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PREVIEW

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**Human rights coverage in the media: A quantitative content analysis**

**Ovsiovitch, Jay Samuel, Ph.D.**

**The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1993**

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PREVIEW

HUMAN RIGHTS COVERAGE IN THE MEDIA:  
A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

by

Jay Samuel Ovsiovitch

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Political Science

Under the Supervision of Professor David P. Forsythe

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1993

DISSERTATION TITLE

HUMAN RIGHTS COVERAGE IN THE MEDIA.

A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

BY

JAY SAMUEL OVSIOVITCH

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HUMAN RIGHTS COVERAGE IN THE MEDIA:  
A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Jay Samuel Ovsiovitch  
University of Nebraska, 1993

Adviser: David P. Forsythe

The news media have long been seen as playing an influential role in politics. This influence can be seen in the area of international human rights. News reports are recognized as an informal means of documenting abuses, they shape public opinion and influence the development of foreign policy and the media helps keep human rights on the international political agenda. In spite of the importance attached to the media's coverage of human rights only a handful of studies have examined what the media reports. This study seeks to fill in some of the gaps by examining the media's coverage of human rights.

This study explores human rights issues reported in the New York Times, Time magazine, the CBS Evening News, and the Times (London) for a 12 year period, 1978-1989. Media coverage of human rights in all four news sources focused on

civil and political rights, most notably to issues involving the integrity of the person and political participation. An examination of the geographical news coverage of human rights found emphasis being placed on stories in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Regional coverage usually focused on a small number of countries, most notably the Soviet Union and Poland, in Eastern Europe, and Argentina, Chile and El Salvador, in Latin America. One important distinction was noted when examining the Times' geographic coverage. The London paper gave priority first to human rights issues involving the European Community. Otherwise, the geographic emphasis was similar to reports in the US media.

This study also tries to examine the linkages between the media's coverage of human rights and the development of foreign policy. Between August and September, 1991, a questionnaire was mailed to Congressional committee staffers in order to seek their views on the news media's coverage of human rights issues. The respondents acknowledged that media information can influence policy development at least some of the time, while over 40% of the respondents believe that news coverage of human rights often influences policy development.



HUMAN RIGHTS COVERAGE IN THE MEDIA:  
A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction: Human Rights and the Media**

The effect of human rights coverage by the media highlights the impact journalists can have on different aspects of international human rights. The media's potential makes it necessary to examine what is actually reported. This study is concerned with the content of the U.S. media's coverage of international human rights. It will examine the media's reporting of human rights focusing on the issues and regions receiving attention, as well as factors which influence why some countries may receive more media attention than others. This study will also attempt to gain insight into how this coverage affects the development of foreign policy.

#### **The Effects of Media Coverage**

The media's potential influence on human rights can be felt in a number of areas. News reports are sometimes the

first indication that rights violations are taking place, thus becoming an informal means of documenting abuses (Ezell 1992, 88; Rosenblum 1979, 201; Ramcharan 1983, 24). One example is Amnesty International's use of newspaper and radio transcripts to verify torture allegations (Amnesty International 1985). There are other countless examples of abuse first coming to worldwide attention through the media. America's Watch points out how massacres committed by Salvadoran forces, during the early 1980's, first came to international attention when printed on the front pages of the New York Times and the Washington Post (America's Watch 1991, 49). These reports educate people (UN Centre for Human Rights 1989) and shape public opinion (Cerbrian 1988, 17; Forsythe 1991, 75; Keenleyside 1988, 16; Pritchard 1991, 133; Reisman 1984, 651; Shestack 1978, 110) and this, in turn, can motivate legislators and other policy-makers to consider human rights when developing foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Forsythe (1988, 145) found that on selected issues there were political rewards for congressional action on behalf of human rights. Likewise, Berry and McChesney (1988, 72) found that "media support gives rights issues a higher profile." Lobbying by human rights groups in the Canadian Parliament would probably not succeed without arousing media interest.

