Comparing international coverage of 9/11: Towards an interdisciplinary explanation of the construction of news

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Abstract
This article presents an interdisciplinary model attempting to explain how news is constructed, by relying on the contributions of different fields of study: News Sociology, Political Communication, International Communications, and International Relations. It is a first step towards developing a holistic theoretical approach to what shapes the news that bridges current micro to macro approaches. More precisely, the model explains news variation across different media organizations and countries by focusing on the different ways the sense of newsworthiness of journalists is affected by three main variables: national interest, national journalistic culture, and the editorial policy of each media organization. The model is developed on the basis of an investigation into what shaped the media coverage of 9/11 in eight elite newspapers across the USA, France, Italy and Pakistan.

Introduction: contradictory perspectives on news

Different fields of study have developed research on news leading to various, possibly contradictory, findings. If a scholar, for instance, approached the literature of political communications, international communications and news sociology, with the same question – what shapes the news? – he or she would receive completely different answers.

Within Political Communication there is a tendency to understand news as the result of a struggle between political actors and journalists. Not only are politicians essential

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to the news production process because they are a constant source for news stories (Bennett, 1990: 103), but they also make active attempts at imposing their 'spin' on the news (Bennett and Manheim, 1993; Kavanagh, 1995; Oborne and Walters, 2004; Pfetsch, 1998). The focus of analysis is mainly the national context. One main issue of investigation within the field is the issue of media independence against the attempt by political actors to control media coverage. The extent to which political actors are able to manage news and the shape it takes under their influence have been conceptualized in different ways over time. The hegemonic approach tends to see the media spontaneously reproducing the ideology of the political system (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1989). The agenda-setting approach focuses on the 'theoretical metaphor' of the 'agenda' (McCombs and Shaw, 1993: 61–2). Studies within this strand of literature concentrate on identifying the specific issues or topics political actors communicate to the media to serve their own interests (Berkowitz, 1992).

While the view that media and politicians have an ambivalent relationship and can influence each other is not new (Cohen, 1963; Gans, 2004[1979]; Sigal, 1973), more recent developments in the field have explored the conditions under which a party has more influence on the other. Bennett and Livingston (2003: 359), for example, have expressed the idea that news content is the result of a 'negotiated process'. Several studies have indeed pointed out that, far from being a passive recipient of political actors' influence, the press enjoys margins of independence (Althaus 2003; Callaghan and Schnell, 2001; Entman, 2004; Livingston and Bennett, 2003).

International Communication approaches the study of news in a macro-perspective. It is important to stress that in the literature it is not possible to identify clear-cut answers as to 'what shapes news'. In fact I am going to refer to concepts such as 'media flows', 'globalization', and 'localization', as if they were distinct. In reality the idea that flows of media product move from one country to another is often loosely associated with 'cultural imperialism', 'Americanization', and 'globalization'. Cultural imperialism is related to the 'dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States' by Tunstall (1977: 57); Thussu (2000: 167) equates globalization with Americanization; Boyd-Barrett (1997: 143) writes that 'globalization is Westernization'. Furthermore, 'localization' and 'globalization' can well coexist. This view is embodied by the perspective of 'domestication'. Clausen's (2003) comparative study of news contents and news production processes in Denmark and Japan, for example, concludes that homogenization and particularization of news are not mutually excluding phenomena. Even the same events are framed differently at the national level by news producers who try to make it understandable to local audiences.

Having said that, at the expense of oversimplifying a very fluid literature domain, for analytical purposes it is possible to identify three main trends in explaining news. The first is that news is the expression of imperialism by powerful countries on developing ones (media flows). This approach is supported by a series of empirical studies pointing at the existence of unbalanced, unidirectional flows of TV programme materials and foreign news (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974; Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985; Varis, 1985). Boyd-Barrett (1977: 117), for example, wrote that 'while there is a heavy flow of exported media products from the US to, say, Asian countries, there is only a very slight trickle of Asian media products to the US.' In the second trend, news is becoming

homogeneous on a global level (globalization). Globalization of news is the ground for claiming that the development of communications technologies and the multiplication of media channels are leading to a shrinking debate rather than a proliferation of views. Paterson (1997: 154), for example, suggests that 'the proliferation of television news is ultimately insignificant, and in fact, illusory, if the original source of most international news material [newsagencies] is all the same.' In the third trend, news differentiates itself along national or regional (sub-national) lines (localization). Cultural and ethnographic studies, in particular, approach the globalization phenomenon from the point of view of the reception and interpretation of global texts, emphasizing their differentiation at the local level (Cunningham et al., 1998; Kavoori, 1998; Thussu, 1998). Kraidy (2004: 252) calls this 'multidisciplinary concern over the fragmentation and fusion of cultural forms' 'hybridity'. Communication technology and news agency access might contribute to the worldwide diffusion of information about the same issues, but they are received and interpreted differently from local audiences (Clausen, 2003; Gurevitch et al., 1991).

News sociology, instead, engages directly with the questions of what is news and what are the factors shaping it. The answer provided by the field is that the news product of each media organization is the unique output of patterns of social interactions among media professionals and between them and the rest of society. This, however, is translated into multiple focuses within the field, depending on which level of analysis is being addressed: the individual, the organizational, or the societal.

