preserve the status quo. The critical approach thus regards the bias as consonant with the interests of the government of the nation state. The Glasgow University Media Group study (1985), which examined press coverage in a crisis situation, the Falklands War, also supports the idea that the politico-social context and journalists’ understanding of their nation’s interests will influence their role perception. Critical theory researchers, like their professional theory colleagues, believe that one cannot separate professional considerations from the domestic/national climate in which the journalist functions.

Foreign news: journalists and editors as universal human rights ‘gatekeepers’

According to the radical-democratic critique, the media serve ‘social ends’ despite the tension that exists between such ideological ends and professional journalistic values (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). The ‘propaganda model’, which comprises economic and political news ‘filters’, suggests that in order for journalists to survive, they must be able to adapt to the system’s demands. ‘The media are indeed free – for those who adopt the principles which the “social ends” demand’ (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 304). Journalists generally handle any tensions between their journalistic values and the need to
meet national ends by having a belief system such as patriotism. Inevitably, there are exceptions and journalists who lack the ‘right attitude’ earn themselves labels like ‘irresponsible’ and ‘ideological’.

Studies of journalists’ role perceptions indicate a close but also distinct relationship between a journalist’s professional attitudes and domestic-cultural attitudes. Shamir’s (1988) study on the role perceptions of Israeli journalists serving the quality press found that a high percentage was ready to place the nation’s morale and image, as well as a broad definition of the national interest, before their own professional values: more than half the study sample felt they needed to consider the country’s morale. Furthermore, the journalists in the sample found no contradiction between freedom of the press and social responsibility. This points to a perception of national interests that are not in conflict with professional attitudes. Similar conclusions were reached by Wei et al. (1996), whose study examined journalists’ attitudes to professional values, perceptions and roles, in a comparative Russian–American study. They found that journalists adopt a relative view of their profession influenced by various historical and cultural traditions and defined by their political, economic and social environment. These studies appear to support Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) claim that journalists are willing to concede professional norms to national interests. In fact, however, their findings show that journalists’ behavior is actually context dependent.

Earlier research studies show that not only is media news selection affected by domestic factors but that the nature of the coverage is also affected by such factors (Entman, 1991; Kaid et al., 1993; Grundmann et al., 2000). Thus, it is possible to present the same data in different ways (Roeh and Cohen, 1992). One important example of this can be found in the study by Cohen et al. (1990) of television news coverage of social conflict. The many differences in American network coverage of the intifada and their coverage of the Gulf War are further evidence of this. The nature of the coverage shows that the media treat an event differently depending on whether the conflict is internal (i.e. whether it concerns the media’s nation state) or external (it does not concern the media’s nation state) (Liebes, 1992; Cohen et al., 1993). Moreover, in the news coverage of terrorism, different myths are woven into the coverage depending on the degree of affinity with the audience culture (Berkowitz and Nossek, 2001; Nossek et al., 2003).

**Political violence as foreign news: a case study**

Political violence has several definitions and meanings. This is due to differences in viewpoint and interpretation. Legal, political, psychological and moral theories all offer definitions, while social scientists offer definitions for
use as tools in empirical research. Political violence or, in other words, violence in a political context is a broad definition encompassing a wide spectrum of behaviors and events, ranging from terrorism and war to political protest, and all involving some form of conflict. Political violence is invariably employed by a person or group with a political goal opposing a government or political rival. Political violence also carries a message, which is why media coverage is important for those behind it, both as an end in itself and as a means to other ends. This is very clear in the case of protest but also pertinent with regard to terrorism (Picard, 1993). References to this appear in other empirical definitions of terrorism, such as Wilkinson’s (2000: 12): ‘It (terrorism) is used to create and exploit a climate of fear among a wider target group than the immediate victims of the violence, and to publicize a cause’.

The media’s function in covering terrorism is, as already mentioned, important to the terrorist, the government, the audience and the media. However, it seems that not all events which researchers define as political violence are regarded as such by the media even if they meet the criteria for ‘newsworthiness’, e.g. drama, negativity, tragedy, pain, etc. (Kelly and Mitchell, 1984; Nossek, 1990, 1994; Weimann and Brosius, 1991).

