

INTERNATIONAL NEWS AGENCIES AND THE WAR DEBATE OF 2003

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Abstract / A stratified random sample of articles about the debate from 29 January 2003, to 18 February 2003, leading up to the US–Iraq conflict was selected from six news agencies – AP, Agence France Presse, Reuters, Xinhua, ITAR-TASS and Inter Press Service. US official sources were cited most frequently by all agencies except IPS and ITAR-TASS, which showed a nationalistic bias in its sourcing. Neither the western news agencies nor Xinhua’s sourcing patterns were nationalistic, and their coverage was more balanced than IPS and ITAR-TASS. However, the non-western news agencies presented significantly more non-western viewpoints in their coverage of the pre-war debate.

Keywords / international conflict / international news / news agencies / news flow / sources / US–Iraq war

Introduction

In March 2003, the United States waged war against Iraq and its leader, Saddam Hussein. As the US military prepared to invade Iraq, President Bush used his January 2003 State of the Union address to present his case for taking action against Hussein. Although the US had persuaded Great Britain and about 30 countries to support its efforts to oust Hussein, many influential nations, including Russia, China and France – all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – remained steadfastly opposed. Ultimately, the decision to go to war belonged to Bush, a democratically elected leader whose tenure would be decided by US voters.

How much of the worldwide debate did US citizens hear in news coverage? How prominent were the viewpoints of those opposed to military action, whether in the US or elsewhere, compared with the views of Bush and his supporters? ‘In democratic political systems’, Larson and Chen (1992: 82) assert, ‘the assumption is that an enlightened public will receive politically important information through the press and in turn will provide guidance to policymakers.’ In the US, Great Britain and France, all democracies, the scope of a pre-war debate presumably matters. But even in less free societies, such as China and Russia, news coverage carries political significance. Indeed, Alleyne (1995: 67) argues, ‘the global flow of news is political: it reflects and determines the international configuration of power’. This

article examines how six news agencies – the Associated Press (AP), Agence France Presse (AFP), Reuters, Xinhua, ITAR-TASS and the Inter Press Service (IPS) – reflected that configuration of power leading up to the 2003 war in Iraq. Perhaps the most important question is how the information most likely to reach the US public differed from the information flowing to other parts of the globe. Whose viewpoints were most likely to be heard, and did that coverage tend to support or oppose the Bush administration's policies?

Literature Review

Because most individuals do not have first-hand knowledge of international events and foreign policy debates, they must largely depend upon the media, which in turn influence public opinion. In the US, numerous scholars have asserted a link between public opinion – or at least policy-makers' perceptions of public opinion – and the resulting foreign policy (see, for example, Powlick, 1995; Seaver, 1998). Given the media's influence, agenda-setting scholars began asking who sets the media's agenda in the 1980s and have identified factors such as the journalists' sources, other news media and the journalists' professional practices, values and traditions (McCombs, 1992: 816–17). Of those influences, the journalists' sources are perhaps 'the best available measure of influence on news coverage' (Kern et al., 1983: 237). And, more important than ease of measurement, the sourcing patterns are an explicit component of the media content consumed by the public. Who gets quoted carries political weight. In the realm of foreign policy, for example, Livingston and Eachus (1995: 427) note that different segments of the US government try to use the media to articulate and win support for their positions.

Researchers examining US journalists' use of sources have found that official, government sources predominate (Gans, 1979: 9; Sigal, 1973: 123–4) and that reporters rely mainly on 'routine channels of newsgathering', such as official proceedings and press conferences (Sigal, 1973: 125). Similarly, an analysis of network news reports on the first Persian Gulf crisis found that more than 50 percent of all reports 'emanated directly from official spokespersons' (Iyengar and Simon, 1993: 382), and case studies have confirmed the influence US presidents can have on news coverage of international issues (Cassara, 1998; Wanta and Foote, 1994; Wood and Peake, 1998).

As noted earlier, the journalists' sourcing practices also are colored by their professional values. Bennett's (1990) 'indexing' hypothesis may help integrate the literature on source dependency and journalistic values. Bennett's hypothesis is that US journalists choose news sources to reflect the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a topic. In their revision of Bennett's hypothesis, Althaus et al. (1996) concluded that the journalistic norm of objectivity led *New York Times* journalists covering the US–Libya crisis of 1985–6 to cite foreign sources when opposing views were difficult to find in the US.

Values also can vary depending upon the individual, the news organization and the country where the news organization is based. 'Journalists are not nonpartisan actors', Patterson and Donsbach (1996: 465) conclude after studying European

journalists. 'They are simply more or less partisan, depending on the country and arena in which they work.' Peterson (1979) found that perceptions of newsworthiness even among staffers of the same news organization, *The Times* of London, varied depending upon the cultural backgrounds of the staffers. Another cross-cultural study (VanSlyke Turk and Franklin, 1987) discovered differences between British and US journalists' willingness to use secondhand information – press releases, for example – from their own governments, partly because the US journalists were more skeptical about the press releases. The study synthesized previous research, however, and did not focus on foreign policy coverage.

In the realm of foreign policy, some evidence suggests news coverage within a country tends to favor that country's government (see, for example, Wittebols, 1996). In one cross-cultural study, Alexseev and Bennett (1995: 399–400) found that when covering a national security issue, the elite news media in the US, Great Britain and Russia 'predominantly voiced the opinions of officials in the administration in power (more than 50 percent)'. Another study (Atwood, 1987) suggests international correspondents may favor sources from their own country, at least on an issue such as trade.

