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Foreign News Coverage: The U.S. Media's Undervalued Asset

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Foreign News Coverage: The US Media's Undervalued Asset

By Jill Carroll¹

Introduction

Media companies are cutting back on the numbers of foreign bureaus and correspondents as the newspaper and television news business face financial pressures. But they are making a financial miscalculation and missing an opportunity to capitalize on an asset that they appear to undervalue.

Good quality foreign news coverage is in fact in demand by readers and viewers. It adds significant value to a medium but in ways that can't always be directly measured by net profits. Higher quality employees, greater credibility and exclusive stories are all a result of having one's own staff providing good quality foreign news coverage. These benefits strengthen the medium as an organization and when factored into a cost-benefit calculation, the costs associated with producing good quality foreign news coverage begin to seem like a bargain.

Data collected from individual media outlets as well as from surveys done by media think tanks show declines in the amount of foreign correspondents and foreign news coverage in general. But in this time of financial uncertainty in the media industry, cutting quality foreign reporting will only further weaken the ability to turn a profit. Investing in good quality foreign reporting will raise the value of the entire news product.

There is evidence that a demographic has emerged that is drawn to media with original, top quality foreign news. This group is made up of very high news consumers that are also generally well heeled and averaging early middle age—an attractive audience for many high-end advertisers. At the same time there was a general increase in demand for foreign news after the 9/11 attacks. While receding slightly recently, it still represents higher levels than the 1990's. It is also evidence that people are thinking more about the outside world and how it impacts them and are looking for information that helps them understand what that impact might be.

There are also innovative ways that will be discussed in this paper to produce good quality, unique foreign news coverage that are cheaper than the traditional model and could be used best by small and medium-size media outlets.

For larger organizations, the credibility of their brand name is in large part staked on the fact that they have experienced foreign correspondents around the globe producing some of the best reporting in the world. It imbues the medium with a sense of seriousness about the news and trustworthiness that is crucial to reader and viewer trust. Chopping foreign

¹ I am deeply grateful for all the help I received from people in the industry who took the time to talk to me and send reams of data to help with the paper. Thanks also to Kimberly Schneider who, through enormous effort, collected data, assembled the charts and was a great sounding-board for ideas and discussing the content of the paper. I couldn't have done it without such a wonderful research assistant.

bureaus and reducing insightful, unique foreign coverage would terminally undercut the credibility of a serious, major media outlet.

Credibility is the only asset that matters for a serious news medium. It is intangible but yet directly affects the medium's financial health. Undercut it, and it spells the beginning of the end, like burning the 2x4's of your home to provide heat for the night.

I. There is a Demand for Quality Foreign News Coverage

In readership surveys the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Baltimore Sun* all found that readers ranked international/national news among the top sections they read, according to the foreign editors at those publications I spoke to. The reliability of readership surveys is a question for statisticians and polling experts to decide, but they do affect the thinking of decision makers at newspapers.

Starting with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks the public's interest in foreign news increased, buoyed by generally higher news consumption. Not surprisingly, just after the attacks 74% of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Pressⁱ said they were closely following the news of the attacks, and interest remained at the 60% level by early December 2001. The increased interest in news of the attacks also boosted interest in all news in general, up from an average since 1990 of 23% to 48%.ⁱⁱ

A separate Pew poll conducted in April 2006ⁱⁱⁱ found 39% of people polled followed overseas news closely most of the time and 58% follow it only when there are major events overseas. That is down from April 2004 when 52% of people said they followed international news most of the time, but this is still more interest than people showed in news about politicians or from Washington. Just 17% of people in the 2006 poll said they followed news from Washington closely, down from 24% in 2004, an election year.

Aside from measuring the public's actual news consumption there is an increased interest in foreign issues that could clearly be fed by in-depth, quality foreign news coverage.

A Pew survey^{iv} in August 2006 during the Israel-Lebanon war and revelations in London of a plot to hijack and blow-up American airliners found high interest in overseas news. Some 54% of those polled said they were following the airplane bombing plot "very closely" and another 40% were following the Israel-Lebanon war "very closely,"—a significant number considering US forces were not involved in the fighting.

But the survey also found that "most Americans feel they do not have a very good understanding of the political situation in the Middle East. When asked which current news story they wished they understood better, more volunteered the Lebanon crises than any other story," the survey report said.

This is evidence that there is an appetite for foreign news. The demand is there and the market can meet it if only it finds the right way. From this example it appears more background information and context about events overseas will help people's understanding and, in turn, their level of interest.

This may in part explain why a magazine like the *Economist*, which specializes in in-depth foreign news from all corners of the globe, even with a high newsstand price, has found an audience.

Its North American circulation grew 14.8% in the last year and the region now accounts for about half the *Economist's* total circulation, according to Paul Rossi, publisher of the *Economist* for North America.

“Post 9-11...being broadly and better informed is a requirement in this world. The post 9-11 MBA audience is very savvy and they’ve seen a different world,” Rossi said in an interview. The average age of an *Economist* reader is 39 and they tend to be high news consumers, like those found in a 2002 Pew survey report.

In that survey, Pew found an increase in people following foreign news “very closely” from 14% to 21% between 2000 and 2002.

“Given the fragmentation of modern news audiences, serious news outlets may benefit from the modest increase in interest in the international news observed in the survey...(because those interested in foreign news) make up a disproportionate share of the audiences for outlets such as the NewsHour, political and literary magazines, and to a lesser degree evening network and cable news,” the report said.^v

That growth was mainly among the highly educated, affluent and older Americans while 61% of the general population pays close attention to foreign news only when there is a major crisis.^{vi}

While the *Economist's* business model, as a weekly magazine, may not be applicable to daily newspapers, it is evidence that good quality, in-depth foreign coverage can be profitable and draw an audience for media that are already oriented towards serious, hard news.

“Very close” attention to foreign news spiked after the 9/11 attacks and as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan unfolded, it has since declined slightly. But still some 62% of those polled by Pew in 2006^{vii} followed international news “very closely” or “somewhat closely.” That figure was at 68% in 2002 and 62% in 1998.

Since 9/11 Americans have felt their daily lives and even personal safety are tied in some ways to events happening overseas. This realization is an opportunity for news outlets to help people understand those events and how our actions as a nation shape those events and their consequences.

II. Declines in Foreign Bureaus and Coverage

The numbers of foreign bureaus owned by the US media have steadily declined in recent years, even as they pour more resources into covering expensive stories like the war in Iraq.

