

THE RESTLESS SEARCHLIGHT: NETWORK NEWS FRAMING OF THE POST COLD-WAR WORLD

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Abstract

For many decades the cold war frame provided a clear and simple way for American reporters to select, structure and prioritize complex news about international affairs. The cold war frame cued journalists and viewers about friends and enemies throughout the world. The key question posed in this paper is what are the consequences of the breakdown of this frame for how American network television communicates international news. The paper presents the results of the first content analysis of network news in the pre- and post-cold war periods (1973-1993).

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A growing literature has explored the nature of news frames, whether in coverage of election campaigns, foreign policy or social conflict. The idea of 'news frames' refers to interpretive structures which set particular events within their broader context. Information processing research suggests that people have cognitive schema which organize their thinking, linking substantive beliefs, attitudes, and values ¹. For journalists and readers, these schema guide the interpretation and evaluation of new information, by slotting the new into familiar categories. Yet remarkably little attention has focussed on how news frames alter over time in response to external events. The central aim of this paper is to understand how dominant news frames evolve, change, and adapt, focussing on American network news coverage of international affairs after the end of the cold war. Old stereotypes of 'friends' and 'enemies' have had to be rapidly recast. Just like far-reaching structural and organizational changes in the Pentagon, CIA and NATO, the question is how far and how fast network coverage of international news adapted to reflect the realities of the new geopolitical world.

Theoretical Context

Journalists work with news frames to simplify, prioritize and structure the narrative flow of events. News frames bundle key concepts, stock phrases and stereotyped images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments. The essence of framing is selection to prioritize some facts, events or developments over others, thereby promoting a particular interpretation² Reporters can 'tell it like it is' within 60 seconds, rapidly sorting key events from surrounding trivia, by drawing on reservoirs of familiar stories to cue readers. New developments are understood within regular patterns. Frames represent stereotypes, which slot particular events into broader interpretive categories which may, or may not, be appropriate. Since news frames can be expected to reflect broader social norms, political minorities challenging the dominant culture are most likely to prove critical of such treatment.

There are numerous examples of framing that we can recognize. To take just a few: within the election campaign the familiar 'horse race' frame (who is ahead, who is behind) dominates coverage of the primaries³. In reporting complex acts of 'terrorist' violence the victim-perpetrator frame simplifies the attribution of responsibility⁴. The black-white 'racial

conflict' frame can shape coverage of riots, whether appropriate or not⁵. The campaign associated with the New World Information Order (NWIO) has long criticized the framing of Western news from developing countries only in terms of 'coups, earthquakes and disasters'⁶. Alternative social movements such as feminists⁷, and anti-nuclear groups⁸, may be framed in ways which they judge inappropriate. Framing has also been applied to how we evaluate government responsibility for issues such as the Gulf War, crime, poverty and Iran-Contra⁹. Lastly 'framing' can be treated more broadly as a category of certain types of coverage. Iyengar argues that the 'episodic' frame, treating particular events as discrete news stories, appears far more common than the 'thematic' frame providing a broader interpretation of events¹⁰. Dominant frames are so widespread within a journalistic culture that they come to be seen as natural and inevitable, with contradictory information discounted as failing to fit preexisting views. Like paradigms guiding scientific understanding, dominant news frames can be seen as 'journalism as usual'. Yet just like paradigms, at times long-established schema break down, producing a period of confusing rivalry between alternative interpretations of the news narrative.

Like the development of all-pervasive social stereotypes, it is often difficult to study the origins and gradual evolution of frames. Yet periods of sharp change - like the end of the cold war - highlight awareness of frames which come to be seen as out of touch with social reality. From 1945 to 1989 the cold war schema prevailed in American foreign policy, providing a cultural prism to explain complex political and military events in countries from Hungary to Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. It was not the only schema in American news of international affairs. The 'North-South' frame was often used when covering disasters like famines or floods in developing countries. The 'dictatorship-democracy' frame was evident in reporting events in Chile, Argentina and Spain. Nevertheless the cold war frame ran like a red thread through most coverage of international news because it dominated American foreign policy. The schema simplified and prioritized coverage of international news by providing certainties about friends and enemies. The frame highlighted certain foreign events as international problems, identified their source, offered normative judgments, and recommended particular policy solutions.

The task of reporting international politics became increasingly complex following the breakdown of the cold war¹¹. This raises certain central questions considered in this paper which help us to understand the framing process: how fast did American network news abandon the dominant cold war frame in response to events in Eastern and Central Europe; how far was this frame replaced by alternative schema; and, in

conclusion, what have been the consequences for American television coverage of international affairs?

