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Agency Source Influence On Television Foreign Reporting: Case Of Mururoa And Tahiti

Broadcasters globally are dependent on the commercial news agency wholesalers of television pictures. By following the chronological development of a story, this article demonstrates how framing determined in agency planning processes influences the stories told to audiences by broadcasters. It is hypothesised that news agency economic priorities drive international event coverage planning; that news-coverage "frames" influence the news delivered to agency clients and the stories told to audiences by broadcasters; and that wealthy broadcasters are more likely to localise their coverage of international events, while smaller broadcasters relay to their audiences strictly the stories told by agencies. The case of the Mururoa nuclear testing and Tahiti independence rioting in 1995 are used to demonstrate that the reproduction of news frames manufactured by news agencies may be expected among broadcasters worldwide, diminishing the possibility of multiple interpretations of global events.

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This article draws on research concerning international news agencies to illustrate the influence of major sources on foreign news coverage. Particular reference is made to the related stories of French nuclear testing and pro-independence rioting in Tahiti in 1995. These events are highlighted not only due to the regional focus of APME, but since they coincide with the June to November 1995 period of ethnographic research conducted with international television news agencies and with the September 1995 empirical data gathered for an international news flow study (Paterson and Putnis 2000). It is hoped that the model of international news flow advocated here and its application to this particular example of news coverage will provide useful insights for journalism educators about the construction of the Asia-Pacific region's international image.
"First tier" organisations in the television news industry are "wholesalers" of visuals, sounds and textual information. The leading examples are Reuters Television and Associated Press Television News (APTN). Reuters Television is a small division of the massive Reuters information conglomerate and is derived from the former VisNews. APTN was created in 1998 with a merger of the relatively new Associated Press Television and the oldest TV news agency, Worldwide Television News (WTN), which itself was the former UPITN. The latter development was a crucial example of industrial convergence in global mass communications and has yielded unprecedented concentration of control over global news production – by AP and Reuters – across all major forms of media. These two commercial companies dominate international television news gathering, but also important are the various cooperative news exchanges, especially the European Broadcasting Union’s Eurovision network, and in the US, the commercial TV news cooperative CONUS.3

Organisations at the second tier are "packagers" and distributors of news (or "retailers") constructed from the "raw material" of the first tier. As in other information industries, they add value to existing information and re-sell it. CNN overlaps both tiers, and other major players such as Reuters and the BBC are attempting to do so (in both "traditional" and "new" media channels).

Intra-industry news gathering and distribution is not well described in our field’s research literature or classroom texts. This is mostly because it is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of cutbacks by national broadcasting organisations and industrial realignments occurring within the last decade. The key elements of this crucial internal structure are revealed in the more substantial recent analyses (Hjarvard 1995a, 1995b; Cohen et al. 1996; Johnston 1995). Boyd-Barrett (1980; Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992) has described a wholesale/retail model in the context of print news agencies. Increasing concentration of control over the global wholesale news system have made the major news agencies more influential than they have ever been (Paterson 1998, 1997, 1996; also Boyd-Barrett 1998). Apart from an ethnographic study of news agencies (Paterson 1996), there have been a number of important works concerning agencies employing other methodologies (Cohen et al. 1996; Hjarvard 1995b; Read 1992; Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992; Fenby 1986; Boyd-Barrett 1980).

Agencies have considerable influence on other media through the choice of stories they distribute to clients, the wording of the textual information they provide, and the amount and nature of visuals provided (moving for TV, still for newspapers and magazines and both for webcasters). Television broadcasters write
their stories around the video that these organisations offer, and if they are not offered images, they generally do not report or will minimise an international story. Many studies of television newsrooms have reported that the availability of visual images is an important determinant of whether a foreign news story is included in a newscast (Cohen et al. 1996; Helland 1995; Rodriguez 1996; Molina 1990; Schlesinger 1987; Golding and Elliott 1979).

Through the analysis of ethnographic data about news production and empirical data from content analysis, I hope to demonstrate how international coverage of a news event such as the French nuclear testing in the Pacific can be described chronologically from the initial planning of international news wholesalers, through the coverage process, to the impact of these processes of production on the final news text. In an effort toward developing a model of international news event coverage, I attempt to show that:

- news agency economic priorities related to competitiveness and efficiency drive international event coverage planning, influencing coverage by all media;
- news-coverage “frames” are introduced in this planning process and go on to influence the news product delivered to news agency clients;
- news-agency framing influences the stories told to news audiences by broadcasters;
- wealthy international broadcasters are more likely to localise (Cohen et al. 1996), even for their global audiences, their coverage of international events, while poorer broadcasters and small new commercial news broadcasters are forced by dependency on news agencies to relay to their audiences strictly the stories told by news agencies.