Furthermore, analysis of the impact that factors relating to news value have on the coverage of protest movements shows that we cannot ascribe a lack of coverage simply to these factors. A triangular relationship exists between protest, politics and the media, whereby news coverage of protest is shaped by political factors and journalists’ professional routines. The grounds and political context for the protest determine whether it attracts news coverage (Oliver and Maney, 2000). Oliver and Maney analyzed protests that were covered as domestic news. If the political context is what determines whether a protest receives coverage, one could speculate that the same might apply to foreign news. In the case of foreign news, because the political context is on the level of the nation state, news factors cannot adequately explain why a protest on foreign soil received or did not receive coverage. We need to place the protest or other act of political violence in a national context in order to explain why an event is defined as news and how it is covered.

To summarize: while proponents of the professional and critical theories of foreign news coverage do not distinguish between bias of a cultural, political and national nature and general professional considerations, radical critique sees them as separate dimensions. Thus, journalists can choose whether to adopt a universal professional perspective or a domestic national one. It is with this question of the tension between the two perspectives that my argument is concerned.

I wish to argue that, as in the professional approach mentioned earlier, journalists and editors ‘wear a pair of domestic glasses’ when dealing with
foreign news. These glasses, however, are not an inseparable part of the professional considerations they apply. Like the radical critique, I maintain that journalists and editors have two distinct ‘frames’ regarding foreign news coverage – a national ‘frame’ and a professional ‘frame’. I believe that the frame which the gatekeepers apply is dependent on several factors: (1) the type of event (some form of political violence, namely war, terrorism, political assassination, etc.); (2) the location of the event (is the locality relevant to the domestic politics and foreign policy or international relations of the journalist and media’s nation state?); and (3) the event context (the timing of the event and its local and international context). The definition of an event is, therefore, dictated by these three variables and by the domestic-national ‘glasses’ worn by the gatekeepers. Only when the event is defined as either ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’, can the journalist decide whether to apply a professional or a national-patriotic ‘frame’ when covering the event.

This argument can be displayed and analyzed using a flow diagram of the gatekeepers’ decision-making processes vis-a-vis the coverage of political violence (see Figure 1).

To answer the research question, i.e. which factors dictate the nature of foreign news coverage given to political violence, the article poses five questions. These questions are based on the theoretical literature and empirical studies regarding definitions of news and foreign news and the coverage of political violence and terrorism in the news. The five questions are:

1. (a) Is the political violence that one country defines as news also news in another country?
   (b) What do the similarities and differences in the coverage of political violence by the media tell us about the definition of news?
2. How does the type of event and its location affect whether it is defined as news?
3. Do all events of a certain type anywhere in the world receive the same coverage or are some events only defined as news if they happen in certain places?
4. What is the relationship between the party responsible for political violence, the target of the violence and the definition of an event as news and newsworthy?
5. How does the new media environment, i.e. global television and the internet, affect how foreign news is defined?

**Methodology**

To study the research argument and research questions empirically, the study used data formerly collected for a large study of foreign news conducted in September 1995. One reason why the data are relevant today is that they relate
to the mid-1990s and can, therefore, offer us insights into the impact of global trends on foreign news. Another reason is that the process of data collection enables us to investigate how different countries covered the same event, while controlling all other relevant variables apart from the national identity of the media professionals reporting the event. Thus, the data could be treated as quasi-experimental, i.e. as an approximation of laboratory conditions.

I also had the aim of examining different types of events along an axis of political violence (with protest at one end and war at the other). The vehicle that presented itself was a study initiated by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), which examined foreign news coverage in some 40 countries – using the same time frame (see Sreberny and Stevenson, 1999; Wu, 2000). The type of foreign news coverage studied
fulfilled two of my criteria, namely they provided (1) a variety of events involving political violence over a short period and (2) no differences in the political and international context that might affect the results.

The following events, which took place in the first two weeks of September 1995, were chosen for the study:

**Event 1:** NATO bombardment of Bosnia. On 5 September 1995, in an attempt to force the Serbs to end the siege on Sarajevo and withdraw their heavy artillery, NATO bombers attacked Serbian army emplacements in Bosnia. On 14 September 1995, America sent Assistant Secretary of Defense, Richard Holbrook, to discuss a peace agreement with Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs. The NATO attacks drew fierce criticism from Russia and, on 12 September 1995, the US Deputy Secretary of State was sent to Moscow to calm matters. This event fits the definition of war, being an armed conflict between ethnic groups involving their armies and intervention by military forces of sovereign states (Carruthers, 2000).