Previous Literature, Data and Methods

To consider the most appropriate research design for a new study of framing we can draw a distinction, as Adams suggests, between three lines of inquiry¹². Production research looks at how journalists's values and news-gathering structures shape news frames. Contents research - the focus here - analyses the characteristics of news frames. Effects research examines the impact of news frames on the public's interpretation of events.

Content analysis has commonly focussed on the framing of particular events. This includes conflict in Vietnam¹³, the Middle East¹⁴, Nicaragua¹⁵ and the Gulf War¹⁶, and international disasters such as Bhopal, the 1973 Oil Crisis, Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill and international terrorism¹⁷. Some have looked at framing of a specific foreign policy decision, such as American withdrawal from UNESCO in 1985¹⁸, or reaction to the KAL and Iran Air incidents¹⁹, and Iran Contra²⁰. Yet, by definition, it is difficult to generalise from the framing of major wars, specific decisions, and dramatic disasters to the more typical, day-to-day framing of international news on the major American networks, which is the approach of this study.

Coverage of international news has been analysed in a range of media outlets in the United States including the *New York Times*²¹ and *CNN*²². There have been a number of previous studies of foreign and international news coverage on U.S. television network newscasts. James Larson provided the most systematic content analysis of network news, based on a random sample of programs from 1972-81²³. This has subsequently been updated by others with the most recent analysis by Gonzenbach et al covering the period from 1972 until 1989, just prior to the end of the cold war²⁴.

To investigate how far and how fast international news frames on television changed in response to the end of the cold war a structured random sample of 2,059 stories on ABC and CBS network news television programs was drawn from 1973 to 1993. Replicating previous studies, data was derived from the *Television News Index and Abstracts* from the Vanderbilt Archive²⁵, which has provided short abstracts of the evening new broadcasts of the three major networks since 1972. The *Index* has been widely used in previous research, and found to provide a highly reliable source of data about international news coverage²⁶.

The study focuses on trends from 1973-1993, sub-divided into

three periods, to analyse the dynamics of change. The period 1973-87 is treated as representing the late-cold war years. In contrast, 1988-91 is regarded as the watershed transition. In 1988 Hungary began the process of transition to a multiparty system. In 1989 a noncommunist government swept into power in Poland, and communist regimes collapsed in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. In 1990 even the most die-hard communist regimes were shifting, and the old Soviet Union broke up in 1991. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe, the period 1992-93 represents the early years of post-cold war era. International news coverage was compared over two decades to analyse consistent trends, since coverage of particular countries may vary substantially from one year to the next.

Content analysis reveals what countries, issues and themes are considered newsworthy by the press. Previous studies have often emphasised the continuity over time in the pattern of international coverage by the networks. As Gonzenbach concluded: "The study suggests that network TV coverage of the world at the end of the 1980s did not differ substantially from the TV world at the beginning of the 1970s."²⁷ Following the end of the cold war we might expect major changes in network news to occur in the *priority* given to international news, the *geographic coverage* of countries and regions, and the *thematic* focus of stories.

First, the priority of coverage can be measured by the number of stories, their length, and the story order. Previous studies have found that domestic news dominated the networks, but international coverage remained significant. Almaney's review of network newscasts in 1969 found that 37 per cent of all stories were about foreign and international news²⁸. This estimate received further confirmation in later studies by Larson²⁹, and by Gonzenbach et al³⁰, who reported that 40 percent of networks news dealt with foreign or international news. Other studies found that foreign news (defined more narrowly as news reported from outside the United States) represented about one quarter of network news time³¹. Measures based on the number of stories, and their length, provide slightly different estimates mainly because many financial and economic items are relatively brief (eg stock market reports). The first hypothesis for this study is that the breakdown of the cold war, and the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe, would stimulate a dramatic increase in international news during the transition period (1988-91). Thereafter we might expect that the amount of international coverage would return to the levels of the cold war period, or would fall even lower if the complexities of the new world order proved difficult for television journalism to convey without the structure of the cold war

frame. The length of international news stories, and their order in the program, may be expected to follow similar patterns.

