



# The Foreign News Flow in the Information Age

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**THE FOREIGN NEWS FLOW  
IN THE INFORMATION AGE**

by

**Claude Moisy**

**Discussion Paper D-23  
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The Joan Shorenstein Center

**PRESS • POLITICS**



**•PUBLIC POLICY•**

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Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

## INTRODUCTION

It is one of the paradoxes of our Information Age that in a time of unprecedented abundance of news about the world around them, Americans want it less. Newspaper readership is down and, as Claude Moisy reports, foreign news is a smaller proportion than ever. This is perfectly understandable. Civilization means, almost by definition, a reduction in the sorts of events that have traditionally been considered as news: “rumors of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, ... shipwrecks, piracies, and sea-fights,” to quote Robert Burton, writing of his own information overload in the pre-CNN year of 1632. As we grow more civilized, and especially as the Cold War has ended, the world becomes duller. Foreigners are less likely to kill us, and therefore they are somewhat less interesting. When was the last time anyone read a “news” story from, say, Basle, Switzerland, or Copenhagen? A few heavy papers occasionally try to force-feed their readers analyses of Indian politics, but by and large the readers have tuned out; and, chances are, the correspondent who writes these stories does so more out of guilt than genuine interest.

At the same time, the technologically adept citizen has at his disposal more theoretical sources of information than ever. In some cities, cable TV carries foreign-language nightly newscasts in Moscow, Paris or Jerusalem. The Internet can connect him to newspapers around the world, self-administered news groups, bulletin boards, chat rooms, government agencies, libraries and transcript services. And more change is coming. The Pentagon has already developed and deployed a helmet-mounted TV camera. It won't be long before amateur eyewitnesses can post their own videos onto the Internet. Moisy discusses the fate of the commercial wire-services and of news-gathering in the light of these technological advances. His analysis is a tour-de-force; the future does not appear bright.

I would voice only two arguments that may preserve the traditional news-gathering businesses for the indefinite future.

First, the news needs storytellers. This is not a universal skill. Even experienced newspeople can leave an event they all have witnessed, asking each other (or more likely asking a hard-nosed wire-service reporter like Moisy)

“What's the lead?” It is perfectly possible to see an event and not be able to describe it coherently or to pick out what in a speech or press conference is “news.” On the Internet and other interactive fora — radio talk shows, for example — the news consumer often is at the mercy of whoever happens to have seized the floor. The news source could be an experienced analyst or a fanciful fabricator. Even if the source is honest and well-intentioned, he or she may be disorganized and inarticulate. Among all the professionals in the news business, a reporter is still a premium product who can do an off-the-cuff “stand-up” in front of a TV camera. Newspaper editors have a special place in their hearts for the pencil reporter who can dictate a coherent story over a telephone on deadline to his home office.

Second, the traditional news sources are not the only conduits of information, they are also filters. Any newspaper person who has logged onto an Internet news group will recognize many of the contributors at once: They are the same obsessives who write dense postcards in tiny script that covers all available space and then continues around the edge, often continuing with a PS on the address side. These are cards and letters the newspapers routinely do not print; the Internet, by contrast, is a vanity press for the demented, the conspiratorial or the merely self-important. Even the wonderfully-named “killfile” feature — which allows one to bar any further messages from a bore — does not solve this problem. You often don't know what you really want until you actually see it. Except for specialist subjects, the news groups are a frustration and a bore.

The technological changes Moisy cites are truly breathtaking. But perhaps a little historical perspective is warranted. Short-wave radio allowed Americans to hear Hitler's speeches in the 1930s. But short-wave did not replace news-gathering. Live TV coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1953 allowed shut-ins as much access to a national event as the reporters assigned to cover it. The shut-ins still read every word and watched every newscast. There is still a market for professional newspeople, and the weakness of the Internet is that no one has yet figured out how to take in enough revenue to pay professionals to contribute to it.

Moisy is undoubtedly correct in predicting

that news will increasingly be aimed at and consumed by an elite. This is a reflection of a wider change in this once-egalitarian nation. It has become polarized into elites and non-elites, a split that is not only skewing our income statistics but has even begun to replace the old left-right division in our politics. Issues like the North American Free Trade Agreement split the country into elites who welcomed free trade and non-elites who feared it. Thus, you saw odd-couple coalitions, such as populists Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader on one side, and internationalists like Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich on the other.

One fascinating thread that runs through Moisy's analysis is the success of Reuters, the British-based news agency (known to Moisy and his fellows at Agence France Presse by the internal code-name "Rosalie"), for which I once worked. Its prosperity, even today, is based on an inspired philosophy propounded by its founder, Baron Julius Reuter, more than 150 years ago. "Follow the cable." Reuter started with carrier pigeons, but quickly realized that he could make his fortune by keeping up with the latest technology, at that time, the telegraph wire. Wherever the cable went, Reuters would go too. The "cable" has now become digital computing, interactive networks, home-shopping, real-time video and the like. Reuters is still there, gathering, distributing and filtering the news. By the way, the best and most satisfying way to read it is in black and white, on newsprint.

**Lars-Erik Nelson**  
**Columnist**  
*New York Daily News*

## THE FOREIGN NEWS FLOW IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Will the Americans still see the world when they travel on the Infobahn?

by Claude Moisy

### I. INTRODUCTION

The amazing technological innovations that are revolutionizing the field of communication at the end of the 20th century are generally regarded as beneficial to our ability to acquire knowledge and to understand and solve problems.

The optimistic proponents of the "global village" theory seem confident that instantaneous access by the individual citizen to an unlimited number of sources of information will shrink our unruly planet. They see in the new interactive multimedia the promise of a "boundaryless" world. The purpose of this paper is to try and find out whether the global electronic interconnection — the much heralded information superhighway — is likely to improve the flow of international news, make the public more aware of world problems and, consequently, contribute to their solution.