The media are important for non-governmental organizations which rely on news reports to first document

abuses, and then to disseminate further information about human rights. The media may also correct the failings of international governmental organizations (IGOs) by keeping human rights on the international agenda. Often the beneficiaries of canceled IGO sessions are the governments that would have been discussed at those meetings (Sandvig 1988, 59). Human rights issues in these countries might not be forgotten if violations were mentioned in news reports. And finally, the penetration of foreign television (including news programs) has been linked to political changes, including improvements in human rights. The most notable example was the fall of Communist governments in Eastern Europe (Quester 1990). There has been a link made between the media, specifically television, and the events of 1989. Quester points out that "[t]he same East Germans who headed through Hungary for West Germany in the summer of 1989 had been watching that West Germany in their living rooms each evening - on West German television news broadcasts" (Quester 1990, xii).<sup>2</sup> This potential impact stresses the need to examine the content of what is reported in the media.

Lasswell (1960) identifies three roles for the media: observing world events, interpreting the meaning of these events, and socializing individuals into their environment. Clearly these categories relate to the functions attached to the media in the field of human rights. Observing world

events, a function identified by others, such as Cohen (1963) and Gans (1979), is self-descriptive. An event gains in significance when news coverage influences political action, though it is usually difficult to measure this influence. As Linsky (1986, 203) concludes, "[t]he press has substantial and specific impacts on policies and policy-making ..." This is seen in a Senate attempt to provide \$5 million in humanitarian aid to Cambodia. Interest was raised after an ABC documentary on the plight of Cambodian children (McGrory 1990, 25). Analysis helps explain the significance of an event. While television viewers could see the protesters in Tiananmen Square, during the summer of 1989, it was foreign correspondents who tried to explain the impact these events could have on both China, the viewer and the rest of the world. The transmission of international human rights norms through the media also aids in socializing individuals to internationally agreed upon standards. This is analogous to the same role undertaken by the media in a domestic setting where journalists help to "construct nation and society, to put flesh on ... otherwise vague concepts, and thus to help make them real" (Gans 1979, 297). Interpreting international values informs both individuals and governments about these norms. One of the tasks, in this case, is informing individuals of the machinery available to promote and protect human rights (UN Centre for Human Rights 1989, 16).

Discussion about the media and politics cannot ignore the impact the press has on the policy process. Beyond the role of observer, the press is seen both as a participant in the political process and as a catalyst for further political activity (Cohen 1963, 134-135). As a participant the press plays an active role in the policy process including the transmission of information from one governmental actor to another. Policy-makers also turn to the press for analysis and evaluation of new ideas, and sometimes for ideas themselves (Cohen 1963, 219-220; Gans 1973, 291-292; Reisman 1984, 651). These ideas will often be found in editorials, columns and news analysis, though some officials are reluctant to admit this (Rubin 1979, 210-211).

#### **News Selection**

By recognizing that media attention to international human rights can educate people, monitor governments, or assist non-governmental organizations in fulfilling their mandate, I am highlighting the importance of the media as a political actor. This impact can only be felt if human rights are reported. In other words, the different media effects are the end product of a long chain of events with each link affecting the next (see figure 1.1). The factors affecting media coverage must be recognized in order to understand the content of what is reported. These values become the first step in the sequence of events beginning

with the decision to report an event, and ending with the reader's (or viewer's) final perceptions (Galtung and Ruge 1965, 65; Larson 1984, 21; Adams 1978). News consumers can then attempt to take this perception of the event and, if desired, translate them into one of the previously discussed media effects.

(figure 1.1 about here)

News selection is based upon a number of factors that can be defined in terms of news values and production constraints. News values are those beliefs which determine the news-worthiness of an event while production constraints are limitations that can determine whether or not an event is reported. Other limitations are attributable to both the economics of running a news agency and the political realities faced by foreign correspondents.

A number of common points can be identified as influencing news production in western society. One of the first common points is that the press reports on events involving elite nations and elite people (Galtung and Ruge 1965, 68).<sup>3</sup> The logic behind this is clear. Events in elite nations will have a greater impact upon events in the news recipient's country. Foreign news is based on the diplomatic considerations, or political interests, of the national government (Lent 1977, 47; Gans 1979, 32; Shoemaker, et al. 1991, 792).

Conflict and/or crisis, including diplomatic/military



crisis and natural disaster, are considered newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Lent 1977; Gans 1979, 32-36). Gans adds to this list by specifying other regularly reported items including peaceful change and the excesses of dictatorships. Deviant events, and people, attract attention and are thus deemed newsworthy (Shoemaker, et al. 1991, 782-784, 794-795).<sup>4</sup> Events and information about Communist bloc countries are also identified as "news" (Gans 1979, 33-34; Herman and Chomsky 1988, 29-30). This is due, in part, to the fact that activities in Communist nations, like activities in other elite countries, are seen as regularly affecting the foreign affairs of the United States. Also, reporting failings within this system support commonly held expectations about Communist society. This last point was noted by Ajuonuma (1987, 111) and Oveissi (1987, 84), both of whom found television coverage of the famine in Ethiopia emphasizing the failures of a government aligned with the Soviet Union.

