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Journal of Sociology 1976 12: 9

DOI: 10.1177/144078337601200102

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Australian Press Coverage of the Third World

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In seeking to understand the central aspects of the mass media as agents of communication, it is important to group three points of the communication process which emerge from the general discussion of media. These are 1. the sender-receiver relations; 2. the sender-message relations; and 3. the message-audience relations.

1. The principal defining characteristic of the mass media is the sender-receiver ratio. By their nature, a very few senders can communicate directly to a huge and diverse audience which has no chance to effectively respond. Message transmission is overwhelmingly in one direction. The audience can only choose whether or not to receive it. The senders in the mass communication process are predominantly employees of media organisations, whose work revolves around the production and transmission of messages. The audience typically receives these messages as part of their leisure activity.

2. In selecting messages for transmission the news media are forced to make judgments about what they believe is important and what they believe will interest the audience. On some occasions, these choices may be influenced by other goals of the senders e.g., support for a particular party or cause. The needs of the media organizations to deploy limited personnel for maximum output means that they will concentrate on those places defined as richest in news (e.g. parliament). The demands of the media for regular and continuous scheduling of news output means that discrete, finite events (e.g. a speech, trial, football game) are more amenable to news coverage than long, slow-moving, indefinite processes (e.g. environmental deterioration) or the mere continuation of a normal state of affairs (e.g. the continuing oppression of Aborigines). In sum, such factors as the definition of news as disruption, the emphasis on the immediate, and the reliance on institutional sources all yield a picture of the world that excludes as many important messages as it includes.

3. The news messages that an audience receives mediate to them a world that is largely remote from their normal experiences. Thus the media can potentially define for the audience the truth, significance and meaning of the world it brings them. This potential can be limited by such factors as competition and diversity within the media or normative restraints and professional values about news reporting. It is also more limited when the audience has access to alternative sources of information—their own experience or memories—or when the audience's own preconceptions cause them to resist or reinterpret the incoming information.

The central concern in this article is with Australian press coverage of the Third World—the under-developed nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is an area where the second and third points above combine to become important. The normal Australian audience has little contact in its experience with the topics raised, is unlikely to have alternative sources of information or to be familiar with the cultures, living conditions or normal workings of the societies involved. It is an area likely to receive a low priority when deploying news gathering resources. The usual concentration on immediate or disruptive events and on institutional reporting are likely to predominate, but with the audience having less than the usual background context to interpret them. Thus in a situation where the media's strategic position in forming opinion is likely to be greatest, its news practices are likely to be most inappropriate for increasing audience understanding. It is against this general background that the specific studies of press coverage reported here should be seen.

Research Design

The research design for the present study had three phases:

1. a quantitative study of basic aspects of press coverage of foreign news.

2. a quantitative study of coverage of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia adding a time dimension.
3. a qualitative study of some selected episodes. (This phase is not reported here)¹

The first aspect was designed to show the relative types and amounts of attention given to different parts of the world by the press. The second aspect focuses on two countries of particular interest because of their proximity and importance to Australia, and examined some trends in coverage over the last 15 years.

The data gathered by these studies are not, of course, able to settle disputes about the worth, adequacy, or bias of news coverage. They are, however, able to provide an empirical basis that allows such disputes to proceed in a more informed way.

It was decided to concentrate on the daily press because the broadcast media present problems of retrievability, which, when an historical dimension is added, are insuperable. The proportion of the population who read a daily paper is higher than for any other printed matter. It was decided to study only the three Melbourne dailies—*Age*, *Sun* and *Herald*, as this would complement survey work already done by the writer on a Melbourne sample.

For the general study of foreign news, 1973 was chosen as the most recent full year. For the study of Indonesia it was desired to compare coverage during the Sukarno regime with that of Suharto's New Order. Thus three recent years (1969-71-73) were compared with three years of the Guided Democracy period a decade earlier (1959-61-63). These years also served for analysing Papua New Guinea, both for convenience and because they gave a suffi-

cient range to chart any changes in coverage patterns.

To make confident generalizations about foreign news patterns in 1973 it is necessary to ensure that the sample is sufficiently large, has no obvious biases and has a representative spread throughout the period. Stempel (1952) said that a sample of 12 days was sufficient to generalize about press coverage for a year, and that increasing sample size did not significantly increase reliability. However because the present study particularly focuses on areas that receive relatively little coverage, it was decided a sample of 24 days would increase the reliability. Two other conditions were placed on the sample. The 24 days had to consist of 4 "constructed weeks" (4 Mondays . . . 4 Saturdays) to minimize any day of the week bias and to consist of two days from each of the twelve months. A sample of dates was then randomly chosen—eliminating any that fell within 8 days of another chosen date. The same dates were of course examined for each paper. These dates then served as the basis for the samples from the other years for the Indonesian and Papua New Guinean studies. Only *The Herald*, the paper with the most foreign news items in 1973, was used in these studies.

Foreign News

Location The geographical location of foreign news in the three papers is shown in Table 1. Several interesting points² emerge.