**Event 2:** Explosion at Jewish school, Lyon, France. On 7 September 1995, a car bomb exploded close to the gate of the Jewish school in Lyon, minutes before 700 pupils left their classrooms at the end of the day. Fourteen people were wounded in the explosion, among them three children; a delay in the bell signaling home time prevented greater tragedy. The explosion was one of several attacks on French Jewry. The event is defined as political terrorism – the bomb was planted by an oppositional group fighting a government: its purpose was not simply to injure the schoolchildren but to reach a larger target audience with a specific message (Nossek, 1990; Picard, 1993; Wilkinson, 2000).

**Event 3:** Nuclear test by France in the Pacific. France conducted a series of mid-ocean nuclear tests in the Mururoa area of the South Pacific, the first detonated on 5 September 1995. President Chirac’s decision to hold the tests sparked a wave of protest across several countries, led by countries in the region, namely Australia and New Zealand. Protest demonstrations were also organized on the island of Tahiti by environmentalists and members of the Polynesian independence movement to protest against French rule. Serious damage was caused to property on the island, occasioning a police response. French soldiers were dispatched to the area. The demonstrations on Tahiti are defined here as violent political protest, both because of the type of action (disturbing
the public peace) and the character of the instigators (movements for independence) acting against the establishment (Tarrow, 1983; Sprintzak, 1995).

Event 4: Bomb explosion at the BBC bureau, Srinigar, Kashmir. On 7 September 1995, a bomb exploded in the BBC bureau in Srinigar. Three people were injured in the blast, including the BBC regional correspondent. A television cameraman who was wounded in the incident died later of his wounds. Several other attacks in the region by pro-Pakistan Kashmiri separatists took place at about the same time, including the kidnapping of several western hostages. The incident is also defined here as political terrorism due to the nature of the incident and its goals. This case is an interesting example of journalists’ involvement, this time as a direct victim of the act.

Choosing the media

To investigate the research questions, newspapers regarded as ‘elite’ or ‘quality press’ and as the finest models of Western journalism were chosen. The decision to focus on printed rather than on broadcast media resulted from the fact that, in an era of advanced communication technologies, newspapers still provide a basis and model for professional journalistic norms across all media. Another relevant parameter of the quality press is the prominence it gives to foreign news, in particular political and international news.

Newspapers from the USA, Britain and Israel were chosen since these are countries with an indirect national connection to some events and no direct connection to others. It is important to note that none of the incidents occurred in any of the selected countries, which means that they should all be foreign news for the three countries. The following newspapers were selected: The New York Times, The Times (London) and an Israeli newspaper, Ha’aretz. All three newspapers are considered elite, veteran and prominent publications in their field. The New York Times and The Times are regarded as role models for newspapers worldwide (Tunstall, 1977: 28) and Ha’aretz is considered quality press in Israel (Roeh, 1994).

For each event, each of the newspapers was scoured for several days, searching for relevant news items. Because the French nuclear test and the war in Bosnia were not isolated incidents but ongoing operations, the analysis focused on ‘climactic’ events as far as possible. In contrast, because the car bomb outside the Jewish school and the explosion at the BBC office in Kashmir were isolated incidents, the newspapers were only searched on the
first day of coverage, i.e. the day after the incident. Table 1 displays the number of items found on the dates relevant to the various events. The total number of items for a given event provided the data on which the findings were based.

**Qualitative content analysis method**

The first factor to be evaluated was the *journalistic definition* of the coverage. This was chosen because not all acts of terrorism or political violence are newsworthy, i.e. defined as news. To qualify as newsworthy, an event requires drama: injury to civilians and damage to property is simply not enough (Nossek, 1990). Nevertheless, the coverage of a dramatic type of event does not guarantee that the media definition will coincide with the observational research definition of the type of event. Thus, this criterion concerns how the newspaper defines the story – as war, terrorism, freedom fighting, bombardment, an explosion, etc.