However, these studies have primarily examined either the prestige press or television, and not compared the work of news agencies. Some exceptions include Giffard (1999) and Rauch (2003). Giffard found that Reuters and AP mentioned US sources the most in coverage of an international conference, while the Inter Press Service quoted UN sources more than any other type of source. In her case study of a summit involving 100-plus developing countries, Rauch (2003: 97–8) found the AP quoted US official sources nearly as much as sources from the developing nations; IPS was more likely to quote sources from non-governmental organizations than was the AP. Neither the Giffard nor Rauch study focused on a brewing international crisis. Nevertheless, who is gathering the news seems to matter. As Cohen (1963: 13) noted, 'The world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.'

The Western News Agencies

For many news organizations, that map often is drawn by journalists working at the big three international news agencies based in the US and Western Europe: the Associated Press, Agence France Presse and Reuters. All three are based in countries with permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. The western news agencies have been said to monopolize or at least dominate the worldwide flow of news (Boyd-Barrett, 2000: 12; Giffard, 1999: 328; Yu, 1981/2: 189). Indeed, Wu (2003: 14) found the presence of an international news agency bureau is a significant predictor of news coverage of a country and that developing countries still relied primarily on western news agencies for international news (Wu, 2003: 21). AP and Reuters also provide much of the news found on television (Bartram, 2003: 398), and Boyd-Barrett (2003: 383) remains skeptical about how well smaller agencies can compete with AP, AFP and Reuters.

AP, a US-based non-profit cooperative, is a major source of international news for most daily American newspapers and the 'dominant institution in the world news system' (Hachten and Scotten, 2002: 33). AP (2005) reports that it has 3700 employees spread across 242 bureaus worldwide and serves 121 countries, including 1700 newspapers in the US and 8500 international subscribers. AFP (2005) claims 2000 employees worldwide, including journalists working in 165 countries, while the British agency Reuters (2005) calls itself the world's largest international multimedia news agency with 2300 editorial staff members working in 196 bureaus worldwide. Boyd-Barrett (1982: 250) suggested that clients' dependence on the big agencies reflects 'the resources available to them, their generally non-government character, and their traditions of rigorous editing, comprehensive coverage, relatively high reliability and quality of delivery'. The three western news agencies have a 'stated goal of objectivity' (Rosenblum, 1981: 226), which some believe also facilitates their ability to distribute news around the world.

The western agencies are not without their critics, however. For example, Rauch (2003: 88) asserts that the big western news agencies are 'rooted in the perspectives, assumptions, and interests of their individual journalists, management, and home nations in the developed North'. Indeed, part of the 1970s and 1980s debate over the flow of news stemmed from developing countries' belief that the dominant news organizations were not reporting objectively but instead were reporting stereotypes and reporting more about the interests of wealthy countries than developing ones (Altschull, 1994: 307). Boyd-Barrett (2000: 11) fears the decline of another western agency, United Press International (UPI), will not provide AP the competitive incentive it needs to fully cover international news.

AP's primary competitors, Reuters and AFP, both have a history of subsidies from their home governments (Boyd-Barrett, 2000: 9, 2003: 372). Today, Reuters faces continual financial pressures as a publicly listed stock (Bartram, 2003: 391), while AFP still receives subsidies. In spite of occasional pressure from the French government and depending on government for more than 40 percent of its revenue, 'AFP is in part saved by the professionalism and resolution of many of its managers and journalists' (Boyd-Barrett, 2000: 9).

Despite the importance of the big three western news agencies to the international flow of news, few recent studies have examined their coverage. Most studies are several decades old (Bishop, 1975; Lewis, 1960; Peterson, 1980). In his study of the Cuban revolt in 1959, Lewis found that AP and UPI seemed to rely on official government sources but did not quantify his results. Bishop examined the news transmitted by AFP and Reuters to African countries and did not find evidence of a French or English national bias. Peterson found that compared with AP, UPI, Reuters and the London *Times*, AFP focused the most attention on the developing world.

Non-Western News Agencies

In the non-western world, two countries have permanent seats – and veto rights – on the UN Security Council, as well as their own news agencies: Russia and China. Freedom House (2005a) rates both countries as not being free and not having free

press systems (Freedom House, 2005b). Although the Russian agency ITAR-TASS was once considered among the top five world news agencies, it has not competed seriously with the top western agencies since the Soviet Union dissolved (Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett, 2004: 41–2). Since its inception, ITAR-TASS has been seen as a propaganda machine, transmitting news that reflects the government's interests (Schwartz, 1970: 743). Even with the fall of Communism, ITAR-TASS is still viewed as an official news agency for the Russian government – despite reforms in the late 1980s that 'meant a new role for TASS, more approaching that of the Western agencies' (Alleyne and Wagner, 1993: 41).

Like ITAR-TASS, the New China News Agency, Xinhua, was established as a state-controlled, official spokesperson for its country's Communist Party. In recent decades, the agency's Hong Kong branch has been used to serve political needs (Chan and Lee, 1991: 307; Chu, 1999). Even today, Xinhua journalists working outside China have diplomatic immunity (Yin and Payne, 2004: 371). Like AFP, Xinhua receives subsidies from its home government, but those subsidies have been cut over the past decade (Chen, 1996). As Xinhua tries to compete in an increasingly free-market economy, the agency has produced 'more credible, unbiased reports' (Faison, 1996), raised its standards and dramatically increased its daily news output (Chen, 1996). Like the other news agencies in this study, Xinhua also has an extensive internet presence. Elliott (1997) confirms the change in Xinhua's tone from the 1950s to the 1980s, finding a dramatic decline in negative stories about the US and an increase in objectively written stories.

