



10 Differences Between Public and Expert Understandings of International Affairs

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Introduction & Summary

If a chief goal of the Global Interdependence Initiative is to move American public opinion in the direction of increased support for cooperative global engagement, then it is essential to take into account both public understandings and expert models of the issues. As this report will show, there are striking differences between the two. Communications strategies aimed at the public must recognize the gap between the cultural models held by average Americans and the expert models presented in the media — some of which probably correspond more closely to the default understandings among advocates for the Initiative.

There is also an important and challenging reminder for advocates in the fact that average Americans have not internalized the expert models, even though these models are widely disseminated in the mainstream press: People do not necessarily accept and digest the information they are given, particularly if it clashes with their own frames. As Susan Bales has put it, the truth shall *not* set you free — at least, not all by itself. But when properly framed, the truth will have a better chance.

Methods

This paper presents the results from analysis of approximately a hundred news articles and opinion pieces on foreign affairs from the mainstream print media – including the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Forbes*. The items were selected because they implied some particular perspective about the proper role of the United States in the world. The report also follows up on results from a series of cognitive interviews conducted with non-expert members of the American public (Aubrun & Grady, "American Understandings of the United States' Role in the World"), and other findings from the FrameWorks research group.

While this paper sets out to evaluate the frames used by the press in discussing international issues, the terms "expert model" and "media model" will be used somewhat interchangeably, since we found that press accounts are much more likely to take perspectives like those of foreign policy practitioners than those used by the public. The press is a medium through which perspectives are expressed, and in the language of newspaper and magazine articles, practitioner models come through much more often and more strongly than lay models.

Findings: Major expert frames

Our analysis shows that the media typically frames international issues in terms of two distinct, over-arching frames, or cultural models.

The *Discrete Country* frame is strongly rooted in the metaphor that countries are persons. In this frame, the world as a whole is the setting for an ongoing series of confrontations, reconciliations, bargaining sessions and other sorts of encounters between countries-as-persons (CAPs). The *Discrete Country* frame typically assumes that individual CAPs act principally in their own self-interest — realpolitik is an extreme form of this frame — and that encounters have winners and losers. *Discrete Country* framings often imply that the United States should remain strongly autonomous, since binding agreements and co-operative engagements limit our ability to maneuver for advantage. But they also can be friendly to international engagement, as when they highlight the value of cultivating friendly allies.

The *Global System* frame is radically different, though it is used by many of the same experts, only in different contexts. This frame implies the strong interconnectedness of individual countries, sometimes to the point of minimizing the existence of national borders and interests. For example, experts often frame questions about foreign policy in terms of its effects on the global economy. According to this frame, the United States is unavoidably part of a larger system in which the

economic health of any country may be affected by that of any other. Security is another topic often framed as a *Global System*.

Most international issues can be framed using either model. The issue of international terrorism, for example, can be framed in terms of national security, with an emphasis on tighter borders and an attempt to punish or influence other countries perceived as sources of terrorist activity. Alternatively, terrorism can be framed less politically, as a problem facing the world as a whole — a form of criminal activity that destabilizes the global order.

In principle, the GII's core value of cooperative engagement can be promoted using either model, though in different ways. The *Discrete Country* frame is, in some ways, a more natural semantic fit with the image of cooperation. The term implies individual participants. Yet the *Global System* frame also clearly suggests the importance of cooperation, with the caveat that in some contexts it may provoke anxiety of the sort evoked by the term "new world order," since it minimizes the importance of national boundaries, or even sovereignty.

What public and expert frames have in common – the “American view”

In a number of ways, the frames used by experts and members of the public overlap. These define, in a very general sense, an American sense of the United States and its role in the world:

- Cooperation is not a priority - Neither experts nor non-experts make many references to multilateralism, cooperative engagement or joint decision-making in the international domain. This probably reflects the basic American value of individualism, explored in the report on findings from cognitive interviews.
- The United States does the heavy lifting - The view that the United States is doing more than its fair share in most international efforts, although it has limited resources with which to work, is also a strong theme in both public and expert framings. In some ways, this view reflects the reality of American expenditures, military commitments and so forth; as the difficulty of correcting people's perceptions about certain facts shows, however, it is an important consequence of a cultural model, which the interviews identified as the *Invisible Neighbor* model.

[T]he United States can't lead every fight. [WP, 9/23/99, p. A28]

When the United States does participate in multilateral efforts, its contributions are exaggerated, sometimes subtly, as in the following headline:

U.S., Japan, Other Nations Pledge \$7.9 Billion in Food Subsidies [subheadline of a story explaining that the United States pledged \$300 million to Indonesia, while Japan pledged \$1.3 billion and unidentified other countries pledged \$6.3 billion. WP, 7/31/98, p. A20]

- The United States knows best - Both experts and the public tend to agree that American ideas and knowledge are generally superior in all important realms, from economics to science to politics.

