

THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA AND INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW: IS IT NEW OR IS IT MUCH OF THE SAME STORY?

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ABSTRACT

The democratization developments in Africa during the 1990s (and not the least in South Africa) offered new opportunities for researchers in the field of news flow studies. Since the 1950s, a number of studies have been undertaken internationally, but relatively few comparative studies were done in Africa since 1990. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall demand not only new cartographic and conceptual maps, but also new news media maps, especially of Africa. In this article, a broad question is posed: 'How does South African mass media portray South Africa and the rest of the world in the 1990s through the process of international news coverage?' This article deals with some possible answers to this question as it pertains to specific newspapers and broadcast news in the country. The general goal was to provide answers to some of the questions set out in the international project on Global News-Flow in the 1990s for the period 3-9 and 17-23 September 1995. Aspects such as main news topics,



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main news events, datelines and sources of international news were, amongst others, addressed.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the news media as an integral part of democratic structures world wide, is well researched and documented (e.g. Golding, 1990; McQuail, 1991; Curran, 1991; Negrine, 1989). A free media system ensures a free flow of especially political information in society. This implies an informed public which in turn has freedom of expression. Within this context, it is also acknowledged that the media can play an important role in developing countries, especially when a democracy is still in its beginning phase, as is the case with present-day South Africa (Groenewald, 1992; Addison, 1993; Griswold & Swenson, 1992).

In some fledgling democracies (for instance in Africa), there is a strong

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feeling that mass media news should play an important role in defining development issues and that such news should also play an educational role (see De Beer & Steyn, 1996).

According to the 'development news paradigm' mass communicators should adopt as their ultimate goal the improvement of living conditions and quality of life in their societies. However, they should at the same time remain independent of both government and big business in order to function as critics and evaluators of development projects (Griswold & Swenson, 1992:583).

Development journalism (Addison, 1993:36) is not a unique form of news gathering, but simply the view that the primary role of journalists should also be to cover routine development news, and to act as independent watchdogs, bringing to public notice the misdeeds of politicians and civil servants. Topics that may be covered as part of development journalism include: business development, education, health, agriculture, environment, culture, energy, housing (Griswold & Swenson, 1992:587).

However, such an approach has many pitfalls, not the least, the way in which news is defined within the Western context and dispersed world wide in the form of international news.

WESTERN NEWS VALUES

Within the Western context of practi

cal journalism, as well as in theoretical and research work, news and news values have traditionally come to be defined and identified according to the Anglo-American model (De Beer & Steyn, 1996)².

The Western tenets of news and news values are largely based on attributes such as: timeliness, unexpectedness, predictability / non-predictability, magnitude, change in status quo, proximity, and especially conflict and unusualness (see e.g. De Beer's 1977 Distance/Intensity Scale of News values; also Steyn, 1995).

Coupled with the abstract notion of objectivity, these values were offered by generations of media people as a Holy Grail to be sought by all aspiring and seasoned journalists, not the least those from the so-called underdeveloped or Third World countries (for traditional American concepts of news values, see LeRoy & Sterling, 1973; Roshco, 1975; Hiebert, Ungurait & Bohn, 1991; McQuail, 1983:139).

To concerned governments, media researchers and others involved in the media, it seemed as if events in Southern Africa and other parts of the Third World could only become news in the Western media if conflict-orientated themes such as corruption, coups, political unrest and famine were the main course of the news menu (Cohen, Adoni & Bantz, 1990).

In the post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa of the 1960s and 1970s (as elsewhere in the Third World), a negative attitude developed towards Western style conflict ridden news coverage of the continent. This disillusionment with Western media coverage of Third World countries led to the development of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the 1970/1980s, as specifically espoused by MacBride (1980; also see Giffard, 1984, 1987, 1992).

In reaction to what was perceived to be the West's negative media coverage of Africa, and in line with the NWICO, many African states started their own developmental news programs in order to rectify the imbalance of news coverage about their countries (e.g. Giffard, 1992; 1993).

THE NEED FOR DEVELOPMENTAL NEWS

In the 1970s (see MacBride, 1980:xvii), international debates on communications issues 'had stridently reached points of confrontation in many areas'. There was Third World protest against the biased and unbalanced reporting on Africa and other Third World regions, and against the dominant flow of news from the developed countries to the developing countries (De Beer & Steyn, 1995).