An alternative news agency to those designed to serve the world's most powerful countries is the Inter Press Service. IPS began in 1964 as a cooperative of Latin American journalists but began in the late 1970s to extend its operations in Asia and Africa and to cooperate with 30 national news agencies in the developing world (Altschull, 1994: 311–12). IPS is now 'the largest international agency specializing in Third World News' (Giffard and Rivenburgh, 2000: 12). Despite facing financial constraints, Boyd-Barrett (2003: 376) says IPS has survived because it offers a news agenda 'distinctly different' from the international western-based agencies. Although IPS's focus on the concerns of the developing world sparks doubts about its objectivity, Rauch (2003: 89) asserts that 'alternative journalism such as IPS deserves more scholarly attention because it is vital to the mediascapes that enable audiences to imagine resisting a Northern knowledge monopoly and building more democratic news systems'.

Overall, studies of international news flow generally show that how much news coverage a country receives is related to the country's status on the world stage (Chang et al., 2000; Peterson, 1980), giving the US 'superstar' status in the world's media (Wu, 2003: 19), while the developing world 'continues to be a neglected part of the globe' (Wu, 2000: 126).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Given their vital role as worldwide purveyors of information, how these news agencies reported an international debate about a monumentally significant issue

such as war takes on added importance. Can multiple viewpoints be heard in the flow of news? Whose viewpoints? Will powerful countries dominate particular debates just as they dominate the overall news flow? Do official sources – not those most likely to be personally affected by a war – dominate in each news agency's coverage just as those sources appear to in studies of broadcast and newspaper coverage? The literature review suggests the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: What is the geographic reach of each news agency? The diversity of date-lines may be one indicator of how many countries were allowed to effectively participate in a global debate.

RQ2: Who are the news agencies' most frequently used sources, and how does the sourcing vary by agency? For example, will US official sources be quoted most often just as the US dominates the international news flow? Will those nations with permanent seats on the UN Security Council have louder voices than those with less power?

H1: The news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect the agencies' national origin by using a significantly higher percentage of sources from their own countries than do the other news agencies.

H2: The news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect the agencies' regional background by using a significantly higher percentage of sources from their home regions than do the other news agencies.

H3: The news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect their own western or non-western orientations.

H4: The tone of the non-western news agencies' coverage will reflect the foreign policy of the country (or countries) each agency serves. Because the Russian and Chinese news agencies have historically served as mouthpieces for their governments, their coverage is expected to be more negative toward US policy, which their governments opposed, than the coverage of the western news agencies, which have a self-proclaimed commitment toward objective reporting. Similarly, IPS's coverage is also expected to be more negative because of suspicions in the developing world and elsewhere that the US was motivated more by its need for oil than evidence Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

RQ3: Will the tone of the western news agencies' coverage reflect the foreign policy of their home governments? Despite the professional norm of objectivity, differences in the tone toward US policy might exist. For example, because the US and British governments favored the war in Iraq, the news coverage by Reuters and AP might be more positive toward US policy than the news coverage by AFP, whose home government opposed the war.

RQ4: Do the news agencies vary significantly in their use of official vs non-official sources?

Methodology

A stratified random sample of English-language news stories was selected from the LexisNexis Academic and Factiva databases using 'Iraq' and the 'United States' as

key words, 'between Jan. 29, 2003, and Feb. 18, 2003', as the date, and the individual news agency (AP, AFP, Reuters, IPS, ITAR-TASS or Xinhua) as the source. After the main topic of each Reuters story was recorded, some business stories were removed at random to keep the percentage of economic news equal to the percentage in the AP and AFP files. This step was taken to avoid any confounding results from Reuters' heavier emphasis on economic news. The three-week time period begins the day after President Bush's State of the Union address and includes US Secretary of State Colin Powell's appearance before the Security Council asserting US allegations that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, as well as the 15 February worldwide protests against the looming war.¹ Stories of fewer than 150 words were excluded. One out of every 10 original stories was selected for AP ($N = 92$), AFP ($N = 125$), Reuters ($N = 115$) and Xinhua ($N = 45$). Because the IPS and ITAR-TASS were significantly less prolific, the sample size goal was 10 stories per agency per week ($N = 30$ each). Duplicates and write-throughs were excluded from the possible sample, as were AP stories that moved only on the local and state wires. In all, 437 stories were analyzed.

Each paragraph of each story was coded for the sources cited, as well as the valence – positive, negative or neutral – toward the US policy on Iraq. Studies by Kim (2000), Giffard (1999) and Alexseev and Bennett (1995) used a similar method. As in Alexseev and Bennett's (1995: 398–9) study, a paragraph was coded as positive toward the US if it supported or echoed the dominant administration policy at the time. For example, paragraphs describing the possible negative impacts of war were coded as negative if the source indicated those impacts were a reason to avoid war. Paragraphs in which sources indicated UN weapons inspectors should be given additional time to do their work in Iraq also were coded as negative toward the US given President Bush's statements that no more time was needed.