[The United States is] the country with the model that works ... [Newsweek, 9/27/99]

- Americans are good - Both experts and the public tend to talk in terms of America's unique dedication to moral principles. While this view may often be exaggerated, it has some positive influence in that Americans do not feel comfortable taking positions that appear to go against humanitarian principles. At its best, this view leads to a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

Where the media stands

Our findings demonstrate that the media provides a perspective on international relations that is closer to the expert models held by foreign policy practitioners than to the common understandings

(or *folk models*) held by average Americans. This is not surprising given that reporters may be dealing directly with expert practitioners and are typically educated on the issues (or, at least, more educated than the public). Also, many pieces appearing in the mainstream press are actually generated by experts and insiders.

A striking finding coming out of the research is that *public understandings are not closely based on media representations, even though those representations are a major source of information for the public*. In press accounts of foreign affairs, the models used by practitioners (i.e., foreign affairs professionals) are pervasive and consistent. Still, they are not thoroughly absorbed by consumers of the media. As cognitive anthropologists would predict, public understandings are based more on lived experience than second-hand information, even when the lived experience can only be applied via analogy or metaphor.

An interesting hypothesis, not explored in depth in this report, concerns the human interest elements — such as photos of suffering children — inserted into foreign affairs stories by popular newspapers and magazines in order to provide an entree into the story. It is possible that because the "hook" satisfies their conceptual expectations, many readers do not absorb the substance of the story. That is to say, there is a point at which the media's attempts to interest their readers have the unanticipated consequence of shielding them from the expert frame.

Drawing from a different scholarly tradition, other observers of frame effects, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, investigated the "vividness hypothesis," or the presumed power of presenting news through compelling pictures and dramatic case stories. While their work focused on such American domestic issues as the environment and unemployment, there is no reason to doubt that these results would hold for international issues as well, given their consistency. In short, Iyengar and Kinder found that, contrary to conventional wisdom, "news stories that direct viewers' attention to the flesh and blood victims of national problems prove no more persuasive than news stories that cover national problems impersonally – indeed, they tend to be *less* persuasive." These scholars' rationale for this effect is similar to our own: "Viewers may get so caught up in one family's troubles that they fail to make the connection back to the national condition. Overwhelmed by concrete details, they miss the general point." (Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, "News That Matters," University of Chicago Press, 1987: 42)

Public Understandings vs. Expert Models

What follows is a summary of 10 chief differences between public and expert understandings of international affairs. As one would expect, the expert models are more fully articulated and take into account additional factors (such as the global economy) that are barely present in public understandings. On the other hand, the expert models are often striking in that they minimize the importance of people or moral values.

1. Experts pay more attention to foreign *governments* – The public pays more attention to foreign *populations*.

Interviews with the public revealed that they are concerned with the fate of individuals in other countries, but they seldom refer to foreign governments. The press commonly refers to Beijing, Moscow, Baghdad and other world capitals as ways of referring to the governments of foreign countries. These references rarely come up in non-expert discourse.

While both the public and experts make heavy use of the metaphor that countries are persons, the nature of the mapping is different in each case. In the public's understanding, the CAP metaphor

usually frames the citizens of a given country as though they were a single person. For experts, the CAP refers to an abstract entity that is far removed from actual persons.

This difference helps explain the tendency for media accounts of foreign events to provide a human interest "hook" in a news story, typically in the introductory sentence and/or accompanying photos. A cognitive-frame analysis suggests that precisely because it directly meets their conceptual expectations, many readers do not progress past the "hook." That is to say, there is a point at which the media's attempts to interest their readers have the unanticipated consequence of shielding them from the content of the news story.

Again, as Iyengar and Kinder found in their experiments with news effects, "Human despair and devastation, poignantly depicted, did not generally add to viewers' sense of national priorities." (Ibid, 1987:38.)

There are logical reasons for the differing forms of the CAP metaphor. For example, experts deal with other governments, while private individuals do not.

This is not to imply that the public always has a positive attitude toward foreign populations. These foreign populations, for example, may be seen as overly dependent on U.S. aid. They also may be seen as essentially different from Americans in their values.

2. Expert models give much more prominence to the rest of the world – public models downplay the existence of the rest of the world.