I will begin by describing news-coverage planning at the former television news agency WTN, where I observed news production during the summer of 1995, when coverage of French nuclear testing was on the planning diary. The bailiwick of television news agency future planners is what McManus (1994) calls “minimally active discovery” – the compilation of future stories from possibilities offered to journalists. “Future Planning” at the international television news agencies, though considered a fairly minor administrative position within agencies, is the dominant means by which these news workers assert their control over a very unpredictable world of news. There is great comfort to a news manager or “Editor of the Day” (the supervisor of minute-to-minute news gathering) in having several neat pages
summarising most of the news to be covered over the course of
the next day, week or month. (See, for example, Tuchman 1978:
56-57.)

To the journalist, that comfort means empowerment to
deploy news-gathering resources logically, efficiently and safely.
To the manager, that is important, but even more important is the
ability to accurately predict the costs of coverage of different parts
of the world for the weeks and months ahead. Doing so reassures
corporate superiors and company shareholders, all with little
interest in journalism, that costs are properly controlled and profits
maximised.

As McQuail (1987:165) notes, there is some evidence in the
journalism literature that news planners effectively shape the
outcome of major news events through the provision of the means
of reporting. There is evidence of such an effect in the work of the
international television news agencies, but further research is
needed to quantify it. A case in point was the violent pro-
independence rioting in Tahiti in September 1995, which
commenced at the moment the television news agencies and some
broadcasters had fully deployed on the island to cover the French
nuclear testing. Agency planners had determined that there would
be the means to cover civil unrest in Tahiti, virtually in real time,
over a month earlier (although the riots caught most journalists
by surprise).

While it is important in this case that several large
broadcasters (especially those with a strong regional interest like
TVNZ) deployed independently of the news agencies and
generated much of their own news coverage, news agencies often
still have a substantial role in shaping such “independent”
coverage. It is primarily they who provide the means of satellite
uplinking, and often news crews, vehicles and other coverage
logistics without which a broadcaster cannot operate in a foreign
environment. (See, for example, Paterson 1997; MacGregor 1997;
Wiener 1992.)

The news agency’s future coverage schedule is largely based
upon calls from bureau chiefs who learn of an upcoming news
event in their area, but future planning staff are also deluged with
press releases from governments, organisations and corporations.
From all of this they must determine which stories to present to
managers for consideration, what to put on the agency’s coverage
agenda without further consideration, and what to file away or
simply discard. The WTN planning desk also received the
planning diaries of the BBC, indicating its coverage plans for
upcoming international stories. These were reviewed carefully,
both to ensure that they were in general agreement with WTN’s
list of what future events constitute the news of the world, but
also to note opportunities for cooperation or cost sharing.

Ethnographic analysis of agency news production revealed that the most powerful international broadcasters have a far greater direct and indirect influence over the actions of the news agencies than do smaller clients. But it was also shown that the wishes of major clients are often assumed or anticipated in news agency planning. Agency clients may also propose coverage to the forward planning desk whenever they have an interest in a story but do not wish to devote their own resources to coverage (a principal rationale for paying a news agency). There were indications that only the wealthiest of agency clients do so. An agency typically would not spend money to cover a story for a single smaller broadcaster, and it is clear that smaller clients knew this despite the customer-service rhetoric of the agencies. Agencies are sensitive to this critique and have made efforts to reach out to smaller clients.

Much news agency coverage planning is "protective". In such cases, the Forward Planner and agency managers do not anticipate international distribution of a story, but they tell a staff crew in the area to cover the event anyway. In this way, if the event develops greater news significance than anticipated or if competitive pressure or client interest dictates that it should be distributed, the company is protected. Costs are minimal or nonexistent, since staff crews and bureau resources are already paid for (unlike expensive freelance crews or purchased footage). Clearly, scheduled events of marginal interest out of easy reach of staff crews present more of a problem. Protective coverage would be expensive. I observed little indication that this often emerges as an issue, however. A likely reason is (a) that anyone scheduling a news event deliberately does so within easy reach of agency news crews and (b) that agency bureaus do not propose stories which they cannot reach easily. The French nuclear testing in the South Pacific exemplified a very remote (from London) story that was covered protectively, for London journalists were initially sceptical of its news value. WTN's coverage was largely driven by concern about Reuters dominating coverage of the story. This story also had substantial appeal because it conformed well to certain typical agency news values. A Reuters editor told me the story was important neither for the environmental nor Tahitian independence angles, but for the diplomatic row pitting New Zealand and Australia against France, all home to significant agency clients.