The way individual preferences and attitudes affect media content are mainly covered by studies interpreting the role of the media professional as a 'gatekeeper' (Berkowitz, 1997[1990]; Shoemaker, 1997[1991]; White, 1964[1950]). Moving up to a broader perspective from the individual level is the study of the social environment in which journalists operate. This level of analysis downplays individual judgment, while focusing on the way individuals are constrained by the policies and imperatives of the news organization (Bantz, 1997[1985]; Breed, 1955; Ettema et al., 1987; Sigelman, 1973; Tuchman, 1973). As for influences at the societal level, political and economic aspects are approached, for example, by Hallin and Mancini (1984). The authors, comparing presidential TV coverage in Italy and the USA, explain how differences in media coverage stem from the political culture of the countries rather than from the characteristics of the television medium. This influence is mediated by economic structures. Herman and Chomsky (1994), in their propaganda model, also focus on the way media reflect the interests dominating private and state activity and therefore serve to reproduce ideology. Within this level of analysis are also what Schudson (1989: 16) calls 'culturological' approaches to the study of news. They are useful in understanding the differences between journalistic practices in different countries (Chalaby, 1996; Esser, 1998; Hallin and Mancini, 2005; Mancini, 1992, 2000; Martín Algarra and Gaitano, 1997; Wu et al., 1996). Köcher (1986), for example, explains how political, legal, and historical contexts affect the perception by journalists of their role in different countries. Journalists in the UK are defined as 'bloodhounds' hunting for news, while the German counterparts are labeled 'missionaries' supporting the editorial line through their commentary (Köcher, 1986: 43–64).

The hierarchy-of-influences approach (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Reese, 2001) integrates these different levels of analysis in one single theoretical perspective. According to Reese (2001), news is the product of five successive levels of influence with each level

subsuming the one(s) prior: 1) individual preferences, training and background of media professionals, constrained by 2) routines ('a multitude of limits imposed by technology, time, space, and norms') (2001: 180). Routines are, in turn, shaped by 3) organizational aspects such as policies of the news organization and the way power is exercised within it. The news organization is, then, part of society at large and is subject to 4) extra-media influences: institutions such as the government or advertisers, other media organizations. All these factors contribute to supporting the status quo, serving to making the media an instrument of social control. The last level of influence is therefore 5) the ideological.

Despite these different focuses within news sociology, as even societal influences are mediated by journalists, the idea behind all of them is that news is 'what newspapermen make it' (Gieber, 1964).

The interdisciplinary model presented in this article is based on an international comparative investigation of the media coverage of 9/11 in eight elite newspapers across the USA (*The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*), France (*Libération* and *Le Monde*), Italy (*La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*), and Pakistan (*The Dawn* and *The Nation*) (Archetti, 2007). The study tested the validity of the explanations of news provided by the three different fields of study by measuring the extent to which news coverage: a) was shaped by national political discourses (Political Communication); b) fitted international news flows patterns rather than being localized or becoming homogeneous on a global scale (International Communication); c) was the unique output of each newspaper organization (News Sociology).[1]

Presenting in detail the empirical results of the study exceeds the scope of this article, which, instead, focuses on its theoretical findings. Since none of the approaches, as briefly illustrated below, was able to explain the patterns of coverage identified by the analysis, it particularly concentrates on the elaboration of an alternative Global News Model explaining the variation of 9/11 news across the different countries and newspapers.

Findings

The study finds that what shapes the news is not related to the extent of the influence political actors manage to exert on coverage, to international macro-processes, or to social interactions among media professionals *only*. While statements by governmental political actors were reported to different extents in each country by the newspapers under study, there was no evidence that officials were able to 'control' the framing of 9/11 in the news, even where a very organized media management effort was at work, as in the USA. There were varying levels of news similarity among the countries, which did suggest the possibility that unilateral news 'flows' existed. If anything, however, their direction ran against the idea that poorer countries are exposed to 'news imperialism' by more powerful ones. In the most revealing example there was indeed some similarity between the framing of 9/11 in Pakistani and American news, but the coverage in the developing country was ultimately more varied than in the world's superpower. In fact the content analysis showed that, overall, it contained 439 different ideas about 9/11 and its aftermath against the 393 in the American counterpart. The framing of 9/11 did not present strong enough similarities across all newspapers to support the globalization hypothesis. Nor did newspapers from the same country show a common 'national interpretation' – such as a uniquely French, American, Italian or Pakistani perspective on

the issue – which would have confirmed the 'localization' hypothesis. Coverage appeared to be most strongly differentiated at the level of the single media organization, suggesting that, indeed, news tends to be shaped by media professionals. The analysis, however, also showed that the constraints affecting journalists' decisions of 'what is news' and who should be allowed to express an opinion within the news text came from far beyond the newsroom.

The analysis suggests that news is doubly constructed. It is constructed by media professionals, who physically assemble it by gathering information. It is also constructed in meaning by *sources* – which might well include editors or journalists themselves – 'speaking' within the news text and competing among each other to communicate to the public their interpretation of events. The news framing of an event, as the study of the coverage of 9/11 in eight newspapers across four different countries suggests, can effectively be explained by the selection of newsworthy sources within the news. It is the range of sources, their variety of origin (foreign rather than national) and identity (politicians rather than intellectuals, members of the public, experts or religious leaders for instance), that determines the scope and variety of the news discourse. The choice by journalists and editors of which sources are newsworthy was found to be guided by three variables: national interest, journalistic culture, and editorial policy. They act as multiple and progressive filters on the media professionals' judgments about newsworthiness: they shape their *news values*.

