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Waltraud Queiser Morales

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Research in Brief

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Latin America on Network TV

By Waltraud Queiser Morales

Third-World attention has been turning increasingly to attacks against the existing international communication and information orders. The charges of the developing nations—expressed in UNESCO forums—include cultural imperialism, systematic neglect and distortion by First World news bureaus.¹ Researchers have begun to generate studies to support or refute such criticism, and many of these have turned to television coverage.²

The purpose of this research report is a brief explanation of how the three major, commercial television networks in the United States have reported one Third-World region—Latin America—and whether Third-World criticism of Western media is substantiated by Latin American news coverage. Do the networks neglect the region, and is there ethnocentrism, and bias toward violent and crisis events?

Method

► The data are based on a content analysis of the *Television News Index and Abstract*

¹ *Many Voices, One World: Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).

² William C. Adams, ed., *Television Coverage of International Affairs* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1982), and *Television Coverage of the Middle East* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1981), and with Fay Schreiber, ed., *Television Network News: Issues in Content Research* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1978); David L. Altheide, *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1976); James F. Larson, "International Affairs Coverage on U.S. Network Television," *Journal of Communications* 29:1936-47 (Spring 1979); and, with Andy Hardy, "International Affairs Coverage on Network Television News: A Study of News Flow," *Gazette* 23:241-56 (1977); Emile G. McNany, James F. Larson, and J. Douglas Story, "News of Latin America on Network Television, 1972-1982: Too Little Too Late?" Paper presented at the International Communication Association, Boston, May 1982.

³ See Waltraud Queiser Morales, "Revolutions, Earthquakes, (Footnote Continued)

of the Vanderbilt University Television and News Archives, and a continuing research project.³ The index and abstract were used to locate Latin American stories for a six-year period, 1970-73 and 1978-79, presented by early evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS and NBC. These years were selected to compare news coverage over early and later years of the decade and coverage of two major Latin American events: Allende's Marxist experiment in Chile and the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Air time for all Latin American news was calculated from broadcast time published in the abstracts to determine annual coverage by each network. With the author as sole coder, broadcast time for each story unit was then allocated to issues and countries mentioned in the story by the following system. Domestic video and foreign video reports were distinguished from anchor introductions. Anchor lead-ins to a story were allotted a nominal 10 seconds, longer ones 20 seconds, of the overall story time. The domestic and foreign video report time, and the anchor lead-in time were then separately allocated to countries and issues mentioned in each. Air time was divided equally over all countries and issues mentioned when these were integral to the story. Countries or issues mentioned that were clearly not central were arbitrarily allocated a total of 10 seconds. If more than one country or issue was mentioned, the 10 seconds were divided among them.

There were 12 issue categories: non-violent politics, instability/violence, domestic economy, international economy, energy/oil, foreign relations, drug traffic, international terrorism, national security/defense, immigration, natural

► Dr. Morales is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Central Florida.

disasters and human interest. There were 22 country categories, which included the traditional 19 Latin American republics (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela); and the associated U.S. territory, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the United States and an "other countries" category.

Coding and allocation of story time was exclusively determined by news summaries from the Vanderbilt abstracts, which were found to be extremely reliable, after an extensive review of eight hours of compiled videotapes by the author. Thus 15% of all Latin American news coverage by ABC, CBS, and NBC for the six years was also directly analyzed from the compiled videotapes.

Findings

News coverage of Latin America compared unfavorably with attention to other news, totaling 53 hours or 2% of ABC, CBS, and NBC news time for the six years.⁴ More than half of this time (30 hours or 57%) represented news stories broadcast in 1978-79, indicating that coverage varied more over time than by network. Attention to Latin American news more than doubled from 1.5% of all early evening news in 1970-73, to 3.9% of all news in 1978-79. Despite peak coverage in 1978 (16 hours or 30% of Latin American news) because of the Nicaraguan Revolution, Latin American news was only 4% of the total evening news in that year.