To address these questions we must look at the changes that the unfolding "information revolution" has already brought and will continue to bring to the international news market. The global newswire services remain the principal suppliers of international news to the media. But since the comprehensive study made ten years ago by Jonathan Fenby,<sup>1</sup> the conditions in which these wire services collect, produce and distribute news around the world have been affected by new economic, political and, above all, technological changes. Some of these changes are positive, some are negative. Their evolution determines to a large extent the quality of the international news flow that, hopefully, contributes to international understanding.

The shaping of public opinion, however, is increasingly affected by the development of two phenomena: the ascendancy of television over the newspaper as a source of news, and the emergence of interactivity as a way of acquiring information. To what extent will the newswire services have to substitute image for word in order to keep their role as international news providers? To what extent will newspapers, and even television, have to change their approach to providing news in

*Claude Moisy, former chairman and general manager of Agence France-Presse, the French international news agency, has been a journalist and an executive in the news business for more than forty years in many parts of the world, including twenty years in Washington, D.C. He was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the Spring of 1995.*

order to remain relevant in a system dominated by the choice of the consumer?

It may very well be that the prospects for a real globalization of information through instant communications are overestimated. Will computer interactivity remain the privilege of a small minority in affluent societies for a long time to come, or will it quickly become accessible throughout the globe? Will the information superhighway generate greater curiosity about distant societies and their problems, or will it only appeal to natural human tendencies for greed and indifference to others?

### *The Nature of News*

Any discussion of the news business today needs to be preceded by an attempt at clarifying the semantic confusion that surrounds the world of communication. Words such as "information," "media" and "news" have acquired a much wider scope of meaning than they had 30 years ago.

Information is no longer synonymous with news. The term now covers all sorts of data that can be reduced to "bytes" to be transmitted electronically. Media is no longer synonymous with the press. It is now applied to all enterprises that disseminate any kind of "information" in the widest possible sense of the word (news, stock quotes, advertising, entertainment, etc.). We have even reached a point where the term news itself is no longer restricted to what it used to mean: the coverage of events by journalists. The parent company of Fox Television, an entertainment network, is called "News Corp." Users of the Internet form "news groups" when they get together in cyberspace to exchange ideas, opinions and mere trivialities. Some "news and information" channels on cable television can program anything *but* the coverage of events.

This study only deals with news in its narrow traditional sense of coverage of events, and more specifically with news from the outside world available to the American public. It will examine first the primary production of such news, in the form of text or image, and then its consumption by the media and the public. It reaches the conclusion that a potentially greater supply of international news is being met in the United States by a reduced demand.

## II. THE SUPPLY OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS

### *The Not So Global Television*

It is widely assumed by the general public as well as by media professionals that, in the United States, television has long been the main source of news. It is also increasingly believed that television has become "global" in the sense that it has acquired the capacity to cover events everywhere and bring that coverage everywhere.

Historians of the communication industry may someday reconstruct with disbelief the genesis of the CNN phenomenon in the wake of the Gulf War of 1990-91. For the first time in history, thanks to the shrewdness of Saddam Hussein, a television network became an active participant in the development of a major international crisis. It became the channel of communication between the warring parties and the instant chronicler of the conflict. The impact on the international community was such that the expression "global live coverage" was widely accepted as the description of what had happened and as the definitive hallmark of CNN. But the feat could in no way become a permanent fixture, and the very high ratings reached in the United States in the first quarter of 1991 during the fighting phase of the crisis plummeted almost as soon as it was over.

CNN currently has a news gathering network of 20 bureaus with 35 correspondents outside the United States. That is more than other aspiring global television networks such as Fox. But it is only half of what the BBC has had for a long time to cover world events on radio and television. It is hardly more than what comprises the foreign network of any of the three or four major American newspapers and news magazines which were never regarded as global print media. And, above all, it is only a fraction of what the three largest international newswire services maintain on a permanent basis. It may be adequate for occasional spectacular operations in a few long-brewing world crises, but it certainly does not allow an immediate and sustained coverage of all events breaking out in unexpected places on the planet.

On the distribution side, a distinction must be made between the "potential reach" of a television network and its actual audience. Richard Parker recently estimated CNN International viewership at much less than one percent of the world population.<sup>2</sup> Even in the industrial democracies of Europe and in Japan, where the CNN International signal is widely available on cable, it is only watched by an insignificant

fraction of the potential audiences that naturally prefer to receive the news in their own language from their national television channels.

We cannot discount the possibility that if a real global television news network ever exists, it will come out of one of the global newswire services that have already started producing video news, Reuters being the prime candidate. Whether news organizations that have for so long concentrated on written news will be able to master an entirely different medium remains in question.

### *The Global Newswire Services*

The only news organizations approaching a global dimension are still the largest of the traditional international news agencies. Little known to the general public, they have been the main purveyors of foreign news to the world media since their creation in the mid-nineteenth century. In recent times, the international news market has, in fact, been dominated by "the big four" Western news agencies: AFP, AP, Reuters and UPI (in alphabetical order).

During the Cold War and its "neutralist" by-product, this exclusively Western control of the international news flow led to a UNESCO sponsored call for a "new world information order" that fizzled out long before the end of the East-West rivalry. The only real changes in the last fifteen years were the disappearance of UPI and the expansion of Reuters.

### *The Fall of United Press International*

The decline of UPI in the 1980s was a significant event for the world news business, and particularly for the supply of international news to the U.S. media. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and analyze the downfall of the second American wire service. Suffice to say that it was one of the first signs of the reduced demand for news on the part of the newspaper industry.

A painful series of financial crises and unfortunate changes of ownership progressively reduced the news-gathering network and the scope of coverage, both national and international, of UPI. A vicious circle of mounting deficits and staff reductions hurt the credibility of the wire. In the 10-year period from 1982 to 1992, it changed hands five times to end up as a subsidiary of a relatively new and little known communication company owned by the Saudi royal family. Its annual revenue had plummeted to less than \$30M from more than \$100M while its staff had been cut to less than 300 from over 1,800. By then, UPI had renounced competing with AP and

started experimenting with new products for new markets. Since 1992, the new owners have worked at reviving the network of foreign bureaus which had been reduced to almost nothing, except in Latin America. But the U.S. newspaper industry remained uninterested.