This article by no means claims that these are *all* the variables affecting news values. They are the variables the study could identify by relying on its comparative research design, conceived for the purpose of testing five different explanations of news (political influence on media coverage; existence of media flows, globalization or localization dynamics; uniqueness of media output in each media organization) from three fields of study (Political Communication, International Communications, News Sociology). Their inclusion into a model, which is admittedly imperfect and only an initial step towards more multidisciplinary research, nonetheless fills some gaps in the literature. In fact, existing extensive discussions of news values do not address the issue of what actually shapes them. The model not only identifies some important variables shaping the sense of newsworthiness of journalists, but also explains how the combination of these variables affects the selection of sources and, ultimately, news content variation across different media organizations, journalistic cultures, and national borders. Before illustrating the concepts of national interest, national journalistic culture, and editorial policy and explaining in more detail how they shape journalists' and editors' news values I am going to explain the social ontology on which the model is based and define newsworthiness.

The ontology of a Global News Model

The model is based on a constructionist ontology of the world (Giddens, 1984). In this perspective, structure and agency are mutually dependent and mutually constitutive. Structures are the medium and outcome of the social action they constrain. This means that structures do not exist separately from social action but are implicated in its production and reproduction (1984: 376). In other words, structures are at the same time the result of human agency and a constraint on it.

The social actors within the model are politicians as well as journalists, editors and sources with whom they interact in the newsgathering process. They interact within more or less material structures that constrain their behaviour at different levels. Such structures can be governmental institutions, international alliances and national institutional practices, existing political agendas, media systems, editorial policies, and media organizations' routines and budgets. At the same time as acting within structures, social actors contribute to shaping them. Political actors might, for example, exploit an international crisis situation to reshape existing policy agendas. Editors, while respecting the mission statement of a news organization, might want to readjust the focus of its coverage so that it better suits audience interests in an increasingly competitive market (Benson, 2004).

In this view of the world ideas are important. The study borrows from International Relations (IR) constructivism the belief that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collective shared system of meanings (Risse, 2007: 128). IR constructivism acknowledges the importance ideas have in the way countries interact with the rest of the world, particularly in shaping norms of appropriate behaviour (March and Olsen, 1998).

By shifting its application from the world of interactions among states to social reality, this perspective can be combined with the constructionist ontology of the study. If structures are constituted by ideas and norms, agents' social reshaping of structures is also achieved through the changing of those ideas and the redefinition of their meanings. The discourse produced by social actors is therefore both the output of structural constraints and a structure itself in the way agents interpret and construct reality.

News is part of the very process through which the world is constructed and social meanings created. Tuchman (1978: 184) writes, for example, that it is the meanings within the news that contribute to 'perpetually defining and redefining, constituting and reconstituting social phenomena'. In a world that is constructed, however, news is constructed too (Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). While news can contribute to structure our world, it is at the same time the product of the action of social agents. According to Schlesinger (1978), making news is 'putting "reality" together':

> News does not select itself, but is rather the product of judgments concerning the social relevance of given events and situations based on assumptions concerning their interest and importance. The 'reality' it portrays is always in at least one sense fundamentally biased, simply in virtue of the inescapable decision to designate an issue or event newsworthy, and then to construct an account of it in a specific framework of interpretation. News must be assessed as a cultural product which embodies journalistic, social, and political values. It cannot be, and certainly is not, a neutral, impartial, or totally objective perception of the real world (1978: 165).

Within this world ontology the question of what shapes the news is to be interpreted, in terms of the mutual interactions between agents and structures, as 'who shapes the news and under what constraints'. The model explains the relative weight of agency (and whose agency) versus structural constraints (and which ones exactly) at the international, the national and media-organizational level – and the way they affect the construction of the news discourse.

Newsworthiness: what is news?

The literature refers to *news values* in relation to the news-making process, particularly in relation to how journalists are able to select, among the countless events happening in the world, what is most 'interesting' or 'important' to potential readers in order to fill the daily news hole.

News values allow media professionals to fulfil their role of gatekeepers. According to Shoemaker (1997[1991]: 57), 'Simply put, gatekeeping is the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person every day.' White (1964[1950]), in a famous study about the selection of news, closely examined the way an editor, 'Mr Gates', decided what was 'in' and 'out'. He found that the reasons for the selection of stories (such as 'no space', 'not too important', 'don't care for suicide stories') are 'highly-subjective value judgements' (1964[1950]: 165–6).

One of the most quoted studies of news values is an article published in 1965 by Galtung and Ruge. On the basis of the coverage of four international crises by Norwegian newspapers they identified 12 criteria according to which 'events become news' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 70): frequency, intensity ('threshold'), unambiguity, cultural proximity ('meaningfulness'), predictability ('consonance'), unexpectedness, continuity, 'composition' (meaning the event suits the needs of the news agenda of a media organization), reference to elite nations, reference to elite persons, human interest ('personalization'), and negativity (1965: 65–70).

News values in the view of both White (1964[1950]) and Galtung and Ruge (1965) constitute, in practice, an understanding by media professionals about 'what is news'. It appears to be a 'gut feeling' which almost naturally leads journalists and editors to agreeing about the selection of certain events rather than others. On the one hand this approach helps explain how news comes to exist. On the other hand it does not tackle the question of where the news values come from and how they got into the minds of the media professionals in the first place. Within this strand of research, Bleske (1997[1991]) duplicates White's study. His aim is to assess whether '40 years of sweeping technological and social changes' would produce similar results in the way editors select stories (1997[1991]: 78). His observation of the work by a wire editor, this time a 'Ms Gates', leads to the conclusion that 'gatekeepers learn to select news by being gatekeepers' (1997[1991]: 79) and to the admission that 'the case studies of Mr Gates and Ms Gates may not explain much about why a gatekeeper selects a particular story' (1997[1991]: 78).