American Foreign Correspondents

	2000	2002	2006
Baltimore Sun	6	5	3
Boston Globe	5	5	10
Boston Herald	10	10	0
Chicago Tribune	9	10	11
Christian Science Monitor	13	8	9
Copley News Service	1	1	1
Dallas Morning News	7	8	4
Detroit News	2	2	0
Houston Chronicle	3	3	--
Knight Ridder	7	8	9
LA Times	28	30	30
Miami Herald	5	6	6
New Orleans Times-Picayune	1	1	--
New York Post	1	1	1
New York Times	34	41	23
Newark's Star Ledger	0	2	0
Newsday	6	5	4
Philadelphia Inquirer	4	3	2
San Antonio Express	1	1	1
San Francisco Chronicle	1	2	1
San Jose Mercury News	1	2	0
St. Petersburg Times	2	2	2
USA Today	6	5	5*
Washington Post	23	23	22
Washington Times	2	3	0
Total w/out Wall Street Journal	179	188	141
Vacancies	4	12	1
Occupied	175	176	140
Wall Street Journal	107	128	109
Total	282	304	249

Source: State of the American Newspaper, *American Journalism Review*, 2002, and information individually provided by the newspapers.

* One vacancy

But pressure seems to be strongest on mid-sized newspapers to cut foreign staffs and indeed, the sharpest decline has been among some of those newspapers.

Distribution of American newspaper foreign correspondents

	2000	2002	2006
Wall Street Journal	37%	41%	44%
Large Newspapers	35%	34%	36%
Mid-sized Newspapers	28%	25%	21%

Source: State of the American Newspaper, *American Journalism Review*, 2002, and information individually provided by the newspapers

The starkest example is Tribune Company. It is shuttering the *Baltimore Sun's* and *Newsday's* foreign bureaus and will rely instead on Tribune system reporters overseas. The rationale is that Tribune's *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* will handle the bureau reporting and that doing this will also eliminate overlap with other papers in the chain.

But one of the things the *Sun* and *Newsday* were particularly well known for was their ambitious foreign coverage. They distinguished themselves from average metro daily newspapers by having their own foreign staff—even if only a handful of correspondents. Their investment in original foreign coverage is often what made them great and not just average. But at small and mid-sized papers the fad solution to the industry's struggle to maintain 20% profit margins is to focus more on local news.

ⁱ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Survey Report, Terrorism Transforms News Interest. Dec. 18, 2001.

ⁱⁱ Pew Center, Survey Report, Terrorism Transforms News Dec. 18, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ Pew Center, Biennial news consumption survey, Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership, July 30, 2006.

^{iv} Pew Center, Survey Report, American Attitudes Hold Steady in Face of Foreign Crisis, Aug. 17, 2006

^v Pew Center, Survey Report, Public's News Habits Little Changed by Sept. 11, June 9, 2002

^{vi} Pew Center, Survey Report, Public's News Habits Little Changed by Sept. 11, June 9, 2002.

^{vii} Pew Center, Biennial news consumption survey, Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership, July 30, 2006

Number of foreign correspondents at small/medium size newspapers

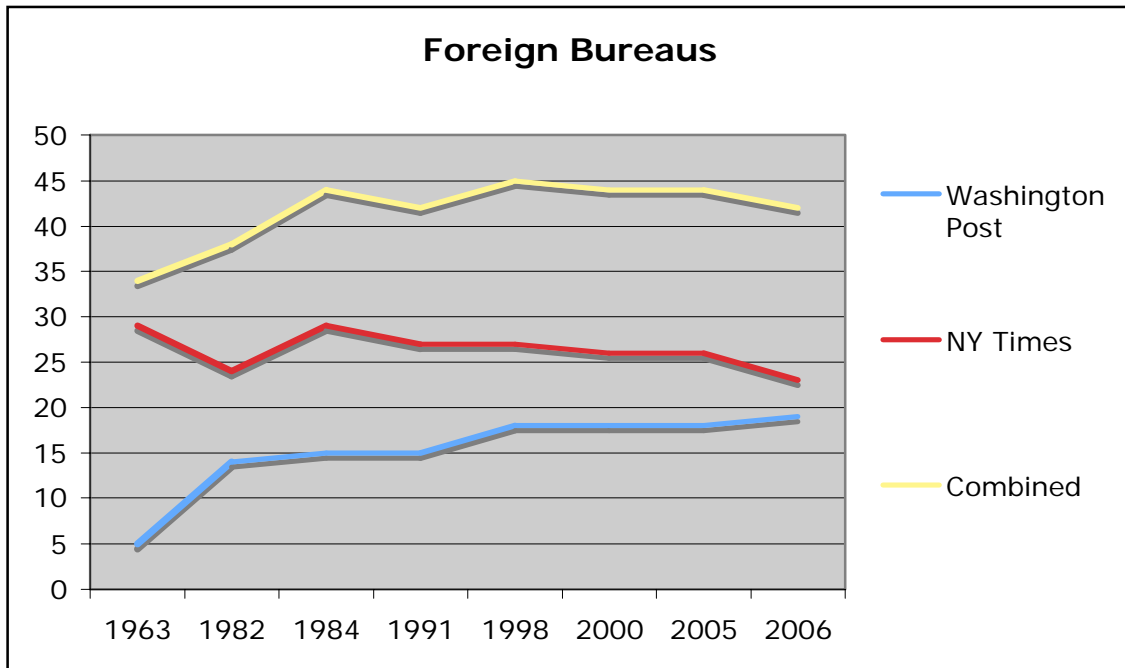
	2000	2002	2006
Baltimore Sun	6	5	3
Boston Globe	5	5	10
Boston Herald	10	10	0
Chicago Tribune	9	10	11
Christian Science Monitor	13	8	9
Copley News Service	1	1	1
Dallas Morning News	7	8	4
Detroit News	2	2	0
Houston Chronicle	3	3	--
Miami Herald	5	6	6
New Orleans Times-Picayune	1	1	--
New York Post	1	1	1
Newark's Star Ledger	0	2	0
Newsday	6	5	4*
Philadelphia Inquirer	4	3	2
San Antonio Express	1	1	1
San Francisco Chronicle	1	2	1
San Jose Mercury News	1	2	0
St. Petersburg Times	2	2	2
Washington Times	2	3	0
Total	80	80	52

Source: State of the American Newspaper, American Journalism Review, 2002, and information individually provided by the newspapers.

* All four bureaus will close in 2007.

That message has reached some of the larger newspapers, whose credibility is in large part staked on the breadth of their original foreign stories. As a result their investments in foreign coverage have been steadier than their smaller counterparts over the years.

“We are front and center in the paper's determination to be distinguished, and worth reading. We are what makes the *Post* different from the *Baltimore Sun* or *Philadelphia Inquirer* or *Houston Chronicle*,” wrote David Hoffman, assistant managing editor for Foreign News *Washington Post* in an emailed response to questions.



Source: The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*

But the number of foreign bureaus at the “Big Three” networks has dropped significantly since 9/11. ABC, NBC and CBS all had six foreign bureaus by the summer of 2003, according to *American Journalism Review*,^{viii} after ABC and NBC cut seven and CBS cut four bureaus since the 1980’s.

That decline has in turn meant drops in the amount of foreign news. Coverage of foreign affairs dropped from 27% in 1987 to 14% by 2004,^{ix} according to a month-long study of 16 newspapers’ front pages by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. The same study found the nightly broadcast news devoted 19% of all stories to foreign affairs in 1987, slowly dropping off to 10% by 2002 then spiking to 25% in 2003 before dropping again to 14% in 2004.