For the quality of the international news flow to the United States, the collapse of UPI has certainly been a loss. There was obviously a large amount of duplication in the foreign coverage of the two American newswires. But there was also a complementary element in their competition, each one having its strong and weak points in international reporting. The sad and relevant fact is that in the 1980s the U.S. newspaper industry had already given up on its previous interest in maintaining two independent American sources of general news.

### ***The Transformation of Reuters***

At exactly the same time that UPI was reeling under financial difficulties, the British news agency Reuters, which was not in much better shape in the '60s, underwent the opposite evolution. Its managers responded boldly to the challenge of new technologies and of a changing international information market. Taking advantage of Reuters's long tradition as a source of financial news and of its location in the top international financial center, they decided to put all their available resources into developing the electronic processing of business information for the world's business community. The gamble

was a success, and Reuters financial services — including interactive services — became an indispensable tool of the global marketplace. Its revenues increased ninefold in the '70s and fifteenfold in the '80s. The former cooperative of British newspapers was very successfully floated as a public company in 1984. And in the mid-'90s, through a wide-ranging wave of acquisitions in the communication industry, it was well on its way to becoming one of the largest global multimedia companies. The general news services for the media now represent less than seven percent of its revenue. But the huge profits (\$650M before tax in 1994) generated by the numerous business information services, enabled Reuters to invest heavily in new types of news services for the media, such as photo and video news.

This expansion contrasted with the relative stagnation of the two other global newswires. The development of *Associated Press* has always been influenced by its legal status as a non-profit cooperative of U.S. daily newspapers in which the electronic media have been belatedly granted only token representation. It kept concentrating on the production of text and photo for its domestic newspaper members. It never really tried to compete with Reuters for the expanding business information market and started late and modestly in video news production.

*Agence France-Presse* for its part has always been hampered in its expansion by a hybrid legal status of "autonomous body operating under commercial law" but deprived of capital or

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### **Relative Dimension of the Three GNWs (1993)**

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	AP	Reuters	AFP
Revenue (\$M)	355	2,810	204
Expenses	353	2,240	207
Income	2	570	(3)
Employees	c.3,000	11,300	c.2,000
Total bureaus	226	126	130
Foreign bureaus	91	c.100	105
Total journalists	1,400	1,350	1,160
Journalists abroad	310	615	560

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*Source: Annual reports and other company documents*



shareholders. It is supposed to finance its operations solely by the sale of its services, but depends on "subscriptions" of French state administrations that still amounted to 48% of its revenue in 1993. Whenever it needs to invest in new technologies or new services it must negotiate with the state for preferential loans from the public banking sector.

### ***The Real Wholesalers in Foreign News***

As different as they are in their structure and activities, the three global newswires are the only organizations that really collect general news *all around the world* and distribute it *all around the world* to a wide variety of media and non-media clients. To conduct this double activity they rely on networks of news producing bureaus that no other type of news organizations maintain, and on world-wide autonomous telecommunication systems to distribute their services.

They all have between 90 and 100 full-fledged bureaus (an office with at least one permanent staff journalist) outside their home base. And the number of professional journalists (news writers and photographers) assigned to these foreign bureaus varies between 300 and 600 depending on the administrative status granted to their local personnel.

All three global newswires produce between 400 and 500 news items every day (not counting multiple versions in different languages) on all aspects of world activities: political, social, economic, cultural, sport, etc. Even the most "domestic" service of AFP, for instance, the French language general wire distributed to the French media (around 150,000 words daily), contains on the average 35% foreign news. The English language wire for Europe (120,000 words), contains more than 50% non-European news. The Associated Press, a wire in the United States, dominated as it is by the heavy demand of its members for national and regional news, can carry up to a hundred foreign stories a day. By comparison, CNN (including CNN International) never brings more than twenty foreign stories a day to its viewers, if for no other reason than the much higher cost of producing and transmitting video news.

### ***The Effect of New Technologies on News Production***

The international news business enjoyed a relative technological stability for almost a century when the news was produced on typewriters, transmitted by telegraph wires or radio

waves, and received on teleprinter tapes. Things started to change in the early 1970s with the introduction of computer terminals for news writing and editing. The change was even more radical in the 1980s with the progressive adoption of satellite transmission by the global newswires.

These two technological developments, computers and satellites, clearly worked in favor of the news producers and fostered a more intensive flow of their international services. Although it was not intended, the computerization of word treatment immediately increased the volume of news produced and transmitted over the wires. In some news agencies the management strove to convince the journalists to reduce their output in order to counter the unions' claim that the computer was a tool for the exploitation of the worker. But by all accounts, the introduction of video display terminals in the newsrooms invariably resulted in gains of productivity. At AFP, for instance, no foreign language service had less than a 40% wordage increase in five or six years with a smaller number of journalists.

By the mid-'80s, with the standardization of the PC as a receiving and editing device, more and more subscribers were able to do away with messy reams of carbon paper and skim over the lengthening news menu on their screen and print out only what they were interested in. This, in turn, enabled the global newswires to widen and diversify the content of their services which became more indispensable than ever to their users.

Satellite transmission turned out to be even more beneficial to the global wires. It freed them from the costly and inefficient monopolies that public telecommunication companies enjoyed in most parts of the world, particularly in autocratic or developing countries. Around 1980 they could begin building their own satellite distribution networks with small reception dishes installed at the subscribers' premises. It was a slow process because of the political reluctance of many governments to allow direct reception of news services, or any other data, from abroad by their nationals. But the global newswires were helped by a general climate of deregulation of telecommunications and by the advent of satellite distribution of television, which proved irresistible and generated a sprouting of parabolic antennas in the most unlikely parts of the globe. By the end of the decade, Reuters, AP and AFP had practically completed their respective global networks of satellite distribution.