Sources from the US, Great Britain, France, China, Russia and Iraq were coded as either official sources or non-official sources from those countries. Sources of other nationalities were coded as official or non-official sources by region based on Hess's regional breakdown of the world's countries (Hess, 1996: 116–17). The UN was a separate category.

The distinction between official and non-official sources was adapted from the protocol developed by Kern et al. (1983: 237–9). Official sources included the heads of state and their staffs, diplomatic personnel, past or present members of the military, officials in government agencies and elected and appointed legislative officials at the state, local and national level. NATO sources who were not identified by their nationalities were coded as official Western European sources. Non-official sources included statements attributed to other media (unless the media were identified as state-controlled or were themselves quoting another source), academics, business leaders, public opinion polls and citizens. Unnamed individuals were only coded as explicit sources when they were associated with both a country and a clear time element.

The author and three independent coders conducted pretests using randomly selected stories. After the level of agreement on the pretests reached nearly 84 percent for the valence coding and 91 percent for the source coding, the actual

coding for the study began. 'A minimal level of 80 percent is usually the standard' (Riffe et al., 1998: 51).

To create interval-level data, a percentage was calculated for each story ($N = 437$) for each type source and the positive, negative and neutral direction of coverage. Using a percentage rather than the actual number of paragraphs helps control for the varying story lengths. On average, ITAR-TASS and Xinhua transmitted the shortest stories, at about 250 words each, while the three western agencies averaged double that, and IPS stories averaged more than 900 words. For those hypotheses comparing two groups, such as western and non-western, a t -test on the relevant mean percentages was conducted with the alpha level set at $p < .05$.² When comparing more than two means, an analysis of variance was performed with the alpha level also set at $p < .05$. When the analysis of variance was statistically significant, a Tukey post hoc test was conducted.

Findings

Geographic Reach of News Agencies

In this sample, AFP reported from the greatest number of countries at 38, including the UN, with Reuters running a close second with 35. The number of different datelines among the other agencies ranged from 30 in the AP report to 14 in ITAR-TASS. For most news agencies, the most frequent dateline was the US. The greatest percentage of the Russian agency's stories originated in Russia, and IPS reported twice as many stories from the UN as from the US. About 10 percent of AFP's and Reuters' articles were reported from their respective home countries – more coverage than given by the other agencies. AP had the highest percentage of stories from the US at 32 percent, slightly higher than the Reuters percentage of 29 percent.

Combined, the three western news agencies produced stories from 57 countries plus the UN, compared with reports from 35 countries and the UN by the non-western news agencies. Although the non-western news agencies reported from fewer countries, they did report from countries that otherwise might have not been heard from. ITAR-TASS, for example, was the only agency to report from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and the Ukraine – all formerly part of the Soviet Union. Xinhua was the only news agency to report from Communist Cuba, as well as Cyprus and Nicaragua.

Most Frequently Used Sources

Of the six agencies, all but two – ITAR-TASS and IPS – cited US officials more than any other type source from an individual country (see Table 1). For ITAR-TASS, Russian officials dominated, accounting for more than half the explicit sources (54 percent), compared with about 12 percent for US officials. The other agency that did not give US officials an edge in its sourcing was IPS. It most frequently turned to non-official US sources (18.2 percent), rather than official US sources (10.7

TABLE 1
News Agencies' Most Frequently Cited Sources

AFP	AP	IPS	ITAR-TASS	Reuters	Xinhua
1. US officials, 18.9%	1. US officials, 24.5%	1. US non-officials, 18.2%	1. Russian officials, 54.4%	1. US officials, 22.9%	1. US officials, 16.8%
2. W. European officials (but not British or French), 15.1%	2. W. European officials (but not British or French), 14.6%	2. Asian officials (but not Chinese), 11.3%	2. US officials, 12.4%	2. US non-officials, 12%	2. Asian officials (but not Chinese), 11.6%
3. Iraqi officials, 8.4%	3. US non-officials, 11.0%	3. US officials, 10.7%	3. Other E. European officials, 11.5%	3. Asian officials (but not Chinese), W. European officials (but not British or French), 9.2% each	3. W. European officials (but not British or French), 11.4%
4. W. European non-officials (but not British or French), 7.3%	4. Mid. East officials (but not Iraqi), 5.9%	4. Mid. East non-officials (but not Iraqi), 9.1%	4. Iraqi officials, 4.6%		4. Iraqi officials, 10.0%
5. US non-officials, 5.8%	5. Iraqi officials, 5.6%	5. Asian non-officials (but not Chinese), 8.8%	5. E. European non-officials (but not Russian), Chinese officials and other Asian officials, 3.9% each	5. Iraqi officials, 5.8%	5. Other Mid. East officials, 8.7%

percent). Of those non-official US sources, only about 8 percent made statements favorable toward the Bush administration. An example is a paragraph attributed to an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, which the IPS reporter labeled 'a major cheer-leader for the hawks' (Lobe, 2003: para. 20). The other paragraphs IPS attributed to non-official US sources were split fairly evenly between negative and neutral comments.

The news agency most likely to cite Iraqi officials was Xinhua. On average, 10 percent of the sources cited by the Chinese agency were Iraqi officials, compared with less than 1 percent in IPS coverage. The average for Iraqi officials among the six news agencies was about 6 percent. IPS was the only agency to include African officials among its top 10 most frequently used type sources, and the same was true for Xinhua's use of officials from the Americas (excluding the US).