In addition to this, a variety of studies confirm that news values, far from being universal, are actually different depending on the countries and media organizations considered. Mellor, for example, writing about the making of Arab news, defines the already mentioned study by Galtung and Ruge (1965) as the 'most influential study on *Western* news values' (2005: 76, emphasis added). News values, as she points out, are different in other parts of the world. As she observes, while in the West human interest is an increasingly important criterion for selecting stories, news in the Arab world is more closely associated with 'social responsibility' (2005: 81). The majority of Saudi journalists, for example, think that the main function of the press, which is arguably going to affect their selection of what is newsworthy, is enhancing Islamic values (Tash, 1983, cited in Mellor, 2005: 82).

Campbell also argues that different countries 'exhibit very different, culturally-specific attitudes towards events' news value' (2004: 123). In his analysis, for example, for journalists in authoritarian regimes 'a pro-social function is usually part of the job, promoting activities of the state rather than focusing more on a critical watchdog role' (2004: 123). Nasser confirms that, in developing countries, journalists see themselves as 'educators and nation builders' rather than conveyors of information (1983: 48). Restrictions on western-style investigative reporting are justified on the grounds that developing countries' societies are 'too fragile to stand too much probing into the failures of government' (1983: 49). In a study of African news, Da Costa also shows how media in African countries provide the public with 'reassuring news' in the attempt to avoid 'troublesome reactions' (1979: 7). Developing countries' news focuses therefore more on positive events than on disasters, corruption and wars (1979: 48). As Lendvai put the principle guiding the selection of news in the old Soviet Union: 'good news is news – bad news is not really news at all' (1983: 72).

The Global News Model is based on the realization that news values vary, and with them the formulation by media professionals of judgments about what is newsworthy. More specifically, the perception of sources' newsworthiness in the minds of media professionals – i.e. who should be allowed to 'speak' in the news and who should not – I argue, is shaped by three variables: national interest, national journalistic culture, and editorial policy. I now define these concepts, and explain how each of them shapes media professionals' news values and, in so doing, affects the variety and amount of ideas within the coverage.

National interest

The first variable found to affect the assessment of sources' newsworthiness by journalists and editors is national interest. Within the constructionist perspective of the model national interest is socially constructed (Wendt, 1992) rather than fixed and determined by material resources (Morgenthau, 1967). Using Nye's words, it is:

> the set of national priorities regarding relations with the rest of the world. It is broader than strategic interests, though they are part of it. It can include values such as human rights and democracy, if the public feels that those values are so important to its identity that it's willing to pay a price to promote them. (Nye, 1999: 23)

This notion suits not only the idea that national interest might evolve over time, but also the notion that what a national priority is in the first place is open to redefinition. National interest is a country's level of interest towards the rest of the world, which can be motivated by a range of different reasons. They vary depending on time and circumstances. They can be related to the need to defend a country's security, as in the USA in the immediate aftermath of 9/11; or they could be rooted in a foreign policy agenda that wants to promote, as in France, specific cultural values (Rioux and Van Belle, 2005: 485–6) and multilateralism (Stahl, 2003).

National interest appears to be shaped, as the analysis of governmental statements in the four countries suggests, by structural constraints that political actors themselves have

contributed to build over time: national identity, existing foreign policy agendas, systems of international alliances and, as a combination of all the previous aspects, positioning within the international system. The Italian political reaction to 9/11, for example, is heavily shaped by the legal and institutional framework of the UN, EU, G8, NATO and the respective resolutions adopted in the aftermath of the attacks.[2] Differently from their French counterparts, who identify France as a player on the world stage, the analysis of the political statements also clearly shows that Italian authorities see their country in closest contact with two regional contexts. The first is the 'Mediterranean's Southern shore' (*sponda Sud del Mediterraneo*). Foreign Minister Ruggiero refers to a *sponda sud* in an article published on *Corriere della Sera* on 18 October (Ruggiero, 2001a). The second is the Middle East and the Balkans. One reason for the Italian politicians' focus on these areas is the link, as established by Foreign Minister Ruggiero, between regional crises and extremism/terrorism (Ruggiero, 2001b). Another reason is the consideration of Italian physical proximity to the areas, Italian involvement in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, and commitment, through the EU institutions, to mediation in the Middle East peace process.

National interest guides the selection of newsworthy sources by journalists and editors. The relations of a country with the rest of the world affect whether the sources in the coverage are mainly national or international. For example the analysis of sources reported in the news in the aftermath of 9/11 suggests that US unilateralism and hyper-power status (Singh, 2003) translate into a low interest in the foreign world. The main sources reported by American elite newspapers, besides national sources (which constituted 78% of all sources), are from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the EU (respectively 11%, 7%, and 4% of all voices). This might not seem surprising given that the attacks took place on American soil. Datta-Ray (2006: 54), however, illustrates how the very interest in Afghanistan constituted a drastic shift in comparison with previous reporting:

> 'Afghanistanism' was the term for news that was remote or irrelevant for … colleagues on the *New York Times*. 'Who can check up on or take offence at news from Afghanistan?' Operation Enduring Freedom and the war on terrorism changed all that, making Afghanistan front-page news only because of the involvement of Americans and American interests.

In addition to this, French and Italian newspapers covered 9/11 through a much wider range of sources than in the USA, even if the events did not affect their countries directly. A good third of the sources within French national media coverage, for example, were from Afghanistan, Pakistan, the EU, the Middle East, Arab countries, and international organizations, besides US sources (53%) and national actors (14%). Over the whole timeframe of analysis French newspapers quoted 164 different sources against 126 in the USA. The French sources from the Middle East and the Arab world, in particular, appeared to mirror the diplomatic contacts with foreign countries that the Foreign Minister Vedrine, as the analysis of French political statements confirms, had in the aftermath of the events.[3]

Sources within the Pakistani coverage also reflected the country's identity as a 'fortress of Islam' (Musharraf, 2001) and its interest in developing countries (Khan, 2006: 246).

