

Indira Gandhi's Assassination

A Case Study in International News Reporting

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COVERAGE of Indira Gandhi's assassination was analyzed in the **Washington Post**, **The Times**, **The New Straits Times** and **The Hindustan Times** in the context of the New World Information Order debate. **The Times** and **The Hindustan Times** show more "subjectivity" than **The New Straits Times** and the **Post**. **The New Straits Times** depends heavily on Reuters and AP. The coverage of an international news event depends on the nature of the event, and the political, economic, cultural, and historical patterns between the reported country and the reporting agency.

THE objective of the present paper is to analyze the coverage of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in the context of the New World Information Order debate on international news flow. This study answered the following questions:

1. To what extent were the Western and Third World newspapers objective or subjective in reporting Mrs. Gandhi's assassination?
2. To what extent were Western and Third World Newspapers dependent on their own staff, wire services, or other

sources, in reporting Mrs. Gandhi's assassination?

On June 5, 1984, the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, ordered the Indian army to storm the Golden Temple, the Sikh's holiest shrine, in Amritsar, Punjab.¹ Gandhi wanted to check the "terrorist" movement which sought autonomy for the predominantly Sikh state of Punjab. On October 31, 1984, Gandhi was shot and killed at her residence by two of her personal Sikh bodyguards. Her 40-year old son, Rajiv Gandhi was then sworn in as Prime Minister.

Mrs. Gandhi's assassination received extensive coverage in the press of Western and Third World nations. Gandhi's killing by her Sikh bodyguards was interpreted as the Sikh revenge for the Indian army's storming of the Golden Temple. **The New Straits Times** of November 1, 1984, quoted a Sikh leader: "It's not very surprising somebody has killed her. She was more or less asking for it."

The election of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister engendered a discussion on "dynastic rule" in India. Rajiv Gandhi's leadership abilities in quelling the sectarian violence in India after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination

were closely scrutinized by the press. **The Washington Post** of November 1, 1984, wrote: "It is Rajiv's abilities and performance that are, perhaps, the biggest uncertainty for many people as the nation tries to adjust to the great loss."

Indira Gandhi's assassination evoked powerful reactions in India and abroad. For nearly a week, Western and Third World newspapers reported Gandhi's assassination and its violent aftermath.

Background of the New World Information Order

Information plays a paramount role in international relations as a means of communication between countries, and their peoples. Unfortunately, in today's world information has become an exchange between unequal partners. The rich, more powerful Western countries control international channels of mass communication dissemination, and thus control the quantity and quality of information that flows to, and from, Third World countries. The call for a New World Information Order (NWIO) demonstrates the dissatisfaction of Third World nations with international communication, under Western political and economic dominance.²

The New World Information Order debate has dominated discussions on international communication in the 1970 and 1980s.³ Extensive literature on the NWIO has appeared.⁴ Need for a new, more just information order is widely recognized.⁵

International news flow has been the most contentious and controversial aspect of the NWIO debate, which has been raging in the United Nations for nearly two decades. Third World complaints about the flow of international news range from the content of news to the structure of the international news dissemination system.⁶

The one way direction of information flow from the West to the Third World is a result of historical, cultural, and the linguistic patterns.⁷ Links from former colonial periods and existing economic ties also influence direction of information flows.⁸ For example, events in India are likely to get more attention in the British press than in the newspapers of other nations.

The Western monopoly on the dissemination of news limits the distribution of stories about one Third World country to another.⁹ Indeed, in many Third World countries the only way to learn about news from a neighbouring country is to use Western wire agencies. However, these agency's reports are aimed at the Western audience with little concern about what Third World people want to know.¹⁰

The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the International

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flow of News claimed that the Western press did not publish enough about the Third World, and that what is published failed to reflect the economic and political realities of these countries.¹¹ Editors underplay or omit Third World news in the Western media because of lack of space, and a lack of readership interest. Competition for newspaper space leads to a malpractice known as "hying". Stronger words are preferred, such as "riot" rather than "demonstration", and "massacre" instead of "killing".