Perhaps more important than how often the news agencies cited US officials or any other particular type source, however, is the manner in which the sources were cited and how the agencies conveyed a source's credibility. For all six news agencies, the most common verb of attribution was 'said'. For the most part, then, when a particular type source was used, the news agencies did not work to cast doubt on a source's credibility by using more loaded terms of attribution.

Perhaps the event for which the credibility conveyed would have the most impact on public opinion was US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation before the UN Security Council. The western news agencies sent mixed cues about how they perceived Powell's credibility. Before the US secretary of state's briefing, AFP carefully noted that the material Powell was to present was characterized by the US government, not necessarily AFP, as evidence. For example, the agency reported on 1 February that Powell would 'lay out *what Washington says* [emphasis added] is fresh evidence that Iraq is defying disarmament demands' (AFP, 2003a: para. 23). After Powell's briefing, however, AFP seemed to accept Powell's arguments as being highly credible, stating, for example, on 5 February that he 'gave dramatic new evidence of Iraqi efforts to hide its weapons of mass destruction' (Lee and Holloway, 2003: para. 1) and describing the presentation as a 'damning speech' (AFP, 2003b: para. 2). AP also varied in the credibility it bestowed upon Powell. Although one story (Schweid, 2003: para. 1) reported that Powell 'methodically' made the US case against Iraq and presented 'evidence' (para. 3), another AP story the same day (Linzer, 2003: para. 11) carefully attributed all aspects of Powell's briefing to the secretary of state, reporting that Powell 'presented tape recordings, satellite photos and statements from informants that *he said* [emphasis added] constituted "irrefutable and undeniable" evidence' against Saddam Hussein. Another AP article, also transmitted 5 February 2003 (Hendawi, 2003: para. 2), attempts to put even more distance between the news agency and Powell's statements, reporting that Powell played recordings of Iraqi military officials '*purportedly* [emphasis added] discussing hiding vestiges of banned weapons projects from weapons inspectors'. Interestingly, Hendawi's article was written from Baghdad. Reuters (2003: para. 2) was also cautious, noting that Powell was 'using what he said was intelligence data'.

As for the non-western news agencies, IPS took great pains to make it clear that US officials, not IPS writers, were describing Powell's data as evidence. Even a headline suggested IPS had doubts stating, 'UN council divided over US "evidence" against Iraq' (Deen, 2003). And, unlike stories by ITAR-TASS and Xinhua, the IPS report on Powell's presentation focuses more on negative reaction to Powell's appearance than what Powell actually said. Although the negative information is attributed to Bush administration critics, the material is presented in such a way that IPS appears to perceive the critics as having more credibility than Powell. Two examples: 'The telephone excerpts provided by Powell – *allegedly* recording conversations of Iraqi military officials talking about ways to conceal weapons – could easily be concocted', the Iraqi ambassador said (Deen, 2003: para. 26), and 'US officials have *admitted* that some of their "evidence" comes from interrogation of detainees held under harsh conditions at Guantanamo Bay', a policy expert said (Deen, 2003: para. 29; emphasis added). As for the other non-western news agencies, the ITAR-TASS story about Powell's presentation merely reported what Powell said and did not question the accuracy or implications of the secretary's presentation. For example, on 5 February ITAR-TASS (2003: para. 2) reported, 'Powell presented intelligence indicating that there are at least seven mobile bio-weapons laboratories in Iraq.' Although the information is attributed to Powell, the story offers no room for the possibility that Powell's evidence is subject to debate. For its part, Xinhua (2003: para. 8), on the same day, noted Iraqi assertions that Powell's accusations were false, but also reported that Powell made a presentation 'proving' that Iraq has biological and chemical weapons.

Do the Agencies Have a Nationalistic Bias?

Hypothesis 1 – that the news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect the agencies' national origin by using a significantly higher percentage of sources from their own countries than do the other news agencies – was supported only for one news agency, ITAR-TASS. In its stories, the Russian news agency averaged 55 percent Russian sources, compared with 6 percent in AFP and 2 percent or less in the other agencies. Not surprisingly, an analysis of variance showed the ITAR-TASS difference was statistically significant ($F = 41.6$, $p < .0001$, d.f. = 5, $N = 431$). A Tukey post hoc analysis showed ITAR-TASS's use of Russian sources varied significantly from all five of the other agencies.

The French and British news agencies did use sources from their home countries more than the other agencies did, but the differences were not statistically significant. For example, about 5.6 percent of AFP's sources were French, compared with an average of 3.3 percent among the other agencies. About 8.6 percent of Reuters' sources were British, compared with an average of about 3.6 percent in the other agencies. A larger sample size might be needed to detect significance. The Russian agency, ITAR-TASS, actually cited a higher percentage of Chinese sources than did the Chinese news agency, and the British agency cited a slightly higher percentage of US sources than did AP.

Do the Agencies Have a Regional Bias?

Hypothesis 2 – that the news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect the agencies' regional background by using a significantly higher percentage of sources from their home regions than do the other news agencies – was only clearly supported for ITAR-TASS. On average, the Russian agency used 70.5 percent Eastern European (including Russian) sources in its stories, compared with a 5.9 percent average use by the other news agencies. Not surprisingly, an analysis of variance found that ITAR-TASS's use of Eastern European sources was significantly higher than all the other news agencies ($F = 37.43$, d.f. = 5, $p < .001$, $N = 431$). Although AFP cited a higher percentage of Western European sources than did any other news agency, AFP's total use of Western Europeans varied significantly only from ITAR-TASS. The Russian agency, by the way, used significantly fewer Western European sources than all the western news agencies. As for the use of Asian sources, IPS actually cited a slightly higher percentage on average than did Xinhua. The six agencies did not vary significantly in terms of North American, primarily US, sources used.

