Reporting Foreign Places: Challenges and Prospect

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Abstract
This paper throws light on the complications of journalistic reporting from distant places. It raises numerous pertinent questions on mechanism of doing so and how to ensure objectivity. The news we receive about foreign places is the outcome of multiple decisions by journalists, cameramen, editors, government spokespersons, and political spin-doctors. Those concerned with the production of foreign news need to unpack the way journalists work; consider how foreign correspondents are meshed within the news-making agenda of their home organizations; grapple with how foreign policies of home countries can impact upon the news agenda of the journalists’ home organizations; also how journalistic stories are constructed within pre-existing worldviews and discourses. These existent images determine the questions they ask and the images they seek. Hence, the partiality of news frames tends to be recycled and reproduced, so that discourses about foreigners and foreign places are resistant to change.

Keywords: Idealization, Demonization, Universalized, Prejudice, Misreading, Distortion

Introduction
Foreign news is a particularly complex product because it intersects with the political context of the journalist’s home country; with the way journalists relate to foreign environments, and with the shifting relationships existing between home and foreign countries (Louw: 2005: Chap 12). But this complexity is worth exploring as it can have significant impact. Gaye Tuchman (1978) has argued that journalists construct a window on the world which is always a partial view. For local news consumers, a potential corrective exists for moderating the distortion. But when it comes to reporting of distant places, such checks are not possible for the general public. So news consumers become dependent on the news media to help them make sense of those distant places. Furthermore, when distortions occur, they are generally not redressed because there is no pressure to correct them – given that distant audiences do not recognize the media distortions. As Wallis & Baran (1990: 231) note, it is difficult for foreigners to redress reporting inaccuracies at a distance. For this reason, the emergence of International government directed efforts to influence foreign – news-driven “mediated realities” has inherent dangers, such as was the case with the embedded journalists in the Iraq war and the consequent news reports on the (missing) weapons of mass destruction, that turned out in the long run not to have been there in the first place.

Double misreading
Reporting distant places inherently produces a double misreading because journalists are generally not equipped to read distant context, and the audiences. The result is double misreading, as audiences with already limited understandings of distant contexts are forced to rely on partial/skewed journalistic reports to build up any kind of picture of foreign places. These “partial pictures” acquire a reality that then serves to frame the way the next generation of foreign correspondent and their news editors look at the distant places. Once a prejudice has rooted itself within a newsroom culture; that prejudice will inform future news making about the particular group of people.

In fact, distant issues exist only when reported. Increasingly, Television sets the agenda for what enters the consciousness of mostly people in North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia where there is wide access to Television news channels. And when it comes to foreign contexts this agenda-setting role is almost absolute. Television is very good at presenting visually sensational and unidimensional material; but it is a poor medium for dealing with complicated issues and contexts that require non-sensational analytic unpacking of their complexity. As Wallis and Baran (1990: 246-247) remark, “Radio and television are immediate and emotional media. The emotional prerequisite for successful communication in the broadcast media means that news, ideally, should be both informative and dramatic if it is to grip.” Hence foreign news selection tends to be geared to the highly visual, dramatic, and emotional because such news is more appealing to the audiences.

Television news, simplifies, and shuns ambiguity. Wherever possible, TV news production will reduce complexity to binary oppositions – mobilizing what Hartley (1982: 21) calls “hooray” and “boo” words – because this makes for good emotive television that can attract and hold audiences. Foreign situation can be more easily simplified into facile “good guy” versus “bad guy” scenarios than local situations because audiences have no way of personally verifying report on distant places. Sadkovich noted a similar process at work in reporting the breakup of Yugoslavia. He says, “Television seems able to portray only a limited range of emotions because it lacks linear development and nuance. It homogenizes and reduces complex situations, events and emotions to simple standard items that are almost mythic. Television precludes careful exegesis in favour of simple explanations of
group conflict and reality in general. It invokes and evokes, it does not inform or explain. If television is a dream, it also decides what is real. . . . As the tube creates and idealizes some groups and ideas by focusing on them, it makes other[s] disappear by ignoring them... (Sadkovich:1998:60). This distorted media reality is sometimes deliberately manufactured, such as with the Anglo-American propaganda fed to journalists preceding the Iraq wars. When journalists (and news editors) cover foreign contexts, they engage in their task with already existent pictures and discourses in their minds. These existent images determine the questions they ask and the images they seek.