In the meantime, the progress made in digitalization and compression of data was another boon for the international flow of information. Along with the development of multiplexing techniques, it meant that many different news products, text, pictures or graphics, could now be transmitted more securely and economically on the same channel in much less time than it took before to transmit only one.

Last, but not least, new technologies have also enabled the wire services to manufacture the news in a much more efficient way. Computer interconnection between the central newsrooms and the outside bureaus, and between the bureaus themselves, made the editing of news much easier. A journalist sitting in Brussels now can cooperate with a colleague in Washington to write a story on a trade dispute between the United States and the European Union with an editor in London or Paris looking over their shoulder. With a satellite broadcasting station no bigger than an attaché case, a reporter can file the account of a Russian air raid on a Chechen town deprived of all means of communications, and a photographer in the mountains of Afghanistan can immediately transmit to end users a digitalized picture that no longer needs to be developed.

### ***The State of Press Freedom in the World***

The freedom to collect and distribute news around the world has slightly improved in the last ten years. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the advent of some form of political pluralism in parts of Africa, and the disappearance of many military regimes in Latin America, have all contributed to alleviate the totalitarian control of the media in large parts of the world. A measure of independence was introduced in the press in many of these countries. It became somewhat easier for foreign news organizations to gather information, especially with the contribution of local reporters who had previously been prevented from dealing with foreign journalists, except to spy on them.

But this liberalization had its limits. Most of the nominally democratic new regimes, particularly in Russia and Eastern Europe, still strive to retain as much control as they can over the information process, even when they cannot prevent a dose of privatization of the media. It would be difficult to contend that the impediments to the collection and distribution of news in many authoritarian countries of Asia, Africa and the Middle East have yet been significantly

alleviated. The record of political intimidation and outright repression of journalists is still too blatant in too many countries.

This situation also weighs on the business prospects of international news providers. Persistent obstacles of all kinds discourage the development of independent, economically stable news media in large parts of the world. This deprives the global newswires of the opportunity to gain new markets. Obviously, the world is still far from being an open global village.

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To sum up the supply side of the international news equation at the end of the century, the global wire services are, from a technological standpoint, in a position to cover more of the world events than ever, and to do so faster than ever and in more forms than ever. In particular, the Associated Press, even if it has been so clearly outpaced by Reuters in many other respects, remains the privileged and abundant source of foreign news for the American media and American officials dealing with international affairs.

It is difficult to agree with Mort Rosenblum's contention that today's international news distribution "amounts to a theft of information that everyone badly needs," or that "few Americans are able to follow distant events which shape their lives."<sup>3</sup> It is rather a situation where there is much more than they care to follow.

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### **III. THE DEMAND FOR INTERNATIONAL NEWS**

The demand for international news has already been, and will continue to be, affected by a series of economic, political, societal and technological changes. Some are permanent, some are ephemeral, and some are too new to be seriously assessed. Here are the most obvious of them:

- the slow but continuing decline of the newspaper industry;
- the end of the Cold War and the changing frame of reference for international relations;
- the ensuing loss of attentiveness of the American people to foreign affairs;
- the ascendancy of television as the medium of information for the masses and its effect on the news content; and
- the rapidly spreading interactive means of communication that enable people to select their information themselves.

### ***The Decline of the Print Media...***

The most important market for the international news produced by the global newswires has traditionally been the print media, and particularly newspapers. Radio and television later developed as their second major market. With the exception of Reuters, the newswires, global as well as national, remain largely newspaper oriented and still depend on the survival of that form of media for their economic equilibrium.

In the early '80s, as Ted Turner was struggling to establish his newly created Cable News Network, he brazenly announced at an annual meeting of the then American Newspaper Publishers Association in Las Vegas that their time was up and that they were on the endangered species list. It was only a slight exaggeration. In 1995, the total circulation of American dailies, which had peaked at 63 million copies in 1984, is back at its 1960 level of 59 million. But because of the population growth in these 35 years (from 180 M to 260 M), it means that the per capita circulation of newspapers in the country has declined from 1 per 3 inhabitants to 1 per 4.4 inhabitants, a drop of almost 50%. The number of daily newspapers has gone down by almost 200 in the last fifteen years, from 1700 to a little over 1500. The current rate of attrition is around fifteen titles a year. Even more ominously, the rate of newspaper readership today is twice as weak among those under 30 than among those over 65.

The developments in other types of print media are of little comfort to the global news wires and to the prospects for the flow of international news to the public. The small market of general news magazines is also suffering a decline in total circulation. The simultaneous burgeoning of all sorts of money-making periodicals is of no help. Their increasingly narrow specialization (from computers to cosmetics, biking or rock music) makes a general newswire largely irrelevant to their editors.

### ***... And the Worst is Yet to Come***

The prospects for daily newspapers and their international news content appear increasingly dim as there seems to be no end to their economic problems. A weak advertising market in the late 1980s was followed by a string of sharp hikes in the price of newsprint in the early 1990s. In an "Industry Focus" on the subject of newsprint prices, *The Wall Street Journal* reported in February 1995 that, in order to control production

costs, "several papers have trimmed news space, with international news apparently first to go." In a typical case, the executive editor of the Green Bay (Wis.) *Press Gazette* explained that "not to affect our local news reporting" the paper had to carry less international wire-service stories.<sup>4</sup> According to a survey of affected newspapers by *The American Journalism Review*, complaints from readers only came when the space squeeze hit the horoscope column or the puzzle page, not the foreign news.<sup>5</sup> Widespread reductions in staff forced by the mounting cost of newsprint is bound to further weaken the ability of middle-size newspapers to handle unfamiliar international affairs.

Generally speaking, the print media have certainly been hurt by the popularization of television. But their greatest challenge may be yet to come in the form of the interactive computer and the increasing use that ordinary people are making of it. The information superhighway could make newspapers, and the sort of journalism they have practiced, obsolete. Some newspaper companies are aware of the threat and are already working to adapt themselves to the future and to still uncertain ways in which people will want to be informed of world events. *The New York Times* showed the way in 1995 by buying Video News International (VNI), which produces news programs for television. At that time, 60 daily newspapers had online electronic versions. Eight major newspaper companies owning 123 dailies joined in a technical alliance, the New Century Network, to publish electronically on the Internet.