Even as the numbers of foreign bureaus shrink, and overall bulk of coverage appears to be diminishing, foreign news is still among the largest segments of news coverage, although by a smaller and smaller margin.

The 2005 annual report^x by the Project found that among the newspapers studied, foreign affairs coverage was roughly the same as domestic affairs coverage in 2003 and 2004, whereas in 1977, 1987 and 1997 foreign affairs went from three times as much coverage as domestic news to about a third more than domestic news.

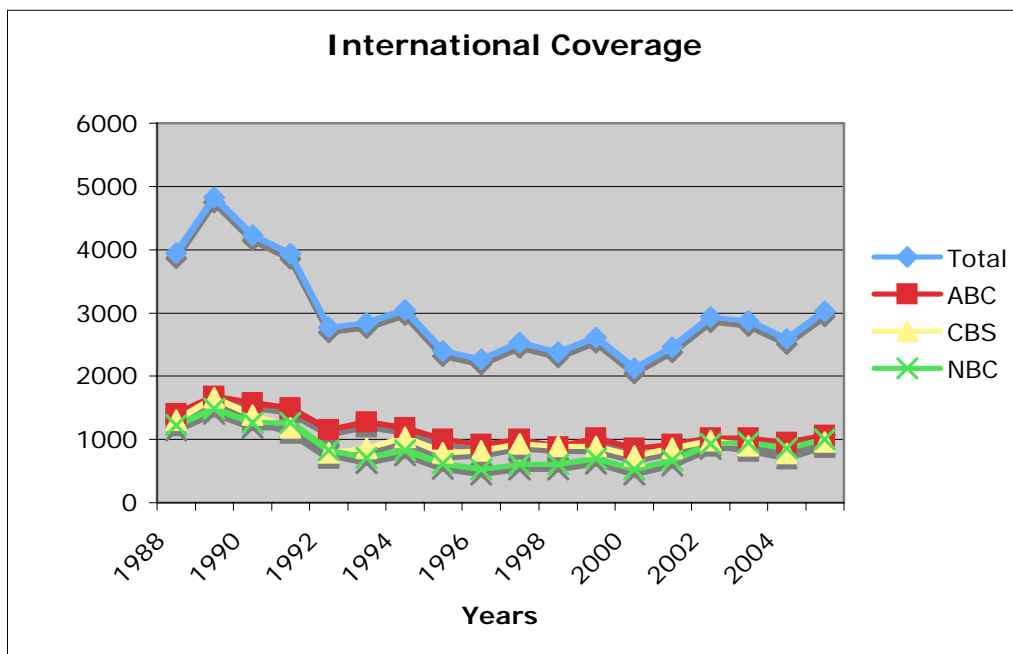
But the picture is different for television news. For CBS, ABC and NBC, foreign coverage in general rose after the 9/11 attacks in the three categories that have been measured by The Tyndall Report since 1988. Stories about US foreign policy,

international stories unrelated to US foreign policy, and stories filed from foreign bureaus all rose sharply after the 9/11 attacks after steady declines in the 1990's.

The number of minutes from stories from foreign bureaus rose from 1,382 in 2,000 to 2,772 in 2003 and then 2,358 in 2005.

Time devoted to stories about US foreign policy totaled 1,254 minutes in 2000 then jumped to 4,111 minutes in 2003 and evened out at 2,358 minutes in 2005.

Some 2,127 minutes in 2000 were devoted to stories from overseas that didn't involve US foreign policy. The number increased to 2,871 in 2003 and continued to climb to 3,030 minutes in 2005.

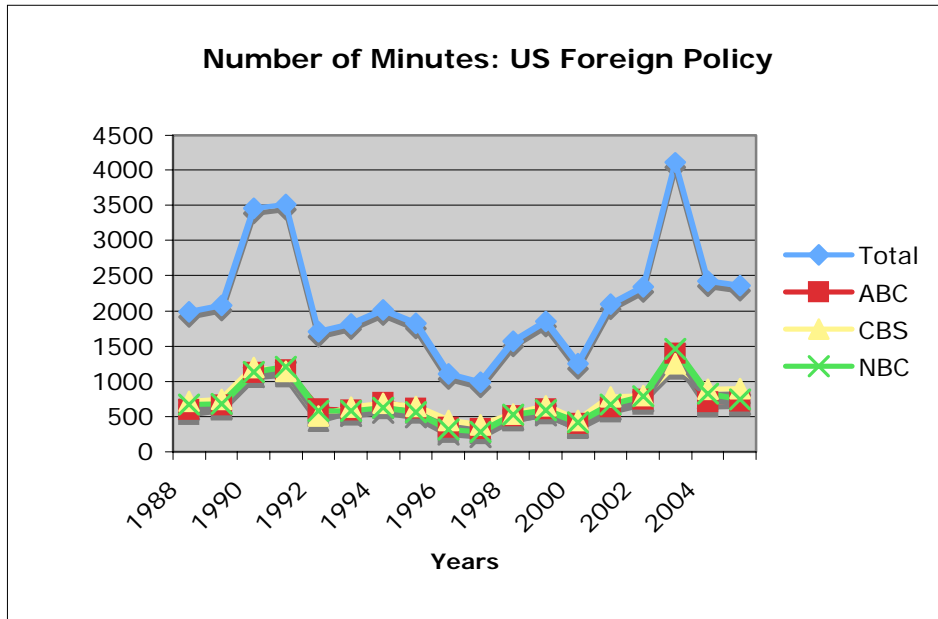


Source: Andrew Tyndall, The Tyndall Report, 1988-2005

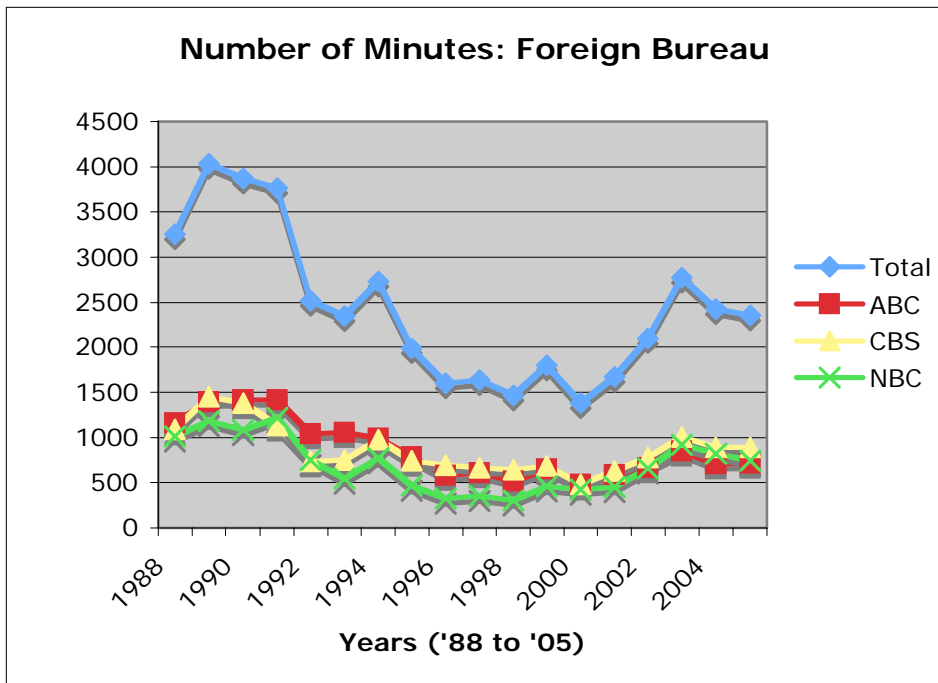
^{viii} Lucinda Fleeson, The Bureau of Missing Bureaus, American Journalism Review, October/November 2003