Content analysis confirms such an emphasis in international television news distribution. Based on his content analysis of Eurovision and the mostly news agency footage it distributes, Hjarvard (1995a) has proposed a news selection model which
emphasises changes in political power. He demonstrated such a focus in 60% of Eurovision stories. It is notable that the French government desire to limit news coverage made the nuclear testing event inaccessible, but placed a pack of journalists on Tahiti where a pro-independence movement could take advantage of their presence to create an entirely different (and anti-French) news event.

Newsroom observation revealed examples of protective coverage being extremely costly to an agency, but continuing only because an agency manager was convinced that a major story could soon break. According to one such manager in an editorial meeting, during the summer of 1995 the agencies were cooperatively spending several thousand US dollars a day to keep stringers in Elath, “to cover a complete non-story”. They were anticipating West Bank unrest that never occurred. This example also indicates how, to these companies, news must be violent to be news – those West Bank stringers were not asked for other kinds of stories. Thus, the maintenance of consistent news frames is built into agency production routines. Client interest in future stories is also an aspect of forward planning, and the interest of major Pacific rim clients and of French clients in the nuclear testing story would have been considered in coverage planning. The Forward Planner would occasionally call clients she suspected would have an interest in an event, and if confirmed, would note this in the logs she prepared so that managers could arrange cooperation according to the news-gathering alliances de jour. News-gathering alliances are the result of an increasingly oligopolistic international mass communications political-economic environment, within which industry sectors are shared by just a few giants or controlled by consensual monopoly, and industry sectors are, virtually in their entirety, cooperatively divvied out to participating TNCs.

Such has long been the case in the international television news-gathering sector. Visnews and UPI TN, and their successors, maintained their duopolistic dominance through the consent of the largest corporations active in international journalism and broadcasting: the BBC, ITN (and its various owners), Reuters, NBC, ABC (the US and Australian versions), CBS, CNN, Australia’s Channel Nine Network and others.

Alliances between news-gathering companies are important determinants of what information is distributed worldwide and how it is tailored. In 1992, Tunstall observed that, “The loose Reuters-Visnews-BBC alliance constitutes the strongest single news entity on the world scene.” While clearly critical at the distribution (retail) level of international television, television news alliances also allow participants to increase news-gathering
CHRIS A. PATERSON: Agency source influence... capabilities while reducing costs to each partner. A by-product is increasing homogenisation of the news – all but neglected amid industry celebration of efficiently. Tunstall (1992), Weiner (1992), and Bell (1995) all allude to the alliances that dominate television coverage of major international stories. My research confirms such accounts.

Contracts between the agency members and broadcaster members of each alliance make the sharing of videotape in the field possible, and ensure that all clients in each agency in each alliance get the best pictures and best interviews shot by any of several news crews covering the story. It was such alliances that allowed CNN and WTN to work together to dominate coverage from Iraq during the Gulf War, thereby not only shutting out the BBC, NBC and Visnews, but also bolstering the position of BBC rival ITN and NBC’s rivals ABC and CBS (Bell 1995; Weiner 1992; Waite 1992). The sharing of resources and personnel has traditionally been more ad hoc, left in the hands of the producers on the scene, although contracts negotiated between corporations more recently (such as an American Broadcasting Corporation-BBC pact) appear to standardise such cooperation (likely resulting in obligations restricting the actions of field producers).

On fast-breaking news coverage, the decision to cooperate or to compete with another company is often taken by the people gathering the news in the field – often even by freelance photographers who likely have no strong corporate loyalties and only the vaguest idea of current corporate cooperation policies. My observation indicates that sometimes news managers in London, New York or Atlanta uphold the decisions of field staff when they learn of them, and strive to work out any complications later, but other times may reprimand their people in the field and attempt to put a fast end to cooperation they deem inappropriate.

As future stories are proposed by the agency planner at daily and weekly meetings, coverage of stories is rapidly accepted or rejected by managers. The description of a potential story presented or even the tone of the presentation might influence management’s decision on a story. In one noon meeting, a senior manager quickly dismissed a story idea – coverage of parades for Singapore’s “National Day” – with, “We don’t care”; in other meetings, other stories were often dismissed with, “Let it go”.

An agency planning staffer told me they “sometimes pitch something harder” if they consider it an especially good story, but often in those cases suspicious managers are quick to reject it. Planners also can influence the gatekeeping process by the manner in which they order prospective stories in the lists they prepare. It was clear that in meetings stories near the bottom of the list are barely discussed for lack of time. The WTN planner placed there
stories she perceived to be less “important”.