The Third World's main critique of Western media in terms of the NWICO, centered on three main

² This, and the following section is based on De Beer & Steyn (1996).

problem areas (Jakubowicz, 1985: 81):

- * it perpetuated the relationship between the center of the capitalist West and the peripheries (the so-called developing or Third World) which was a legacy of the colonial period;
- * it served to preserve the information and communication domination of the center over the peripheries which allowed Western media to spread an 'incomplete, one-sided and distorted view of the developing countries, while depriving the latter of the possibility of reaching the world with news of themselves and obtaining full, impartial and independent information about events and developments elsewhere'; and
- * it also incorporated mechanisms of cultural diffusion and knowledge transfer which maintained the developing countries in a state of cultural dependence and the spread of alien ideologies, cultural patterns and systems of values among their peoples.

It is against this background that the question comes to the fore: what kind of news does South Africa as a fledgling democracy receive from outside her borders and what kind of international news does the South African media use? Also, how much of this news is Western in its origin, and how much of it addresses developmental issues, such as voiced at the UN's

Women Conference in Beijing in 1995? Though no comparable research findings could be found for this specific study, the authors hypothesized (based on other news flow and other media studies, e.g. Giffard, 1993) that the South African news coverage will strongly tend to follow Western news selection and news agency patterns.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW

On an international level, the issue of news flow, is not new. Since the 1950s, a number of news flow studies have been undertaken internationally (Hjarvard, 1995; Atwood, 1984; Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977). The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, as Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995:8) indicates, demand not only new cartographic and conceptual maps, but also new news media maps. This holds also true for developmental needs in countries transforming from authoritarian political systems to democracy.

For the South African media and its audiences, as well as news researchers, the democratization developments in South Africa since April 1994 offered new opportunities in the field of news flow studies. One of the main criticisms of the Press system in present day South Africa is that it is perceived to be still to 'white' and/or 'Euro' centered. Recent charges by government ministers and officials on the Press also allured to the view-

point that 'not enough is being done' to inform the public on governmental and developmental issues (e.g. see the formation of a special taskgroup to investigate government communication and media structures, *The Sunday Independent*, 7 October, 1996).

While these arguments may hold true to a greater or lesser extent for local and national news, it is quite unclear in the post-1994 period what kind of international news South Africans are receiving. This paper deals with some possible answers to this question.

METHODOLOGY

The research results discussed in this paper form part of an international news flow research project (Global News Flow in the 1990s) initiated at a meeting in Tampere, Finland in 1994 with Kaarle Nordenstreng as chairperson. The project, with Robert L Stevenson and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi as international project leaders, was undertaken during 1995 in 45 countries, and consisted of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. (e.g. see De Beer, Serfontein & Naudè, 1996; De Beer & Steyn, 1996b; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Stevenson, 1995). This article reports on the South African part of the quantitative research undertaken in the different countries on 3-9; 17-23 September 1995, with the first author as South African project leader (for a discussion of comparative results in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, see

De Beer, Serfontein, Naud, & Steyn, 1996).

Content analysis (according to a research framework supplied to all participants in the international project and according to traditional research methods, e.g. Stempel & Westley 1981) was executed on all international news appearing in the following newspapers and electronic media broadcasts. A final group of international news reports was demarcated as international news and selected for this project (N=820).

In South Africa international news in two newspapers, *The Star* and *Sunday Times*, as well as the main news broadcast at 20:00 from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for the period 3-9 and 17-23 September 1995 was analyzed. The three media were selected in terms of guidelines set out by the international project coordinators: *The Star* was the biggest quality daily with a broad spectrum of readers and considered to be an 'important' opinion forming South African daily; the *Sunday Times* was chosen as being the biggest Sunday newspaper; and the SABC's 20:00 news as being the most important TV news program. The project periods were chosen to coincide with that of the international project. All international news items were coded, regardless of the degree of involvement by South Africa. Film and book reviews, as well as letters and cartoons with international relevance were included.

The flow of news on a daily basis was fairly evenly distributed with the least stories (6,0%, N=820) in the first week appearing on September 8 and most of the stories (8,1%, N=820) on September 3. In the second week most stories (8,3%, N=820) appeared on September 20, and the least (5,6%, N=820) on 18th September 1995.

Five coders worked closely together to code a total of 1 505 news items. The coders discussed the coding instructions before coding started. The South African team participated in the international trial run for this project in May 1995 on a sample of two days' news items. Afterwards problems with the categories and coding instructions were again discussed and cleared with the international project leaders. While the coding was in progress, coders kept close contact with each other and any problems were discussed before a coding decision was taken.

Categories were identified by the international project leaders, such as prominence, source, most important country, the main topic etc. The focus of each story was determined as foreign news taking place at home as well as overseas. It included two elements: geographic location of the event and involvement of the country in which the coding was done.