Audience interest, while not a major determinant of foreign news selection, can influence the number of reports devoted to an issue. Two examples highlight the importance of audience interest. First, Bassow (1988, 248) states that the amount of coverage given to Soviet dissidents "was influenced by the needs of the readership and audience of each reporter's newspaper." Thus, the New York Times and the Washington Post gave a great deal of attention to the

dissidents while the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune did not. In a second example, George Watson, Vice-President for News of ABC television, notes that attention to the Ethiopian famine followed positive audience reaction to a second-hand report broadcast on NBC (Ajuonuma 1987, 118). This was after the US networks ignored the issue for two years.

The reporting of "news" is also affected by tangible factors, such as the cost of running a news bureau or the location of correspondents. One of the first difficulties in reporting foreign news is the limited number of reporters located abroad. In 1975 US correspondents were stationed in 54 foreign countries, with 51% located in Western Europe. Another 38% of US foreign correspondents were located in Asia and Latin America, the remaining journalists being scattered throughout the rest of the world (Lent 1977, 49-50; Graber 1989: 332). This uneven distribution of reporters is not unusual. Elliott and Gould (1973, 315) point out that 73% of the correspondents from the British press were located in Western Europe and the United States. Naturally the placement of reporters in certain locations demonstrates the importance associated with day to day events in those regions and, obviously, would lead to more news coming from those areas.

A number of methods are used by the news media to compensate for the uneven distribution of foreign

correspondents. Local reporters (stringers) will be hired in developing countries and small industrialized nations to assist in news gathering (Rosenblum 1979, 10). There is also the practice of "parachute reporting." When an event is identified as newsworthy and no local correspondents are available to cover the story, reporters will be sent to the location. While an efficient means for covering events in remote areas, parachute reporting limits the information that is reported. The "newsworthy" event will receive considerable attention while day to day problems, such as chronic human rights violations, are often overlooked (Sandvig 1988, 60; Rosenblum 1979, 10-12). Recent examples of parachute reporting include the stranded whales in Barrow, Alaska, in 1988,<sup>5</sup> and the student protests in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989.

Foreign correspondents also face the problem of government censorship (Lent 1977, 48). When the South African government instituted a news black-out, the daily scenes of violence and chaos that was regularly reported immediately vanished from television screens and newspapers around the world. Reisman (1984) argues that the ability to report news from open societies paints a distorted picture of human rights in countries that give greater latitude to the press. North and South Korea are cited by Reisman as examples of this biased image. Because North Korea is a closed society the limited amount of news from that country

gives the impression that human rights conditions are better than in South Korea which receives greater coverage. This, according to Reisman, results in a "reasonably" accurate account of human rights in South Korea while violations in North Korea go unreported (Reisman 1984, 651-652).

Societal problems lead to other difficulties faced by the reporter when trying to report foreign news, in general, and specifically human rights. Human rights violators do not want their activities reported. Therefore, fear of retaliation makes it difficult for reporters to find credible sources. If reliable information is obtained there are still dangers to the reporter for publicizing that information (Rosenblum 1979, 196; Herman and Chomsky 1988, 45 at note 12). Intimidation can be as minor as revoking a correspondents visa or go as far as publishing death lists of named journalists or even the disappearance or execution of a reporter (Article 19 1988, 308-310). These threats are routinely carried out.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, reporters run into difficulty trying to define the term "human rights." Rosenblum (1979, 197), an experienced foreign correspondent, recognizes that the term is vague, with reporters and editors, like the diplomats, lawyers and scholars before them, having difficulty interpreting the concept. Because so many different ideas are included within the category there has been a tendency for foreign correspondents to focus their reports on civil

and political rights, ignoring violations of economic, social and cultural rights (Ennals and Skogly 1988, 130).<sup>7</sup>

### **Foreign News Coverage**

Before discussing the research done on human rights it is useful to see how these different values and limitations translate into actual news coverage. Approximately 25% of world events were found to be "newsworthy," and reported in the New York Times (Shoemaker, et al. 1991, 789). These events take up less than 20% of non-advertising space in US newspapers (Gerbner and Marvanyi 1977; Hague 1983). The newsweeklies (Time and Newsweek), according to Gans (1979, 31), devote the same proportion of news space to foreign coverage as the newspapers.