In a case like coverage of the French nuclear testing, where coverage would be especially complex, the planning staff would write a detailed coverage plan and provide this to managers several weeks in advance. Its objective is to explain the background, list all scheduled events and provide a “strategy proposal”, suggesting coverage options and detailing logistics. The plans of other agencies and broadcasters are mentioned where they are known. Before compiling this, the Forward Planner would have already discussed plans and available information with other WTN staffers assigned to work on the story, especially the field producers who would be sent to provide the coverage. Representatives of WTN’s entertainment, sports and “location specials” departments usually sit in on the weekly forward planning meeting to determine if any news coverage is useful to them and discuss the sharing of costs (each operating from budgets separate from news). Various options for news coverage and satellite delivery are discussed for stories that are accepted. Such interdepartmental cooperation is one of many indications of newsroom adaptation to corporate synergy strategies, which have been shown to have a considerable influence on the nature of news produced in news agencies (Paterson 1996) and other news production environments (Geyer 1996; McManus 1994; Husseini 1994; Linn 1992; Sanit 1992; Waite 1992).

Shortly before nine in the morning any managers present in the agency newsroom convene an informal meeting at the duty editor’s desk to discuss plans for the day and review the news of the past night. The duty editor quickly runs through what he knows to be the major stories of the morning and offer information about the agency’s planned coverage, when this is not otherwise obvious. The editor’s choice of major stories is a function of WTN coverage already underway (where resources are deployed), the top stories in other media and the AP wire (Reuters shut off WTN from its wire) and early discussions with bureaus.

Upcoming stories are judged largely for their expected interest from Eurovision. Editors’ judgment of expected interest is based on conversations with the Eurovision News Editor, EBU member requests they have overheard and assumptions about the interests of specific European broadcasters. The duty editor runs quickly through the stories of the day in their perceived order of the importance. Any client interest in specific stories will be noted, along with what has been done to accommodate that interest. The manner in which AP and Reuters are handling the stories of the day is also often discussed. If managers are uncomfortable with any perceived advantage another agency, usually Reuters, has on a story, they are quick to express this to editors.
There was rarely disagreement in WTN editorial meetings. The same was true to a greater extent at Reuters and a lesser extent at APTV. That such consonance about the news of the world should occur is not remarkable. Tuchman (1978: 35), for example, observed that in meetings of journalists, "to avoid discussion becoming quite heated, editors must maintain a careful equilibrium, for dissonance interferes with the daily accomplishment of the group's task". But such an explanation is perhaps overly functional. It is also clear the agency journalists I observed and interviewed share a common view of the news of the world; rarely did I hear disagreement with company editorial decisions, even in informal discussions well away from regular editorial meetings.

Decisions on whether to cover a story and how much to devote to it are couched in references to "developments", as in what is the latest; to "coverage", as in who has pictures and how do we get them; and to "pegs" or "angles", as in how the relevance of the story can be demonstrated to clients. The concept of story "developments" is crucial in television. In reference to covering a war, a CBS producer told writer Loren Jenkins, "we have to have a significant development to get on the air each night". Agencies, which have invested heavily in ongoing coverage of international crisis, understand that their product only has value to their clients if they can demonstrate a "development". Agency newsroom and field staff are under constant pressure to do so. Such pressure conflicts with the typical unwillingness of agencies to devote resources to the discovery of new stories. Therefore agency editors, in particular, are often placed in an untenable and stressful position. Agency journalists tend to dramatise for their colleagues' stories they are interested in when they hope to convince managers that coverage is worthwhile. One agency forward-planning document's description of a potential story was: "2500 punk rockers descend on Hannover for festival. Rioting expected."

While meaning only to draw the attention of management to a potentially significant story, the description implicitly dehumanises the participants in the news event and celebrates the potential for violence, making it the sole focus of any future agency coverage. Any underlying causes of this story are left out of the news agency's perspective from the outset. Similarly, during a meeting coverage of a women's march in South Africa was proposed, the planner explained that the march was designed as a celebration of the role of women in South Africa, rather than a protest with the potential for conflict. The senior manager present concluded, "that doesn't seem like it's worth doing." (Managers concluded that only the presence of Winnie Mandela might make the march newsworthy.)
A "look-ahead meeting", in which the New York Bureau joins on a conference call, is held early each evening to discuss plans for the next day. The Eurovision Editor reviews the amount of agency exposure on Eurovision, either glowingly or apologetically. The news accountant concludes each noon and late afternoon meeting in a sort of final blessing, reviewing recent stories and verifying all story coverage and picture delivery (satellite) expenses.

Budget meetings and the holy accounting ritual consummating editorial meetings twice daily evidence the considerable pressure on London agency journalists to account for every dollar spent. The very aggravation of doing so (pulling them away from traditional "journalism") is reason enough to avoid coverage costs – costs which most often come with developing world coverage or coverage of non-news elite nations, ie, where the agencies do not have cheap or pre-paid coverage and delivery options.