Compared with coverage from the USA, France or Italy, Pakistani coverage included the voices of religious leaders, ulema (Islamic scholars),[4] and focused more on leaders from the Arab world, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), China, and the UN special representative for Afghanistan (Lakhdar Brahimi).

Pakistan presented 214 sources over the whole period of analysis. It is true that the Pakistani government was on the frontline of the conflict with Afghanistan. Musharraf reveals in his memoirs that the Pakistani director general of Inter Services Intelligence, who was in Washington at the time of the attacks, was told by the US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage that, if Pakistan had chosen to side with the terrorists, it 'should be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age' (Musharraf, 2006: 201). The Pakistani government was also concerned about the influx of refugees from Afghanistan. The number of sources in the media discourse is nonetheless almost double that of US newspapers (126). This can be explained by the greater interest of Pakistan in the foreign world. As Wu (2000: 127) explains, less powerful nations are more interested in what more powerful ones do:

> The phenomenon of the press' concentration on the world elites perhaps is not entirely unexpected. After all, powerful players set up the game rules and dictate the repertoire of actions performed on the world stage, thus affecting the rest of the less powerful countries… Thus, it makes a lot of sense for most countries to monitor closely the moves of the few elites. In so doing, they could take necessary steps to protect their own national interests should something emergent or threatening occur.

National interest, within the model, contributes to selecting a first 'pool' of potentially newsworthy sources, as it can be seen on the first layer of Figure 1. National interest shapes the ratio between international and national sources within the coverage at the level of national media discourse. The chart illustrates, as an example, the impact different national priorities have on both American and French media discourses. In fact, in the case study of the coverage of 9/11, the French greater interest in the foreign world leads to a greater selection of foreign sources within the national media discourse (85.9%) than in the USA (38.3%). These 'pools' of sources are further both cut down and integrated by the second variable envisaged by the Global News Model: national journalistic culture.

National journalistic culture

National journalistic culture is the set of moral ideals, as well as reporting and editing practices, which characterize journalists in a country. Journalistic culture defines media professionals' perceptions of their own role within society and affects the way they gather news, handle sources, and write their stories. Within the model the main distinction between journalistic cultures is between objective journalism and interpretative journalism.

Schudson (2001: 149) defines 'objectivity' in American journalism as 'at once a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing.' This definition can be applied, in principle, to interpretive journalism, too. In both kinds
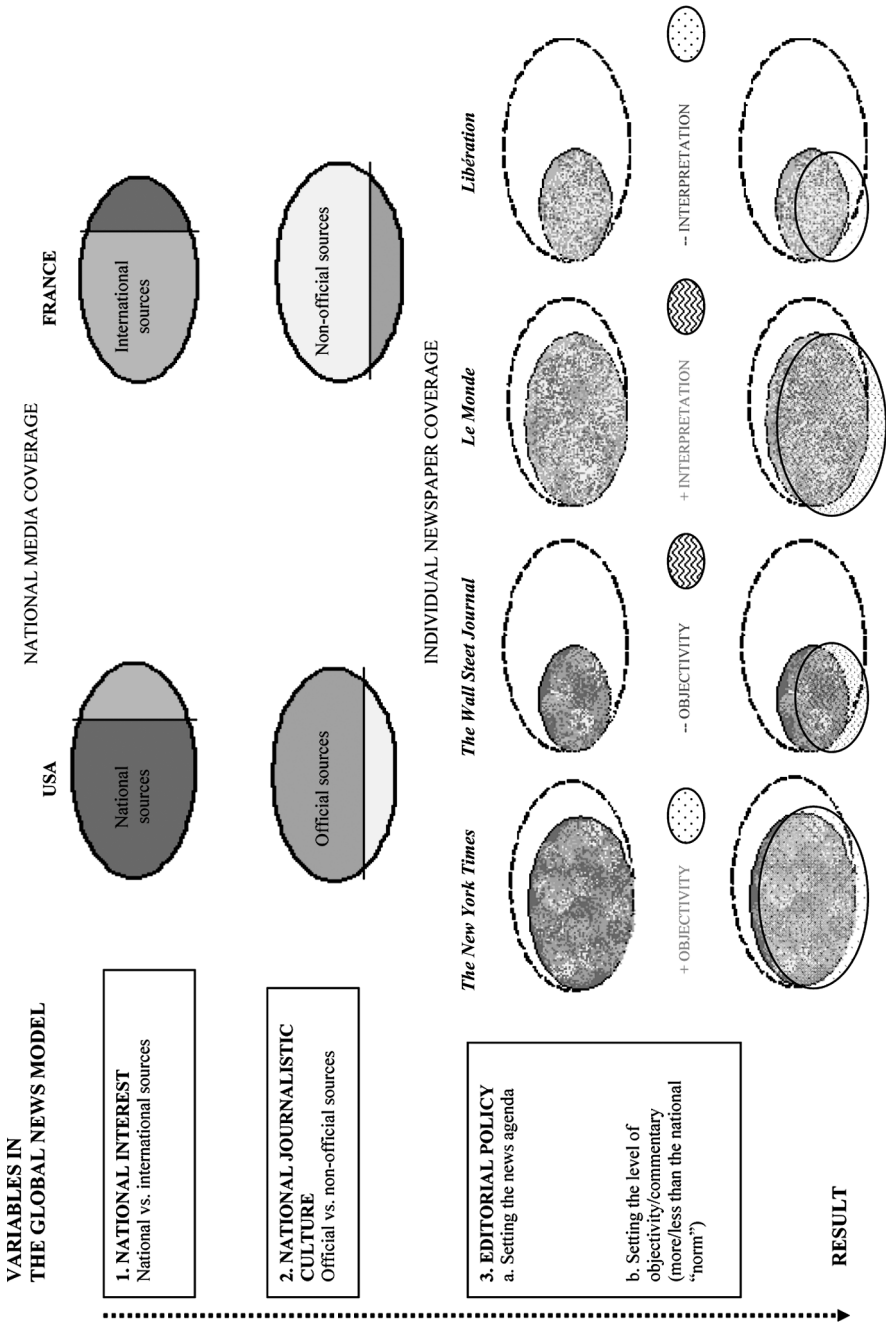
Figure 1. How the variables of the Global News Model progressively shape the news: the examples of the USA and France

