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Coverage of Australia by CNN World Report and US television network news

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This content analysis contrasts CNN World Report and US television network news stories regarding Australia, using the CNN World Report Index and the Vanderbilt Television News (US networks) Archive and Index, both from 1987 to 1996. Significant differences emerged in the Australia topics chosen for presentation in these different news environments. US network stories typically were breaking news “voice-overs” of sports, disasters, animals, national politics, and crime. The two had similar percentages of soft news, but CNN World Report had significantly more background reporter packages on health, culture, economics, education, science, the military, and the environment.

News coverage of Australia is a marvellous case study of the news selection, or gatekeeping, processes at work in US network TV newscasts. The great distance from the US and network budget cuts regarding foreign bureaus (Matusow 1986, Sanit 1992) work against routine coverage using the network's own resources. As with all international coverage on US networks, stories must get past a “gatekeeper”, typically a producer or assignment editor, mindset that stories must have a strong visual element, universal appeal, and/or an obvious US connection to make

it onto the newscast. Of course, one of the best ways to see the effect of gatekeeping is to note what happens in its absence, such as in a program like Cable News Network's *World Report*.

CNN's unusual arrangement with international producers allows each contributor who submits one news package per month to make use of all transmitted programming for the entire month in his or her own domestic news programming. Occasionally producers of other CNN news programs use World Report packages within those programs. The CNN World Report Television Archive, partially funded by CNN, is maintained at Texas Tech University for academic research purposes.

Another important television news archive is the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and Index. It has taped and logged all US network television evening newscasts (ABC, CBS, and NBC) since October 1968. Both have on-line indices. Thus, the CNN World Report can be combined with the Vanderbilt Index to examine news selection in very different news environments; and, indirectly, to see the effect of that environment on news selection.

Literature review

The term "gatekeeper" was used by David Manning White to describe the news selection processes of a wire editor at a newspaper. When White (1950) asked that editor to write on copy why he selected or rejected the stories, White got answers that mirrored traditional news principles: significant, controversial, unusual, and interesting to the audience.

Harmon (1989) conducted a similar gatekeeping participant observation and content analysis study using Cincinnati television news producers. He found that traditional news principles made up roughly half the stated reasons, but that the remaining gatekeeper choices revolved around three questions: Will this story interest all or most of my viewers? Can this story be shown to my viewers?

How will this story fit with the rhythm, flow, and content of the rest of the newscast?

Berkowitz (1990) extended Harmon's work, and found a significant amount of gatekeeping by assignment editors as well as producers. He also found in an Indianapolis case study and participant observation that "news selection decisions were based on several considerations in addition to news values. News content seemed to be built from information that was easy to explain, that would provide a good audience draw, and that could be assembled with efficiency of effort (p. 66)."

A couple of authors have looked at the view of Australia selected by US network TV news gatekeepers. Breen (1996) coded all US network television newscast (ABC, CBS, NBC) coverage of Australia as noted in the Vanderbilt TV News Index and Abstracts from that work's inception in 1968 through to 1995. He found an overall decrease in attention to Australia. The 1976 through 1985 numbers were 256 total stories, while only 185 in the span of 1986 to 1995. The three US networks were very similar in news judgment regarding Australia, and the trend was toward trivialisation.

Breen used an 11-category coding scheme. His tallies showed rather modest and declining attention to Australian legal/political news, and not much US news attention either to matters of crime, art or music, religion, or science and education. Environment got some attention, but that may have been an artifact of his coding scheme including disasters such as brush fires in this category. Sport attention was uneven; it could get a couple of stories a year or as many as 20 to 40 in an America's Cup year.

Breen's work expands the findings by Larson (1982) who used a sampling technique of the Vanderbilt Television News Index and Archive. Larson selected about 35 weeknights per year on all three US networks, approximately 13 per cent of the weeknight newscasts for the entire period examined, 1972 to 1981. He found Australia is among the "blind spot" nations, mostly in the southern

hemisphere, barely covered by US network television newscasts (0.7 per cent of all sampled coverage). Australia did not even make the top 50 nations covered in those newscasts.

Researchers also have begun to explore the news content of CNN World Report. Dilawari et al (1991), for example, looked at the program from the point of view of how many “development” stories were submitted, and from what countries. The researchers discovered that more than 60 per cent of all news contributed to CNN World Report is development news, specifically economic activities, social services, culture, science, and education. Developing countries in 1987-88 contributed a large portion of the development stories, but by 1989 developed countries were contributing almost as much.

Those researchers concluded:

Despite the fact that two-thirds of the contributors to CNN World Report are from developing countries, a ratio which did not change across time, just over 50 per cent of the news contributed by the developed countries was development-oriented. This suggests a tendency on the part of all countries to present more development-oriented news when a world-wide audience is watching. CNN World Report perhaps fosters a desire to present a certain image of their cultures and societies to the world (pp. 132-133).

Kongkeo (1989) also addressed development news and found no significant differences in the amount of such news submitted by different non-Western news organisations. Kongkeo found that international and domestic politics, economics, military and defence were the most common topic areas; development, self-sufficiency and political independence were the most common “themes”, while government officers and politicians were the most common actors within news stories.

Rytel and Harmon (1997) analysed CNN World Report contributions in two different environments, Polish submissions before and after the fall of communism. They found substantial changes in

the latter group: more hard news, more sources per story, more conflicting opinions, and more coverage of conflict.