Third World domination by the Big Four news agencies—Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and Agence France Press—has an economic bias. The AP claims it makes no more than 1 per cent of its total income from the Third World although it spends five times as much in covering news events there.¹² Third World countries earn relatively little revenue for the Big Four, whose revenues come mainly from Western countries. The Report of the MacBride Commission notes that the worldwide operations of these four news agencies has given them a near monopoly in the international dissemination of news, and the world receives approximately 80 per cent of its reports through New York, Paris or London.¹⁴

Objectivity in Western media paradoxically distorts news from the Third World. Objectivity is the factual reporting of news events, uninfluenced by the attitudes or values of reporters, editors, publishers, or others.¹⁵ To fill their "news hole", editors must select what their audiences want, or risk losing readers. Information must grab the audience's attention and hold it.

Distortion in the Western press involves stressing "bad" news and ignoring "good" news about Third World countries. Western coverage of Third World countries concentrates on violence, crisis, and controversy, and not on development news.¹⁶ News about the Third World in the Western media are distorted and dwells only on "bad" news—catastrophe, corruption, civil disorder, and failure. A chaotic and fragmented picture about the Third World is created in the mind of the Western reader.¹⁷

Methodology of the present study

Within the framework of the NWIO, a quantitative content analysis was completed on certain Western and Third World newspapers.

1. Sources were two Western newspapers: The *Washington Post* from the United States of America, and *The Times* from London, England, and two Third World newspapers: *The New Straits Times* from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and *The Hindustan Times* from New Delhi, India.¹⁸

2. The time frame was October 31 to November 7, 1984

(Indira Gandhi was assassinated on October 31, 1984).

3. **Sampling:** A 186 stories which directly dealt with the Gandhi assassination were selected for sampling.¹⁹ **The Hindustan Times** published 75 stories, **The New Straits Times** (45), **The Times** (33) and the **Post** (33). News stories were stratified into four categories: straight news, features, editorials, and special opinion. Straight news stories contain more report sentences, and are relatively "objective". Editorials and opinion pieces contain more inference and judgment sentences, and are relatively "subjective". The degree of objectivity is inversely related to the frequency of inferential and judgmental sentences.²⁰

A stratified random sample of one-third of the articles was selected. The sample of 62 news stories, included 11 stories each from the **Post** and from **The Times**, 15 stories from **The New Straits Times**, and 25 stories from **The Hindustan Times**. The following criteria were used to stratify news stories:

(1) **Straight news stories** tell what happened and when and how and to whom or by whom and where. They do not interpret, or explain.²¹

(2) **Features** explore the topic in greater depth than straight news stories and place a greater emphasis on colourful details: Anecdotes, quotations, and descriptions.²²

(3) **Editorials** are opinion columns, written by a news-

The Hindustan Times published 75 stories, **The New Straits Times** 45, **The Times** 33 and **The Washinton Post** 33

papers' editorial writer, which make an argument for one position, urge a course of action, and favour one side against another.²³

(4) **Special opinion pieces** are generally not written by the regular newspaper editorial staff, and appear on the editorial page or on the page opposite to it. Letters to the editors are included in this category.

(5) **Unit of analysis:** A sentence was taken as the unit of analysis, because it is small and reliable. News stories varied in length from two sentences to 159 sentences. Sentences were classified as report, inference, or judgment sentences based on Hayakawa's typology.²⁴ Hayakawa's classification leaves no ambiguity in classifying sentences as reports, inferences, and judgments.

(1) **Reports** are verifiable statements. There is relatively little danger of misunderstanding a report. They are reliable information and to be trusted. For example, "Rajiv Gandhi, 40, the Prime Minister's only surviving son, was unanimously elected Prime Minister at an emergency cabinet meeting" (**Washington Post**, November 1, 1984, p. 1)

(2) **Inferences** are statements about the unknown made on the basis of the known. They interpret situations, and circumstances, on the basis of what

has happened or is known. Inferences make guesses about what is going on in other people's minds. For example, "Either because they were too alarmed by events in the capital, or because they preferred to stay away for other reasons, there were no Sikh priests present" (**The Times**, November 5, 1984, p.5).