^{ix} Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005 Annual Report, Newspaper Content Analysis

^x Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005 Annual Report, Newspaper Content Analysis



Source: Andrew Tyndall, The Tyndall Report, 1988-2005



Source: Andrew Tyndall, The Tyndall Report, 1988-2005

That is out of the 14,500- and 16,000-minute annual news hole that the three networks' nightly weekday newscasts have, combined, according to The Tyndall Report.

The higher levels of foreign coverage have generally held steady through 2005, the last year data was available, although not always at the record highs of 2003.

For US foreign policy stories "2001 was the beginning of the comeback and 2003 saw record highs, almost all accounted for by the invasion and occupation of Iraq. As Iraq coverage has waned since then, foreign policy has declined from its record heights," wrote Andrew Tyndall in an e-mail.

III. Value That Can't Be Measured In Dollars

Quality, original foreign news coverage strengthens the two most important assets of any serious news organization: credibility and exclusivity. Cutting it means lowering the value of those fundamental assets.

The declines in coverage and foreign bureaus don't seem to be because editors or reporters don't see the value of foreign coverage, but is rather a reflection of the priorities of the financial decision-makers at media companies. Those decision makers don't appear to factor in the non-monetary value great foreign coverage brings a paper when considering the cost of running a foreign bureau. That value is detailed below.

IIIa. A Recruiting Tool and Having Real Experts on Staff

"You get a different pool of people with larger ambition if you have a foreign desk," said Robert Ruby, the former foreign editor of the *Baltimore Sun*. "You have something you can hold out to people as an opportunity for internal advancement...that's to the reader's benefit. It's going to be a better paper."

A story by an experienced reporter living in the region he or she is covering means readers are not just getting a recitation of news of the day. They're getting someone with expertise, perspective and sound judgment and a clear eye from years of on-the-ground reporting. That's an intellectual property asset.

"If you're getting a story by Tracy Wilkinson on the war between Israel and Lebanon you're getting someone who has covered wars...all over. She's bringing all that expertise to this story and therefore (a reader can) trust that judgment," said Marjorie Miller, the foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Many foreign correspondents speak foreign languages and are experts in issues as varied as nuclear weapons manufacturing, civil wars, development in poor countries, religion and climate change. The value of that knowledge to the newspaper or television network has a public-service value that far outweighs whatever those reporters' salaries are.

Here are a few brief profiles of foreign correspondents and the kind of knowledge and expertise their stories bring readers and viewers everyday. It's skewed towards reporters in the Middle East where I have had in-person experience with foreign correspondents.

Anthony Shadid of the *Washington Post* speaks fluent Arabic, has lived in the Middle East for years, and because of that understood the emerging Shiite power structure in Iraq after the war long before anyone else did.

My colleagues at the *Christian Science Monitor* Dan Murphy and Scott Peterson each are experts in a wide range of fields from Indonesia to depleted uranium to militant Islam to Africa's civil wars. They earned that expertise by living day in and day out in with the people and societies they were covering for decades.

Ben Weidman of CNN speaks Arabic and has worked in the region for years covering one of the most complex and contentious conflicts, that between Israelis and Palestinians. Richard Engle of NBC also speaks Arabic, learning much of it by living in one of Cairo's rougher districts before spending the last years reporting in Baghdad.

Through reports that readers and viewers can trust, that expertise is essential to maintaining a medium's credibility. That expertise and credibility cannot be gained by parachuting a reporter into a crisis who has no background in who the players are, how they think and what forces drive them. There may be a role for reporters based in the US to make trips overseas to do stories as a cheaper way for some media to produce good quality foreign stories, but that is a model that differs vastly from the typical "parachute journalism" which I will get into later in this paper.

Media outlets should also be trumpeting this great resource of experienced foreign correspondents whose stories and insight is exclusively theirs. Television has done a pretty good job of marketing its reporters and their experience to show viewers the extra value they are getting by watching their channel.

CNN has made Christiane Amanpour an icon of television foreign correspondence, imbuing her image with a sense of trust and experience by highlighting her broad experience.

The BBC ran a series of commercials in 2005 featuring snippets of discussions with their correspondents about why they love their jobs despite the dangers they face. Viewers and readers won't appreciate the value of having experienced, thoughtful correspondents that report solely for their media organization if no one explains how their expertise serves the reader or viewer.

Miller recounted an anecdote of a reader calling the paper looking to speak to Tracy Wilkinson. They didn't understand that Wilkinson *lives* overseas, reporting on the ground every single day, not from a far away office in Los Angeles or Washington, D.C.

Few reporters like to be celebrities, and being marketed by their medium might be distasteful to many correspondents, particularly print reporters. But consumers won't demand a higher quality product if they don't know what the difference is between a wire story carried by everyone and a story that can only be found in one outlet reported by a seasoned journalist.

At the Pulitzer Center, a nonprofit organization that funds reporting of under-covered parts of the world, journalists are encouraged to give radio and television interviews, or speak at college campuses to promote their work.

“For that moment you're one of the people who has fresh insight and that's something a lot of newspapers don't take advantage of,” said John Sawyer, director of the center.

The highlight should be of course, on the great work the reporter is doing and their experience as a way of underlining the faith a reader or viewer can have in their reporting, but not on reporters as personalities themselves. Reporters should never be the story. But the quality and veracity of a medium's stories should be highlighted by showcasing the credibility of those producing them.

3b. It's an Exclusive

The uniqueness of stories produced by a medium's own reporters is what draws readers and viewers. They want something more than the daily news stories or the wire stories that are repeated across the media.

Indeed, Miller of the *L.A. Times* says that while the public can get the latest news headlines from radio, TV or the newswires, it is the newspaper's one-of-a-kind stories—from distinctive analysis to enterprise series—that draws the most readers to the paper's website.

“It tends to be our unique stories. If they want breaking news, wire stories, they go to Yahoo!,” said Miller. “They come to get the stories they can't get somewhere else.”

