American Journalism and International Relations: From the Early Republic to the Digital Era

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Foreign News Crisis

- TV networks cut bureaus by 50% plus
  - CBS: 1966 24 bureaus; 2004 8 correspondents
- Only 5 newspapers (4 in print) have bureaus abroad: *NY Times, LA Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor*
Why It Matters to IR, 
In Theory and Practice

- Inextricable link between international mass communication and international politics
  - Foreign policy/news media causality
  - News flow and technological infrastructure
- Proposed new framework: News media are crucial factor in IR by functioning (or dysfunctioning) as public arena where meanings for things literally foreign become understandable realities that, in turn, serve as basis for policy and action
  - Discourses about macroconcepts provide historically, culturally specific broad understandings within which policy can be made
Constructivist Approach to IR/Communication

- Discourses about national identities—including, by reflex, that of the United States—that the American press helps create and negotiate influence public expectations and, inevitably, U.S. foreign policies.

- No one, ordinary citizen or policymaker, can conceive and then pursue a course of action toward a foreign country that does not fit existing discourses about that country and the United States’ global role.
New Theoretical Model of Foreign News-Foreign Policy Nexus

A different kind of effect—

- News media provide an essential and unique locus for the negotiation/formation of discourses about the world
  - Discourses=collective frameworks that give meaning to material factors
- It is out of that ecology of discourses that constructions about the world become accepted as reality, which in turn influence policy and actions
- Critical professional implications: Correspondence, as the mediator between national discursive realms, can provide the germs of alternative paradigms
Methodological and Professional Implications

- Applying the framework: Recognize historical/cultural situatedness of international media discourses, follow links between knowledge formation and social processes.
- Causality: Discourses in foreign news are indicative of the range of possible, as well as implicitly excluded, outcomes.
  - Most foreign policy decisions made only within ecologies of discourses that emerge in news media content, among others.
- General-interest foreign news coverage essential to public interest.
  - If media help in “the social creation of the environment in which decision makers act” …
  - … dwindling coverage must entail less room for understanding, with catastrophic consequences for action.
Research Design

From the establishment of regular foreign correspondents in the 1830s to the profession’s endangered status in the 21st century,

- What discourses of the world have the American news media helped create over time?
  - Analysis of themes and scripts that identified three essential discursive formations: A generalized construction of the “other,” the non-American; the construction of American that it implies; specific constructions of the identity of covered countries/regions
- Do those discourses belong to the same paradigms that shaped foreign policy?
- What role did US media assume in international affairs – and what role should they assume in the future?

Method: 20 case studies each in 5 top newspapers/AP

- No wars with U.S. participation
- Variety of events (economic, social, political…)
- Variety of locales (China, Afghanistan, Germany, Mexico, South Africa …)
- Inclusion of both production (journalistic practices, ownership structures, governmental regulations) and reception (reader studies, public opinion)
- Total of over 2,000 stories selected for analysis
Translating Discourses:
A Cold War Example

One man, calling an American reporter to have dinner, was not put off when his friend said he would have to work. ‘We can’t have dinner,’ the American said. ‘Your country is falling apart.’

‘How about tomorrow?’ rejoined the Russian, unperturbed.


After sitting down in front of the camera, but before it began to roll, Gorbachev realized he’d forgotten to tuck a pen in the pocket of his black suit. So [CNN president Tom] Johnson fished from his own pocket a shiny black Mont Blanc ballpoint and handed it to the 60-year-old Soviet leader, who used it to sign the decree giving up his post as commander-in-chief and transferring authority over the country’s nuclear arsenal to Yeltsin ...

No US reporter was in Beijing during the siege, so newspapers relied on AP reports, letters by missionaries and soldiers, cables from their London correspondents, and their own or British correspondents in Shanghai.

Promised would cover story “as intelligently, consistently and accurately as is possible in the storm and stress of publishing in New York at 2 o’clock in the morning the news that it gathers in London as late as 6 o’clock the same morning”

News of Boxer rebellion on the front pages, even as editors lamented confusing and contradictory reports, lack of direct news.

Most editorials constructed images of “lust-maddened, ravenous Chinese mob” facing off foreigners who were “the elite, the noble, the cultured of the six most powerful and enlightened states of the modern world”

Reporters who had seen China wrote strikingly different stories: Chinese civilization “founded upon the respect of children for their parents, and upon the fundamental principle that education is a universal necessity”
Press as Educator: *New York Tribune* editorial note introducing a summary of the Boxer rebellion:

“[The events] are here briefly reviewed for the benefit of those readers of The Tribune who *did not pay that attention* to them which they would have done *had they appreciated* the grave historical importance which now attaches to them.”

