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ABSTRACT

To examine how United States network news personalizes coverage of international terrorism, a study conducted a content analysis of videotaped reports relating to the TWA airliner hijacking of June 1985. Videotapes of the TWA hostage incident from "ABC World News Tonight," "CBS Evening News," and "NBC Nightly News" during the period of June 14 through June 30, 1985, were analyzed according to the televised news source--defined as the videotaped "sound bite" of the newsmaker as seen and heard in the context of a network news report. For this study, televised news sources were included in the analysis when they were seen and heard on camera in either an interview, public speech, or studio setting in both live and prerecorded contexts. A total of 790 "sound bites" were broadcast in 244 stories during the 17-day incident, with CBS televising the largest percentage of news. News stories which qualified as news commentary or analysis were not included in the study. Each "sound bite" was coded using a list of variables including network, source type, source status, time length, source setting, and newscast placement. Results showed that the sources televised during the TWA hijacking were most frequently unofficial, domestic sources. Over half of these sources were either hostages or relatives and friends of hostages, suggesting that network coverage of terrorism tends to relate a "human" drama in which hostages and their families are portrayed as the central characters. (Five tables of data and 30 footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

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TELEVISED NEWS SOURCES IN NETWORK COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

by

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To provide empirical evidence on how U.S. network news personalizes coverage of international terrorism, a content analysis was undertaken to identify and describes sources televised in the news coverage of the TWA hijacking of June 1985. Contrary to previous studies which found a reliance on official sources, this data showed unofficial, domestic sources comprised a majority of the 790 sound bites broadcast in 244 stories relating to the hijacking in ABC, CBS and NBC newscasts which aired during the 17-day incident.

Televised News Sources In Network Coverage of International Terrorism

Introduction

Network television coverage of international terrorism has been the subject of a growing body of mass media research in recent decades. Most recently, mass communication scholars have begun to explore the potential, if not the propensity, of network news to dramatize terrorist acts.¹ In assessing media coverage of the TWA hijacking, Weimann observed, "News organizations, and especially the U.S. networks, gave the story impressive coverage, turning it into a dramatic, emotionally charged crisis that was rich in incident and interest."²

Livingston has noted, "Terrorism as an extreme form of violence, is particularly newsworthy and well suited to the needs of television, which is a highly visual and compact medium with little time for exposition."³ Other media researchers have suggested that news processing of international terrorism by television networks "decontextualizes" terrorist events.⁴ Altheide notes that television news "formats" operate independently of specific content in ways that potentially distort information.⁵ He suggests that this occurs when television reports extract specific events from their historical, social and organizational context, massage them by the news format and subsequently "recontextualize" the events.⁶

The context of television coverage of international crises prompted Nimmo to conclude, "Regardless of the crisis, television

news covers it as an unfolding drama involving ambiguous actions, motivated actors, often panoramic scenes, sanctifying agencies and conflicting purposes--all in rising action, turning points, denouements and conclusions."⁷ Consequently, media coverage of international terrorism tends to be highly personalized with the actors typically including the terrorists, their victims, government officials and the media.⁸

Relatively little attention in the literature on media and terrorism has been devoted to examining sources televised in network coverage of terrorist incidents. To provide empirical evidence on how network news personalizes coverage of international terrorism, a content analysis was undertaken to identify and describe sources televised in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking of June 1985. An examination of the sources presented in television "sound bites" was the approach taken in the study. A sound bite is a term commonly used in broadcast newsrooms to denote a "portion of a statement or interview that is broadcast in a radio or TV news story."⁹

Previous studies by Altheide¹⁰ and Atwater¹¹ have reported similar trends of network coverage in evening newscasts during the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the TWA Hostage Crisis. In both cases of international terrorism, evening news coverage by the major networks was extensive, reactive and dramatic. Topics emphasized in network coverage of both incidents included status of the hostages, U.S. government reaction and diplomatic efforts,

and the plight of hostage families.