Roeh and Cohen’s (1992) research, which defines ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’ in television news items, was chosen as the basis for this research criterion. Their discussion of the application of professional considerations versus the application of the national viewpoint brought new criteria to the analysis of journalistic definitions of newsworthiness. When we examine the

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper / event</th>
<th>Date of search (1995)</th>
<th><em>New York Times</em></th>
<th><em>The Times</em></th>
<th><em>Ha’aretz</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATO bombardment of Bosnia</td>
<td>13–15 Sept.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French nuclear tests in Mururoa</td>
<td>8–10 Sept.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car bomb explosion at Jewish school, Lyon, France</td>
<td>6–8 Sept.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomb planted in BBC offices in Srinigar, Kashmir</td>
<td>8–10 Sept.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*a* Days that were climactic in terms of American involvement.

*b* Here too, we chose the ‘climactic’ event – immediately after the first test, as protest internationally and on Tahiti grew more intense.

*c* This one-time event was checked from the first day to the last day of coverage.

*d* Another one-time event but in this case, when the newspapers were first examined for the Kashmir explosion, we found that the story had not been covered. The search for items was, therefore, extended until 15 September.
definitions of ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’, we see they can also be applied to the press, as in this study.

According to Roeh and Cohen (1992), journalists use three kinds of rhetoric in their writing: (1) objective rhetoric, (2) fact-based rhetoric and (3) neutral rhetoric. Whether a news story is ‘open’ or ‘closed’ will depend on the type of rhetoric used.

From this analysis, we can obtain the following criteria for deciding whether a news story is ‘open’ or ‘closed’:

• **Balance**: Is only one position presented? Does the rival viewpoint get the same amount of exposure?

• **Fact/commentary**: Is the report fact or partly commentary?

• **Neutrality**: Is the coverage biased toward one of the parties or does it maintain objectivity and avoid partiality?

• **Labels**: Are the adjectives emotive or neutral? Labels can indicate the journalistic professional frame (Entman, 1991).

• **Historical references**: Does it link the event to past events in the report text, with source citations?

Other criteria for professional definitions of newsworthiness and for indicating how open or closed the coverage was were added to the examination:

• **Scope of coverage**: How many items on the news pages were devoted to the subject? How many days did the coverage last?

• **Prominence**: Where were the items located – initial pages or inside pages? (Nossek, 1990). Position in a newspaper is a criterion for measuring newsworthiness (Servaes, 1991). According to the literature, if a story has a more national frame of reference, it will generally be defined as domestic news as opposed to foreign news and vice versa.

• **Story source**: Who supplied the newspaper with the story? Where is the source of the story located? This criterion is important both for measuring the newsworthiness of an event and as a factor affecting the news frame of the story (Servaes, 1991: 32).

• **Information sources**: Who are the parties referred to directly or indirectly in the story as sources of information, i.e. secondary sources? Who are the story’s spokespersons (direct and indirect)? The choice of sources is important in terms of the frame of coverage (Liebes, 1992).

• **Emphases**: Which aspects of the story are highlighted in the report? What is the story’s main point/main themes?

In summary: how ‘open’ or ‘closed’ a story is depends on how balanced and factual its presentation. Thus, the fewer historical allusions and emotive labels there are, and the greater the variety of sources, the more open the story will be and vice versa.
Findings

To understand the relationship between the journalistic definition of an event and its coverage, the findings have been summarized according to each newspaper’s coverage of each event.

Story 1: The NATO bombardment of Bosnia

All newspapers defined the NATO bombardment of Bosnia as part of a regional war. This appears to be a case of ‘their’ war, since the theater of conflict is the Balkans and because it involves local actors – Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, the UN and NATO. On closer scrutiny, however, a different position can be detected in the story. Thus, while the war is actually ‘their’ war, the story in essence addresses issues of concern to ‘our’ country.