Journalistic misreadings

A number of factors contribute to journalistic misreading. First, journalists arriving in a new context are foreigners and so are not rooted in the history or codes of the society they are expected to report. Journalists necessarily experience real difficulties when sent to cover societies grounded on unfamiliar religions (such as Anglo journalists in the Muslim world), or societies that are extremely complex (such as the Balkans, Russia, or Southern ‘Africa). Van Ginneken (1998:125-126) argues how journalists often read the history and mores of their own societies into foreign contexts when trying to make sense of these places. In the process, they produce a distorted view of “the other.” Karim (2000: 177), for example, notes how the Western media, when confronted with socio-political complexities, they could not understand in the Caucasus and former Yugoslavia, and simply produced a reductionist explanation based upon religious differences and irrationality. When encountering “difficult” and “foreign” places, journalists often herd together into expatriate communities consisting of Western media people, businessmen, embassy and intelligence staffers, and NGO humanitarian aid workers (Van Ginneken, 1998:134). These expatriate communities tend to be cut off from the countries they live in, and so invent “closed-shop” interpretations or “scripts” (Van Dijk in Karim, 2000:179) to describe the difficult cultures surrounding them. It is these closed interpretations that the “folks back home” get to hear (via journalists and embassy dispatches). The reporting of post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-2003 Iraq are examples of this kind of reporting. Misreading is also because journalists carry their cultural biases with them when reporting on foreign contexts. Furthermore, they carry by extension the biases of their news editors—that is, journalists necessarily respond to requests and pressures from their home base to deliver stories conforming to “home needs” (see Cohen et al., 1995). In this regard, Karim (2000) and Said (1981) have discussed the anti-Muslim bias in Western media. Van Ginneken (1998:110) argues that journalists effectively judge others in terms of their own cultural biases. So foreigners operating in ways confirming the journalist’s own cultural norms seem sensible and normal, while anyone operating outside these norms becomes “incomprehensible” or even “despicable.” (Van Ginneken, 1998:111). Notably, Anglo values have become something of a measure of normalness (or even truth) in the global media system, due in no small measure to the growing centrality of Anglo global-televising such as CNN and BBC, and to the central position occupied by the United States within the New World Order. Consequently, Anglo journalists assume their values to be universally valid truths and incontestable, partly because the New World Order is de facto Anglo hegemony. Measuring other cultures against Anglo values is thus taken for granted. So, the American trajectory of socio-economic development is seen as a valid model for all to emulate, and the Anglo-American model for political modernization becomes a self-evident truth. This leads to the view that the United States has a right to export its vision of democracy to the world—as seen in George Bush’s rhetoric about the Iraq War. Greenfeld (1993:446) suggests that Americans have de-contextualized their model of socio-political organization and transformed it into a “pan-human universalism”. Anglo-American journalists now uncritically apply this pan-human universalism to all situations they encounter. Hence, when Americans believed in the melting pot, that became the measurement criteria for all. When multiculturalism replaced the melting pot, the journalistic measurement criteria shifted. Those, not adhering to Anglo-American models of societal organization, become despicable and/or incomprehensible. North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan and Libya have become such incomprehensible societies, as have all Muslim fundamentalists. Muslim fundamentalism has become a major boogey word in the Anglo-global media.

A third reason for the misreading of foreign contexts is the journalistic practice of deploying simplistic role labels. This takes place because journalists are often faced with the problem of rendering incredibly complex foreign contexts that are easily comprehensible for overseas audiences. Although the habit of shorthand labelling pragmatically achieves this end, it can also simplify to the point of distortion. In this regard, Wallis and Baran (1990:231) cite the BBC’s deployment of race labels to describe 1980s South Africa. Van Ginneken (1998:105-108) looks at similar deployments in the case of Libya, Iran, and Eastern Europe. A similar pattern is evident in reporting post-2003 Iraq. Ultimately, the journalistic practice of labelling and seeking the visually dramatic and sensational necessarily eschews complexity in favour of de-contextualized and de-historicized reductionisms; for example, the complexity of Kosovo was reduced to the label of ethnic cleansing, and the complexity of South Africa was reduced to a struggle against white supremacy. The problem is that such reductionisms when applied to foreign contexts can become reality because the audiences have no direct knowledge of the context.
being described. Simplistic labels grow into truth for the audiences (and the editors) back home. They also become reality for the next generation of journalists sent to cover these foreign contexts.