These similar trends in coverage were not surprising in view of what the literature on television news processing has suggested. Tuchman, for example, has noted that television news tends to engage in "routinization of the unexpected," by applying preset values, practices and resources when significant and unexpected events occur.¹² Epstein¹³ and Gans¹⁴ have suggested that television news content manifests a host of internal and external influences including news values, and organizational and logistical factors.

Altheide has focused scholarly attention on the role and "logic" of television formats in preparing television news content.¹⁵ His theoretical perspective is reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message."¹⁶ If the process and method of television news processing is contributing to a distorted view of reality, then media research should investigate the process, method and content with the intent of discerning the roots of such distortion. This study, while not attempting to discern distortion, sought to describe the extent and nature of personalization (via televised news sources) involved in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking. The literature on the use of sources in network coverage of international terrorism provided an additional rationale for the study. This study is among the first to use the "sound bite" as the unit of analysis in investigating network coverage of international terrorism.

Related Studies

While there is a growing body of research literature on media coverage of crises, including international terrorism, few of these studies have devoted much attention to news source analysis.

In a study of CBS and NBC coverage of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Kern analyzed quoting patterns to determine which domestic and international sources were quoted and how they were quoted.¹⁷ He found a U.S. presidential slant to news coverage with modest attention devoted to foreign opponents and observed that the foreign story tends to be viewed through a "domestic prism." In his analysis of network coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, Altheide noted that network journalists relied on official news sources and "commonly turned to those officials having a Western appearance who also spoke English, rather than seeking out their more indigenous-appearing and speaking counterparts."¹⁸

Nimmo and Combs examined network evening news coverage of six domestic and international crises.¹⁹ In studying The People's Temple deaths in Guayana and the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the researchers found that public officials were the primary news sources followed by relatives and friends of crisis victims. The major variance in coverage came in depiction of sources, with "ABC showing officials as failing to prevent tragedy, while CBS described them as processing events and NBC pictured them as

caught up in a larger heroic drama."²⁰ In network coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the researchers reported that "average citizens" were interviewed more frequently by NBC than the other networks during the seizure and attempted rescue periods.

Paraschos and Stewart examined print and electronic news coverage of the KAL #007 airline incident and concluded that source imbalance and heavy reliance on U.S. sources may threaten the credibility of the news organization and may support accusations of "media imperialism."²¹ The reliance of U.S. media on domestic sources in reporting international news also has been recognized by Said.²² He observed that reliance on domestic sources overseas tends to be a practice among American reporters who view a foreign assignment as a mission "to translate what happens there into a language that compatriots at home...can understand."²³

The reliance of U.S. media on official sources in covering international news has also been the focus of mass communication scholars. Sigal has observed that reporters cope with uncertainty by continuing to rely on authoritative sources, because it may be difficult to discern who, if anyone, is in charge during mass movements or riots.²⁴ Chibnall noted that the journalist's source selection process is colored by the expectations of editors who want to see official accounts, regardless of their accuracy.²⁵ He observed that often unofficial sources are used to reinforce official statements.

While the primary objective of the study was to identify and describe sources televised in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking, several underlying motives contributed to the study's rationale. The authors felt that the analysis would give insight into the notion that "sound bites" are a "format" element used similarly by all three networks.

The study also attempted to shed light on the kinds of "characters" who are likely to be personalized by networks in their dramatic coverage of terrorist events. Larson concluded that visual coverage of the Iranian hostages and their families "helped to sustain audience interest in the crisis and simultaneously created a climate or set of pressures within which the president and other U.S. officials conducted foreign policy."²⁶

The study also sought to describe through empirical means the televising of official versus unofficial sources and of domestic versus non-domestic sources. By contributing to the viewers construction of social reality on foreign affairs, televised news sources convey a sense of context and perspective which may influence public opinion.

Seven major research questions were addressed in this study of network television news content.

1. Which sources were the primary characters used in personalizing network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking?