The New York Times

Analysis of The New York Times coverage shows that even though the war is indeed ‘theoretically’ their war, it is nevertheless ‘our’ war when we identify the sources of information for the story and where those sources are, in fact, located. Thus, we find that, whereas the story contains information sent from the theater of war, it is actually being reported from inside the United States. Thus, American sources such as the Pentagon and Washington are widely used. That the event is not only ‘theirs’ but ‘ours’ too is evident from the coverage components: the coverage is extensive – both the scope and duration – and although an obvious journalistic frame of reference renders the story ‘closed’, the American national angle affects the way in which it is ‘closed’. This can clearly be seen from the way America’s involvement and the Russian stance are described. The text describes the antagonistic Russian stance and the commentary leaves little room for uncertainty: Russia is depicted as having lost her influence at the end of the Cold War and her stance is interpreted as an attempt to recoup international standing. The agreement reached with the help of American mediation is represented as an American diplomatic victory, which gains in stature against the background of failed attempts to reach agreement. Emphasis on the NATO attack and the refugee problem draws attention to how important American involvement is. Reference to the Second World War stresses the picture of America as Europe’s savior and ally, while references to the Communist regime in the region carry associations with the Cold War and imply that the United States is a force for ‘Good’. This is evident from the use of expressions like ‘military forces’, ‘peace initiatives’ and ‘war criminals’. In the war context, America stands ready to help countries that have managed to banish the Communist gloom. As mentioned earlier, defin-
ing the bombardment as part of the war makes the news story closed (due to
the abundance of commentary, the lack of balance and neutrality and the use
of historical allusions). However, the additional journalistic definition of the
story as ‘ours’ is what dictates how it is closed.

The Times
The Times also awarded the story extensive coverage. Here too, the news items
were very prominent, although the extent and prominence of the coverage
was less than in The New York Times. While the journalistic definition (as war)
is similar to that seen in The New York Times, because Britain is less involved
in the war, the story is more open (the reporting is factual, more balance is
evident between the various positions and there is a wider variety of sources –
UN officials, western diplomats, senior American officials, Bosnian and
Croatian government representatives, local Bosnians). The British paper puts a
lot of emphasis on the Russian–American angle. This can be seen from the fact
that the report is from the paper’s Washington and Russian correspondents. In
the British paper, the American mediated agreement is viewed more skepti-
cally. The refugee issue is also covered, though the British paper talks about
their return home following the local army’s victory. Compare this with The
New York Times, where the report stresses the flight of the refugees. At first
glance, the story appears to be open: relatively factual, relatively balanced
reporting, no emotive historical references and more use of neutral labels
(Bosnian army, Croatian forces). However, the concluding commentary is
skeptical over the American involvement and stresses the local nature of what
is happening: this is ‘their’ war and we don’t need to interfere in it and make
it ‘ours’.

Ha’aretz
Ha’aretz, the Israeli paper, also covered the subject relatively extensively.
However, unlike the other papers, Ha’aretz used Western news agencies
(Reuters, AP and AFP), whose reports quoted similar sources to those referred
to in the other two papers. This indicates a decision not to dispatch a
respondent to the region and shows the paper’s attitude to the war as
‘theirs’. Also relevant is the low profile given to the story, compared with the
other two papers, where it was very prominent. Ha’aretz too defined the event
as war and covered it in a relatively factual, balanced way. It interprets Russian
opposition to the NATO attack as reflecting a keenness to re-establish her
influence abroad. This interpretation resembles the opinion of The New York
Times and shows the reporting country’s attitude toward the dispute between
the United States and Russia. The paper’s historical reference to the Gulf War
reflects a relatively pro-American stance. Accordingly, American intervention
is important for restoring order, a theme that is emphasized by the use of such terms as ‘Western Alliance’ and ‘peace initiative’. References to matters not mentioned in the other papers, namely to neo-Nazis and Muslim states (mentioned despite their obvious lack of relevance to Israel), are indirect references to the Gulf War coverage frame, a war into which Israel was dragged unwillingly and America stood by her. The story in Ha'aretz is ostensibly ‘open’, though some of its elements serve to ‘close’ it and point to a perception of the USA as an ally in crisis, which explains why Ha'aretz emphasizes the American position.

**Story 2: French nuclear test in the Pacific**

The second story that gained wide coverage in all three papers was the French nuclear test in the Pacific and the wave of protest in response. Both The New York Times and The Times were not satisfied with defining the event as a protest, they made the struggle for Tahitian independence a significant element of that protest. Both papers covered this story widely – both time-wise and in quantity. The story was covered by correspondents in Tahiti and Paris.