1. 40 per cent or more of foreign news comes from only two countries, the U.S. and U.K. Regrouping the figures slightly, about two-thirds of our foreign news comes from the affluent Western nations and less

Table 1 — Foreign News Location (%)

	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Herald</i>	<i>Age</i>	Total
TOTAL ITEMS	514	859	831	2204
Nth. Am. & U.K.	45.12	50.11	42.04	45.75
West Europe	11.90	14.29	10.01	12.04
East Europe	2.98	4.05	3.90	3.74
Middle East	6.94	4.58	8.51	6.69
Asia	16.86	15.46	19.12	17.23
South Pacific	8.26	4.69	8.11	6.88
Africa	2.98	3.20	5.11	3.89
Latin America	4.63	3.20	2.70	3.34
United Nations	0.33	0.43	0.50	0.43
	100.00	100.01	100.00	99.99

than one quarter comes from the Third World or under-developed three-quarters of the world's population.

Black Africa is virtually not covered: nearly three-quarters of the four per cent of African news is from South Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese colonies.

Latin America gets very scant coverage: (about one third of these stories were about cricket in the West Indies).

2. In the South Pacific, six-sevenths of the news comes from New Zealand or Papua New Guinea. The rest is devoted to the French bomb-test. Other coverage is virtually non-existent, despite this being one of the few areas of the world where Australia's policies often crucially affect local outcomes.

Mode of Articles About 10 per cent of stories were in the commentary/editorial mode and the rest were straight news reporting. A special search was made for contextual or background articles which help put current events in their setting. Less than one half of one per cent were of this mode.

Area The area within a country was studied for appropriate news items. (This excluded commentary-type articles and items involving Australia, as these would tend to be predominantly capital city). 80 per cent of items were from the capital or major metropolitan centre of a country, 17 per cent from provincial cities, (e.g. Los Angeles, Jogjakarta) and 3 per cent from small towns and centres.

Subject Each item could be classified in either one of two of the 70 subject categories drawn up. Table 2 shows a summary of the findings. This is the only point at which significant differences emerged between the newspapers.

Prominence Weighting was given to the relative prominence of items by combining three criteria—length, location within paper and column width of headline. These weightings did not affect the distribution patterns in Table 1. One difference between the papers emerged. Although *The Herald* is slightly ahead of *The Age* on total number of items, after weighting for prominence their positions are reversed, due to the large number of short filler items in *The Herald*.

Conclusion The quantitative analysis clearly shows the focus of Australian foreign news is on the Western industrialised world. Two further points, especially pertinent to Third World coverage, also emerge. The lack of contextual articles is very important in stories about the Third World because Australians are so often ignorant of basic background details. The concentration in stories on metropolitan centres suggests the lack of coverage of the "common people" of these countries where the overwhelming majority typically live in rural areas.

Papua New Guinea

Table 3 summarises *The Herald's* coverage of Papua New Guinea for 24 day samples from each of six years. The table shows that coverage has been consistently low and that in the 3 later years it is only marginally greater than in the 3 earlier ones. In 1973, the year it attained self-government, news from Papua New Guinea comprised 1.0 per cent of *The Herald's* total foreign news.

Table 3 also compares the distribution of items about different groups. The classifications 'natives' and 'whites' are used for stories predominantly about the respective

Table 2 — Foreign News Subjects (%)

	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Herald</i>	<i>Age</i>	Total
1. Political process (Electoral, coups, strikes, etc.)	19	14	22	18
2. Political issues and social concerns (Education, defence, ecology, religion, etc.)	32	26	36	32
3. Economic activity (Trade, companies etc.)	4	16	16	13
4. Crime/Accidents/Disasters	10	12	5	9
5. Human Interest	14	16	3	10
6. Sport/Leisure/Entertainment	21	16	18	18
	100	100	100	100

Table 3—Papua New Guinean News In *The Herald*

	<u>Items</u>	<u>Prominence</u>	<u>Natives</u>	<u>Whites</u>	<u>Both</u>	<u>Other</u>
1959	8	11	4	3	0	1
1961	9	15	1	8	0	0
1963	11	28	3	5	1	2
1969	13	27	2	7	1	3
1971	10	22	3	3	3	1
1973	9	17	3	2	2	2

Each item is given a prominence score between 1 and 4

groups. Both are used if both groups figure prominently, and "other" if stories cannot be classified by group, e.g. 'Volcano erupts'. 'More traffic for Papua'.

As shown by the table, the majority of news about Papua New Guinea is not about Papua New Guineans. It is about whites in the country. There are 27 stories about whites compared with 16 about blacks. But it is not just the number that distinguishes coverage between the two groups: the types of stories also differ sharply.

The 16 stories concerning Papua New Guineans had the following headlines: "Fighting on plantation", "Sing-sing trouble", "They tried to 'grow' money", "30 killed in tribal raids" (1959), "Sorcery" (1961), "Sorcery is out with . . . The Bold Papuans", "I was thrown to the sharks", "N.G. wives protest at drink—Native women at Rabaul rally say 'There's too much liquor.'" (1963), "Papuans blamed", "Child sacrifice feared" (1969), "Police hurt in ambush", "Duke brings 'magic key'—cargo cult", "Winning over the cannibals", (1971), "Warrior dies in P.N.G. 'War'", "Tribes clash in Highlands", "Somare defends N.G. image" (1973).