Secondly, we might expect changes in which countries and regions were considered newsworthy. Most previous studies have focussed on the question of news flows between countries, in particular Western dominance. Interest in this issue was expressed as early as the 1920s by Walter Lippman³², with the first systematic research by William Schramm in the 1960s, and a major debate over the New World Information and Communication Order prompted by UNESCO in the 1980s³³. This generated a series of comparative studies comparing the volume and direction of news flows across different countries, including newspaper coverage³⁴, television³⁵ and wire services³⁶. While studies commonly report an imbalance in news flows across countries, there is no consensus about the extent of the imbalance, still less the implications for news frames.

The pattern of news flows might be expected to change in recent years. The end of the Cold War era brought about a major realignment of American interests. The story changed from the NATO region versus the Warsaw Pact countries towards a diverse series of engagements in Bosnia, Somalia and the Gulf. Therefore, in the transition period we would expect considerable attention to the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe (the 'Dan -Rather- here- by- the- Berlin- Wall' phenomenon). Thereafter we would expect to see a diminution of interest in the old Soviet Bloc, and a wider range of international concerns, with a tilt from the developed to the developing world.

Lastly, we might expect that the themes of news stories would also have changed in recent years. Previous studies found overall coverage often depicted the world as a dangerous and conflictual place, with the greatest attention (39 per cent of stories) given to military-defense issues³⁷, although this proportion dropped after the end of the Vietnam war³⁸. Following the end of the cold war period we might anticipate concern to shift from defence to the international economy, such as the NAFTA trading agreement with Mexico and Canada, the trade gap with Japan, and threats to America's ability to compete economically.

Analysis and Results

Given the deep cultural roots of news frames, the first question concerns how far and how fast the priority given to international events changed on network news during these years.

Number of Stories

During the last twenty years most network news programs covered about eleven stories every evening, including about four international and seven domestic items. The results confirm the expectation that there have been significant changes over time in the total number of international stories on network news (see *Figure 1*). During the cold war period, about a third of all news stories could be classified as international. In contrast during the transition period the number international news stories grew sharply, reflecting the momentous events during these years including the fall in the Berlin wall, the break-up of the old Soviet empire, the first free elections in Eastern and Central Europe, developments in the Middle East, Panama, and the Gulf War. During the transition period about 41 per cent of all news stories were international, with a gradual growth in coverage which spiked in 1991. This was followed by a dramatic fall in the post-cold war period, down to 29 per cent of stories in 1992, and 24 per cent in 1993. Reflecting the complexities of international conflict, network news turned back again towards the domestic agenda³⁹. The average number of international news stories fell dramatically from five stories every evening in 1991 down to two per night in 1993. The transition period therefore represented a marked peak of interest, as expected, with declining coverage in the more complex post-cold war era.

[Figure 1 about here]

Length of stories

The amount of time devoted to international news displays similar trends over time. The last two decades experienced a sharp decline in the time spent on international coverage, from 45 per cent of news bulletins in 1973 down to just 20 per cent in 1993. In the average twenty-minute of news per program (after ads) coverage of developments around the world fell from 9.6 to four minutes per night. The length of stories remained brief but showed no clear shrinkage; the average story lasted 1.7 minutes. As shown in *Figure 2*, there were different patterns in the periods under comparison. In the cold war and transition periods international stories were slightly longer than domestic items. In contrast this pattern was reversed in the post cold war period, confirming the lower priority found earlier.

[Figure 2 about here]

Running order

The last indicator of editorial priority concerns the running order of stories and what is given headline treatment. 'Headlines' in this study are defined by the first three stories in the news. As *Figure 3* shows during

the cold war period domestic stories were given the greatest priority. During the transition period this was reversed, with American events and international developments given roughly equal treatment in the headlines. Lastly, in the post cold war period domestic stories overwhelmingly topped the headline news. The priority in running order therefore broadly reflected the pattern of international news in the amount and length of coverage.

[Figure 3 about here]

Trends in geographic coverage

The end of the cold war may also be expected to influence the regions and countries which are regarded as newsworthy. During the first period we would expect American news to reflect the structural and cultural cold war framework with maximum attention towards the major (G7) allies in the developed world along with the Soviet Bloc, and subsequent neglect of the less developed world unless it enters this framework. The transitional years should increase attention in Central and Eastern Europe. In the post-cold war period we might expect more diverse country coverage, with greater attention to regional and ethnic disputes such as Rwanda, Somalia and Bosnia.

Given the limited number of cases for most countries, considerable caution is necessary in interpreting the results. Nevertheless the analysis suggests that coverage of Western Europe declined from the cold war to post-cold war period. In contrast, as expected, coverage of Central and Eastern Europe, Latin and Central America, Africa and the Middle East expanded between these periods.