3c. It Doesn't Cost That Much

The actual cost of running a foreign bureau seems like a bargain when compared to the value it brings, which can't be measured directly by profit margins: expertise, credibility, cache and public service.

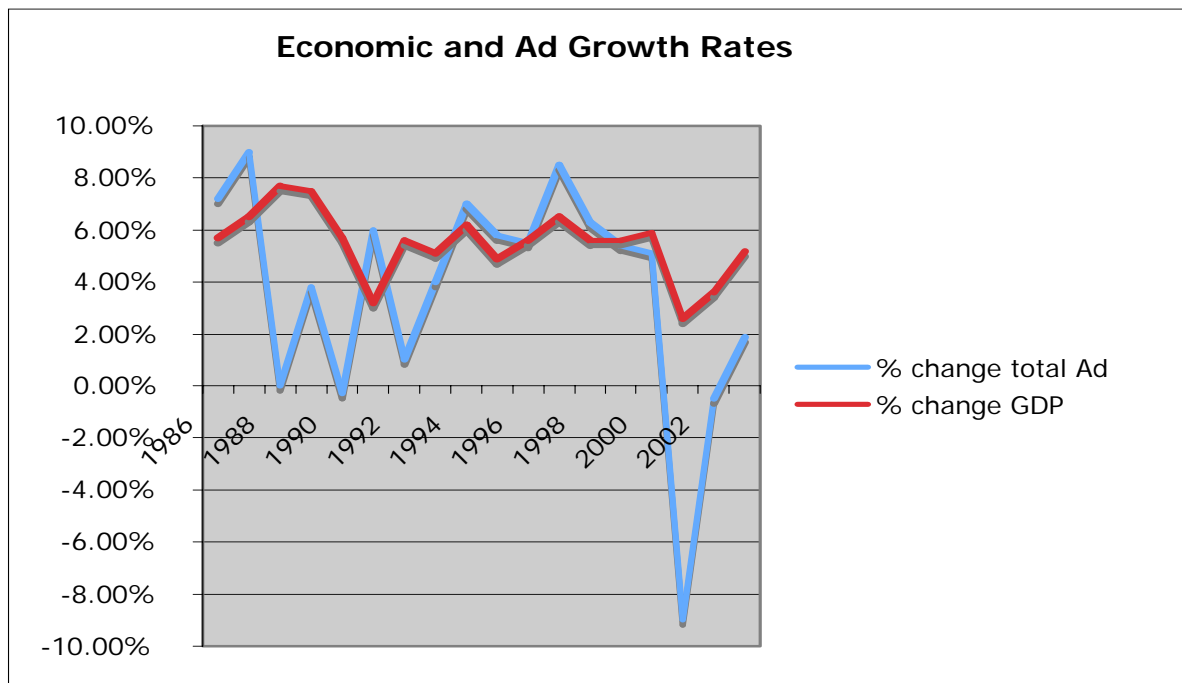
An average newspaper foreign bureau costs between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year depending on whether you include a reporter's salary. Most bureaus are one-man operations. Some can cost far more than that, like Baghdad; other locations can cost far less. One major metropolitan newspaper spends \$1.5 million a year to keep reporters year-round in Baghdad and television operations can run far higher. The major expenses are rent (many media companies pay part or all of their correspondents' housing costs), travel and expenses associated with moving a correspondent. In places like Baghdad, security can make up the bulk of the costs.

Robert Ruby, the former foreign editor at the *Baltimore Sun*, said the paper ran one of the leanest foreign operations around, taking up about 5% of the total budget but producing 20-25% of the front page stories.

“But it looks like a cost center to someone just coming up the corporate ladder,” he said.

Covering any story is more expensive for television than print publications. In places like Baghdad, where security services and masses of support staff are needed, one bureau can easily cost several million dollars a year.

The vast majority of those costs have to be covered by advertising revenues.



Source: Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003.

Total ad revenues for the Big Three broadcast networks in 2003 were \$12.4 billion according to a 2003 report by Kagan World Media.^{xi} News programs alone on the three major broadcasters in 2002 brought in \$579,897,000 in revenues. Ad revenues for the nine largest newspaper companies, by comparison, in 2002 were \$14.1 billion.

Advertising revenues for the broadcast news programs in general have had a rocky road. They fell 7.7% in 2000 and a staggering 43.6% in 2001 and another 3.5% in 2002, according to the Kagan report.

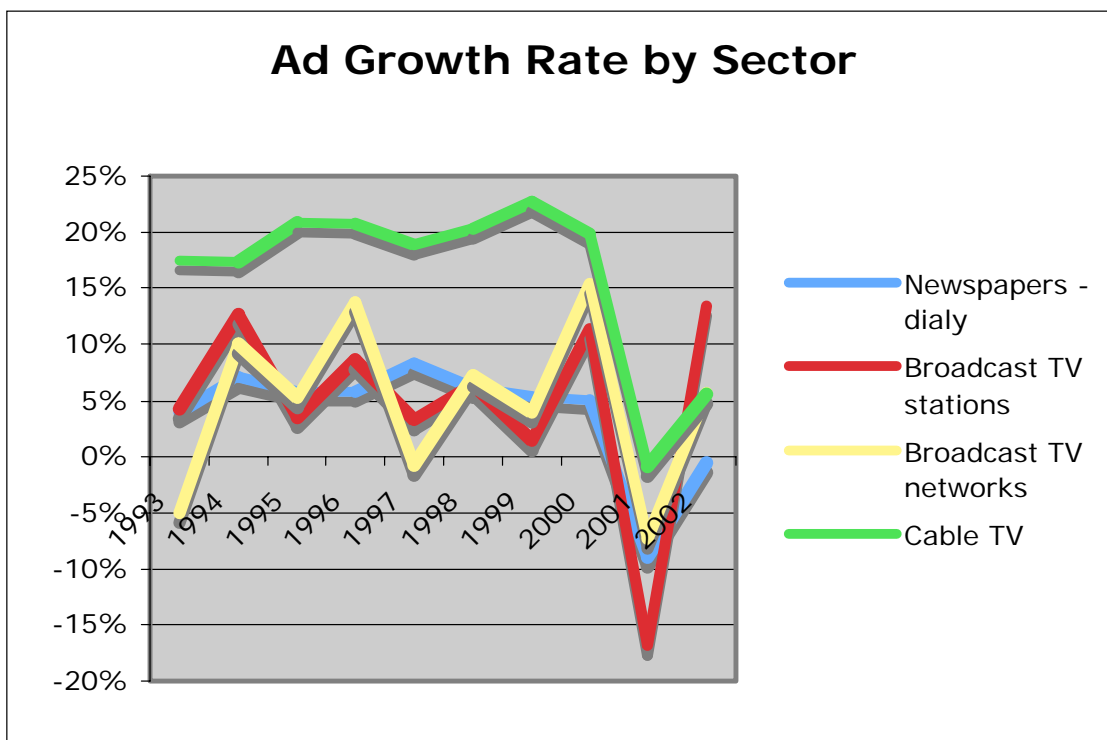
^{xi} Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media

