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Two timely and politically relevant concerns underlie this book. They are the role of network television in the American foreign policy process, and the international debate on a New World Communication Order, a debate partly sparked by Third World criticisms of imbalance in international news flow, and the lack of "development news" in Western media.

The book itself culminates years of research by Larson and his assistants on news coverage of international affairs by the three dominant U. S. television networks. The research was made possible by the existence of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Canadian scholars can only regret that no comparable data source exists here.

The heart of the book (Chapters two to four, along with six appendices) reports the methods and findings of Larson's content analysis. The basic unit of analysis were individual news stories, and references to various nations within the stories. Other information coded for each news item included the "format" (is it merely a script read by the anchorperson alone, or is it a video report of domestic or foreign origin?), the geographic origin of each foreign video report, and the theme (or topic) of the item, with particular attention to the distinction between crisis and non-crisis themes. Larson focuses on these variables, describing the differences of coverage accorded to the major regions of the world -- Western Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R., Latin America, Africa, and Canada. Canadian readers should be forewarned -- Canada is treated as a residual category, and the analysis is less detailed than that of other regions. Coverage of the developed capitalist countries, the "developing" Third World, and the socialist bloc is also compared.

The reported findings include the following:

- The network's picture of the world is hierarchical and concentrated; a few nations account for a large proportion of all coverage. Regionally, Western Europe and the Middle East received the
most attention, Africa and Latin America the least. This pattern is especially pronounced in foreign video reports, which indicate a greater commitment of network resources than do the anchor reports derived primarily from international news agencies.

- Stories from or about developing nations are more likely than other coverage to focus on crisis, such as unrest, war, crime, coups and disasters.

- Developing countries are less likely than other nations to be the exclusive focus of news stories. It seems that developing countries are more newsworthy when they impinge on the interests of developed countries, especially the United States.

Such findings are hardly likely to surprise attentive television news viewers. They nevertheless provide a useful empirical basis for Larson's critical evaluation of the United States networks' performance.

Larson's content analysis has one advantage over most others in the field: its longitudinal nature. The sample consists of over 1,000 weeknight newscasts for the entire decade between 1972 - 1981. The patterns described in the study are almost certainly stable long-term ones, not the ephemeral by products of an atypical sampling period. Larson was also able to identify long-term changes, such as the trend towards greater use of video reports and decreased use of anchor scripts, which is attributable to technological innovations such as lightweight videos and satellite transmission.

Methodologists may second-guess the author at points. In content analysis, coding categories are sometimes unavoidably arbitrary. One such definition results in perhaps the most surprising finding -- that the Middle East receives proportionately less crisis coverage than almost every other region! Larson explains this apparent anomaly by pointing out that political efforts to resolve conflict (such as Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" of the 1970s) were coded as non-crisis themes. Moreover, Larson's argument on the distortions of "news geography" would be even more convincing had he compared more systematically the regional distribution of network coverage with such benchmarks as the distribution of the world's population. Comparisons of television's international coverage with domestic coverage, and with international news in other media, would also have been a welcome addition. Finally, his tabular treatment of ties in rank orders is inappropriate: a nation which receives slightly less coverage than two other nations which tied for eighteenth place is the in the twentieth, not the nineteenth position. But on the whole, the coding and analysis of the content data exhibit professional rigour.

More seriously, the book does not transcend the confinement of content analysis to patterns of manifest content as measured by frequency counts. Larson does not draw on the insights of semiotics to
explore the codes or deep structure which render the news text meaningful. In particular, he does not pursue a point to which he himself alludes on occasion: that international coverage on United States networks may be informed by a Manichean division of the world into West versus East, good versus evil, Us versus the Other. Disappointingly for a book on the networks' "window on the world," it fails to address what may be the window's single most important ideological feature: the failure to explain why millions of people around the world may reasonably regard the United States as exploitative and imperialistic. Symptomatically, there is no reference in the book to the polemical but massively documented research by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman on the distortions in American media coverage of human rights violations. Part of the problem is the absence of any theoretically elaborated conception of how ideology inflects media's maps of reality. To be fair, this blindspot characterizes most mainstream American media research, not just this book.

To his credit, Larson does try to link the amount and nature of international news content with the social production of network news, on the one hand, and with the impact of news coverage, on the other. Larson thus stands squarely within the dominant American conceptualization of mass communication as a chainlike process. This tradition has come under attack from the semiotics school in recent years, but Larson's study at least has the advantage of not treating news content in isolation. Chapter Five relates the content data to key elements of the infrastructure of international news communication: the presence or absence in each nation of news bureaus, AP or UPI news agencies, and Intelsat earth stations. Adding such control variables as national population and GNP per capita, Larson seeks to account for the amount of coverage of each nation. He finds that the presence of a network bureau is the strongest predictor, while satellite connections have no statistically significant impact.

In Chapter Six, based primarily on journalistic and academic literature rather than his own research, Larson discusses the impact of network news in the foreign policy process. Following the pioneering work of Bernard Cohen, he usefully distinguishes between the roles of network television as an observer/reporter of foreign policy news, as a participant which interacts with policy-making elites, and as a catalyst and agenda-setter for public perceptions and debate on foreign policy. His conclusions are not comforting. The networks face governmental restrictions on access in many countries. Foreign correspondents have become firemen who rush from crisis to crisis without acquiring a thorough grasp of particular countries. While foreign policy elites depend heavily on news media for much of their information about international events, they also have various resources to influence media coverage, so that a collaborative rather than adversary relationship develops.

Larson argues persuasively that network television has become the dominant source of international news for the American mass public.
This is particularly depressing, since his main criticism of network coverage is the virtual absence of "the ongoing struggle for social change and development" in the Third World. The implication is that without such information, the American public will fail to demand that their policy leaders take Third World problems seriously. It is hard to dispute Larson's conclusion that "fundamental structural changes in the international news system, including a redefinition of what constitutes good television news coverage of world events, will be necessary if progress is to be made on the political front" (page 143). The dilemma is that given the incentives of commercial broadcasting and the symbiotic relationship between government officials and the media (which Larson himself recognizes), neither the networks nor political elites may have an incentive to change. Presumably the impetus must come from elsewhere.