The news environments between US networks and CNN World Report clearly are decidedly different. The US networks have a small news hole, a dearth of their own reporters on the scene (made worse by network budget cuts in the mid-1980s), and strong concerns not only for traditional news values but also for maintaining audience, flow, and pacing. On the other hand, CNN World Report has a large news hole, contributing reporters around the globe, no newsroom gatekeeping, and at least the potential for use of the news reports for promotional fluff pieces about beautiful beaches and colorful festivals.

Quite frankly, however, the available research is too limited to permit strong hypotheses related to how the two different news environments yield different news choices. Furthermore, absent any interviews with the gatekeepers themselves as to the reasons for differences, any observations as to motivations for news choices only can be preliminary.

Methods

The researcher chose to contrast CNN World Report and US Network news stories regarding one country, Australia. Australia was chosen for several reasons. It is a developed country, mixed governmental and commercial broadcasting, English-speaking, a United States ally. Thus, language, journalistic and cultural traditions, and political differences would not prove major obstacles. Nevertheless, it is distant enough as to not be covered easily by a network's own resources.

This project used the CNN World Report Index record of every Australia report used from the inception of the program in 1987 to 1996. The researcher also selected every network television news story with a keyword Australia in the Vanderbilt Index. These sto-

ries were coded by form (reporter package, anchor package, multiple packages, voice overs, sound bites only, readers, and commentaries). The coding also kept track of story length (in the ten-second increments used by the Vanderbilt TV Index), date, and topic. The topics came from the existing coding scheme used for World Report. That scheme is in Table 1. Two archivists for World Report served as coders. Their intercoder agreement was 73 per cent. In cases of disagreement, the principal archivist's coding was used.

Findings and discussion

Some clear differences did emerge in the Australia topics chosen for presentation in these different news environments (Table 1). US networks emphasized sports, disasters, animals, national politics, and crime. A review of these stories easily could be called "sailing ships, tennis, brush fires, and funny critters". World Report also covered sports and animals extensively, but also gave significant attention to health and culture (Table 2). The high number of "other" stories is an artifact of sloppy and inexact coding in the early days of the program; this is slowly being remedied by the current archivist.

Table 1: US Networks v. CNN World Report, Australia Report Topics

	US Networks # stories	CNN World Report # stories
Agriculture	0	3
Animals	10	34
Art	1	7
Children	0	1
Crime	9	1
Culture	2	21

Diplomacy	8	1
Disaster	16	3
Drugs	1	0
Economics	0	9
Education	0	6
Environment	3	19
Health	4	33
Media	2	0
Military	0	7
Music	0	5
National Elections	3	1
National Politics	10	1
Other	0	34
Poverty	0	3
Protest	5	4
Religion	5	3
Refugees	0	2
Science	1	14
Sports	21	22
Terrorism	5	0
Tourism	0	8
Transportation	2	0
Women	0	6
Totals	108	248

Table 2: Top five story topics by percentage of stories

US Networks	%	CNN World Report	%
Sport	19.44	Animals	13.71
Disaster	14.81	Other	13.71
Animals	9.26	Health	13.31
National Politics	9.26	Sport	8.87
Crime	8.33	Culture	8.47

One could expect differences in form. CNN World Report is almost exclusively videotaped reporter packages. In sharp contrast, the US networks used only 50 reporter packages over the entire time period. More than 82 per cent of Australia stories were either simple anchor readers or voice overs. Australia apparently is a “kicker” story for many gatekeepers, a good opportunity to show quick video of an unusual, amusing event or animal. These reader and voice-over stories usually run about 23 to 30 seconds (Table 3).

Table 3: Manner of Presentation, US Network Australia Coverage

Form	Count	%	Mean Length (seconds)
Reader	150	45.317	22.940
Voice-over	122	36.858	30.099
Reporter package	50	15.106	119.787
Commentary	3	.906	103.333
Anchor package	3	.906	130.000
Sound bite only	3	.906	30.000
Multiple packages	0	0	0

Another set of striking differences (with clear and obvious links to the news environment) emerge when one arbitrarily collapses the existing categories into three divisions: hard news, background news, and soft news (Table 4). The networks veer sharply toward the hard news stories with obvious timeliness, conflict, and significance. The networks and CNN World Report do not differ greatly in percentage of stories devoted to soft news (the kicker phenomenon at work), but the CNN World Report has significantly more background, or topical analysis pieces. And, yes, a few puff pieces about tourism do get into the mix, but hardly dominate the CNN World Report Australia stories.

Table 4: Classification of story topics: hard, background, and soft

Report %	US Networks % (N=108)	CNN World (N=214)
Hard: Crime, Diplomacy, Disaster, National Elections, National Politics, Protest, and Terrorism	52	5
Background: Agriculture, Children, Drugs, Economics, Education, Environment, Health, Military, Poverty, Religion, Refugees, Science, Transportation, Women)	15	50
Soft: Animals, Art, Culture, Media, Music, Sports, Tourism	33	45

Regarding US network TV newscasts, the findings from this analysis neatly parallel the Breen and Larson observations. Australian stories rarely appear on US network TV newscasts. Network crews infrequently venture to Australia to create reporter packages. Instead, news is gathered from wire services and the video of others. This leads to brief accounts of brush fires, sailing races, tennis matches, and amusing features frequently highlighting unusual animals.

The highly competitive gatekeeping process in US network TV news means that all stories selected must interest all or most of the audience. This process works together with a news environment where many Australia stories simply aren't on the agenda or available easily. Look for this pattern to change briefly when network crews descend on Australia for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. This should be especially evident in sports stories and on the network having the broadcast rights to the games. However, these long-term patterns of scant and generally trivial attention to Australia are based on real factors that should re-assert themselves shortly after the Olympic flame is extinguished.

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