2. To what extent were networks similar or different in the types of sources televised during the TWA hijacking?
3. In what settings were televised news sources most often presented, e.g. news conference, on-site interview?
4. What was the ratio of official to unofficial televised sources in network coverage of the TWA hijacking?
5. What was the ratio of domestic to non-domestic televised sources in network coverage of the incident?
6. What was the distribution of "sound bites" broadcast by each network in evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking?
7. Which televised sources received the most "news time" in network evening news coverage of the hijacking?

Method

To address the above issues, a comprehensive content analysis was conducted using videotaped reports relating to the TWA hijacking of June 1985. The analysis was performed using comprehensive, compiled videotapes of the TWA hostage incident as broadcast June 14 - June 30 on "ABC World News Tonight," "CBS Evening News" and "NBC Nightly News." The videotapes used in the analysis were obtained primarily from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. Several videotaped newscasts not available at the archive were obtained from the networks.²⁷

The unit of analysis was the televised news source, operationally defined as the videotaped "sound bite" of the newsmaker as seen and heard in the context of a network news report relating to the TWA hijacking. For purposes of the study, televised news sources were included in the analysis when they

were seen and heard on camera in either an interview, public speech or studio setting and in both live and prerecorded contexts. Each videotaped "sound bite" was timed with the aid of a stop watch to the nearest second, starting with the first word spoken by the source and ending with the last word spoken by the source. The televised "supers" or titles identifying each televised news source were noted and used in conjunction with information published in the June 1985 edition of the Vanderbilt University Television News Index and Abstracts to accurately identify televised news sources.²⁸

In addition to coding each televised news source, the analysis coded each story in which the sources appeared. For purposes of the study, a news story was defined as any topic introduced by the anchor person, coupled with any report by another correspondent on the same topic and any concluding remarks by the anchor person.²⁹ News stories which qualified as either news commentary or analysis were not included in the study.

Each unit of analysis (the sound bite) was coded with respect to a list of variables including network, source type, source status, time length, source setting and newscast placement. A two-page coding protocol was used in recording these data. This procedure was aided by cross checking televised sources, stories and newscasts with newscast data published in the Vanderbilt University Television News Index and Abstracts.

To systematically identify the sources televised in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking, each source was coded with respect to a "type" variable and a "status" variable. A list of source types was developed by reviewing the videotaped data and the June edition of the Vanderbilt University Television News Index and Abstracts. Source type categories were mutually exclusive and included 17 source types ranging from average citizen to former U.S. government official.³⁰ The rationale for including this variable was to specify the kinds of sources presented in network coverage of international terrorism.

A second source variable, "status," was used to identify televised sources with respect to being either official or unofficial sources in the first instance and domestic or foreign sources in the second instance. This variable was used to generate data on the extent to which elite and domestic sources are used in covering international terrorism.

The setting in which televised sources were interviewed was noted by including the variable "source setting." This variable was not always possible to specify due to the ambiguity of the background video or an extreme close-up shot. To the extent that the source setting was identifiable, a sound bite was placed into one of six categories which included: formal public speech, news conference, office or studio interview, on-site interview, ad hoc interview and other interview context.

To establish intercoder reliability on the three judgmental variables used in the analysis (source type, source status and source setting), a sample of 25 sound bites was randomly drawn and independently coded by two judges. Reliability was estimated as a percentage of agreement between the judges on each of the three variables. The reliability estimates obtained through this procedure were 88 percent for source status, 100 percent for source type and 92 percent for source setting.

Results

A total of 790 sound bites were broadcast in 244 stories relating to the TWA hijacking in network evening newscasts which aired during the 17-day incident. CBS broadcast the largest percentage of televised news sources (38 percent) compared to ABC with 34 percent and NBC with 28 percent. This distribution of sound bites appeared relatively balanced among the three major networks and suggested similar news treatment with respect to the integration of sound bites into story content on the hijacking.

Data on the placement of televised news sources in network evening newscasts showed that sound bites on the hijacking were, generally, evenly distributed throughout the individual news broadcast. Not so surprisingly, the highest percentage of televised sources (28 percent) were broadcast in the first five minutes of network evening newscasts. However, the second

largest percentage of televised sources (26.7 percent) appeared in the final five to seven minutes of the newscasts.