of journalistic cultures journalists express allegiance to the moral ideal by reproducing the norm in formal codes of professional ethics, by incorporating it in textbooks and in educational curricula, and by developing the idea in professional journals. The application of the objectivity norm can be identified by means of content analysis that measures 'the degree of impersonality and non-partisanship in news stories' (2001: 149).

This is indeed confirmed by the analysis. In the USA, where journalism is supposed to be about objectivity, reporters tend to see themselves mainly as gatherers of facts, who would approach news sources to ask for their interpretation of events and present them to the readers without evaluating them. Journalists from the *New York Times* appear to closely follow the objectivity ideal as, within the time span under analysis, they never directly express an opinion and the purpose of first page articles appears to be purely informing the reader about the raw facts and 'who said what'. Pakistan's journalistic culture, at least for what concerns the elite newspapers under study, appears to be closer to the objective journalism model of the USA than interpretive journalism. First page news contents are largely fact oriented while opinion articles, such as editorials, are placed in the 'comment' section.

By contrast, in France or Italy, where the figure of the journalist has historically developed from that of 'high literary creators and cosmopolitan thinkers' (Schudson, 2001: 166), journalism tends to be more oriented towards providing commentary to the facts. This is reflected, for instance, by the presence of numerous comment and analysis articles on the first pages of both *Corriere* and *Repubblica*. On *Repubblica*, comments constitute most of first page coverage contents to the point that, on some issues, they almost replace the 'news' in the American sense. On 17 September, for example, there are three relevant comment articles starting on the first page. They are by Bernardo Valli (journalist of *Repubblica*), Susan Sontag (American essayist), and Giorgio Bocca (Italian journalist and writer).[5]

The social embedding of journalistic practices, or national journalistic culture, affects the journalists' very sense of what is news and what is newsworthy. This, again, also applies to sources. More precisely, in the Global News Model, national journalistic culture influences the selection of newsworthy sources in the coverage by affecting the ratio between official and non-official sources. The observation by Gopnik that in France 'journalists tend to think that there are more interesting things to do in life than pester some politician or official who has never said anything interesting in the first place for one more quote' (2004: 64) is supported by the analysis. *Le Monde*, for example, presents a wider range of non-official sources (44.28%) than the *New York Times* (16.57%).

The focus on a wide range of international sources (shaped by national interest, particularly French multilateral foreign policy) combined with the interest in their opinion (national journalistic culture) produces an extremely rich picture of the issues under analysis in terms of the number and variety of ideas expressed in the coverage. A very good example of the diversity of interpretations which characterizes *Le Monde*'s first page news is offered by coverage on 19 September. Apart from the third upper part of the cover reporting the day's 'hard news' ('Enquête sur Ben Laden, la cible des Etats-Unis [Investigation bin Laden, the target of the United States]', most of the page is taken up by comment articles. The first contribution to the framing of 9/11 is that of

US intellectual Francis Fukuyama (2001). He suggests that through the attacks the USA could perhaps become 'a more ordinary country' [*un pays plus ordinaire*], with concrete interests and real vulnerabilities, instead of thinking of being able to decide unilaterally about the nature of the world in which it lives. A link to the reprint of a page of the *New York Times* adds the idea that, despite the attacks, life must go on and the perpetrators are 'lowlifes.'[6] In the centre of the cover page there is another article (Smith, 2001) reporting the views of Nadia Yassine, daughter of the chief of the Moroccan Islamic movement *Justice et Bienfaisance*: she is reported saying that 'globalization has a head and an address: the United States, repository of a huge economic power' ['*La mondialisation a une tête et une adresse: les Etats-Unis, siège d'un pouvoir économique énorme*']. This power, which 'crashes the Muslims in Palestine', has had a 'boomerang effect' on the USA. If the West does not want to make Islam the faith of the 'underdeveloped and barbarian', then it will have to engage with the Muslims, facing 'either an Islamist with a knife between his [sic] teeth or an interlocutor within a dialogue of civilizations.' Yassine also says that 'for an ordinary Muslim' 'bin Laden is a hero' ['*Ben Laden est un héros*']. As evidence of this point, the article also reports that the weekly Moroccan *Al-Ousboue* (The Week), normally not regarded as an extremist Islamic newspaper, published in the aftermath of 9/11 a picture of the World Trade Center with the caption '*Les oiseaux de Babylone qui ont frappé*' ['The birds of Babylon have struck'] – a reference to the Koran, precisely to a miraculous victory against the infidels.