Is There a West vs Non-West Bias in Sourcing?

Hypothesis 3 – that the news agencies' sourcing practices will reflect their own western or non-western orientations – was supported. The non-western news agencies were significantly more likely to use non-western sources than were the western news agencies (see Table 2). Fifty-nine percent of the sources cited by the non-western agencies – Xinhua, ITAR-TASS and IPS – were non-western, compared with 36 percent non-western sourcing by the western news agencies. By the same token, 60 percent of the western agencies' sources were western, compared with 39 percent for the non-western agencies. Among the six news agencies, AP used

TABLE 2

West vs Non-West: Mean Percentage of Western vs Non-Western Sources by News Agency

	Western sources	Non-western sources
Associated Press ($N = 92$)	64	32
Reuters ($N = 115$)	60	35
Agence France Presse ($N = 125$)	58	39
Weighted mean for western agencies	60*	36**
Inter Press Service ($N = 30$)	49	47
Xinhua ($N = 45$)	46	52
ITAR-TASS ($N = 30$)	15	85
Weighted mean for non-western agencies	39*	59**

Notes: The percentages may not total 100 because the percentage of UN sources is not shown. The Satterthwaite t -test method was used because of the unequal sample sizes per agency.

* $t = 4.35$, $p < .0001$, d.f. = 158.

** $t = 4.6$, $p < .0001$, d.f. = 154.

the highest percentage of western sources at 64 percent, compared to ITAR-TASS, which used the lowest percentage at 15 percent. Conversely, AP used the lowest percentage of non-western sources at 32 percent and ITAR-TASS the highest at 85 percent. (The AP percentages do not total 100 because UN sources were coded neither as East or West.) If ITAR-TASS, the apparent outlier, is excluded, the differences between the western vs non-western news agencies remain statistically significant. Among the three western news agencies, an analysis of variance showed no significant differences in the western vs non-western sourcing patterns.

Tone of Coverage

Because China and Russia opposed US policy toward Iraq, the coverage by Xinhua and ITAR-TASS was expected to be more negative toward the US than positive and more negative than the coverage appearing in the western news agencies. Similarly, as a news agency designed to cover issues of significance to non-western, developing countries, IPS was also hypothesized to have negative coverage toward US policy. Of the six agencies, the three non-western agencies did have the most negative tone toward the US (see Table 3). In addition, *t*-tests of the western vs non-western agencies' tone of coverage did find statistically significant differences for the percentage of positive paragraphs ($t = 2.92, p = .004, d.f. = 189$) and for the percentage of negative paragraphs ($t = 4.27, p < .0001, d.f. = 168$). On average, nearly 53 percent of ITAR-TASS's paragraphs were negative toward US policy, compared with nearly 45 percent negative in IPS's coverage. Although Xinhua was the third most negative toward US policy, its coverage was only slightly more negative than AP or AFP.

That more than half the ITAR-TASS coverage was negative toward the US reflects the high percentage of Russian sources cited – sources who were voicing their opposition to US foreign policy. When the IPS coverage was negative toward

TABLE 3

Tone of Coverage toward US Policy: Mean Percentage of Positive, Negative or Neutral Paragraphs by Agency

	Positive ^a	Negative ^b	Neutral	Imbalance ^c
ITAR-TASS (<i>N</i> = 30)	17.7	52.8*	29.5	-35.1
Inter Press Service (<i>N</i> = 30)	8.8*	44.6**	46.6	-35.8
Xinhua (<i>N</i> = 45)	18.9	33.2	47.9	-14.3
Agence France Presse (<i>N</i> = 125)	25.5*	30.7	43.7	-5.2
Associated Press (<i>N</i> = 92)	26.6*	30.5	42.9	-3.9
Reuters (<i>N</i> = 114)	19.0	22.8**	58.2	-3.8

^a $F = 3.39, d.f. = 5, p = .0051$. Significant differences between IPS and AFP, and IPS and AP.

^b $F = 6.84, d.f. = 5, p < .0001$. Significant differences between ITAR-TASS and all other agencies but IPS. Significant differences between IPS and Reuters.

^c The imbalance is equal to the difference between the mean percentages of positive and negative paragraphs.

US policies, the information conveyed was not necessarily attributed. One example is a feature following President Bush's State of the Union address that said many Arabs 'were troubled by the lack of damning evidence against Baghdad and the lack of any articulated plan for post-war Iraq' (Baghdadi, 2003: para. 6). Later, in reporting on war protesters in Australia, IPS appears sympathetic to the protesters, writing that the Australian prime minister 'thumbed his nose at the hundreds of thousands of Australians who took to the streets . . . and refused to budge on his support for an impending war' (Inbaraj, 2003: para. 1).

In examining all six news agencies, an analysis of variance provides a more nuanced look at the agencies' differences. ITAR-TASS's coverage was significantly more negative toward the US than any other news agency besides IPS. The IPS report also was significantly more negative than the reports by Reuters. In examining the positive paragraphs, both AP and AFP were more positive toward US policy than was IPS.