Ironically, the last item from our sample reports Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's Chief Minister, criticising Australian press coverage of his country. The headlines of the preceding articles certainly suggest his criticism was warranted. The two main strands in items about the indigenous people are their violence and their backwardness or peculiarity. None of the stories present the indigenous people in a very favourable or sympathetic way. Not one gives the reader any appreciation of

native culture or folkways. They are in marked contrast to the overwhelmingly favourable presentation of whites in the country.

Indonesia

It is generally believed that Australian news coverage of Asia has been increasing. Table 4 shows that, for at least one country, Indonesia, the trend is in the reverse direction. There is less than half the number of news items in the latter three years than in the former three. Not only has the number of items declined, their prominence has diminished even more dramatically. The types of stories have also changed. The major single coverage in the latter three years was by *The Herald's* racing correspondent about the opening of Jakarta's first horse-racing track. Describing Jakarta's night-life, his article begins "Jakarta is a little 'Las Vegas' and could equal that city in a few years". Other stories are predominantly short filler items about either financial news and foreign investment or inconsequential incidents, e.g. 'Cake for Whitlam'.

During Sukarno's Guided Democracy period, Indonesia was increasingly defined by Australians as a trouble-spot and source of threat. Press coverage was extensive and prominent. After Suharto took over, it was no longer considered either a trouble-spot or a threat, and coverage dropped away to almost nil. While the two countries were antagonistic, the press sharply highlighted internal problems and abuses in Indonesia. While the countries are allies, completely different criteria of reporting apply and the

Table 4 — Indonesian News In *The Herald*

	<u>Items</u>	<u>Prominence</u>		<u>Items</u>	<u>Prominence</u>
1959	23	41	1969	10	16
1961	13	30	1971	2	8
1963	20	40	1973	13	19
TOTAL	56	111		25	43

Each item is given a prominence score between 1 and 4

press now largely overlooks undesirable aspects of the regime. The conclusion seems inescapable that, for the press, only bad news is news and the ability to perceive bad news in Indonesian internal affairs has varied directly with changes in Australia's international relations.

Effect on Opinion

The research reported here did not study directly the processes whereby mass media affects public opinion. However, some survey data do show parallels between the press coverage outlined here and the public's attitudes. A public opinion poll in 1965 found 49 per cent of Australians with no opinion on the timing of Papua New Guinea's independence and in 1970 and 1971, three similar polls each found Don't Know responses of 40 per cent or more—incidentally high compared with polls on other issues. An ANOP poll in late 1972 found the proportion of No Opinions had dropped to 9 per cent (Aitken & Wolfers, 1973). The lack of attention by the public through the '60's mirrored the lack of coverage by the press.

The Australian public's attitude to Indonesia has shown a similarly amazing transformation. There is no survey data specifically on Indonesia during the Sukarno period. However, survey questions on West New Guinea and on Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia, both reveal a widespread hostility and suspicion towards Indonesia.

A 1972 survey of 190 Melbourne electors by this writer asked a series of 4 open-ended questions to examine attitudes to Indonesia.

1. Do you know who President Suharto is?
2. Can you tell me anything else about him?
3. What can you tell me about how he became President?
4. Are things very different in Indonesia since he became President?

If a person didn't know who Suharto was, they were told "He is President of Indonesia, can you remember anything about him now?" If not, questioning stopped.

As already reported, 40 per cent failed to identify Suharto correctly. Of the 60 per

cent who could, one-quarter could give no further details about him.

One-half could give some answers to how Suharto became President. One-fifth of these thought it was an orderly process (election, just succeeded, etc). However, 40 per cent of the sample remembered the coup. Only 2½ per cent mentioned any conditions leading up to the coup. For most it is just something that happened. Not one person mentioned the post-coup massacres.

When asked about changes under Suharto, people named a diversity of things without any one dominant pattern. But 30 per cent of those who gave an answer mentioned only changes for the better and gave a wholly favourable response. (Only 1 per cent gave a wholly negative answer). The actual answers include: improved international relations (9 per cent), improved the economy (13 per cent), improved living conditions (14 per cent), more stable (10 per cent), more democratic (7 per cent), less corrupt (6 per cent).

The diversity of content in these commonly favourable responses suggests that the favourable image is more basic than any actual information.

We are able to deduce an image of Suharto's Indonesia from less than half the sample. Four-fifths of these have a completely favourable view. There are no significant exceptions to this pattern. Both the ignorance and the image are bi-partisan. Both reflect the press coverage of Indonesia.

FOOTNOTES

1. The analysis of these episodes is reported in Tiffen (1974). Available from ACFOA Education Unit, P.O. Box 1562, Canberra City, ACT 2601. \$1 postage paid.
2. A study of the dispersal of international news gathering resources can be found in Harris (1974).

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