Datelines (the name of the city from which the news story was reported) were identified. Thereafter datelines were coded according to the country

in which the city was located. In most instances the dateline was the same as the most important country in the story, but there were a few anomalies, for example stories reported from an outside location and events that took place in a foreign location. These were then taken to have referred to the main country in the news story.

A distinction was also made between stories that emphasized disruption, conflict, and exceptional events (coded as disruptive) and stories that do not (coded as non-disruptive). Newspaper sources were also included. The first reference to any source was coded as 'source 1' and the second reference as 'source 2' (regardless of whether it referred to a person / correspondent or a news agency).

Where the main topic was concerned with international politics and international military/defense/conflict the distinction was made as follows: international military / defense / conflict were only used where there were references to physical violence / war / conflict. In these cases the second topic was coded as international politics. The term 'domestic' (as used with several topics, e.g. domestic politics) was coded as referring to the most important country for that specific news item. As soon as there were more than one country involved, the 'international' codes were used.

The data was analyzed with the use of the Statistica computer program.

Several recordings and subsets of datelines were executed in order to compare different aspects with each other. Subsets of the different continents according to datelines were made to get a clearer picture of the main countries and the main topics according to the different continents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In general the results show that, at least in 1995 in the selected media and in the particular time frame, the flow content was, with exceptions, very much what was expected - a strong emphasis on Western news values and a strong emphasis on news and news sources from the West or the First World.

More specifically, the results show the following with regard to specific questions:

- 1 What were the main topics covered in the South African media?

Sports (26,5%) and entertainment (11,6%) were the two most single covered topics. Then followed: international economics (8,3%); crime (8,2%); oddities (6,0%); international politics (5,1%); domestic politics (4,1%); domestic economics (4,0%); international military (3,9%); culture (3,7%); 'other topics' (where a topic was covered 3,0% or less of the total number of stories): 18,6% (N=820).

- 2 What were the main topics according to regions?

Topics mostly covered with reference to the West, were sports and entertainment (Western Europe [N=172]: sports: 30%,2 and entertainment: 13,4%; North America [N=131]: entertainment: 34,4% and sports: 21,4%).

- 3 What were the main/specific events covered?

In the research period little coverage was given (outside Africa) to specific 'big news' events. About 6,1% (50 stories) of the total number of stories (N=820) was devoted to 'big news events'. Of these stories (N=50): 43% were devoted to the Women's Conference in Beijing; 28% to UN/NATO bombing in Eastern/Central Europe; French nuclear tests (25%) and bombings in Srinigar, India (2%) and Lyons, France (2%).

- 4 What flow patterns could be distinguished in terms of datelines?

According to regions a total of 41,2% of the stories was datelined in Africa (South Africa: 30,6%; Zimbabwe 2,9%), followed by Western Europe 20,9% (UK: 14,2%); North America 13,5% (USA: 12,9%); Asia/Pacific 10,6% (China: 2,7%); Central/Eastern Europe 4,5%; Middle East 2,1%; other regions 7,2% (N=820).

5 How were the regions covered?

This section showed the same pattern as the previous one with most of the main news stories (N=820) covering Africa 38,7% (South Africa: 27%; Zimbabwe 1,3%; rest of Africa: 8,7%); followed by Western Europe 20,9% (UK: 12,9%; France 3,3%); North America 16,0% (USA: 14,9%); Asia/Pacific 11,7%; Central Europe 5,7% (Bosnia 2,3%); Middle East 2,6%; South America 1,2% and other 3,3%.

6 What were the main sources of international news?

The main sources for international news (N=820) were: own correspondents and other editorial sources (38,2%); AFP and AP through Sapa (16,1%); AFP (3,0%) and Reuters (9,3%) independently; none indicated (19,0%) and other (14,4%). The relative high incidence of the latter two was mainly caused by news media not stating the exact source of the particular news stories.

7 What was the nature of focus, type and length of the stories?

Just over half of the stories (51,6%) were classified as minor; 34,4% medium and 14,0% (N=820) of major size.

The majority of the stories (59,5%) dealt with topics other than the South African ('own country')

situation. More than 90,7% (N=820) of the stories consisted of news with very little editorials, letters, pictures or cartoons.

8 Who were the main 'gender actors'?

From what we could ascertain from the stories, 43,5% of the 'gender actors' were male and 9,4% female with 47,0% uncertain or not stated. Of the correspondents 67,6% were male, 24,4% female and 7,9% (N=820) uncertain/not stated. In all regions, there were more male correspondents (50% and more), except in Asia where there were 80% female vis-...-vis 20% male correspondents.

9 How was the UN Women's Conference in Beijing covered?

Though the Conference was identified as one of the specific stories covered during the research project (see question 3), only 2,7% (22 stories) of the total number of international stories (N=820) dealt with the Conference.