A fourth reason for journalistic misreading is that journalists routinely use binary oppositions when describing foreign contexts. Foreign places are peopled by good guys and bad guys. Some individuals and groups are idealized, while others are demonized and villainized. The process of demonization and idealization is frequently directly related to the foreign policy requirements of one’s own hegemonic order. Hence, in an increasingly Anglo fied global hegemony, it is the U.S. media’s binary oppositions that have increasingly acquired a universalized naturalism. Recent examples are the demonization of leaders not acquiescing to U.S. interests (e.g., Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, and Hugo Chavez); while leaders serving U.S. interests (e.g., General Pervez Musharraf) are idealized. Other examples of the demonization and idealization process are Serbs (bad guys) versus Kosovars (good guys), and Saddam’s “henchmen” (bad guys) versus “ordinary Iraqis” (good guys).

Victim villain discourse

The binary opposition model often slips into a victim-villain discourse, in which victims are portrayed as needing to be rescued from villains. This villain-victimhood discourse allows Nature to be the villain (in the form of natural disasters) and/or possibly some ill-defined villains who are discursively portrayed as bringing about climate change, which then causes natural disasters. Since the 1980s, the villain-victimhood discourse (in its various forms) has become very influential and has even produced a whole industry of NGOs, and aid and humanitarian agencies that specialize in helping “the weak.” Those perpetrating the victimizing are often equated with the Anglo folk devil of Hitler. Once such a folk devil is successfully evoked, aggression against the villain can be easily justified (since it involves saving the weak from being victimized).

Not surprisingly, Western military planners and spin doctors have learned to mobilize both the villain-victim and folk-devil discourses. For example, Saddam and his “henchmen” were demonized prior to the 2003 Iraqi War. Similarly, before commencing the 2001 Afghanistan War, Pentagon spin doctors first popularized the idea of liberating Afghan women from the Taliban. These spin doctors recognized that a women’s liberation discourse was a useful issue to piggyback upon because it has widespread currency and resonates well with many Western intelligentsia gatekeepers (e.g., journalists, teachers, and university intellectuals). Pentagon spin doctors understood the propaganda value of this theme in getting anti-Taliban stories picked up with minimal critical scrutiny from many Western journalists. For this reason, the head-scarf and grill (Chadri) was mobilized as iconic of Taliban repression of women - a symbol of victimhood justifying war against the Taliban. Similarly, before the 2003 Iraq War, Saddam’s victimization of Kurds was mobilized (although Turkish repression of Kurds over the border was conveniently ignored). Then there are problem groups formerly portrayed as victims, who begin behaving in ways that might call into question the old binary opposition model (e.g., repression, corruption, and mismanagement in many African states). The discomfort produced when the old binary oppositions unravel causes the media to fall silent—that is, uncomfortable issues disappear because they are taken off the television screens. The way in which Africa has generally fallen off the news agenda is an example of this, even with clear human rights violations in countries such as Zimbabwe still ongoing.

Similarly, journalists paid scant attention to the enormous post-Soviet social, religious, and ethnic tensions in Yeltsin’s Russia, as well as the repression of Russians in some former Soviet states because such stories would get in the way of the preferred post-communism good-news agenda. Only when the United States began criticizing Putin’s undemocratic behaviour did the Western media once again begin focusing on Russian transition problems. Then there are foreign groups enmeshed with U.S.-issues, which prevents their media portrayal in a binary opposition format—for example, despite some striking similarities between Israeli and white South African aggression / repression, the Israelis were never unambiguously cast into the role of villains due to the strength of the U.S. Jewish lobby and Western guilt about the Holocaust. Further, binary oppositions routinely deployed by the media are sometimes shelved when using them would generate too much discomfort. Karim (2000) argues that attention is always drawn to a religious binary opposition when Muslims can be cast as repressing Christians; but is dropped in favour of ethnicity when the reverse is the case. A fifth reason for journalistic misreadings is that when sent to report on foreign contexts, journalists tend to (subconsciously) select contacts who are as culturally close to them as possible and/or people who confirm their worldviews (Van Ginneken, 1998:91). For example, in non-Western societies, Western journalists generally cultivate contacts among Westernized elites because it is easier (and more culturally comfortable) to associate with and understand people who broadly mobilize the same discourses as oneself. Such contacts also tend to express views that confirm the cultural biases and prejudices of news editors back home (whom journalists have to please.) Choosing foreign contacts that are culturally proximate to one necessarily skews the reports produced and can even build in biases that the journalist may not be aware of. An example can be found in the way Anglo journalists sent to cover South Africa have done their job - that is, for contacts they have favoured white Anglos leaning slightly to the left (e.g., opposition politician Helen
Suzman), or Anglofied/Westernized blacks (e.g., Anglican Archbishop Tutu.) Such people are culturally proximate to Anglo journalists and so confirm their worldviews. A similar process unfolded in post-Taliban Afghanistan, where Western journalists relied on the interpretations of those inside the Kabul compound - Westernized members of the new government, aid workers, and UN staffers - while shying away from the majority of Afghans because they behaved in ways that were incomprehensible to Western journalists.