(3) **Judgments** are statements which express approval-disapproval, like-dislike, or good-bad dimensions of an occurrence, person, or object under description. They are opinion statements; for example, "A certain amount of discipline is Rajiv's hallmark" (**The Hindustan Times**, November 5, 1984, p.1)

(5) **Sources** of news for each of the four newspapers of study were noted. Sources were: (1) AP and Reuters, (2) newspapers' own staff, (3) Indian news agencies, and (4) guest writers. There was a fifth category for unattributed stories.

RESULTS

The intercoder reliability coefficient is 0.88.

TYPE OF SENTENCES

Each newspaper employed more reports than inferences or judgments. The **Post** and **The Times** used 61 per cent and 43 per cent of report sentences, respectively, to cover the news event. The **Post** had about the same proportion of inference (19 per cent) and judgment sentences (20 per cent). **The Times** had a higher proportion of judgment sentences (37 per cent) than inference sentences (20 per cent). **The New Straits Times** and **The Hindustan Times** used 68 per

cent and 45 per cent report sentences, respectively.

News Sources

Table 1 shows the source of news reports on Mrs Gandhi's assassination in the four newspapers of study. The Post, The Times, and The Hindustan Times, relied heavily on their

own staff to report on Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, whereas The New Straits Times relied heavily on Western wire services.

The Post heavily relied on its staff (82 per cent) and the rest of its coverage was by Indian news agencies (9 per cent) and guest writers (9 per cent).

staff, wire services, or other sources, in reporting Mrs. Gandhi's assassination?

The present is a case study of a single news event, and hence, caution is warranted in generalizing from the findings of the present study to the NWIO debate.

Table 1

Sources of News for Each of the Four Newspapers of Study

Sources	Post	The Times	The N.S. Times	The H. Times
1. AP and Reuters	0%	0%	73%	0%
2. Own Staff	82%	73%	13%	68%
3. Indian News Agencies	9%	0%	7%	12%
4. Guest Writers	9%	18%	0%	20%
5. Unattributed	0%	9%	7%	0%
Totals:	100%	100%	100%	100%

The Times depended on its own staff for 73 per cent of the stories on guest writers (13 per cent), and (9 per cent) of its reports were unattributed.

Of the western newspapers, the Post was more objective than The Times. Of the Third World newspapers, The New Straits Times was more objective than The Hindustan Times.

The New Straits Times relied for 73 per cent of its stories on Reuters and AP, 60 per cent on Reuters alone. It partly relied on its staff (13 per cent) the Indian news agencies (7 per cent) and 7 per cent of its reports were unattributed.

The Hindustan Times' coverage, mainly provided by its

own staff (68 per cent), was supported by guest writers (20 per cent) and Indian national news agencies (12 per cent).

Summary and Conclusions

The present paper analyzed the coverage of Mrs Gandhi's assassination in the context of the NWIO debate on international news flow. A quantitative content analysis was completed of a stratified sample of 62 news articles from the Post, The Times, The New Straits Times, and The Hindustan Times. This study answered the following questions:

1. To what extent were the Western and Third World newspapers objective or subjective in reporting Mrs Gandhi's assassination?

2. To what extent were Western and Third World newspapers dependent on their own

Objectivity in News Reporting

The Post and The New Straits Times' coverage of Mrs Gandhi's assassination was mainly "objective". But The New Straits Times mainly depended on Reuters and the AP for its reports, suggesting that these news agencies can be "objective" in reporting Third World events.

The present study also showed that The Times of London, and the Delhi-based The Hindustan Times employed considerable inference and judgment sentences in their coverage of Mrs Gandhi's assassination. Both Western and Third World newspapers were subjective. The Hindustan Times was more "subjective" and than the Post and The New Straits Times.