The *New York Times*, instead, on the same day presents 10 sources in total, from the USA (6), China (1), the EU (2), and the Middle East (1) and, among them, it quotes mainly officials (9 out of 10, the only non-official source being a libertarian civil society group). *Le Monde* presents, in this case, a lower number of sources (7), but their range covers international organizations (1), Mediterranean area actors (2), the USA (2), American media (1) and Mediterranean media (1). There are only three official actors (the OECD, a Moroccan official, and President Bush). The result is that there are 31 ideas in the coverage of the *New York Times* against 30 in *Le Monde*, but in qualitative terms, the framing of the 9/11 issue in the *New York Times* is far more coherent. Because of the high reliance on American official sources on that specific date, more specifically, coverage is consistent with the Administration policy. *Le Monde*, instead, as the example from the coverage reveals, contains more contrasting ideas.

I discuss official sources because they are the main suppliers of raw information about the issue of terrorism and security – the focus of the empirical investigation on which the model is developed. The model can, however, be applied to other issues by changing the category of who the 'authorities' are. In the case of 9/11, non-official sources are commentators, intellectuals, academics, and researchers from think-tanks asked to give an evaluation of the situation in the USA, Italy and France. These sources extend to religious leaders and *ulema* in Pakistan. The fact that interpretive journalism tends to give more space to non-official sources, particularly commentators, than objective journalism does, can be observed in layer two of Figure 1. The chart shows how national journalistic culture leads to the selection of more official sources in the American than in the French media discourse. The judgment about sources' newsworthiness, however, is affected by one more variable: each news organization's editorial policy.

Editorial policy

The editor or editorial board of each media organization sets the news agenda. This means establishing the relative size of the news hole for the different issues which are going to be covered in the news. This choice is made in accordance with the mission statement of the media organization and its focus of interest (for example, business or domestic affairs rather than foreign policy), and is made with economic considerations in mind – budgets and anticipation of readers' interests. Editorial policy translates both into a limit to the kind of stories that can be reported, and into setting the space within the news which should be allocated to a certain topic (Ostgaard, 1965: 44–5; Soloski, 1997[1989]: 153). Editorial policy affects the way individual journalists write their stories as it shapes their sense of what is news in the first place: what is 'newsworthy'.

Within a constructionist view of the world, editorial policy is defined within a country's national journalistic culture. However, while all editors in France might attribute greater newsworthiness to opinion than in the USA, where just fact ideally becomes news, there are further differences at the level of each newspaper. Some newspapers might only very marginally deal with certain issues because they are not considered newsworthy in the organization's specific agenda. The 9/11 coverage study found, for example, that *Libération* does not cover the issue of 9/11 in as much detail as *Le Monde*. This difference in priorities reflects the fact that *Libération* was established in 1973 as the voice of 'all the leftist political ferment' of French society and was therefore concerned with domestic issues (Thogmartin, 1998: 248). The very title of *Le Monde*, 'the world', reveals, instead, a strong international vocation. Its first page in 1944 was, in fact, dominated by foreign news, with just one story on domestic politics (Thogmartin, 1998:181).

Such differences in editorial policies are reflected in the coverage of 9/11. On 31 October, when *Le Monde*'s main story is '*La conduite de la guerre alarme l'Europe* [The conduct of war alarms Europe]', on *Libération* not only there is no mention of the topic, but the main title is '*Un kimono pour Renault* [A kimono for Renault]', about Nissan acquiring 15 per cent of Renault. The war in Afghanistan is addressed on *Libération* more marginally than on *Le Monde*. Even at critical moments, such as the fall of Kabul, when on *Le Monde* it is possible to identify a variety of interpretations of the Afghanistan conflict by different actors, on *Libération* the range of voices is quite limited. This is made more extreme by *Libération*'s 'événement formula in which a single event or trend occupies the cover and the first inside four to five pages' (Benson, 2001: 33).

Even within the same journalistic culture different newspapers might present different levels of commentary or objectivity that the national 'norm'. Within the same American objective journalism, *The Wall Street Journal* shows a higher presence of evaluative statements (interpretation) in the news than the *New York Times*. An example is offered by what reporters David Cloug and Neil King (2001) write the day after the attacks:

> By successfully attacking the most prominent symbols of American power – Wall Street and the Pentagon – terrorists have wiped out any remaining illusions that America is safe from mass organized violence.

That realization alone will alter the way the U.S. approaches its role in the world, as well as the way Americans travel and do business at home and abroad.

Bias takes also the form of quote manipulation. Later, the same article reads:

The events occurred without any apparent warning, prompting immediate questions in Washington and elsewhere about a failure of U.S. intelligence. How did such a broad and coordinated attack on multiple sites occur without U.S. intelligence officials getting wind of it? How were so many commercial airplanes hijacked and diverted hundreds of miles out of their flight paths toward the nation's largest population centers? 'Today our government failed the American people', said Rep. Curt Weldon, a Pennsylvania Republican.

It is interesting to notice that the quote by the Republican representative appears to be *used* by the journalists to support their point, rather than being merely reported.

The presence of bias, even within a journalistic culture which traditionally aspires to objectivity, reflects the editorial philosophy of the business news organization, which openly states: 'We often take sides on the major issues of politics and society, with a goal of moving policies or events in what we think is the best direction for the country and the world' (DowJones.com, n.d.).