Approximately 22 percent of televised sources appeared in the second five minutes of evening newscasts compared to 23 percent that appeared in the third five-minute news block.

The Character of Televised News Sources

Research data were generated on specific identification categories (source type) and on the status of televised sources. The percentage data on source type (see Table 1, column four) indicated that the hostages and their relatives and friends were the dominant characters depicted in sound bites on the TWA hijacking. When the two "source type" categories are combined, they account for more than half (53 percent) of the total number of sound bites on the hijacking. Just over 8 percent of televised sources were U.S. administration sources, and approximately 7 percent of televised sources were included in each of the categories "average citizens" and "non-U.S. interest group sources."

The data in Table 1 indicate that, overall, the network broadcast of sound bites on the hijacking did not differ significantly across networks. However, some differences in specific "source types" were noted. CBS, for example, included more sound bites of hostage relatives and friends than the other two networks. ABC and CBS gave more exposure to average citizens in sound bites than did NBC. And, the data show that ABC gave

much more exposure to non-U.S. cabinet sources in sound bites than did CBS and NBC.

In reporting foreign affairs, television and other mass media have been accused of relying on elite, domestic sources, raising questions about balance, context and perspective in international news reports available in the U.S. Consequently, the study examined the status of televised news sources to assess content patterns in the broadcast of sound bites on the TWA hijacking. The percentage data in Table 2 (column four) suggest that unofficial, domestic sources accounted for the majority (65 percent) of televised news sources. Approximately 16 percent of televised sources were U.S. government officials. When the data on official and non-official sources are collapsed, the findings showed the ratio of unofficial sources to official sources to be approximately 70 percent versus 30 percent.

The data in Table 2 suggest that sources televised in evening news coverage of the crisis were much more likely to be domestic sources. When the data relating to domestic and non-domestic status are collapsed, the findings showed the ratio of domestic to non-domestic sources to be approximately 83 percent versus 17 percent. Although no significant differences in source status were found across networks, some noticeable differences among the three networks on specific status categories were noted. NBC televised more U.S. government officials

than did the other two networks. ABC used more televised sources who were either foreign officials or unofficial foreign sources than did the CBS or NBC.

Table 3 lists frequencies and percentage data on the communication setting in which televised sources appeared in network coverage of the hijacking. The percentage data (in column four) show that most televised news sources (39 percent) appeared in on-site interviews, i.e. on the site of the news event being reported. Approximately 22 percent of televised news sources were pictured in a news conference setting, whereas 18 percent of these sources were interviewed in an office or television studio. Again, the data show no significant statistical differences across networks, overall, with respect to the source settings in which sources were televised. However, the data indicated that NBC televised sources more often in a news conference setting than did the other two networks. CBS televised more sources in either office or studio settings than did its competitors. And both ABC and CBS televised more sources in on-site interview settings than did NBC. Eleven percent of televised sources were shown in random ad hoc interviews, and only four percent of these sources were photographed in the context of a public speech.

Network News Time Devoted to Televised Sources

A total of 176 minutes (2.9 hours) was devoted to televised sources in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking. The average time length of an individual sound bite relating to the hijacking was 13.4 seconds. The distribution of news time among networks showed that they devoted similar amounts of time to televised sources. ABC devoted approximately 62 minutes (35 percent) to these sources, compared to CBS with about 58 minutes (33 percent) and NBC with nearly 57 minutes (32 percent).

The findings showed, with few exceptions, that the types of news sources that received the most news time were those which were televised most frequently. The data in Table four show that hostages, their relatives and friends, U.S. administration sources and non-U.S. faction/interest group sources received the largest amounts of news time. Hostages and their families accounted for 53.3 percent of network evening news time devoted to televised sources. Non-U.S. legislative sources received the least amount of news time on network evening newscasts.