Of the Western newspapers, The Post was more "objective" than The Times. Of the Third World newspapers, The New Straits Times was more "objective" than The Hindustan Times. Hence, labelling newspapers as "objective" or "subjective" on the basis of their being Western or Third World is inappropriate. Newspapers have different political, economic, and regional status, and different styles, viewpoints, and reporting patterns.

Market forces determine the content of news in most Western nations. News coverage tends to be event-oriented and ethnocentric to cater to Western tastes.²⁵ In Third World countries usually national governments control the channels of news dissemination. Economic and political biases influence notions of "objective" reporting in Western and Third World nations.

Third World Dependence

Malaysia's elite English newspaper, *The New Straits Times*, depends on Reuters and AP to learn about news events in India. Reuters and AP's reports are aimed at Western readers, so Malaysian readers get a Western account of an Indian event.

Logically, it is more feasible for *The New Straits Times* to obtain a story from a Western wire service, than to independently collect and report news from India. The costs of fielding a correspondent overseas are enormous. The situation is akin to the Third World importing Western television programmes for broadcasting on their national television systems. It is cheaper to purchase reruns of "I Love Lucy", "Kojak", and "Dallas" than to locally produce similar quality programs in the Third World.

The New Straits Times relied on an Indian news agency for one of its 15 news articles, and on Reuters and AP for 11. Third World countries oppose Western domination, but show little cooperation among themselves. *The New Straits Times* depended on Reuters for 60 per cent of its news articles.

Malaysia is a former British colony, and the dependence of its most "elite" English news-

The present study shows the futility of looking for "simple" solutions in a complex NWIO debate.

paper on a British wire service suggests a type of neo-colonial dependency.

The Hindustan Times, another "elite" Indian newspaper (and India was also a former British colony), covered this major news event through its own staff, and with help from Indian news agencies. *The Hindustan Times* was in proximity to the news events, and had the infrastructure of resources, personnel, correspondents to cover the event. Its reliance on PTI and UNI, the Indian news agencies, reflects a relatively "mature" national mass media system in India.

India's rich journalistic tradition is a typical for a Third World country. Its British heritage is evident by the number of English language newspapers: 2,765, including 89 dailies.²⁶ There are four Indian news agencies: Press Trust of India (PTI), United News of India (UNI), Hindustan Samachar and Samachar Bharati. India played a leadership role in setting up the Non-Aligned News Pool (NNAP), under Tangu, the Yugoslav news agency.

The present study provides evidence that the Indian Press is capable of covering a major national news event. Thus, not all Third World countries de-

pend on the Western news agencies for news reports. The nature of the event, the country in question, the status of its information media, and its national information policy ultimately determine "who" reports a Third World news event, and "how".

Certain Third World myths about operations of Western news agencies need to be clarified.²⁷ None of the Big Four news agencies show a profit on their news operations: Associated Press is a non-profit cooperative; United Press International recently experienced transfer of ownership on account of being in deficit; Agence France Presse is subsidized by the French government; and Reuters earnings mainly come from its data services, not news services. Finally, Third World editors are not compelled to use Western news agencies. Third World editors prefer Western agencies, not because they have a lack of alternatives but, because (1) they have a global reach, (2) they deliver news files at high speeds, (3) their writing is professional and requires less editing, and (4) they are more credible than alternative sources.

The present study shows the futility of looking for "simple" solutions in a complex NWIO debate. Western and Third World arguments have both merits and demerits. The coverage of an international news event depends on the nature of the event, the political, economic, cultural, and historical patterns between the reported country and the reporting agency, and the "idiosyncraticity" of the newspaper.

Foot Notes:

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18. The four newspapers were chosen because of their recognized international image, elitist reputation, foreign policy influence on respective governments, and because all are independent newspapers being published in capital cities.
19. These included stories which dealt with the shooting, the violence in its aftermath, the Gandhi-Sikh confrontation Indira Gandhi's personality, appointment of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister, his credentials, and his handling of the violent aftermath in India.
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