The editorial policy therefore also shapes the way national journalistic culture is implemented at the level of the single media organization. It operates as a further selector of the pools of newsworthy sources previously identified in Figure 1 appearing earlier in the article. The third layer in the chart shows the double effect of editorial policy on the coverage: setting the size of the news hole (layer 3.a); and defining whether there is going to be more or less objectivity or commentary than expected from the national journalistic norm (3.b). The chart, more specifically, visually illustrates the way different selections of sources lead to different news discourses. The news in each newspaper appears like a canvas with different shades. It is, in fact, the sources who 'colour' the coverage by expressing ideas (each idea could be represented by a pixel in the image). Newspaper coverage in the USA presents shades representing the prevalence of ideas from national and official sources rather than from international and non-official sources as in France. Coverage in each newspaper ('individual newspaper discourse') further differentiates itself from the national coverage ('national media discourse') through setting the size of its agenda in relation to a specific issue and either the 'objectivity' or 'interpretation' lens through which journalists or editors produce the news (respectively the dotted or wavy 'screens' superimposed on the 'results' layer in the chart).

Conclusions

The Global News Model presented here attempts to bridge the fragmented perspectives – international, national or media-organizational – of existing explanations of news into a single, seamless theoretical framework. The model spans from the macro level of the interactions among countries at the international level, to the micro level represented by the exchanges among media professionals in each individual media outlet. It provides an explanation of the way three variables – national interest, national journalistic culture, and the editorial policy of the individual media organization – affect the sense of

newsworthiness of media professionals, therefore playing the role of multiple filters on the selection of sources within the news coverage and, as a consequence, producing variations in news coverage across media organizations, journalistic cultures, and national borders.

The model is a first step towards building more complex and multidisciplinary approaches in explaining news, which have been advocated across several fields of study over the years. Hjarvard (1995: 7), for example, has criticized the narrowness of news flows studies, arguing that 'both the realm of foreign news and the outside social world have been considered to be much more simple and homogeneous than is really the case.' Political Communication suffers from investigating the media–politics relationship almost exclusively on a national basis (Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004). International Communications, instead, could benefit from integrating micro-approaches into the mostly macro-perspective of the field. Hjarvard (1995: 3) proposes, for example, a middle-range analysis in the perspective of interaction that stresses the interrelatedness between social actors and different factors in the news process. From the globalization vs. localization debate, Chadha and Kavoori (2005: 100) highlight the inadequacy of current approaches by calling for a:

> model of media globalization that recognizes the continuing role of the national… rather than the somewhat Manichean homogenization versus heterogenization debate that does little to illuminate the complexities of contemporary media developments as they are manifest across national contexts around the globe.

In this respect the model makes an attempt to systematically explain the dynamic way in which social actors – not only media professionals, but also politicians and members of the wider public – are constrained in the way they act and construct the world by structures they themselves contribute to create over time at the international, national, and media-organizational level.

Blumler and Gurevitch (2005) make the point that advances of communications technologies in the last few decades have had such a profound impact on the way political actors communicate with the public, on the proliferation of media formats, and on the dynamics of information distribution across the globe, that the paradigms we have inherited from past research might have become outdated. The problem of the slow adaptation of theories to world change is emphasized also by Nacos et al. (2000: 1). They argue that:

> …indeed, much of what we know about the predominant patterns in news reporting about foreign affairs, the nature and formation of public opinion, and the intricate relationships involving mass media, public attitudes, and foreign policymaking is based on research conducted during the Cold War era.

The findings on which the Model is based suggest that some of the current paradigms are indeed inadequate. If we want to explain news in the 21st century we must do so in a truly multidisciplinary perspective that brings together Political Communication, International Communications, News Sociology and International Relations.

Notes

1   The study involved an international comparative analysis of both governmental political statements and media coverage in the USA, France, Italy and Pakistan between 11 September and 14 November (fall of Kabul during the Operation Enduring Freedom) 2001. The political statements were all public communications (interviews, speeches, press conference interventions) by governmental actors (presidents, heads of state, prime ministers, foreign and defense ministers) in each of the countries under study during the timespan of the analysis. The news coverage involved both first page news and editorials. The analysis focused on the way political actors, journalists, and editors, as well as sources within the news text, constructed (framed) the issues of 9/11 and the following war in Afghanistan. The analysis involved both qualitative and quantitative content analysis, and process-tracing. The former was used to establish the extent of the similarity among news in different newspapers and between newspapers' coverage and governmental statements. The latter was used to investigate through which causal mechanisms a range of hypothesized variables would produce variations both in the news texts and within the political statements (Bennett and George, 1997).

2   UN Security Council Resolution; UN General Assembly Resolution; Conclusions of the EU General Affairs Council; Statement by the North Atlantic Council (12 September 2001); Joint Declaration by the EU Heads of State and Prime Ministers (14 September); Declaration by the G8 Heads of State and Prime Ministers (19 September); Conclusions and Action Plan of the EU Council Extraordinary Meeting (21 September).

3   *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), *Déclarations françaises de politique étrangère depuis 1990* (French Foreign Policy Statements since 1990), available at: http://www.doc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/BASIS/epic/www/doc/SF; Ministère de la Défense (The Ministry of Defence), *Archives*, available at: http://www.defense.gouv.fr/archives/principale.html

4   'Ulema is the plural of [the] Arabic word *alim*, one who possesses the quality of *ilm* – knowledge, learning, science in the widest sense' (Akhtar, 2000: n.13, 53).

5   Bernardo Valli, 'Se la guerra diventa una crociata [If the war becomes a crusade]', *Repubblica*, 17 September 2001; Susan Sontag, 'Il sostenibile peso della verità [The bearable weight of truth]', *Repubblica*, 17 September 2001; Giorgio Bocca, 'Dai cattivi saraceni ai piloti kamikaze [From the evil Muslims to the kamikaze pilots]', *Repubblica*, 17 September 2001.

6   'For One Day, Just Making Trades Meant More Than Making Money', *New York Times* in *Le Monde*, 19 September 2001.

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