But whatever the changes in mass news consumption, it is quite possible that quality print journalism will keep a niche as a channel of information for a minority of attentive consumers, those most likely to keep up the demand for a sustained thoughtful coverage of the outside world.

### ***International News after the Cold War***

The end of the Cold War was a turning point in the on-again off-again interest of the American people in the outside world. Its effects on the coverage of foreign news by the American media has already been widely researched and commented upon. In a recent study, Dr. Pippa Norris reminded us that the end of the Cold War brought a sharp increase in the number of foreign news items on American television (CBS and ABC) for a brief transition period (1990-91), followed by a "dramatic fall" starting in 1992. From an all-time high of 41% of all news stories on network

television in 1991, it went down to 29% in 1992 and 24% in 1993. The drop was even worse in the length of time devoted to foreign news, which fell to an average 20% in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

A personal survey conducted in March 1995 shows that since then, the situation has been getting worse. From a sampling of twenty random days of evening news during that month, the percentage of foreign news (per number of news items) was 24% on ABC and 22% on CBS. That is not too bad, even if we consider that about half of these “foreign” items were in fact concerned with Americans abroad rather than with the situation in foreign countries (U.S. veterans returning to Remagen or Iwo Jima for the 50th anniversary of the War, American victims of terrorism in Pakistan, a fugitive American arsonist arrested in Brazil, etc.). But the time devoted to foreign news had fallen to 12% on ABC (3.4 minutes) and 15% (4.1 minutes) on CBS during the 27-minute news show. That is about half the immutable 26% (7 minutes) occupied by commercial “messages” intertwined with the news.

By all measures, the status of foreign news on network television has not only declined from its peak in the watershed years of 1990/91, but from the levels of the Cold War years.

Not surprisingly, an even smaller proportion of the television news magazine stories concerns foreign topics. In a 24-week period from October 1994 to March 1995, the most durable and most prestigious of these shows, “60 Minutes” on CBS, treated only twelve foreign subjects out of 72 (with the exception of pure entertainment topics such as Britain’s Mick Jagger or Italian soprano Cecilia Bartoli). It amounted to about one-sixth of its programming. But it was still more than on similar shows on other networks that do not even attempt to resist the “tabloidization” of television

news. “Nightline” on ABC, which prides itself as a “serious show”, used the OJ Simpson trial in early 1995 to improve its ratings.

As to the hundreds of local television stations that program their own one-hour news show before switching to network evening news, it is documented that they very rarely venture into foreign topics; and when they do it, it is to enter into the “mayhem” categories of crime, disaster, terrorism and war.<sup>7</sup>

The wider choice of programs offered by satellite TV is clearly of no help since it mostly caters to the entertainment function of the medium. In the Boston area, out of 166 channels available via satellite in the spring of 1995, only 3 are news programs, including one (NENC) that covers only regional and local news. That compares with 91 movie channels, 24 sports channels and 33 pop music channels.

### ***The Changing Frame of Reference***

To make things worse, the globalization of the world economy has contributed to the recent reduction of foreign news presented by the media and particularly the video media. International trade and finance tend to supplant security at the top of the world agenda. Relations among the United States, Western Europe and Japan are no longer dominated by their common opposition to international communism but by their economic interdependence. Economic tensions between the haves and the have-nots are now a more real threat than nuclear war. Great strides have been made by the global newswires and the major print media to equip themselves with reporters and editors able to handle international economic issues. But these stories do not play well on the television screen. “It’s too complicated to

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Continuing Decline of Foreign News on Network Television

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	1970s	1990/91	1993	1995
Percent of foreign stories	35%	41%	24%	23%
Percent of time	45%	NA	20%	13.5%
Avg. length of foreign story (in minutes)	1.7	2.2	1.6	1.2

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Sources: Norris, *Television News Index from the Vanderbilt Archive*, and the author.

explain, but too important to ignore," said an embarrassed "60 Minutes" reporter, who had to recount in March 1995 how a young trader in Singapore could sink a major bank in London by playing with "derivatives" on the Tokyo market. He eventually gave up explaining what derivatives were.

The post Cold War relaxation of tension combined with the changing economic conditions of network television to weaken their former dedication to news, and particularly to foreign news. Gone is the "golden age" of television journalism when the news divisions were the "jewel in the crown" of the networks and were not required to make a profit. The likes of Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor and other first class foreign correspondents could roam the world without worrying too much about the bottom line. The sit-coms, the games and other entertainment programs drew enough advertising money to make up for what the evening news would cost. Now the news division is expected to make money too. And if it does not, it must trim its costs. All three networks started to substantially reduce their permanent overseas staff before the end of the Cold War for financial reasons, and continued afterwards.

Even the most internationally oriented of the media, a handful of big metropolitan dailies, felt the cooling effect of the end of the Cold War. In a memo to his staff in December 1992, Bernard Gwertzman, foreign editor of *The New York Times*, went as far as asking: "Is foreign coverage still important to the *Times*? ... Do we care what happens to Serbs, Croats and Bosnians?" Even if he answered his own questions with an "unambiguous yes," he admitted that "the proportion of front page, hard news stories from overseas may have dropped in the past year."<sup>8</sup> In 1993, Louis Boccardi, president of Associated Press, underlined the increasing difficulty "to bring some stories home to Main Street into a newshole where international news has to fight for every inch."<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Public is Less Interested***

The newspaper industry and the television networks are naturally basing their "cost effective" strategy of international news curtailment on the wide-spread assumption that the consumer of their product does not really care that much. The end of the confrontation of the two nuclear superpowers was only to reinforce this assumption.

As measured by the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press,<sup>10</sup> only four international

events have been followed "very closely" by at least 50% of the American public in the last six years. They were:

- the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (50%);
- the invasion of Panama by U.S. forces in 1990 (60%);
- the Gulf War in 1990-91 (with peaks of 66% for the deployment of U.S. troops and 67% for their return after achieving victory); and
- the landing of U.S. forces in Somalia in 1993 (52%).