Less than 15% of international events were reported by U.S. television news according to Shoemaker, et al. (1991, 789). The amount of limited time being used for foreign news appears to be changing. In 1967 Gans (1977, 31) found that television used only 14% of their space for foreign news. A recent study found television news giving greater attention to foreign affairs (Larson 1984, 40-41). Between 1976 and 1981 43% of the network television news broadcasts were given to international issues coverage.

No study has examined the proportion of foreign news reported in the western newspapers that relates to human rights. In looking at Asian newspapers, Schramm (1978) found that less than two percent of foreign news coverage

reported in the press, and less than three percent of foreign news reported on the wire services, looked at human rights in the third world.<sup>8</sup> While this information is not known for the US press it is possible to determine that the New York Times, on average, reported 1.2 stories a day, between 1976 and 1986, that discussed human rights, while the Washington Post reported, on average, less than one story a day (Geyer and Shapiro 1988, 389-390). The specific focus of those human rights reports were not examined.

Hanson and Miller's (1987) study of television news coverage of Central America found a considerable percentage of news reports focusing on human rights.<sup>9</sup> Initially, they examined television coverage during the Carter administration, finding very little coverage on Central America (5 stories in 1977). However, 40% of that coverage focused on human rights. In later years, television news devoted more time to central America with a larger percentage of coverage devoted to human rights issues.<sup>10</sup>

The previous research on news geography has also found consistent results concerning which geographic regions are emphasized, regardless of whether one is considering the print or broadcast media. Asia, the Middle East and West Europe have been the predominant regions of focus (Gerbner and Marvanyi 1977, 58; Haque 1983, 523; Larson 1984, 68). The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe accounted for less than 10% of all foreign news in US elite newspapers, a surprising

point considering the importance Gans (1977) and Herman and Chomsky (1988) attached to news about Communist societies.<sup>11</sup> An important point about these regional distinctions is that most regional news can be attributed to a small number of countries (Larson 1984, 72; Hanson and Miller 1987, 182).

#### **Previous Studies on Human Rights in the Press**

With few exceptions, previous research on international human rights coverage has looked at the number of stories either reported or broadcast. One of the most recent and extensive works examined the frequency of coverage for those entries listed under select human rights index subject headings (Geyer and Shapiro 1988). When examining New York Times coverage, for example, Geyer and Shapiro tallied the number of stories indexed under "Freedom and Human Rights," "Torture," "Political Prisoners," and "Amnesty International."<sup>12</sup> Similar methods were used in considering stories printed in the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, Newsweek and Time magazines, and CBS Evening News broadcasts.

The subject headings used by Geyer and Shapiro to identify a human rights article are inadequate for understanding the types of human rights discussed in the story. "Freedom and Human Rights" does not tell us whether the story reported on freedom of movement, peaceful assembly, or the right to political participation. Even

though Geyer and Shapiro focused on the larger human rights categories indexed in the New York Times, other aspects of human rights, such as genocide, "freedom of religion" and "freedom of speech," all clearly human rights topics according to the international bill of human rights,<sup>13</sup> were cross-indexed and not included in the freedom and human rights tally.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1.2 provides a visual representation of Geyer and Shapiro's (1988, 389) New York Times findings. They attribute increased human rights coverage to President Carter's first term in office, asserting that "(h)uman rights did receive a dramatic boost in media attention during Carter's early years in office" (Geyer and Shapiro 1988, 387; see also Pritchard 1991, 137-139). While this pattern (in press coverage) would be expected, the findings do not adequately represent this premise since the data begins only two years prior to the Carter administration. Excluded are Congressional attempts, beginning about 1973, to make human rights part of the foreign policy agenda.

(figure 1.2 about here)

An earlier study (Hanson and Miller 1987) examined network television coverage of human rights stories about Central America from 1977-1980. Once again, the focus was on the number of stories, not content. The different subject headings, as well as the regional focus, do not allow direct comparison with Geyer and Shapiro's (1988)