Press as Diplomat: *New York Tribune* splashed on its entire front page news of a cable directly from Li Hongzhang, a high Qing official, stating that the foreign legations were safe:

The cable “had been appropriately sent to The Tribune, which the great Viceroy, in common with men of light and leading throughout the world, has long recognized as the most authoritative medium through which to communicate with the thoughtful and intelligent masses of the American people.”
The Press and International Affairs
Taking on the World:
Covering Japan’s Attack, Shanghai, 1932

- Context: Major precursors to WWII, attack by Japan on civilian population in Shanghai
- Plenty of US reporters at scene, writing very personally, clearly expressing outrage against attackers and at least hinting at necessity of US role/global repercussions
- Most editorials argued against any US intervention in China, which would not even “rebuild the flimsy Chinese shacks burned in the conflagration that followed the bombing”
- Focus of correspondence on suffering of civilian population and shattering incongruity of modern warfare blending into daily life—albeit with some ethnocentric condescension
Redefining objectivity as personal observation, not moral neutrality

“The terrified people were faced with a dilemma of terror. They had the choice of staying in their huts and being burned to death or fleeing into the open to be shot or torn to pieces by bursting bombs. … The flames licked their way through the narrow, warren-like streets of the mud-hut and cobblestone city as a prairie fire might attack the nests of a colony of field mice” (AP)

“Surrounded by marines from California, Texas and Virginia, I watched the Japanese bomb the defenseless city. … Hundreds of Chinese jammed their faces against the huge steel gates leading into the American quarter, hoping to enter the lines of exit from the Chinese city, but they were not allowed to do so” (Sweetland, CDN)

Dramatic news stories from Shanghai represented clarion calls for the United States to intervene to prevent such atrocious civilian suffering

Growing comfort in US taking global leadership because of growing sense of global power and ideological commitment?
Winning the Cold War: Reopening Relations with China, 1979

KUNMING, China—On Sunday morning, the narrow back lanes of Kunming swiftly filled with thousands of parchment-skinned peasants, in from the countryside. Squatting on the cobblestones, they assembled their cucumbers, onions and potatoes in tidy pyramids in front of them, put their plumpest fowl on display and opened for business. Open-air markets are so commonplace throughout the Third World that they rarely rate a second glance, but Kunming’s thriving free market is something special. ... free enterprise has only begun to make a comeback after a decade of suppression. ... Thus the back streets of many Chinese towns are regularly transformed into bazaars that offer practically everything that can be found in an American supermarket—and sometimes more

*Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1979

Exotic Communism, good business opportunity – a sign of a new (or old) kind of global commitment?
News-Policy Paradigms

- From 1930s-1990s, constructions of violent, helpless, ideologically hostile world underscore need for intervention/leadership
  - Increase in journalistic enterprise, first-person accounts, investigation but also in PR-manipulation, homogenization of coverage
- Post-Cold War era, return to main preoccupation with US
  - Africa is Africa, Mexico is Mexico, the EU is not the USA
  - What is the US’ global role?
  - Simplistic coverage fits with stalemated policies and lack of leadership (e.g. Afghanistan, Middle East)
Major Points

Media constructions of foreign countries delimit range of policy formulations that decisionmakers act within PLUS range of palatable options that ordinary citizens understand and support.

Major constructions unchanged 1848-2008

- Focus on whether France in 1848 would be able to establish a republican government “on the model” of that of the United States = questioning of whether Vicente Fox, elected in Mexico in 2000, would establish a “U.S.-style” regime and a justice system on the American model.

- Implicit understanding: There is only one right way to govern, foreigners might not be capable of implementing it but should—the kind of assumptions that underlie the morality, almost the necessity of regime-change and nation-building interventions.
Take Away ...

- A democracy has a critical need for its press to engage foreign affairs because the news media represent a pivotal discursive space where opinions about the world are molded and foreign policy parameters shaped.
- In translating the meanings of national identities, and intentions, across national boundaries, news media serve as irreplaceable mediators between Americans and the world.
- To do so, news media need to continue to invest in foreign correspondence, journalists with extensive experience of foreign realities are uniquely positioned to enrich the discursive space with perspectives that are nearly impossible to find in domestic mass discussion.
- Discourse might not predict policy, but an impoverished discourse environment is bound to lead to less democratic debate and possibly an unnecessarily restricted policy range.