It must be noted that only one of these events, the fall of the Berlin Wall, did not involve the United States directly and did not entail the deployment of American armed forces abroad. It had the lowest rating of the four. The momentous upheavals in China and the drama on Tiananmen Square in June and July 1989, or the break-up of the Soviet Union after the attempted coup to depose Gorbachev in 1991 never rated more than 47%. Attentiveness to major international economic issues is naturally lower, even when they are directly connected to American jobs and trade. The adoption of NAFTA by Congress in 1993 scored 39%, and the tense GATT negotiations in 1993 and 1994 never exceeded 16%.

In February 1995, the foreign news item that was the most closely followed by the American public was the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, a non-political human interest story, with a rating of 25%. The peak of "very close attention" given to the Mexican peso crisis and its handling by the Clinton administration that month, which was to have such a negative effect on the value of the U.S. dollar, was only 14%. Bosnia, which had reached a high of 26% in 1993, had dropped to 8%, while Chechnya never passed the 10% mark. At that time (February 1995) more Americans described their level of attentiveness to foreign news as "low" (31%) than as "high" (27%), the largest proportion (42%) using the neutral term of "medium."

A survey conducted in 1994 by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and released in February 1995 challenged the widely held notion that the declining level of interest for international news reflected an increasing tendency towards isolationism on the part of the American people. In a somewhat contorted reading of its own measures of public attitudes on various international issues, the Council stated: "Despite the decline over the past four years, a review of changes in attentiveness to news over the past 20 years suggests that while interest in foreign news



is not a growth entity, outright lack of interest in foreign news has diminished." And it concluded: "The end of the Cold War has not shaken America's fundamental commitment to maintaining an active role in world affairs."<sup>11</sup>

The 1995 edition of the Chicago Council survey, conducted every four years, is in fact replete with illustrations of the declining interest of the American public in foreign affairs and the inward-looking approach to foreign relations. As a percentage of the total problems facing the country, foreign policy problems are rated today at 11.5% from 25.9% in 1986 and 16.8% in 1990. As for the "very important" foreign policy goals of the United States, the protection of weaker nations against foreign aggression went down to 24% in 1994 from 57% in 1990. The promotion and defense of human rights and democracy in other countries similarly declined to 34% from 58%. Conversely, protecting the jobs of American workers shot up from 65 to 83% as a preferred goal of foreign policy.

The place of foreign affairs among "the most important issues facing this country today" is even smaller in more traditional and more frequent polls such as Gallup, where it never exceeded the 5% mark in the twelve-month period from September 1993 to August 1994. That compared with averages of 43% for the state of the economy, 36% for crime and violence, and 26% for health insurance. Significantly, the "fear of war," which was high during the Reagan years, has practically disappeared from these polls where it hardly registered one percentage point at any time during the 1993-94 period.

Media pundits frequently engage in a sort of chicken-and-egg argument over the responsibility for the lack of interest of the American people in international affairs. Robert Hughes, art critic for *Time* and self-appointed prosecutor of television, strongly contends that "if so many Americans are provincial, if...they have the utmost trouble even imagining that the rest of the world is quite real, much of the blame lies with the TV which supplies their pathetically attenuated picture of the world."<sup>12</sup> But at about the same time Tom Brokaw, the NBC news anchorman, argued that television and journalism are not so much the causes of a new American isolationism as its victims. And Max Frankel, a columnist for *The New York Times Magazine*, recently quoted the former publisher of his paper, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, as saying: "Along with responsible newspapers we must have responsible readers, because the fountain serves no useful purpose if the horse refuses to drink."<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Effect of Television News***

Regardless of the diminishing status of news in television programming, the fact remains that, in the United States as elsewhere, the visual medium has replaced the printed press as the favored vehicle for news, domestic as well as international. According to a 1994 survey by the Times-Mirror Center, television was the preferred news source of the American people by 65% against 42% for newspapers and 14% for radio.

The impact of this increasing domination of television as a medium of information has been debated, studied and documented for too long to be further discussed here. It is generally agreed that television, by its very nature, has had a detrimental effect on the nature of news, the consumption of news by the public and, consequently, on the production of news by the other media. Yoshio Murakami, chief editor of the *Asahi Shimbun*, Tokyo's most prestigious newspaper, puts it quite succinctly: "The gravest menace (to quality reporting) is the growing place that the image is taking in the media.... No picture, no news."<sup>14</sup> Good picture, big news." Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard University gives a socio-political echo to Murakami's complaint by decrying "the democracy of the television show that substitutes hyperbole and sensation for reflection."<sup>15</sup>

Similar judgements have given birth and credit to a series of derisive catchwords such as infotainment, soundbites and tabloidization, even though they could have long been applied to popular print media. There is little doubt that television, and the habits it gives to its consumers, have favored the development of "capsule journalism," as practiced by *USA Today* and its imitators. It emphasizes the visual (fancy graphics and striking color pictures) to the detriment of substance, and reduces even further the coverage of distant events.

### ***A More Emotional Medium***

Whatever its shortcomings, television cannot be denied a dominant role in the dissemination of knowledge and the fashioning of public opinion. Elaborate research done by Neuman, Just and Crigler, on the basis of people's reactions to specific news stories presented by various types of media, show the strong impact of the "densely packed and highly visual" television news stories.<sup>16</sup> According to their study, people tend to view television news as "more personally relevant and more emotionally involving" than newspaper accounts, and as giving them "a greater sense of attachment to the issues."