Total TV Network Revenues
(thousands)

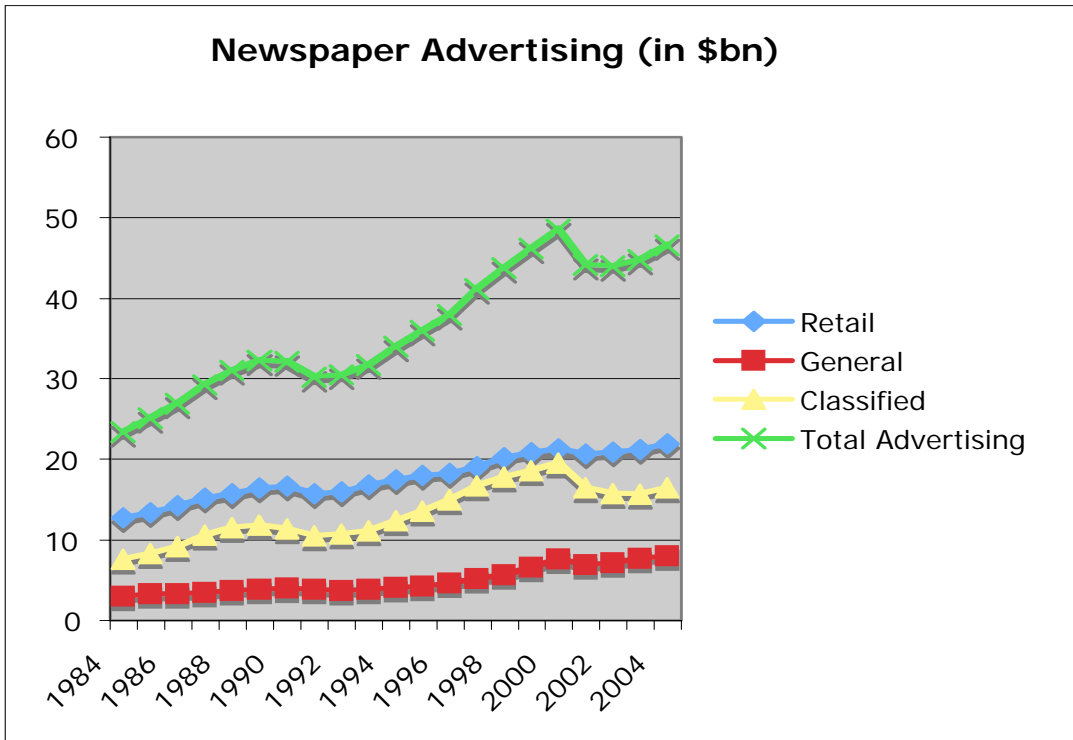
	News	Share
1997	973043	9.2%
1998	1026809	9.0%
1999	1154386	10.1%
2000	1065158	8.0%
2001	600719	5.0%
2002	579897	4.7%

Source: Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003

Newspaper ad revenues also took a hit after the dot.com bust. After peaking at \$48.67 billion in ad revenue in 2000, that number hovered between \$44.3 billion and \$44.9 billion through 2003, according to the Newspaper Association of America. By 2005, ad revenues of the top 25 newspaper companies came in at some \$33 billion, according to *Advertising Age* magazine.



Source: Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003

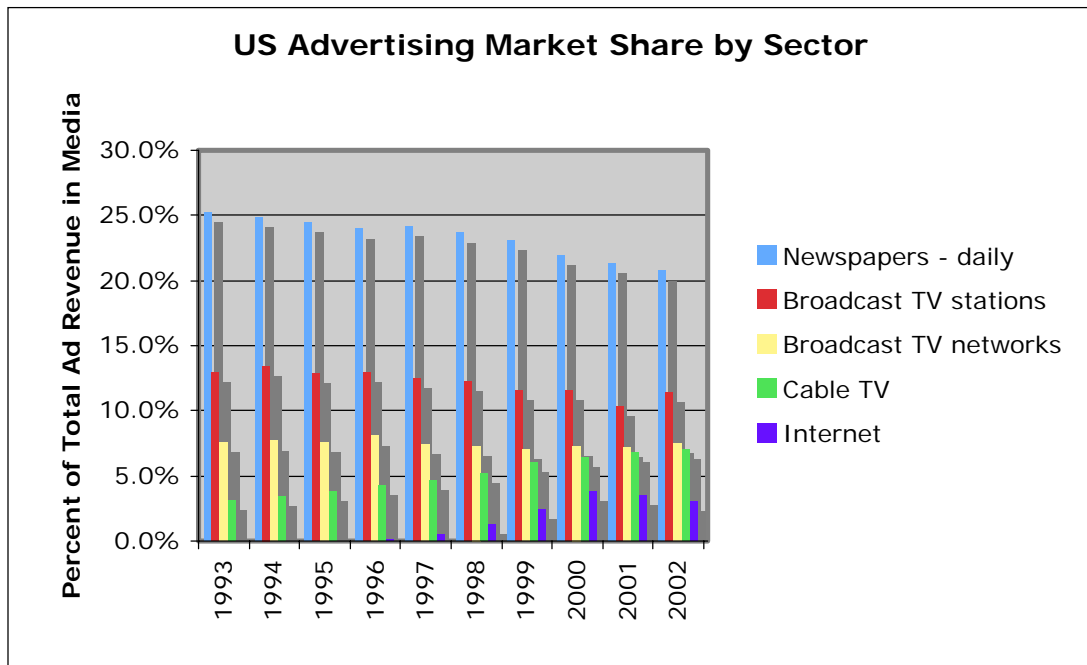


Source: Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003

Newspaper Publishing Division Financial by % in Cash Flow

	Ad Revenues (mil)		Circulation Revenues		Ad % of total		Circulation % of total	
	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002
Dow Jones & Co	953.3	801.5	380.8	357.3	71.5%	69.2%	28.5%	30.8%
Gannet Co	4119.8	4122.7	1233.1	1182.1	77.0%	77.7%	23.0%	22.3%
Knight Ridder	2254.4	2206.9	512.3	487.7	81.5%	81.9%	18.5%	18.1%
McClatchy Co	871.4	877.8	158.5	166.1	83.8%	84.1%	16.2%	15.9%
New York Times	2042.2	2048.8	759.7	825.2	72.9%	71.3%	27.1%	28.7%
Pulitzer	322	325.6	81.2	80.8	79.9%	80.1%	20.1%	19.9%
Tribune Co	2947.3	2948.4	662.4	669.5	81.7%	81.5%	18.3%	18.5%
Totals/Averages	14324.4	14160.8	4025	3997.8	78.1%	78.0%	21.9%	22.0%

Source: Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003



Source: Advertising Forecasts for 2004, second edition, Kagan World Media, 2003

All those dropping revenues may not be comforting to someone who is responsible for keeping a healthy bottom line. But it shows that media companies do still have enormous resources and income and the cost of a foreign bureau is not going to break the bank, particularly not when one factors in the value it brings the medium, though it isn't directly evident in net profit.