Here I focus on one novel aspect of that agency coverage, the interaction between the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Greenpeace and the international television news agencies.15 At the beginning of September 1995, French commandos tried to silence the loudest voice of opposition to nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll. As marines boarded Greenpeace vessels, destroying vital parts of the ships (apparently undeterred by the hefty payments France had to make to Greenpeace for bombing the first Rainbow Warrior) and arresting Greenpeace campaigners and journalists, a live narration of the raid was transmitted from aboard one of the ships to broadcasters worldwide.

The French government had failed to appreciate the extent to which international news media were cooperating with Greenpeace to portray French actions as piracy. As the French Navy signalled its intention to board the main Greenpeace vessel, a Greenpeace campaigner called the intake desk at Reuters Television in London by satellite telephone to provide a vocal description of events unfolding in the Pacific, 2000 miles from the nearest city, for television viewers (and probably many radio listeners) worldwide.

Reuters Television had anticipated the French raid (again, drawn to the conflict news frame) and through an amicable relationship with Greenpeace Communications, a few blocks away in the centre of London, arranged the live international transmission of Greenpeace's view of their victimisation by the French military. That this unique coverage was suggested by
Reuters, rather than Greenpeace, evidences the success of Greenpeace in building conveniently sympathetic relationships with leading international news producers.

A news agency forward planner told me that she thinks of “David at Greenpeace”, a Greenpeace media liaison officer, as “my best friend”. Staff at the other agencies echoed this. It is precisely the relationship Greenpeace seeks. They want the news agencies to turn to them first for dramatic comment on and pictures of environmental crisis (as they define it), and they fuel that dependency by consistently providing these things in a manner geared precisely to TV news agency production processes. In a WTN document, the possibility of Greenpeace provided footage of Mururoa is listed ahead of the BBC and the Australian/New Zealand broadcasters pool under the heading of “allies’ plans”.

The communications savvy of Greenpeace extends well beyond the occasional well-timed telephone call and has implications beyond the obvious lessons for the too frequently inept public relations of non-governmental and progressive organisations. Greenpeace had, during the preceding weeks, been sending video images from their ships in the South Pacific to London via a unique, but simple, digital video-compression system that uses standard Inmarsat satellite telephone channels. This “squisher” video looked a bit like film, rather than normal news video, but was still of high quality. It was the first time anyone had thought to do this, and Greenpeace offered its system to agency and broadcaster videographers to send their pictures as well. When several minutes of video had been received and decoded at Greenpeace Communications in London, it was rushed to the news agencies that were all too happy to distribute it to clients. French naval operations supporting the testing, previously out of the reach of cameras, were thereby seen around the world within an hour or so of being videotaped.

Elite international news media now treat Greenpeace as a force as significant as Western governments. As happened here, Greenpeace is often now afforded greater credibility than some Western governments, a development unprecedented in the business of international news where governments have traditionally dictated the coverage agenda. It is also unprecedented in mainstream news, which Tuchman (1978: 4) notes “is an ally of legitimated institutions”. Greenpeace, and other environmental organisations, have traditionally not been considered legitimate, or at least as a reliable and significant news source.

Despite Greenpeace’s current successes with access to news agencies and broadcasters in London, many international journalists still question their legitimacy. For example, WTN’s New York Bureau Chief, in a telephone editorial conference with
London, referred disparagingly to the “hippies” of Greenpeace staging a protest in the US. Greenpeace told me it prefers the media to maintain such an image, fearing that if the sophistication of its public relations apparatus, superior to that of many multi-national corporations (such as Shell Oil), were understood, their access would decrease. For Greenpeace, it is better to be seen as the honest, passionate hippie, than the polished PR expert. One reason it has built a reputation for credibility is that it tries to ensure rapid and complete dissemination of information on internal politics at Greenpeace and Greenpeace mistakes.

While some of the Greenpeace agenda did successfully influence agency news production, other civil protest did not. An example was evident when grassroots groups around the world began a massive boycott of French wine to protest the nuclear testing (despite Greenpeace declaring its opposition to such a boycott). A senior WTN manager decided a month before the testing to decline a story on the international boycott of French wine, which he justified by the bulk of his coverage budget being spent preparing for a flare-up of the war in Bosnia. Thus a substantial part of the international protest by civil society over French actions was ignored, minimising its importance relative to the French government position and probably reducing its impact. Ironically, this was the result of an incorrect resource allocation decision by WTN, for the war in Bosnia did not escalate in the dramatic fashion predicted.