*The New York Times*

*The New York Times* carried items on this story on the inside pages, hence the story's main definition as foreign news. The coverage, however, does not remain ‘open’: it makes no reference to France's position, only to the protests from the various countries, the struggle for Tahitian independence and reports of ensuing chaos and police violence. Much of the commentary addresses France’s international reputation, which was undermined following widespread criticism of French policy and action from other countries. *The New York Times* describes the test as an attempt by France to boost her international standing. Historical references to Hiroshima reflect an ‘our’ position on the subject, despite its classification as foreign news.

*The Times*

*The Times* defined the story in terms of protest and the struggle for independence. The story had more coverage and even greater prominence than in *The New York Times*. The paper also carried items on the story on its first pages, showing that it too had embraced the story as ‘ours’. This explains the closed nature of the coverage, which was marked by considerable editorial commentary and emphasis on the threat to French colonial rule in the region and France’s isolation in the international arena. References to France's colonial past appear in the commentary and historical references are made. France is
accused of forcibly trying to quash the call for independence, of taking an anachronistic approach to decision-making and of trampling the sovereignty of other states in the region. Criticism inside France regarding the decision is also reported, highlighting the lack of balance.

This story, which ostensibly has no bearings on Britain, is clearly closed because of how The Times defined it. The fact that The Times reported the events as local protest against an outside power fits in with British attitudes on the subject of nuclear testing. The emphasis on France’s isolation (in both The Times and The New York Times) is clearly seen from the wide platform given to the various countries involved and the absence of a French side to the story. Note that both newspapers reported their own government’s official reaction to the event. Both American and British government responses were extremely muted, even neutral. For example, Britain’s Prime Minister referred to it as a French domestic affair. Given the official responses, it is interesting that the coverage is so closed and non-neutral. This highlights the fact that the newspaper’s national viewpoint is based on a definition of the event that is not necessarily consistent with the government position.

Ha’aretz

Ha’aretz covered the event extensively, though not as much as the other papers. It also published the story on the front page, although confining it to smaller pieces at the end of the page. Note, that in contrast to The New York Times and The Times, which both had correspondents on Tahiti, Ha’aretz mainly relied on news agencies for news about the island. Ha’aretz also defined the event slightly differently. Although it was defined as protest – i.e. protest by both nearby countries and environmentalists, there was considerable emphasis on the test itself. Because the subject was a nuclear test, the coverage was relatively closed. France was presented as power seeking and its position received less coverage than the protests of the countries opposing the test. However, the coverage was factual and more balanced than the coverage in either The Times or The New York Times. It was also relatively neutral, since it did not describe the Tahitian protestors with much sympathy. In fact, the environmentalists’ actions are portrayed as lacking in seriousness, which somewhat ‘opens’ the story. Although Ha’aretz refers to Israel’s official response together with that of other countries, it mostly defines the event as ‘theirs’. The reporting is closed because the event is defined as a nuclear test, which itself rules out the possibility of it being ‘ours’. Here, historical references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki contribute to the emphasis on the definition of the event as a nuclear test.

The remaining events in this analysis – the explosion at the Jewish school in Lyon and the bomb at the BBC bureau in Kashmir – clearly show how the
journalistic definition has a pronounced effect on the frame (professional or national) in which the events are reported.

**Story 3: The car bomb outside the Jewish school in Lyon**

The car bomb outside the Jewish school in Lyon was defined as terrorism by both *The New York Times* and *Ha'aretz*. *The Times* did not define the incident as terrorism, which meant that its coverage was ‘open’ in every respect: the report was very factual; there was no reference to who planted the bomb; and almost no reference to those wounded in the attack.

*The New York Times and The Times*

*The New York Times* coverage was relatively open: the report was factual and its lack of prominence shows that it had been defined as foreign news (its profile in *The Times* was also low, i.e. it was similarly treated as foreign news there). Both papers published just one item about the attack, which was covered by their Paris correspondent, and both used French sources (*The Times* quoted just one source, *The New York Times* had several). The definition of the event as ‘terrorism’ gave the coverage a closed dimension. However, there was no emphasis on the injured party, apart from a single, isolated reference to the Jewish context, which made the item relatively neutral. This is substantiated by the two sources quoted: the Rabbi of Lyon and an Islamic organization. *The Times’* report was ‘clean’ and neutral; there was no standpoint, emphasis or use of labels and attributes.