IV. Cheaper Ways to Great Foreign Correspondence

The declines in circulation, viewership and ad revenues have panicked the industry and sent news outlets scrambling to save money. So what's an ambitious newspaper or news program to do that wants quality, distinctive foreign news?

One tried-and-true method is freelancers. There are enormously talented reporters who pick up and move to another part of the world to freelance, immersing themselves in the language, culture and politics of a foreign country. They're usually hungry to write and hardworking. A freelancer can provide a steady stream of quality coverage and be paid well, including expenses, for far less than the cost of setting up an entire bureau.

Some media outlets have reservations about trusting freelancers because they are an unknown quantity. They worry about the reliability of their reporting, and in dangerous areas, about their ability to stay safe. There is a discussion within the industry about the ethics of using freelancers in dangerous areas where they might be motivated to take more risks to get stories that staffers wouldn't cover. Some argue that freelancers shouldn't be used for dangerous stories because the prospect of work will drive more to risk their lives.

But based on the dozens of freelancers and staffers that I encountered in the Middle East, a reporter's decisions about what areas to enter and what stories to pursue is driven by their individual instincts about what is safe. Some are cowboys, most are not, and the income from one story is not enough to motivate most freelancers to take risks unduly.

As just a sample of the talented freelancers out there, take Borzou Daragahi. He left the Associated Press to freelance in Baghdad and soon was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for articles he wrote from Baghdad for the *Newark Star-Ledger*. Ashraf Khalil, who speaks Arabic, was a freelancer in the Middle East for years, including in Iraq, writing for a variety of outlets. The *Los Angeles Times* had the good sense to snatch them both up and make them staffers.

One excellent evolution in the use of freelancers is the recently started Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. The center is a division of the World Security Institute with receives funding from the Pulitzer family. Headed by John Sawyer, formerly of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the nonprofit organization is bringing great, in-depth reporting from undercovered parts of the world to US media.

Reporters around the world, usually freelancers, submit proposals for funding from the Center for reporting projects and the Center finds media who will run the stories. By the end of 2006 the Center had funded 10 projects for just \$100,000. These include print and broadcast media, often combining the two to cross-publicize the stories.

“Some editors look askance at outside work so it's hard, but we have to establish credibility and brand,” Sawyer said. “I just think it's heading toward a direction where you need nonprofits.”

Some of the stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as well as on a public television show called “Foreign Exchange” with Fareed Zakaria, the *Newsweek* International editor and frequent television commentator. The show is also in part produced by the World Security Institute.

“It makes it easier to market the story to old media by having it on Fareed's show,” said Sawyer in an interview. Indeed, after the *Post-Dispatch* ran a Pulitzer Center-sponsored story during the week and mentioned that the same topic would be featured on “Foreign Exchange” that weekend, the market share of the show in St. Louis was 1.3%, up from the usual .5%, according to Sawyer. By comparison, Sawyer said, the “NewsHour,” which also airs on public television, has an average market share of 1% in St. Louis.

“It's a huge challenge because there's no space and there's no money (in newspapers for foreign coverage) and even in the major papers that have some space, there's always more content than space,” Sawyer said of convincing editors to accept Pulitzer Center-sponsored pieces.

It's a model that might be adapted for small or mid-sized newspapers that can't afford to keep reporters permanently overseas. While the Center is non-profit, their model might be adapted for smaller papers as a low-cost way to do serious foreign coverage. Reporters in the US can study an issue and do interviews to gather background before leaving for a trip to the region that might last several weeks, a sort of educated parachute journalism.

Another way small and mid-sized papers can generate good quality foreign news—and provide a good argument to convince management to pay for it—is by localizing international stories.

John Maxwell Hamilton, dean of Louisiana State University’s mass communications program wrote an entire book of examples of smart ways to localize international stories.

In *Main Street America and the Third World*, Hamilton outlines specific ways to find an international angle in local issues ranging from trade, natural resources, foreign aid, the environment and immigration.

“...journalists need only look on *Main Street America for Third World* news—news that will make foreign affairs relevant to the lives of their readers, listeners, and viewers; news that costs no more to cover than a high school basketball game,”^{xii} Maxwell wrote.

Maxwell designed the book to function as a “tip sheet,” for reporters looking to draw connections between the daily lives of their readers and the outside world, whether it’s the kinds of jobs available in the area or the products they are using. Localization done with intelligence and thoughtfulness can be a great launching pad for then sending a reporter overseas to report about the same issue from the other side.

Indeed, the *Portland Oregonian* tried this approach in 1998. The paper tracked potatoes produced in Oregon on their travels to Asian dinner tables, showing how Asia’s economic woes affect local farmers. The effort was rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism.

This approach may not be ideal for larger media organizations that can have reporters living overseas all the time. There is no replacement for that kind of knowledge and experience. For those national newspapers who play to an audience that has a larger appetite for insightful, in-depth foreign news anyway, changes in news judgment and how foreign coverage is conceptualized could help meet their readership’s demands.

For example, an innovative approach to foreign news coverage is underway at the *Washington Post*. The assistant managing editor for foreign news David Hoffman began his tenure in 2005 with a plan to partly do away with the traditional region-centric approach to covering the world. Instead, Hoffman wants many of his reporters following stories thematically and globally.

“What I am championing is a complete overhaul of the way we think of foreign news...to create (reporters) that are fully global, transnational correspondents,” said Hoffman in an interview.

Some beats are organized as issues, ranging from climate change to technology to terrorism to pathogens. Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan of the Post, for example, are based in London but have traveled from Saudi Arabia to India to write about how the digital revolution is changing the world.

“We skip a lot of elections and incremental developments...we’ve given up on the idea that everybody covers geography,” said Hoffman.

Radical changes in news judgment like this could be experimented with as a way to help bring the world home to readers and viewers in a way that is engaging and as effective as possible in helping people understand the world. It also doesn't cost anything to make stories more relevant and engaging for readers and viewers.

One way to come up with creative approaches to foreign coverage is offered in Newspaper Next's approach. The project set out to find solutions to the newspaper industry's financial troubles. One of its advisors, Clay Christenson, is a Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Innovator's Dilemma* and *The Innovator's Solution* where he pioneers the idea of companies finding out what "jobs" people need done in their lives and then tailoring their products to complete those "jobs."

To find out what "jobs" people need done regarding information in their lives, broad questions like "How do you feel about the world you live in?" "Where do you get information that gives you that impression?" "If you don't feel good about the world, what would make you feel better about it?" might help media better understand how to meet the needs of their current readers and viewers as well as non-consumers.

V. Soft News on Television as a Way to Better Inform Large Populations and Non-Consumers of Foreign News

But demanding that Americans consume only serious, earnest foreign coverage is verging on being elitist and may not help achieve the real goal of foreign coverage: a better-informed electorate.