The acceptance of Greenpeace by the core agenda-setting news organisations of the world, both as a credible source and as an international political force, is an exemplar of the shift from a public sphere dominated only by governments and corporations to the three-way interaction between these two forces and “civil society”, represented by a wide variety of non-commercial and non-governmental organisations now finding a voice in international affairs (Galtung 1994). That this should be the case is not surprising in a post-cold war environment where governments seem increasingly impotent and unimportant.

In an empirical study connected to the International News Flow study, mentioned earlier, I have provided some quantification of the extent of influence which news agency sources have over the news product of their client broadcasters. Through close analysis of each form of visual text, this study tries to demonstrate the connection between the story framing by agencies with the story framing by broadcasters. In sum, this study found that production decisions about
the following textual factors within local newscasts - all of which may influence audience perceptions of a story - frequently closely match decisions made by the news agencies providing the bulk of pictures. This was seen to happen in four ways: heavy use of agency pictures leads to consonance in the textual claims made by agencies and broadcasts; heavy dependence on news agency editing, rather than local editing decisions also reinforce the news frame imposed by agencies; the importance given to stories by agencies seems to relate closely to the importance attached to stories by broadcasters; and agency dependence appears to increase as a broadcasters size and wealth decrease.

Coders visually searched for images provided to broadcasters by three TV news agencies in this two-day sample of television newscasts from around the world. Twenty-seven newscasts from 10 countries were compared with 10 hours of "raw" material these broadcasters received by satellite. There is no way of knowing which news agency satellite feeds were received by or used by which broadcasters; this researcher had only partial information on the typically confidential subscription agreements between the agencies and broadcasters. In those newscasts there were 185 non-local stories, 87 (47%) of which coders could ascertain contained images provided by television news agencies, demonstrating a stronger news agency component in international news than the literature typically suggests.

Comparative analysis indicated that in editing international stories to air in their newscasts, many broadcasters, including some of the largest, do not substantially re-edit news agency visuals. Of news stories which could clearly be identified as containing television news agency footage, 61% contained a substantial series of images edited by the news agency, not the broadcaster. Such minimal re-editing of agency product is a rational and efficient use by broadcasters of the costly services provided by the agencies, but indicates a far higher reliance on the editorial decisions made by the agencies than has previously been revealed in the literature or than is commonly acknowledged by the industry.

To provide an example relevant to the South Pacific story discussed here, the Finnish state broadcaster, YLE, on 7 September 1995, did its first international story about rioting in Tahiti. Most of this two-minute, 26-second, story contained footage from Reuters Television. In the YLE story large portions, including 30 seconds at the outset, were the edited visual text provided by Reuters. The images chosen and nature of the editing depict an angry mob invading an airport tarmac, encountering lightly armed police and viciously engaging them in battle, and then looting the rest of the airport. YLE chose not to extensively re-
edit agency material or add images from other sources, both of which might have resulted in alternative or at least, more complex, interpretations of this event. The YLE narrative was then be largely dictated by the visual text created by Reuters, and so too then, the framing of the overall story, preventing or reducing the possibility of alternative readings by audiences.

As London television news agencies prepare to satellite each new feed to client broadcasters throughout the day, agency "output editors" choose which stories go on the feed they are responsible for and decide their "running order" or "line-up" – the sequence stories will be transmitted in. There is considerable pressure from agency managers in regard to what the important stories of the day are. For many broadcasters around the world, the priority that news agencies give stories, as indicated by their feed line-up, and the amount of time given each story by the agencies, substantially affect the story selection, running order, and time given to stories in the broadcaster’s newscast (all of which are typically planned hours in advance).

Preliminary agency run-down decisions come to broadcasters in advance of the feed of pictures, leading broadcasters to plan their newscasts based largely upon the agency promise that the first stories in the agency line-up will be the most newsworthy and the most visually interesting. Helland (1995: 165-166, 169) observed this phenomenon at the Norwegian commercial broadcaster, International News. Given that that broadcasters often report a story only because they have news pictures to illustrate it, the indication from agencies of the availability of good pictures during the planning of a newscast is crucial, especially to small broadcasters like Helland observed who have little news-gathering apparatus of their own.

This study indicates some correlation between agency and broadcaster line-ups. On the days of this sample, the average prominence – or length of time from the beginning of a newscast – afforded the Tahiti rioting story was just below another major international story, Bosnia, and just above a third, the UN women's conference in Beijing. The agencies offered a total of 48 stories on Bosnia and mostly placed them high in their rundowns; 37 stories on Tahiti, also high in their rundowns; and 10 stories on Beijing, generally low in their rundowns. It must be acknowledged that these data only suggest a correlation and remain too vague to draw firm conclusions; some might argue that worldwide consonance in journalist's news values alone might explain such similar rankings of story importance.