TABLE 1

Time Given by Networks to
Five Most Reported
Latin American Countries, in Minutes

	ABC	CBS	NBC
Cuba	118	124	130
Nicaragua	74	92	109
Chile	52	70	90
Mexico	46	72	74
Panama	60	37	79
Network Total	966	1,081	1,141

Over the six years, ABC devoted 16:06 hours (30% of the three network total to Latin American stories, CBS 18:01 hours (34%), and NBC 19:01 hours (36%). Networks were fairly consistent in coverage each year, except for ABC's lower 1971 total of 1:25 hours, compared to 2:50 hours for CBS and 2:57 hours for NBC. NBC reported Fidel Castro's state visit to Chile—the main Latin American news event that year—more extensively than ABC did. In other years average Latin American news coverage for the three networks ranged between 8% and 9% for 1970 and 1972, 12% for 1973, and increased in 1978 and 1979 to 30% and 27% respectively. In the first period of the decade (1970-73), NBC consistently led the other networks in Latin American news, but in the later period (1978-79) ABC became the clear leader, devoting more time to Central American news (Nicaragua) while NBC lagged behind as much as 8 percentage points in 1978.

Early evening news coverage not only neglected Latin America but evidenced reporting bias. Content orientations found in international news coverage—U.S. vs. global vantage, left vs. right, and thoroughness vs. superficiality—applied to Latin America.⁵ The networks presented Latin America from the U.S. viewpoint. As a region, Latin America was associated

TABLE 2
Time Given to Five Most Reported
Latin American Issues, in Minutes

	ABC	CBS	NBC
Foreign Relations	238	218	259
Security	210	213	178
Violence	144	190	201
Disasters	63	83	76
Terrorism	73	55	91
Network Total	966	1,081	1,141

and Latin America: The Networks Look At Allende's Chile and Somoza's Nicaragua," in Adams, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-113.

⁴ This percentage assumes 23 minutes in an average early evening newscast (but also holds for as short as 20 minutes and as long as 26 minutes). Total Latin American news (53 hours) would be 5% of international news using Larson's estimate that about 10 minutes of an average newscast is international news.

⁵ Adams, "Covering the World in Ten Minutes: Network News and International Affairs," in Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁶ The data are available from the author.

TABLE 3

Time Allocated to Countries Most Mentioned
by the Networks In Terms of the
Most Mentioned Issues in Percent

ISSUES	COUNTRIES				
	Cuba	Nicaragua	Chile	Mexico	Panama
Foreign Relations	26	4	23	35	72
Security	55	0.4	0.5	2	2
Violence	0	79	32	5	5
Terrorism	8	0.7	4	2	0.5
Disasters	1	16	4	28	0.5
N=Total Minutes	372	275	212	192	176

with the U.S. 30% of the time compared to 10% for associations with all the other countries or regions, and was consistently linked with only one other country, the Soviet Union. In 1978, for example, 14% of CBS news time on Latin America was allocated to "other country" mentions, of which the Soviet Union represented 10%.⁶

Although no category in the content analysis directly measured ideological orientation, Cuba's high association with national security and the Soviet Union gave an anti-communist tone to the news. Reporting on Cuba was critical of leftwing regimes, and an analysis of compiled videotape broadcasts confirmed an association with hardline, anti-Soviet reporting.⁷ Of countries and issues most reported by the networks in Table 3, Cuba had the highest overall news coverage for the six-year period, and was the most covered Latin American country each year. Over half of news on Cuba (55%) was associated with national security, and most of the rest (34%) on foreign relations and terrorism, shown in Table 3.

Although the networks reported Latin America superficially as a region, coverage of "newsworthy" countries was extensive, but newsworthy for the networks meant disaster, crisis, violence or major threat to U.S. interests. The 20% (645 minutes) of

Latin American news programmed for the first 5 minutes of broadcast time coincided with heavy crisis reporting: 77% of it in 1978-79 compared with 23% in 1970-73.⁸ The factors of country size of proximity to the U.S. did not assure coverage, since Brazil was virtually ignored while smaller Nicaragua received more news attention than neighboring Mexico, but less than Marxist Cuba.