Americans need to know what is being done in their name around the world and how their government's foreign policy might affect them. They need good information to make well informed voting choices and have an informed national debate of the issues. But that doesn't mean the information has to be delivered in a particular format. Any avenue for good information to reach the public should be embraced. Newspapers are wonderful places to find in-depth, thoughtful, smart reporting about the world, but to reach a mass audience, television is far more effective, particularly soft-news programs. Soft-news programs are not hurting for an audience or advertisers and have proven effective at better informing some people who would not normally be high news consumers.

The effectiveness of soft news to convey enough information to improve an electorate's ability to make choices that reflect their desires is well documented by Matthew A. Baum, a visiting associate professor at the Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy. Baum established in a 2006 paper^{xiii} that people who were politically inattentive tended to vote for candidates that more closely reflect their views when they received some political news via soft-news programs than do politically inattentive individuals that didn't watch soft-news programs.

"We argue that news 'quality' depends upon how well it enables citizens to determine which candidate best fits their own preferences. In this regard, for politically inattentive citizens, we argue that soft news is more efficient than traditional, hard news," wrote Baum and Angela S. Jamison of the University of California, Los Angeles, in their 2006 paper. "We found that for some voters, *one of the least* 'elite' press outlets--daytime talk shows—does 'do good' among the very voters who cause most worry for many democratic theorists: the politically unengaged."

But it is a mixed blessing.

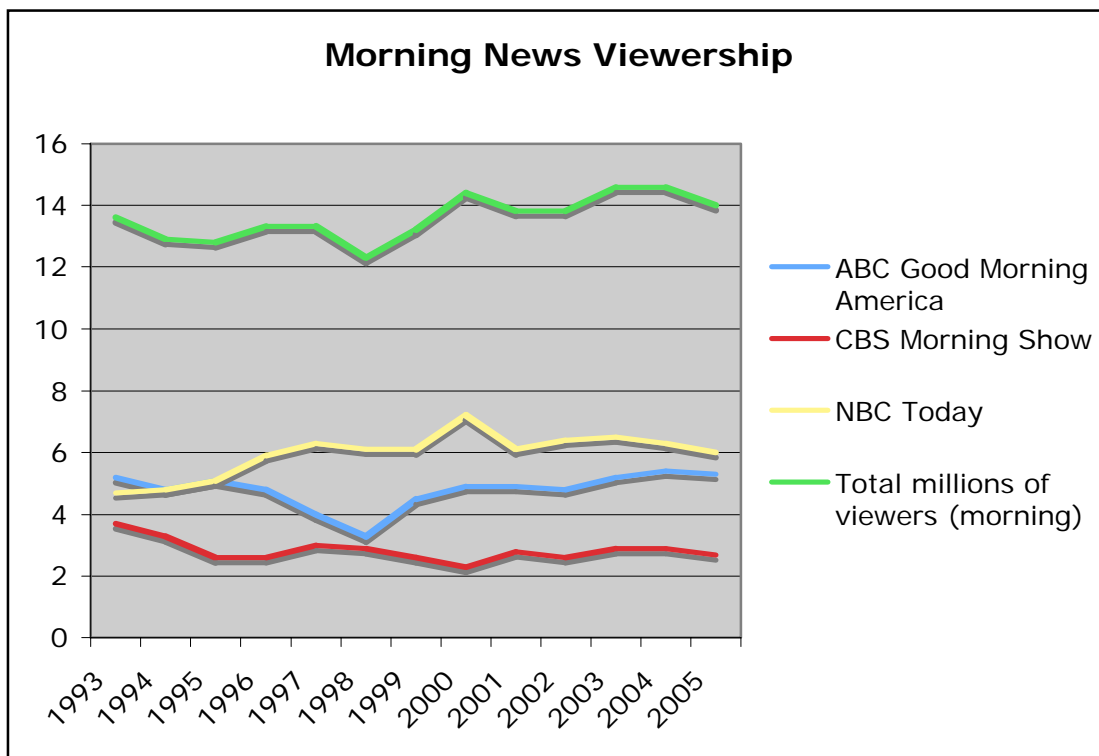
In a separate paper prepared by Baum for the 2006 meeting of the International Political Science Association,^{xiv} he notes that soft news on the one hand has made foreign policy issues accessible to more Americans. “Where America’s foreign policy was once the domain of a fairly small ‘foreign policy elite’ the soft-news media have, to some extent, democratized foreign policy.”

But “because they rarely cover ‘politics as usual,’ however, soft news does not raise *interest* in foreign policy beyond crises...in general, soft-news outlets are far less likely than their traditional counterparts to consider a given conflict as a whole or the circumstances surrounding it,” Baum wrote.

This is significant because as the 2002 Pew^{xv} study found, some 65% of those polled that had a moderate or low interest in international news said part of the reason they lose interest in foreign stories is a lack of background information about the topic.

While other studies have found that readers and viewers aren’t interested in special sections or articles devoted to the history of an issue, it may just be a matter of the way that type of information is delivered to readers or viewers. Maybe a solution is to consistently include context and background in any story, even if it’s only a few lines, to help people understand and maintain interest in the issue.

Soft news also relies in large part on the quality reporting of hard-news outlets, so its prevalence shouldn’t be seen as a challenge to hard news, but rather as a complement to it that can actually amplify the effect of important foreign stories reported in the hard news media.



Source: The State of the News Media 2006: An Annual Report on American Journalism, Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Conclusions

We've seen over the last five years how dramatically the outside world affects Americans' daily lives and how dramatically our foreign policy affects the daily lives of millions of people who aren't American citizens.

As citizens in a democracy we have the privilege and obligation to shape our policies thoughtfully and conscientiously in a direction we, after informed debate, feel is in our national interest. As a world power we have a moral obligation to use our influence responsibly and thoughtfully.

This can only happen if the electorate has enough information upon which to decide what policies most closely reflect their views and the direction they want the country to go in.

The media is an important part of making that happen. The quality of the information provided by the news media determines to a large extent the quality of the national debate and resulting policies. Having many sources of good quality, in-depth, insightful, well-informed foreign reporting is essential to keeping the national debate vigorous and churning.

This moral argument won't hold sway in many boardrooms, but the financial incentives to produce good quality foreign news should. Hopefully financial decision makers will have the foresight to realize they are drastically undervaluing foreign news coverage and have the wisdom to hang onto and invest in this valuable asset.

^{xii} Main Street America and the Third World, John Maxwell Hamilton, 1988, pg. 1

^{xiii} The Oprah Effect: How soft news Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently, Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University and Angela S. Jamison, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006.

^{xiv} The new Soft Politics: How Soft News brings Foreign Policy to the masses, and Why it Matters, Matthew A. Baum, University of California, Los Angeles, October 2006

^{xv} Pew Center, Survey Report, Public's News Habits Little Changed by Sept. 11, June 9, 2002.