Finally, this comparative study showed that greater wealth and resources generally lead a broadcaster to less news agency dependence. Wealthy international broadcasters are more likely
to localise (Cohen et al. 1996), even for their global audiences, their coverage of international events, while poorer broadcasters and small new commercial news broadcasters are forced by dependency on news agencies to relay to their audiences strictly the stories told by news agencies. (Such new services are described in Helland 1995; Paterson 1998.)

On large ongoing stories the largest and wealthiest broadcasters will strive to avoid complete dependence on agency material, but smaller broadcasters, with little or no international news-gathering capability, will demonstrate complete dependence. The exception, of course, would be stories that are proximate to the smaller broadcaster, when they may be expected to invest in coverage of their own. Among the examples we encountered were the heavy French nuclear testing coverage by TVNZ of New Zealand (not a small organisation, but neither is it one which typically has its own large presence at many international news events), and heavy use of non-agency visuals for Middle East coverage by the Lebanese commercial broadcaster.

In the Tahiti case, when anti-nuclear protests turned to violent demonstrations against French colonial rule, larger broadcasters (generally those with some claim to a global rather than regional or national audience) could draw from the best agency coverage and coverage provided by videographers working directly for them or an allied network. This is a function of both deep corporate pockets and a willingness to reach into them to be seen by the local audience to "own" a story; and of the more comprehensive network of freelance contacts and alliances available to such organisations given their by size and reputation. NHK, the world’s wealthiest public network, took 54% of its coverage from agencies on the first day of the rioting; CNN took 22%. But smaller broadcasters could not do the same. It was typically found that for smaller broadcasters, 80% or more of non-local coverage came from the agencies.

With most pictures coming from news agencies and the accepted need in television to connect the aural narrative with the pictures, it is reasonable to expect that the stories told to audiences by most broadcasters about any given international event are essentially the same as the stories told to the broadcasters — visually and textually — by the two dominant news agencies (three at the time of this case study). While the research I have conducted is still far from conclusive and should be only be considered as a starting point for further research, it does seem to indicate that a great deal of the textual elements manufactured by news agencies do carry through into the stories broadcasters deliver to their audiences. The Mururoa and Tahiti stories demonstrate this well, as the agency-determined themes of political conflict and violent
protest dominated the television stories told around the world, while the importance of other key themes (and alternative interpretations of events) like environmental degradation and the power of peaceful protest were diminished.

Despite the increasing number of news channels available to most television viewers around the world, the ownership of the principle international sources of the news services remains highly concentrated. Broadcasters are becoming increasing dependent upon a few news providers to supply the international images they use to shape our global reality, and especially, to shape the television viewers image of the worlds most remote "stories", like that of Tahiti and Mururoa.

The choice of a broadcaster to rely so heavily upon a news agencies' telling of important international stories contradicts the hypothesis of Cohen et al. (1996) that global stories are substantially localised or "domesticated" by local broadcasters. The transference of news agency frames describe in the second half of the article can subsequently be linked with the first half of this article by hypothesising that such news-coverage "frames" are originally introduced in the agency planning process, and that these go on to influence the news product delivered to news agency clients, and on from there to influence the stories told to news audiences by broadcasters.

Future research will ideally describe each of these levels of news manufacturing more deeply than I have been able to here, and will attempt to include the final crucial element in news: the audience. Does it matter to the news viewer whether the multitude of textual elements which comprise a news program were determined by a local journalist on the day, or largely determined weeks earlier by a small group of news agency journalists 4 000 miles away? Perhaps not, but we will not really know without greater investigation at the level of reception, ideally well integrated with analysis of production, which might greatly enhance our understanding of the entire process by which audiences learn about their world every day through television.

NOTES

1 An international news flow study involving researchers in approximately 40 countries, and designed to update the seminal 1978 UNESCO news flow study conducted by the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). See Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1984.
The ethnographic research was conducted for the author's 1996 University of Texas doctoral dissertation. The author wishes to thank the journalists and management of WTN, Reuters and AP for their cooperation and assistance, and the University of Texas and Georgia State University for their support.

CNN and the US broadcast networks also operate news exchanges for their affiliated stations which, like CONUS, are substantial determinants of what non-local news is conveyed to audiences.

See note 19 below.

Also drawn, to a lesser extent, from research with Reuters and Associated Press.

Or major agency clients that can feed pictures to the international services.

And subsequently enabled coverage of the ensuing pro-independence riots in Tahiti.