10 How were disruptive and non-disruptive events covered?

According to our analysis, the majority of news reports (N=820) from three regions could be defined as news about disruptive events: South America (55,5% N=9); Central/East Europe (54,1% N=37) and the Middle East (52,9% N=17). The majority of stories

from North America (87,4% N=111); Western Europe (78,6% N=171); and Asia (61% N=87) could not be classified as news about disruptive events, but were classified as none/non-disruptive.

According to the same analysis, only 16,7% (N=338) of news about Africa was of a disruptive nature, while 83,1% could be classified as none/non-disruptive.

CONCLUSION

The results showed inter alia the following trends:

News topics: Given the role of sports in South Africa, especially in the way it has become part of the 'nation building program', one might understand the emphasis on sports news, but on the other hand it must be noted that topics associated with democratization and developmental issues, for example international aid / developmental relief; social services problems/education; religion; human rights; gender issues; and ethnic issues/identity/politics assimilation are lacking prominence on the South African news agenda.

The Asia/Pacific region (N=96), though consisting of only 11,7% of the total number of stories, covered a somewhat different range of topics (sports: 16,7%; human rights: 12,5%; social services:

10,4%). This differs to quite a degree from Western news and might be an indicator for the kind of news that one would expect to fall under the rubric of developmental news.

In Africa (N=317) the emphasis was on sports (34,4%); international economics (11,4%); international military defense (11,0%), crime, justice, police (8,8%) and international politics (8,2%). The high percentage stories from Africa dealing with sports (34,4%) cannot be judged as a general indication, as the project period overlapped with the African Games held in Zimbabwe.

Traditional Western news values: The South African media covered news topics very much in line with traditional Western news values, with emphasis placed on sports and entertainment (38,1%; N=820).

The news view of North America (mainly the USA) as 'world leader' is strongly based on entertainment, sports and oddities/animals/human interest (61,9% N=131).

There seems to be a clear lack of what could be considered developmental news. However, follow-up studies might show a promising development in this regard with news from Africa and the East.

'Bad news syndrome': The old saying "bad news is good news" is still typically in place for Eastern Europe (civil war/military = 48,9% N=47); South America (disasters = 50% N=10) and the Middle East (crime/military = 52,4% N=21).

One of the most remarkable results was that the 'bad news/good news syndrome' was turned around in Africa where 76,6% of the news could be classified as non-disruptive, while disruptive news accounted for only 16,7% (N=338). Whether this is good or bad, is debatable when one considers that in North America 80,2% (N=111) of the news was of a non-disruptive nature, with personalities, sports and oddities/etc. being the staple diet on the agenda.

Datelines: A significant number of news stories was still datelined in Western countries (Western Europe/North America: 34,4%), but the majority of datelines (41,2%) were from South Africa/Africa (South Africa: 30,6% and rest of Africa: 9,4% N=820).

These results reaffirm the notion that international news flows in general from North to South, with the exception of Africa, where there was a clear emphasis on South Africa and the rest of the continent.

Within the context of democratization it means that although most

of the news originated locally, South Africans are exposed to a relative vast amount of news originating from the Western world or so called old democracies, with relatively little news from the so-called Third World which might include more news of a developmental nature.

News sources: The international news sources were overwhelmingly from Western origin (AP, AFP, Reuters and AP/AFP through Sapa). There was very little indication that the South African media used alternative international news sources. The use of AFP (2,9%) should be seen against the fact that Sapa (16,1%) also carries AFP. Own correspondents (38,2%) might also include Reuters and/or AFP. Associated Press was not as dominant as it used to be, because more news media are now taking AFP.

In the context of developmental news, it was remarkable how little news from outside the 'big Western' news agencies appeared in the South African media, though one must note the large percentage of news from 'own correspondents' (38,2%).

Actors: Though it was difficult to determine the gender of correspondents, it seemed that in the West there are still many more male correspondents, while it was note worthy that 80,0% (N=87) of the correspondents in Asia were

women journalists. This also has a clear implication for South Africa where there is new movement towards gender affirmative action.

This study offers some insight in the way international news choices are made, and also of the way people in a changing society such as South Africa get to know the world around them. From the results it seem that very little developmental news of an international nature reach the South African public, while the image of both First and Third World countries seemed to be clouded by typical Western news values. This has clear implications for a new look at South African media policies regarding international news flow.

The research results suggest that 'international news mapping' within the South African media still shows a very strong Western tendency in terms of news topic and news agency selection. In that sense the 'international news flow story in the New South Africa' was (at least in September, 1995 and in the selected media) still very much the same story as in the pre-1994 apartheid years.

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