Reports on Nicaragua, the second most important country for the networks in terms of coverage time, were associated with crisis and violence. Of Nicaraguan news time, 79% was spent on violent stories and 16% on disaster reports. Most news (95%) was crisis news: the 1972 earthquake and the 1978-79 civil war. More important than the pervasiveness of violence and crisis (since these were to be expected when reporting internal war) was the fact that little other news about Nicaragua was reported in the six years, and that only crisis stories aired within the first 5 minutes of news broadcast time. The cumulative effect of such unbalanced news coverage might have been to create regional and country stereotypes.

Conclusions

The data indicate that Latin America was neglected as a world region in early evening television news coverage. While networks underreported the area fairly consistently, coverage doubled between the early and late 70s because of a combination of

⁷ W.Q. Morales, "Television Reporting of Latin America: The Case of Cuba" Paper presented at the International Studies Association, Cincinnati, March 24-27, 1982.

⁸ The data are available from the author.

factors— decreased preoccupation with Vietnam, the domestic debate over the Panama Canal, and unrest in Central America. Latin American news predominantly was crisis news concentrated on a handful of crisis countries (Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Chile and Mexico), and on crisis issues such as national security, violence and disaster. More peaceful countries and less sensational issues were neglected.

Television News Coverage of Six Federal Regulatory Agencies

By Larry W. Thomas and Laslo V. Boyd

► In recent years, there has been growing skepticism about the effectiveness and desirability of many of the functions performed by the federal bureaucracy.¹ Criticisms, particularly of agencies engaged in regulatory activities, have appeared in campaign speeches, Presidential addresses, executive orders, Congressional bills, newspaper editorials and scholarly journals. In a similar vein, business leaders and corporate executives have asserted that excessive spending and burdensome regulation by federal agencies have contributed to high interest rates, double-digit inflation and burgeoning unemployment.² Moreover, during the past decade, public opinion surveys have shown declining public confidence in the agencies of government.³

Among the various explanations offered to account for this growing anti-bureaucratic sentiment are: the failure of many government policies to measure up

to expectations, the decline of public confidence in bureaucratic expertise, the cost of implementing government programs, and the "negative" coverage of bureaucracy in the news media.⁴ This study examines how one of these supposed sources of anti-bureaucratic sentiment, network television news, portrays the federal bureaucracy. More specifically, the focus is on the amount, content and tone of network news coverage of federal regulatory agencies. The major questions to be addressed are: How much time do the networks devote to coverage of regulatory agencies? What type of stories are covered? What is the tone of that coverage? Finally, are there variations among the three major networks in the amount, nature and tone of coverage?

Answers to the above questions will provide descriptive information on the images that network news is conveying to the public about federal regulatory agencies. Efforts to demonstrate a causal relationship between the content of television news and public attitudes toward bureaucracy, however, are beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, based on previous research, it seems safe to assume that attitudes toward political institutions and public policies are linked to the content and degree of network news coverage.⁵

Methodology

The methodology utilized in this study was a systematic content analysis of the news coverage of six federal regulatory agencies during 1980 by the three major networks. The six agencies were the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) and the Occupational Safety and Health

¹ Herbert Kaufman, "Fear of Bureaucracy: A Raging Pandemic," *Public Administration Review*, 41:1-10 (1981).

² Murray Weidenbaum, *The Future of Business Regulation* (New York: AMACOM, 1977).

³ Carol H. Weiss, "Bureaucracy Maladies and Remedies," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 22:477-81 (1979).

⁴ Kenneth J. Meier, *Politics and Bureaucracy: Policy-making in the Fourth Branch of Government* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1979); Kenneth F. Warren, *Administrative Law in the American Political System* (Minneapolis: West Publishing Co., 1982).

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