*Ha'aretz*

The coverage in *Ha'aretz* was completely different (even though the attack was covered by a correspondent in Paris using only French sources). The attack was clearly defined as terrorism – specifically, terrorism against Jews – hence its prominence. Because the paper defines the incident as ‘our’ terrorist attack (an attack on us), the report is very closed. We see this from the emphasis on Jewish community sources, the imbalance of the report, the use of epithets like ‘Algeria’s most bloody terrorist organization’, ‘an armed Islamic group’ and ‘terrible tragedy’ and, above all, its references and links to recent and ancient Jewish history. (Note that the other papers contained no historical references.)

**Story 4: Explosion at the BBC offices in Srinagar, Kashmir**

This case demonstrates clearly the impact that the definition of an event has on its coverage. *The Times*, the only paper out of the three that covered the
event, did not define it as terrorism. Thus, the explosion was foreign news only and had little prominence. The scant coverage (two items) was ‘open’, i.e. factual, in that it adhered to the details and did not present the sides to the argument. However, the paper used the event as the peg for a story about the challenges facing journalists in that region. This angle, which another item takes even further, examined the problems journalists encounter when trying to do their professional work. The report explained that threats against journalists made objective coverage a problem and terrorized correspondents in the region. Here we have a position that clearly relates to the journalist as a professional individual, alongside absolute neutrality regarding the actual blast. We can speculate that because this event was not defined as terrorism, the other papers decided not to cover it.

**Discussion**

With regard to the research questions, we can summarize the study findings as follows:

RQ 1 *Is the political violence that one country defines as news, also news in another country, and what do the similarities and differences in the coverage of political violence by the media tell us about the definition of news?*

We found that the three national, quality newspapers examined did not define every event of political violence the same way. This divergence can also be seen in the way in which the story is covered and the extent to which it is ‘closed’. Once an event has been defined as war, terrorism or violent protest, the question is: is it ‘our’ event or ‘theirs’? However, when an event is defined as neither theirs nor ours, its coverage remains ‘open’ and it conforms to the professional criteria for defining foreign news coverage. The best example of this is the coverage of the explosion in Kashmir. From this incident, we see that not all acts of political violence are necessarily defined as news, which corroborates Nossek’s (1990) finding.

RQ 2 *How does the type of event and its location affect whether it is defined as news?*

In contrast to earlier studies, we found that the location of an event was not especially relevant to defining an event as news. The professional frame and criteria that make an event news (see Galtung and Ruge, 1965, for example) only go part of the way towards explaining how the event location and type of event affect whether it is defined as news or not but do not account at all for the frame of the coverage. The present findings demonstrate
that the national frame can answer this question. The criterion of relevance too, which can explain why an American paper covered the war in Bosnia (American involvement) but not the explosion in India, does not explain why, for example, the paper took a particular stance in its coverage of the events in the Pacific. This points to the existence of a national frame, which stems from the definition of the event as an event involving protest against the colonialist behavior of a significant country. The popular explanation in the literature on the subject of the press adopting and reflecting a governmental position fails to account for the closed coverage of the nuclear tests since the actual report states that the American administration avoided taking a clear position, whereas the paper actually adopted a national stance in spite of its government’s position.

RQ 3  Do all events of a certain type anywhere in the world receive the same coverage or are some events defined as news only if they happen in different places?

The findings also demonstrate that only some political violence and terrorism become foreign news. Once again, the key lies in the predefinition of the event as a certain type of political violence and if this event then is ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’ according to the national frame adopted by the reporter and the editorial board for the coverage of the event. Differences in the coverage of the attack on the BBC bureau in Srinagar and the Jewish school in Lyon illustrate this very clearly. However, this contrasts with the popular argument that an act of terrorism guarantees the perpetrators automatic publicity and ultimately serves their ends. With Lyon and Srinagar, neither the terrorists’ demands nor the political background to their action received any publicity – apart from a bit of conjecture by the reporting journalists themselves.

RQ 4  What is the relationship between the party responsible for political violence, the target of the violence and the definition of an event as news and newsworthy?