Overall, Hypothesis 4 – that the tone of the non-western news agencies' coverage will reflect the foreign policy of the country (or countries) each agency serves – was somewhat supported. IPS and ITAR-TASS were significantly more negative toward the US and its policies than the other news agencies. However, the analysis of variance showed that despite China's antiwar stance, Xinhua's reporting was not significantly more negative toward the US than was that of the western news agencies.

Do Western 'Objective' News Agencies Favor the Home Team?

As expected, the three western agencies were more balanced in their reporting than were Xinhua, ITAR-TASS and IPS. That is to say, the difference between their percentages of negative vs positive paragraphs was much smaller than the three non-western news agencies. The question, though, was whether coverage by AP and Reuters, whose countries were preparing to lead the war, would be more positive toward the US than the news coverage by AFP, whose government opposed the war. The short answer is no. AP included only a slightly higher percentage of positive paragraphs toward US policy than did AFP, and AFP had only a slightly higher percentage of negative paragraphs toward US policy than did AP. AFP reporters used language with negative connotations in writing about both the US and France. At one point, for example, AFP referred to the Bush administration's 'crusade to hold the Iraqi regime to account' (Daly, 2003: para. 9), while in another story, AFP described France's diplomatic efforts as 'attempts to commandeer a single EU policy' (Schofield, 2003: para. 4).

The tone of coverage in Reuters, the British news agency, was both less positive and less negative toward the US than the other two western agencies. How is that possible? A much higher percentage of the Reuters paragraphs – more than 58 percent – were coded as neutral, compared with about 43 percent for the other two agencies.

Official vs Non-Official Sourcing

Research question 4 asked if the news agencies would vary significantly in their use of official vs non-official sources. They did (see Table 4). More than 89 percent of the explicit sources used by ITAR-TASS were government officials, compared with between 70 and 76 percent for Xinhua and the three western news agencies. Interestingly, Xinhua, a presumably state-controlled agency, relied on a slightly lower percentage of official sources than did AP, a presumably independent news agency. Of all the six agencies, IPS used the lowest percentage of official sources at 52 percent. An analysis of variance showed the differences among the news agencies' use of official sources was significant, with $F = 3.23$, d.f. = 5 and $p = .0072$. IPS used a statistically significant smaller percentage of official sources than either ITAR-TASS or AP. Conversely, IPS also used a much higher percentage of non-official sources, such as academics, public opinion polls, other media and ordinary citizens, than did either AP or ITAR-TASS.

Discussion

Despite some scholars' assertions that the western news agencies do not sufficiently cover world news, this study confirms that those agencies cover a broader, albeit more concentrated, geographic scope than their non-western counterparts. In this three-week sample of pre-war coverage, AFP, AP and Reuters all reported from more than 30 countries – many more countries than IPS, ITAR-TASS and Xinhua. In addition, the western agencies provided news much more frequently. Nonetheless, the contributions of the other news agencies should not be overlooked. IPS, whose stated mission includes giving 'a voice to the voiceless' (IPS, 2005), did accomplish that goal by citing the highest percentage of non-official sources of any agency. Similarly, without the efforts of ITAR-TASS, viewpoints from some of the former Soviet republics might not have had the opportunity to enter the international news flow. Likewise, Xinhua was the only news agency to report from Communist Cuba.

Still, the leading player in the worldwide debate over a proposed US-led war against Iraq was, not surprisingly, the US, the key decision-maker and lone world superpower. Not only did four of the six news agencies report most frequently from

TABLE 4

Use of Official vs Non-official Sources by Agency: Mean Percentage of Sources

	Official sources	Non-official sources
ITAR-TASS	89.2	10.8
Associated Press	76.0	24.0
Xinhua	75.2	24.8
Agence France Presse	71.5	28.5
Reuters	70.1	29.9
Inter Press Service	52.1	47.9

the US, but those same agencies also relied more heavily on US officials as news sources than any other type of sources. Of the five nations with permanent seats on the UN Security Council, the US did indeed have the loudest voice. That is not necessarily to say US voices dominated the debate, however. When all Western European voices are added together, those voices were louder than the US voices in AFP and Xinhua's coverage. Nevertheless, the only news agencies to actively muffle the US government were IPS and ITAR-TASS. IPS interviewed more non-officials from the US, and more than half of ITAR-TASS's coverage expressed the viewpoints of Russian officials.

That the Russian news agency's sourcing patterns would exhibit a bias in favor of its own government was expected. Despite previous analyses asserting that Russia's state-controlled media had been granted more freedom since the break-up of the Soviet Union, this study suggests ITAR-TASS is still being used primarily to convey Russian viewpoints and that the agency's definition of journalism does not include much room for non-official voices.

The coverage by the other state-controlled news agency, Xinhua, was not as hypothesized. Xinhua, at least in its English-language articles available via Lexis-Nexis, did not show a national or regional bias. Furthermore, Xinhua's coverage was much more balanced – in terms of presenting positive and negative information about US policy – than either ITAR-TASS or IPS. In other words, Xinhua acted more as a western agency might be expected to perform. This study illustrates the danger of stereotyping non-western journalists and the potential for the unearthing of rich data in interviews with the Chinese journalists.