The data in Table five show the distribution of news time (in minutes) devoted to televised sources by status group. Again, U.S. non-official sources, most frequently the hostages and their families, were the dominant status group, accounting for 63.5 percent of news time. Approximately 16 percent of news time was devoted to U.S. government officials compared to approximately 10 percent for non-U.S. private officials.

Discussion

In this analysis of network evening news content, findings showed that the sources televised during the TWA hijacking were most frequently unofficial, domestic sources. Over half of these sources were either hostages or relatives and friends of hostages. The typical setting in which sources were televised was the site on which the news event took place. Sound bites of televised sources were prominently featured in evening newscasts but were evenly distributed throughout the entire newscast. Network evening newscasts devoted approximately three hours of news time to these sources.

The data support the findings of previous studies that networks generally treat coverage of international terrorism in similar ways, using similar formats. The study found no statistically significant differences among networks with regard to type, status and setting of televised sources. However, some noticeable differences among networks were observed in specific categories of the three variables.

The tendency for network television to dramatize acts of international terrorism is difficult to avoid in view of industry incentives for higher audience ratings. These data suggest that network coverage of terrorism tends to relate a "human" drama in which hostages and their families are portrayed as the central characters. In this respect, televised sources served to "humanize" the TWA hijacking, permitting audience members to identify with the uncertain plight of the victims of terrorism.

The findings indicate that this act of international terrorism was often reported from the perspective of domestic televised sources. Domestic sources accounted for nearly 83 percent of televised sources and 81 percent of news time devoted to such sources on network evening newscasts. The results support previous research suggesting that network coverage of international terrorism tends to be culturally biased. This issue poses implications for the credibility of network news coverage of international news. The context and perspective of foreign news in America also pose implications for citizens in accurately assessing U.S. foreign policy.

Future studies should examine the "gatekeeping" practices employed by network newsrooms in covering terrorist incidents. Such studies might identify the routines and format considerations that some researchers feel promote consonance in network coverage of crises. Additional studies should systematically assess the context of international news events and examine the extent to which U.S. media reports reflect contextual conditions.

TABLE 1

SOURCE TYPE BY NETWORK

Type	ABC	CBS	NBC	%
Hostage	73	75	74	28.1
Hostage Relative/Friend	62	84	51	24.9
U.S. Administration Source	16	21	27	8.1
Non-U.S. Faction/Interest Group Source	20	18	16	6.8
Average Citizen	23	28	2	6.7
U.S. Cabinet/Military Source	15	13	17	5.7
Non-U.S. Cabinet/Military Source	20	9	6	4.4
Former U.S. Government Official	12	18	4	4.3
Expert	8	14	6	3.5
Air Transportation Employee	10	7	5	2.8
U.S. Congressman	6	5	6	2.2
Journalist	3	7	0	1.3
Non-U.S. Administration Source	2	2	4	1.01
Non-U.S. Legislative Source	0	0	1	.13
Total	270	301	219	

N = 790

 χ^2 with 26 d.f., $p = 1.38$ (N.S.)

TABLE 2

SOURCE STATUS BY NETWORK

Status	Network			%
	ABC	CBS	NBC	
U.S. Non-Official	169	215	130	65
U.S. Gov't Official	35	38	51	15.7
Non-U.S. Private Official	14	19	18	6.5
Non-U.S. Gov't Official	21	14	9	5.6
Non-U.S. Non-Official	24	12	5	5.2
U.S. Private Official	5	3	6	1.8
Other	2	0	0	.2
Total	<u>270</u>	<u>301</u>	<u>219</u>	

N = 790

 χ^2 with 12 d.f., $p = 7.05$ (N.S.)

TABLE 3

SOURCE SETTING BY NETWORK

Setting	Network			%
	ABC	CBS	NBC	
On Site Interview	129	106	76	39.4
News Conference	48	52	70	21.5
Office or Studio Interview	44	71	27	18
Ad Hoc Interview	26	38	23	11
Other Interview Context	14	24	9	5.9
Formal Public Speech	9	10	14	4.2
Total	<u>270</u>	<u>301</u>	<u>219</u>	

N = 790

²
X with 10 d.f., p = 4.5 (N.S.)