From the findings, we see that the victim and the target that he or she represents have an influence on the coverage and the nature of the coverage. However, as we saw, the perpetrator has no control over whether an event will receive any publicity and certainly no control over its content and nature. This can clearly be seen from the analysis of the demonstrations against France’s nuclear tests and with regard to the bomb attacks in Lyon and Srinagar.

RQ 5  How does the new media environment, i.e. global television and the internet, affect how foreign news is defined?
As Paterson (1999) argued, and Fenby (1986) before him, it is generally assumed that such wide access to new technologies will most likely lead to uniformity in reporting. According to the study findings, regarding the quality press at least, the global character of sources has no bearing on consistency in reporting. Thus, according to the analysis of the findings relating to the coverage of the four events by the three newspapers, it is empirically valid to claim that the definition of an event as belonging to the frame of war, terrorism or other type of political violence is responsible for its definition as foreign news. The definition of an event as political violence causes the reporter and editorial board to adopt a stance and define the political violence as ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’. Because an event is defined as theirs or ours, it is then covered as either an open story or a closed one. I suggest that the reason for this distinction is that the national position takes precedence over professional norms whenever an event is defined as ‘our’ political violence and that the professional frame of reference takes precedence whenever political violence is defined as ‘theirs’ or is not framed as a specific type of political violence (e.g. war, terrorist attack, violent protest, etc.).

These findings complement earlier ones concerning the selection of events and their presentation as foreign news. The present findings show that the national identity of journalists and editors influences definition during the selection of political violence as news. This overrides western journalistic professional norms, which previous research has shown to dominate the selection and presentation of foreign news (Sreberny and Stevenson, 1999). The national frame is an addition to the journalistic news frames and cultural frames, which mainly explain the domestication and localization of stories (Berkowitz and Nossek, 2001; Nossek et al., 2003). At least in terms of political violence and terrorism, this frame exists and is extremely obvious. It precedes all other frames and dictates which line the coverage will take and which other journalistic and cultural frames will be selected. In light of the findings, we can theorize that this frame exists in foreign news coverage of other kinds of events – it is very evident in sport (Nossek, 2000) and perhaps in other types of events as well.

Based on their study of domestic news, Oliver and Maney (2000) have argued that political context is what influences news coverage. We can, therefore, speculate that, in a broader sense, this context can affect whether an event is defined as news in the domestic arena as well as with respect to foreign news. Indeed, earlier studies of journalists’ professional perceptions offer support for this idea and conclude that the professional viewpoint is a relative concept defined by its social, economic and political context (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Shamir, 1988; Wei et al., 1996). To examine this
question specifically, further study is needed to address the methodological issue of how to isolate these attitudes for journalists whose professional definitions prevent them from directly relating to national frames of reference, which take precedence over professional frames of reference, at least in cases where the government of their nation state is somehow involved in some kind of political violence.

Regarding the technological changes to global communication, we can further theorize that when dealing with such events, internet coverage is structured according to the national ties of whoever built and edited the website. The way even non-institutional or anti-institutional websites covered Israel’s Operation Defensive Shield might at least give an indication of this. Naturally, these claims must be empirically founded and be appropriate for future research examination. A future study of this nature should also investigate the impact of the internet on the attitudes of journalists working for the traditional media, both from the point of view of their use of sources and in terms of their address to their target audiences, i.e. knowing they are no longer a unique source of information and news.

Despite the spectacular changes in the world of global communication, the role of the nation state has not ended. Further to the arguments presented by Livingstone (1997) and by Curran and Park (2000), the results of this present study teach us that regardless of the changes on the political, economic and communication map at the end of the 20th century, when it comes to politics and international relations, foreign news is still a product of the existing frameworks of nationhood. The tragedy of 11/9 and its aftermath is a dramatic and clear example of political violence and terrorism gaining extensive coverage throughout the world. Use of the model presented here to examine the news coverage of these events and their aftermath can help to shed further light on the questions raised. This analysis is necessary.

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Notes

1 For a fresh, more contemporary discussion of some of Galtung and Ruge’s points, see also Harcup and O’Neill (2001).
Another support for this claim can be found in American studies that examined American media behavior during the Vietnam War (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1989).

References


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