Changes in the themes of news stories

The breakdown of the cold war frame may also be expected to change the predominant balance of international stories. In particular, the number of international stories about international security, defence, and civil unrest may be overtaken by greater emphasis on international relations through economic cooperation, with the development of important trading agreements such as GATT, NAFTA and Maastricht. Stories were classified replicating the twelve major categories developed by Larson⁴⁰, then the categories were collapsed. The result of analysing the main themes of stories in international news covered during these periods, in *Figure 4*, shows that the focus on security and defence issues expanded during the transition period, and remained high during the post cold war years. Contrary to expectations, coverage of economic stories remained fairly low, while coverage of international political events declined sharply in recent years.

[Figure 4 about here]

Conclusion and Discussion

This analysis suggests that the end of the cold war has had significant consequences for how American network news has framed world news. There have been significant shifts in the priority given to international news, coverage of different regions, and the themes of international stories which are judged newsworthy. Despite the significance of the cold war frame as a way of understanding American foreign policy in the 1970s and early 1980s, the study suggests that network news adapted fairly rapidly to the new geopolitical realities.

Nevertheless without a new framework we can speculate that television news may have far greater problems in explaining America's role in the world, and in making sense of international developments for viewers who lack familiar benchmarks to distinguish 'friends' from 'enemies'. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall American foreign policy has been searching for an appropriate role to mediate complex ethnic, regional and religious conflicts in Bosnia, Haiti, and the Middle East. Rapid change in South Africa, Russia, or Japan has received brief attention on US network news during moments of sudden tension, but the revolving laser of attention quickly moves to the next crisis elsewhere. New leaders or political developments in these countries are often highlighted with bewildering speed, without much background information to provide an understandable framework for viewers. In Walter Lippmann's words, "*The press ... is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions.*"⁴¹

The end of the cold war frame has exacerbated this tendency. Global developments produce complex issues for the press to explain although informed public deliberation needs to understand policies such as economic negotiations over GATT, NAFTE, and EMS, or issues of environmental regulations agreed at the Rio de Janeiro summit⁴². While quality newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Financial Times* can cover these issues on a regular basis in some depth, the lack of a simple frame identifiable for journalists and viewers makes it difficult to encapsulate these events into brief stories suitable for television news.

Due to technological developments more information than ever before is instantly available, such as pictures transmitted live from Tiananmen Square, the tanks outside the Moscow White House, or the

bomb damage in Sarajevo. Moreover, the links created by network coverage allow faster interconnection between political leaders, so that proposals originating in Geneva can be reported, along with simultaneous reactions to camera, from Tel Aviv, Moscow, London and Washington, DC. As encapsulated in the title of one book, technological developments in communications have led to 'collapsing space and time'⁴³.

The growth of picture-driven television information has been accompanied, some suggest, by a simultaneous loss of contextual analysis by the press⁴⁴. Organizational changes in news gathering, driven by budgetary constraints, have reduced the number of foreign correspondents who are able to provide expert commentary, in-depth analysis and contextual background⁴⁵. In 1945 American newspapers had about 2,500 reporters abroad. By 1969 Larson suggests the number had dropped to under six hundred, with a further decline to 500 by the mid-1970s⁴⁶, although there is some disagreement about these figures, and other estimates suggest a subsequent increase in the 1990s⁴⁷. American television networks each established about fifteen foreign bureaus in cities like Moscow, Paris and London but often during an international crisis film coverage is provided by special reporters flown in for particular assignments. 'Parachute' journalists jet from crisis to crisis, crisscrossing the globe, replacing the resident correspondents or veteran stringers with a lifetime experience in a region⁴⁸. The lower costs of overseas video footage means that local television stations can now afford to cover international stories, with commentary provided by the local anchors. There are fewer experienced foreign correspondents who have spent years absorbing the politics and culture of a region, like the BBC's Mark Hanna in India or CNN's Peter Arnett in South East Asia. The growth of parachute journalism may therefore provide viewers with a more confusing, disjointed and violent image of the world, rather than an informed and balanced understanding of international events.

During the last decade the rapid pace of change in international politics in the post-cold war period, the technological expansion of global news and transnational television, and changes in news gathering organizations, have combined to raise questions about the ability of the American press to cover the world. No single factor is critical but their interaction, many believe, has transformed the role of international news. Perhaps without the familiar cold war frame viewers have more information available about a far wider range of countries. Whether they thereby understand the world better remains an open question.

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