TABLE 4

DISTRIBUTION OF NEWS TIME BY SOURCE TYPE (In Minutes)

Type	Minutes	%
Hostage	63.8	36.3
Hostage Relative/Friend	30	17
Non-U.S. Faction/Interest Group Source	17.7	10.1
U.S. Administration Source	15.9	9
U.S. Cabinet/Military Source	10.5	6
Former U.S. Government Official	9.5	5.4
Non-U.S. Cabinet/Military Source	7.3	4.1
Expert	6	3.4
Average Citizen	5.6	3.2
Air Transportation Employee	3.1	1.8
U.S. Congressman	2.5	1.4
Journalist	2	1.1
Non-U.S. Administration Source	1.9	1.1
Non-U.S. Legislative Source	.2	.1
Total	176	

TABLE 5

DISTRIBUTION OF NEWS TIME BY SOURCE STATUS (In Minutes)

Status	Minutes	%
U.S. Non-Official	111.7	63.5
U.S. Gov't Official	28	15.9
Non-U.S. Private Official	17	9.7
Non-U.S. Gov't Official	9.9	5.6
Non-U.S. Non-Official	6.5	3.7
U.S. Private Official	2.7	1.5
Other	.2	.1
Total	176	

Notes

- 1 Gabriel Weimann, "The Theater of Terror: Effects of Press Coverage," Journal of Communication, 33:38-45 (Winter 1983).
- 2 Gabriel Weimann, "Media Events: The Case of International Terrorism," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 31:24 (Winter 1987).
- 3 N. C. Livingston, The War Against Terrorism (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1982), p.62.
- 4 David L. Altheide, "Iran VS. US TV News: The Hostage Story Out of Context," in William C. Adams, ed. Television Coverage of the Middle East (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1981), pp.128-157.
- 5 David L. Altheide, "Formats for Crises," National Forum, 68:12-14 (Fall 1987).
- 6 Ibid., p. 12.
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- 9 T. White, A. Meppen and S. Young, Broadcast News Writing. Reporting and Production (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1984), p. 303.
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22 Edward W. Said, Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

23 Ibid., p.47.

24 Leon V. Sigal, "Sources Make the News," in R. Manoff and M. Schudson, eds., Reading the News (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

25 Steve Chibnall, Law-and-Order News: An Analysis of Crime Reporting in the British Press (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).

26 James F. Larson, "Television and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Iran Crisis," Journal of Communication, 36:129 (Autumn 1986).

27 Videotaped reports on the TWA hijacking for the June 15, 1985 edition of "NBC Nightly News" were not available at the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive and a recording of the newscast was not available from NBC. Consequently, this newscast content was not included in the analysis.

28 Vanderbilt University Television News Index and Abstracts: "A Guide to the Videotape Collection of the Network Evening News Programs in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive," (Nashville: Joint University Libraries, June 1985).

29 Joseph S. Fowler and Stuart W. Showalter, "Evening Network News Selection: A Confirmation of News Judgment," Journalism Quarterly, 51:712-715 (Winter 1974).

30 A list of definitions was used in categorizing televised sources into one of the 17 "source type" categories. These categories included Hostages, Hostage Families/Friends, Average Citizen, Journalist, Air Transportation Employee, Expert, U.S. Administration Source, U.S. Cabinet/Military Source, U.S. Congressman, Former U.S. Government Official, Non-U.S. Administration Source, Non-U.S. Cabinet/Military Source, Non-U.S. Legislative Source, Non-U.S. Faction/Interest Group Source, Former Non-U.S. Government Official, International Diplomatic Organization Source and Other Source.

A copy of category definitions is available upon written request to the authors at Michigan State University. Cabinet officials were purposely differentiated from administrative sources to gain a more specific measure of the visibility of national leaders and their advisors, apart from cabinet members, in network evening news coverage of the TWA hijacking.