As such an example indicates, framing is a useful theoretical approach toward understanding wholesale news production routines. As a conceptual tool, framing remains widely regarded as a vague approach to the analysis of mass media. Useful efforts have recently been made, however, to theorise the framing process in more depth and with more precision, making the concept more useful to news researchers (Scheufele 1999; Reese 1997). Scheufele (1999: 109) notes, "no evidence has yet been systematically collected about how various factors impact the structural qualities of news in terms of framing." Scheufele acknowledges that Tuchman (1978) described news production as a process of framing reality, but faults Tuchman for not clearly defining the process. This author (Paterson 1996) approached news agencies' news-production routines in a similar vein, focusing on how news creation leads to particular versions of our constructed reality (in this case, as relates to popular Western conceptions of developing countries). Future ethnographic research in newsrooms could attempt to develop a link between production and content, thereby establishing clearer understanding of the media-framing process from the neglected perspective of message construction. Framing provides an especially clear justification for the analysis of the site of media production and helps to fill in a missing gap in news analysis – the link between the production of news texts and the critical interpretation of those texts.

See Weiner (1992) for a detailed account of CNN's coverage from Iraq.

That is, when such plans are officially known – another agency or broadcaster has told WTN what they are doing for the sake of coordination. The plans of other agencies or broadcasters are often known unofficially (usually because WTN's people in the field had picked up hints from another company's people in the field), but such knowledge does not go on paper.

Occasionally, the planning staff would go to some lengths to prepare this information only to hear "let it go" from (often non-journalist) managers who deemed a story too costly and/or of insufficient interest to major clients. WTN's coverage plans for French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, offered to managers in early August 1995, form the basis of this description.

In editorial meetings I observed, discussion of client interest almost
always focused on British, US and Australian broadcasters, and less often, European continental broadcasters. I noted no instances where comments from a broadcaster from a developing nation were addressed. Since I never observed calls from such broadcasters being taken in the newsroom, it is more likely that these broadcasters are not routinely contacting the agencies than it is that the agencies are ignoring comment from them.

13 Quoted in Cooper (1984: 97).

14 One can only speculate on the role of this practice when cameras were turned on Tahitian independence demonstrators and away from the inaccessible and uncooperative French navy (although at the outset, the French military was organising public relations trips for journalists to the detonation site).

15 Portions of the following case study are drawn from Paterson 1997.

16 News agencies and other major broadcasters now use similar devices routinely, but in 1995, before important contemporary digital video technologies were well developed, video transmission via satellite telephone lines was unheard of. It was the lack of such a capability in 1983 that permitted the British/Argentine war over the Falkland Islands to be conducted almost entirely out of view of the citizenry financing it.

17 The study referred to in this section was a preliminary effort to link, at the international level, representational frames conveyed by television broadcasters with the sources for those broadcasters. Entitled the "Transference of Representational Frames from the Wholesale to the Retail Level of Global Television News", it was originally presented at the 1997 "Framing in the New Media Landscape" conference hosted by the University of South Carolina, and an updated version of it is due to be published in Paterson 2000b.

18 This is the first attempt at such analysis known to this author, and various problems limit generalisability and validity. For example, our sample of agency output included only what the agencies offered and included their major feeds, but did not include everything these companies produced on the given days or agency material from days other than the ones studied. The detection of agency footage in broadcasts relied on the memory of coders and the careful, but imperfect, visual matching of agency images with newscast images. Such analysis may be accomplished more accurately by computer in the future, though programs which may be up to such an application remain unaffordable to most researchers. The amount of agency material detected in newscasts is probably lower than the actual, given these problems. The fact that an image was distributed internationally by a news agency does not mean that it originated with that agency, but I have attempted to identify images not produced by the agencies and account for these. Finally, it is important to note that this study addressed the visual component of these newscasts only; further analysis will attempt to identify the extent to which information sent to broadcasters in textual and aural form also influences story construction. Participant observation and interviews with broadcasters suggest that when news agency video is used in a broadcaster's story, the television news agency is frequently the main
or only source for the aural narrative the broadcaster attaches to the pictures. (See Paterson 1996.)

19 That is, despite the claim by global broadcasters to produce a "global product", that product will typically be demonstrably local, reflecting the ideologies, news values, and financial priorities of the headquarters of the news organisation from which it originates. This is shown in various forms by Paterson 2000a, 2000b; Dillinger 1995; Johnson 1997. It may therefore be expected that just a local media strive to "localise" the global news sources provide to them (Cohen et al. 1996) to make them more relevant to their perceived or constructed audience (Ang 1991), global media will construct news according to the perceived tastes of the "core" audience and the needs and traditions of the organisation.

20 It is safe to assume that remaining 20% may be accounted for as agency material, because we did not code or material from other international sources.

"REFERENCES"


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