The more emotional reaction to events fostered by television has already had well-known consequences for the conduct of foreign policy in the United States. After Vietnam, foreign interventions became highly vulnerable to the low degree of public tolerance for casualties abroad. Lebanon proved it in 1983, and it can be argued that President Bush stopped short of total victory in Iraq in 1991 because he felt that the public was about to tire of the Gulf War if it dragged on. Somalia was another clear case in point in 1993. The unbearable spectacle of starving infants sucking at the empty breasts of their dying mothers in the squalor of refugee camps, repeated for days on the television screens of millions of American homes, quickly built a popular consensus for the prompt dispatch of U.S. Marines to "restore hope" to Somalians. But a few months later the equally unbearable spectacle of the twisted and bloodied body of a dead Marine dragged in the dust of a Mogadishu street by a frenzied mob precipitated the end of the American rescue mission. In both instances, popular emotions whipped up by television pictures had pressured the Administration to make contradictory decisions that were not necessarily the best responses to the problem at hand, or in the long term best interest of the country.

The current attempts at developing global television companies, and the fact that the two most important global news organizations (Reuters and Associated Press) are now devoting important resources to video news production, increase the dangers of the flow of international news taking the visual rather than the written form.

### ***Complementarity and Multimedia***

However, the progress of the picture media does not exonerate the print media, and particularly the high circulation daily newspapers of large metropolitan areas, of their responsibility in providing more substance to the public perception of foreign issues. Neuman, Just and Crigler rightly insist on the complementarity of various media in the formation of public opinion. They point out that in the 1980s only 10% of the population depended exclusively on TV news and half regularly followed both television and newspaper news.<sup>17</sup> In 1995 the Times-Mirror Center put the proportion of those who get their news only from television at 21%.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the real figure, the complementarity of the media is real, particularly for the attentive portion of the public. It is the very basis for the development of the multimedia products

which have so far primarily concerned the fields of entertainment and education. But it is probable that the future of the news business, including foreign news, also lies in the multimedia form combining text, image and sound in the coverage of events.

### ***Foreign News and Interactivity***

Because of their relative novelty, the examination of the various aspects of interactivity remains largely of a conjectural and non-empirical nature. It is still too early, in particular, to seriously assess their impact on the consumption of international news. But if their development comes anywhere near the prospects heralded by the apostles of cyberspace, they could have devastating effects on the flow of information as we know it. It is worth exploring them.

### ***The Many Forms of Interactivity***

Interactivity is a generic term for all electronic systems that enable the individual, through a computer, to browse in and seize only what one desires from the gigantic mass of material available in the wide wired world, and to interject one's own contribution to that mass. It spells the end of the relative passivity of the television watcher, the radio listener and the newspaper reader.

Several forms of interactive access to information have already been tested and developed in recent years with varying degrees of success. Radio talk shows, computer access to database services such as Nexis-Lexis in the U.S., the Minitel experiment in France, financial transaction services provided by Reuters, television programming on demand, newspapers on-line and the recent opening of the Internet to the general public are all variations on the principle of interactivity. They are just a few of the many steps that lead us to the interactive information superhighway. The current scrambling of major telephone companies and global information providers to seize upon the burgeoning interactive market is bound to give it new dimensions.

But in the numbing hype that surrounds this communication revolution today, the emphasis is still centered on technology and means of access rather than on the content and the use made of that content which, as George Gerbner argues, are much more important issues.<sup>19</sup> All the known projects of the giants in the communication industry essentially turn around three types of interactive products: movies on demand, home shopping and video games. An April 1995 press



release for Nethold, a newly created interactive television service developed by two major communication companies in California, listed as its main products "home shopping, ticket ordering, interactive commercials, interactive game shows and improved electronic program guides."<sup>20</sup>

On the consumer side, the principal motivations of those who seem most attracted to interactive devices are always the same: get richer, be entertained, vent sexual fantasy, and find an audience. The down-loading from academic reference libraries and the search for background information on a breaking foreign crisis are likely to occupy at best a very small side-lane on tomorrow's superhighway. More hopeful than Gerbner, Harvard's Brian Kahin sees the Internet as a "useful ... convergence of conduit, content and computing ... that allows for many forms of self-publishing as well as user directed browsing and information retrieval."<sup>21</sup>

### ***The World as a Chat-Room***

The public forum function of the interactive media deserves to be looked into. Internet surfers have already formed improperly called "news groups" and "chat rooms" where they exchange ideas, opinions and, more often than not, trivialities among themselves. This primal yearning to be heard by others and to share experiences with like-minded folks was already at the root of the popular success of Citizen Band radio and opinion radio talk shows. Such phenomenons are rarely credited with opening the minds or widening the horizons of their adherents. They generally promote simplistic answers to complex issues. At this early stage, the optimistic notion that global electronic interactivity will bring people together and promote general understanding is hardly vindicated. As Frank Rich once put it in *The New York Times*: "Since interactivity is achieved with a click, those who live in cyberspace ... may develop the self-ostracizing habit of turning people on and off as if they were any other appliance that can be commanded with a remote control."<sup>22</sup> There is obviously a risk that frequent travel in the "virtual world" opened by the net will divert one's attention from the only too real world around us.

### ***Effects of the Custom-Made Newspaper***

It is too early to tell whether the customized on-line papers now offered by most major dailies in the United States will meet with a substantial market. In addition to receiving on a computer screen a brief summary of the day's top news, the

subscriber can program in advance the topics (baseball, car manufacturing, weather forecast, fashion shows or whatever is on one's mind) on which he will get whatever stories the paper runs on that day. As in all other interactive forms of information acquisition the final judgement on the news value of events will no longer be made by editors or journalists but by the individual consumer. While it was formerly relatively difficult to determine what stories people were actually reading most in their newspapers, it will now become a matter of clear record. In the long run, such evidence cannot fail to influence the editorial choices and the allotment of resources that the newspaper people will make in the coverage of world activities. "There is the danger that executives in the business of providing news on demand will think too much of cost and too little of journalism," warns Ken Auletta.<sup>23</sup> Once again, the new technologies that were supposed to open up unlimited perspectives to our acquisition of knowledge may in fact end up restricting our horizon to the immediately useful or the most enjoyable. Walter Bender, head of the News in the Future program at MIT, emphasizes the individualistic nature of the tailored newspaper of tomorrow by calling it the "Daily Me."<sup>24</sup> The consumption, and eventually the production, of foreign news may very well lose in this process.