For the western news agencies, this study offers support for their claims of balanced reporting. None of the three news agencies significantly favored sources from its own country or region of the world more than any other agency (excluding ITAR-TASS, which appears to be an outlier). In addition, AP, AFP and Reuters came much closer to balancing positive and negative statements toward the US. Whether that form of 'balance' is appropriate is a normative question beyond the scope of this study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although this study finds significant differences in the western vs non-western news agencies' sourcing patterns and tone of coverage, the analysis cannot answer why. Why the Russian news agency appeared more nationalistic than the Chinese news agency, for example – whether for financial, logistical, political or professional reasons – deserves further examination, perhaps via in-depth interviews. Similarly, what political factors or professional norms might account for Xinhua's seemingly more balanced coverage of the war debate compared with ITAR-TASS? Of all the news agencies, Xinhua relied most heavily on other media for its reports, with nearly half in this sample consisting of monitoring other news sources, compared with an average of 26 percent of such reports in the other news agencies' filings. How Xinhua chooses which media to monitor is worth further examination.

More research also is needed on the credibility of the news organizations in their home countries, and on the news organizations' reach via the other media in their countries and beyond. As Peterson (1980: 89) noted, 'Since most people do not read agency news copy in its entirety, but, rather, what newspapers select from and add to that copy, it is particularly important to understand the patterns of news selection of elite newspapers.' Of course, in the present day, millions of the world's residents obtain their news from the internet, not just newspapers, and the Akamai Net Usage Index for News (Weisman, 2005), which can track the number of online global news consumers, may offer a fruitful area for future study. In the past, Boyd-Barrett (1982: 254) suggested that outside the international agencies' home countries, national news agencies may be able to control how the reports are seen. Whether this possibility persists in the internet age is unclear.

In addition, what is true for a news agency based in a particular country might not be true for all media in a country, particularly a country with a free press. A survey of western journalists in five countries found, for example, that although there was little correlation between the American journalists' partisanship and their perceptions of their news organization's partisanship, a strong correlation did exist for journalists working in Europe, where many newspapers are associated with particular political parties or ideologies (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996: 459). However, the survey was directed only to journalists working for newspapers and broadcast organizations, not news agencies, and did not include French journalists. How a French newspaper – or a British tabloid, for that matter – covered the US–Iraq debate might well be different.

The study's time frame and sampling also could be expanded. This study examined three weeks of news coverage before the US war on Iraq began. The results might differ during different stages of the conflict, as Hertog (2000) reported in his study of the 1986 US–Libya conflict. In the last two weeks of February, for example, all agencies might have reported more information from Chinese, Russian and French sources as those countries hardened their opposition to US policy and even threatened a veto in the UN Security Council. Another possibility is that AP might have started using even more American sources after the military conflict began, in a 'rally around the flag' effect.

Finally, how the content is interpreted obviously depends on who is doing the coding (Merten, 1996). How does one's perception of whether a paragraph provides information to support or oppose US policy depend upon whether one is a US, French or Iraqi citizen? How much does the coding depend on what a particular paragraph states vs what the coder believes to be the context implicit in the information presented? Whether coders of different nationalities or even different political persuasions would obtain the same results is worth investigating, especially given the so-called hostile media effect (Vallone et al., 1985). Furthermore, when Hertog (2000: 621) examined coverage of the US–Libya conflict, he found that 'support for the US administration and opposition to a foreign power' are not equivalent. That is likely the case here given that policy-makers from France, China and Russia opposed US policy while also calling for weapons inspections in Iraq.

Conclusions

Despite the limitations of this study, the results suggest that in a global debate about the legitimacy of a war, 'balance' likely encompasses more than a mathematical equation in which one country's viewpoints are given equal amounts of support and criticism in the international news flow. Whose viewpoints are expressed – not just the viewpoint itself – takes on significance, as well, and the western and non-western agencies differed dramatically in their use of non-western vs western news sources. If agencies such as IPS were created to give the developing world a voice, that need becomes more apparent in this study. In this sample of news coverage, on average, western sources accounted for 60 percent of the western news agencies' sources, while non-western sources averaged 36 percent. The reverse was essentially true for the non-western news agencies. While researchers have long studied the imbalance in the flow of news about particular countries, research into source dependency suggests the imbalance *within* the flow of international news should be addressed, as well.

The decision to go to war belonged primarily to the democratically elected leaders of the US. Their decisions would presumably be influenced by public opinion within the US, public opinion that, in turn, would be influenced by news coverage of the pre-war debate. The war to come would certainly affect lives in the US, whether in terms of loved ones sent to Iraq or tax dollars spent, but the war would arguably affect Iraqis and others living in the Middle East even more. Nonetheless, in the western news agencies, western voices were louder than those from outside the world's power centers, and the voices of the Bush administration were the strongest yet. Given their dominance in the international news flow, the western news agencies might want to re-examine how well they convey the attitudes and beliefs of the non-western world to news consumers in the West, most of whom live in democratic societies based on the premise that information will lead to informed self-governance. As Richstad (1981: 248) noted more than 20 years ago:

There are many critics, especially but not exclusively from a socialist viewpoint, who stress the commercial and market nature of the international news agencies, and they contend that this influences the news flow in ways that are detrimental not only to the Third World countries but to all countries. Imbalance in the flow of news, for example, is viewed as a serious problem to the United States understanding of the world, particularly of the non-Western world.

An imbalance in sourcing practices is as problematic as – and is a reflection of – an overall imbalance in the flow of news.

Notes

1. Preliminary results, which did not include Reuters and were based on a smaller sample size (20 articles per news agency) and shorter time frame, were published in Horvit (2004).
2. The Satterthwaite *t*-test method was used because of the unequal sample sizes per agency.

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