A sixth reason for journalistic misreading is that foreign issues are read in terms of home understandings and agendas. For example, the U.S. media have read South Africa’s race relations as if they were simply equivalent to U.S. racial problems (Neuman, 1992:112). Anglo journalists have also tended to assume that the outcomes of Western struggles over secularization, multiparty democracy, and gender equality have a teleological naturalness. Once such struggles are not seen as Western, but as universal, journalists assume they have the right to read (impose) their contemporary measurement criteria, their home battles, and their home agendas into foreign contexts. Not only can this produce misreadings of societies with different socio-economic trajectories from the Anglo world, but it also produces foreign resentments about Western misunderstanding and interference, as has manifested itself at various times, in locations like China, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sudan.

**Spin-doctoring-journalists**

When journalists are unfamiliar with an area, the potential for skewing increases dramatically. Because U.S. power underpins the New World Order, the processes whereby Americans make sense of distant places now has real consequences for non-Americans. In particular, the impact of TV news on U.S. foreign policy must now pay attention to how they can influence the journalists collecting information about their countries. Not surprisingly, one now finds groups in zones of crisis explicitly using the media (such as CNN and BBC) to try and appeal directly to Western audiences (Shaw, 1996:7). In the emergent global communication system, it is simply wrong to assume the margins are always passive victims, because players on the peripheries also now actively engage in spin-doctoring and manipulation of communication variables in an attempt to impact on decisions being made in the United States and the European Union.

Essentially, as the New World Order has shaped up, a new form of journalistic practice is emerging, driven by new technologies and a growing professionalization (and public relations) of news contacts. New technologies have opened up the possibility of building “newsrooms without walls” - in which journalists and camera operators are free to roam widely, collect material relatively easily from remote sites; maintain regular contact with distant home bases; and easily download audio, visual, and written material into home computers from these distant locations. Air travel also means it is now relatively easy to deploy journalists/camera crews to distant locations to cover breaking stories. Thus, it is becoming less important to base journalists in foreign locations, and so the phenomenon of **tourist journalism** is emerging—when camera crews/journalists fly in; cover stories and (thanks to satellite hook-ups) file these in real time with home newsrooms; and then fly out to the next story.

Tourist journalists can be more easily manipulated than local journalists because they spend short periods of time in unfamiliar places. And given the impact news images can now have on foreign policy formulation in the USA/EU, the tourist journalists necessarily become key targets for spin doctors and public relations operators. So, for example, many CNN staffers have reported an awareness of how governments around the world use CNN to distribute messages globally (Volkmer, 1999:153-155). Manipulation of the global news agenda is in no way unidirectional. Ultimately, it is not only Western communication players (like U.S. military spin doctors) who are able to spin the global news system; the system can be spin-doctored by players on the margins as well.

**Conclusion**

Overall, it seems that tourist and other forms of instant international journalism have become a central fixture of the emerging global media machine and newsrooms without walls. For spin doctors on the margins, this can be a good thing, as it provides them with at least some opportunities for influencing the images reaching the key global cities. However, if non-skewed coverage of distant places is the measurement criteria, then the emergence of tourist journalism, festive television events, the televisualizing of diplomacy (and warfare), the closure of discourse through normalizing one set of discourses and practices (those acceptable to Anglo-Americans), and the widespread public relationalizing of journalist contacts (Louw, 2005: Chapter 7) must be seen as less welcome developments. But for better or worse, this has become the nature of the new media environment and by extension now appears to be one of the given variables within foreign policy decision making.

**References**