### ***Information is Free***

Another aspect of the new wired world is unsettling for the global news producers. The information superhighway is anarchic. It has been opened to general traffic without being regulated and, for the time being, most of the information that flows over it is free. It is uncertain whether any government or international body will ever be able to put the genie back into the bottle. The whole framework of copyright laws that has managed to more or less rule over the communication world is now in jeopardy. It had long been anticipated that, as the technological evolution went on, the real value of information would increasingly shift from the content to the conduit, or from the message to the medium. That is why Reuters, for instance, made a point of developing and merchandising themselves the hardware and software that enable traders to use their business services. But general news distribution is still done in more traditional ways. The wire services increasingly lose control over their material once it is sold to primary customers that feed database services that feed the Internet where it can be seized for free. Unless some ways are

found to regulate the system, as advocated by Anne Wells Branscomb among others,<sup>25</sup> the wire services will be unable to balance the increasing costs of collecting news around the world with increasing revenues from new types of consumers. But any mention of any form of control over the Internet traffic immediately brings out the outraged legions of defenders of the First Amendment.

### ***The Planet is Not Yet Wired***

It is impossible to conclude this summary exploration of the potential impact of interactivity on the global news business without raising the question of its real extent. We have already seen that, in spite of claims to the contrary, there is still no such thing as global television that could feed the same images from everywhere to everywhere. Will the multimedia superhighway bring us closer to such a universal medium? Nicholas Negroponte, of MIT's Media Lab, thinks so.<sup>26</sup> He is not the only one to profess that "being digital" will radically change our lives and our societies. International relations will have to be run in an entirely novel manner in a boundaryless planet, he claims.

Other prophets of the coming wired world reason as if most people were ineluctably going to spend most of their time on the Internet to conduct their public and private activities free of national controls. It is far from being inevitable. There may still be a future for life outside the net. And, in any case, it is even less proven that changing technologies will profoundly change people's mentality. The traveler on tomorrow's information superhighway will not be substantially different from the traveler on yesterday's country road. He is likely to have the same basic human motivations and impulses — and the same uncertain attentiveness to foreign news.

Above all, it will be a long, long time before the whole planet enters the "third age" of its evolution, the age of information, if it ever does. Most of it has yet to reach the industrial age. The Harvard Computer Society estimates that in 1995 the number of *computers* with access to the Internet was about 20 million in 150 countries and growing fast. Industry sources put the number of *people* already cruising in cyberspace at 30 million. That looks impressive. But it is still less than 0.5% of the world population, and largely concentrated in the United States and a few other advanced countries. It is to be feared that the superhighway will lead to a deepening gap between the informed few and the uninformed many, with all the attendant dangers.

It is therefore safe to assume that the new technologies of communication will affect, among other human activities, the flow of international news. But the impact will not necessarily be as radical as anticipated by the most sanguine futurists, and it will not necessarily make for a better international understanding.

### **IV. CONCLUSION: DOES IT REALLY MATTER ?**

Does it matter for the foreign relations of the United States if the mass media and the general public really become less interested in international affairs?

The two premises of my investigation have been that, in a democracy, the people have a say in the handling of their country's relations with the rest of the world, and that the media contribute to the good exercise of that right by making the proper flow of information available to the public. In such a perspective the declining demand for international news in the United States, the most influential country in the world, would certainly be a cause for concern. An uninformed public would be more likely to pressure the leaders into making inappropriate decisions.

But the larger view of the triangular equation among the media, public opinion and foreign policy making is not shared by all students of the field nor always supported by practice. There still exists an "establishment" approach which sees only a small group of journalists and educated readers taking part in the foreign policy debate with public officials. "The elite papers recognize that they will not reach many people, but they seek to have an impact that no other medium does on the serious, intellectual, opinion-leading segment of the world community," writes professor John C. Merrill. He otherwise dismisses "the vast global wasteland of crass and mass journalistic mediocrity" in which the media "cater in varying degrees to the superficial whims of the lazy or attitudinal-illiterate crass audience."<sup>27</sup>

More soberly, James Hoge, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, evaluates the "attentive public" for international issues at four or five million people in the United States, out of an adult population of 190 million.<sup>28</sup> It turns out that this rough figure coincides with the circulation of the four or five most internationally oriented American newspapers and with the maximum audience of the NewsHour on PBS. It might not be improper to see it as a reasonable measure of the regular constituency for foreign affairs in this country.

Other scholars strongly disagree and still adhere to de Tocqueville's perception of public

opinion as "mistress of the world." To the "top-down" or elitist perspective, Herbert J. Gans opposes a "bottoms-up" process in which the bystanders or general public play an important role.<sup>29</sup> We have, indeed, seen earlier that wide swings in public opinion have occasionally led the government into momentous foreign policy decisions.

The elitist and the populist views of the foreign policy process are not necessarily contradictory. A strong case can be made that they are both concurrently valid, but at different levels and in different circumstances. It is to be expected that the close and continuous attention to international issues needed for a sustained participation in the foreign policy debate would remain limited to a relatively small portion of the citizenry. Whether one likes it or not, there is a leadership class of politicians, high officials, educators, writers and journalists influencing the people on the issues and eventually leading, or misleading them, in supporting its decisions. Even in our mass communication age, the day-to-day conduct of most of the country's international relations remains the preserve of a small informed establishment with the tacit consent of a relatively indifferent public.

But there will always be circumstances in which the public at large will be stirred to make itself heard on an international issue out of a perception, right or wrong, that the very "raison d'être" of the nation is at stake. In these cases the public will not necessarily react on the basis of knowledge, but more likely on the basis of emotions aroused by mass media. But because of the exceptional extent of public involvement, these rare cases have the potential of becoming turning points in the life of the country. That is why the amount and quality of international news carried by these changing mass media, or the lack thereof, remain relevant to the conduct of the foreign policy of the United States.

## ENDNOTES

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