Interviews with the public reveal that in their day-to-day lives ordinary Americans have little awareness of other countries and have an especially hard time thinking of foreign countries as actors on the world stage. For example, they tend to hold fast to the belief that the United States provides a disproportionate share of development aid to needy countries, even when confronted with facts that contradict this understanding. This solipsistic tendency probably reflects the importance of the *Invisible Neighbor* model in American understandings of social relations — Americans feel most comfortable living as though those around them were not actually present (except in crisis situations).

By contrast, the expert model is highly aware that the United States shares the world stage with many other countries. The expert model differs from the public's model in that it is not based on a simple application of a village model of social relations. More specifically, it takes a "bird's eye" perspective on the world — for example, relying on regional and world maps. The topographic perspective is reflected in, and promotes, the kinds of metaphorical framings built into such terms as "domino theory." The topographic frame allows the expert model to take account of geopolitical facts, beginning with the physical existence and geographic importance of other countries.

3. Experts often think in terms of inclusion within or exclusion from a world community.

While the public sometimes refers to a neighbor model of international relations, this is typically framed in terms of an American neighbor model, in which neighbors are seldom seen except in times of need. Interactions with these metaphorical neighbors are sporadic.

The expert model of the world community, on the other hand, refers to a group of metaphorical persons (CAPs) who interact regularly. The interactions are not usually based on helping, though. Instead, the interactions are often competitive or confrontational.

The community of civilized nations was supposed to have shown its mettle just three months ago with its war to stop ethnic oppression in the Serbian province of Kosovo. [WP, 9/9/99:A17]

Not all the countries in the world participate in the community. While all countries compete for limited prizes, some do not follow the rules of competition and are excluded from the community of CAPs.

The Yugoslav government of Slobodan Milosevic has been a pariah in Europe for much of the 1990s. [WP, 9/19/99:B04]

The *Community of Nations* frame is sometimes invoked in the abstract, i.e., without reference to particular countries:

... how to insure that a test ban could be verified and enforced: Could we catch cheaters, and if so, how would they be penalized by the international community? [WP, 10/18/99:A19]

4. Experts, but not the public, are interested in “sending messages” to other countries, as a basic goal of foreign policy.

Expert discussions of foreign policy often refer to the messages that the United States is sending, or should send, to foreign governments. Both experts and the public believe that the United States is particularly wise and knowledgeable, but experts are much more interested in persuading or manipulating foreign governments into acting in accordance with American views.

The overarching assumption is that the United States is a superior CAP, and that important goals of foreign policy are a) to convert others into junior Americans, b) to negotiate with others, c) to train others not to hinder our objectives.

The expert model allows for a continuum of statuses assigned to different countries, and prescribes styles of interaction appropriate to each:

- Dialog with countries that are full persons

At one end of the continuum are countries, like the United States, that are framed as social persons in a clear and unambiguous sense. These are countries that can be reasoned with and counted on to understand our positions, even if they do not always agree with us.

Still in debt to the U.S. for the Gulf War, the Saudis and the gulf emirates can be cajoled. [Time, 9/20/93:40]

- Training of countries that are less like persons and more like animals

At the other end of the continuum are countries that do not have the status of CAPs in the expert model. These countries typically fall into the evil, or irrational, category. In this case the appropriate mode of interaction, given the factor of U.S. power, is to train the other country, as one would a recalcitrant animal.

Is the U.S. rewarding North Korea's bad behavior? Yes. [Time, 10/31/94:34]

(Note that this is not the same as the parent-child model, which shows up more in public understandings. In the expert model, "bad" countries are typically framed as essentially unlike us and amoral; they are not like bad children whom we protect and love despite a bout of unacceptable behavior.) The expert model often frames foreign aid as a training tool. The language of reward and punishment reflects this frame.

Whether the stick will frighten or the carrot tempt either side in the Bosnian war should be clearer after yesterday's deadline for agreeing with the [G-7's] partition plan. [*Christian Science Monitor*, 7/19/94]

[Helms] wants to withhold aid from Colombia if Bogota shows favor to the Cali drug cartel, a position Kerry also embraces. [*Time*, 12/5/94:34]

The appeal ... sought to persuade the United States that Western sanctions are allowing Milosevic to blame the outside world for the hardships faced by the ten million people of Serbia ... [*WP*, 10/26/99:A19]

5. Experts use a much richer *Country-as-Person* metaphor.

Both experts and non-experts frame countries as people when reasoning about international relations. In particular, they think of relationships and interactions on the international level as though they were personal interactions. As a result, countries are seen as having pride, strength or weakness, motives and other qualities relating to a person's ability to interact with others. The metaphor is more fully mapped, though, in the expert model. (Parts of this mapping have been discussed by George Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 1996). Two parts of this model stand out because they rarely show up in public understandings:

- CAPs's motivations are determined by both reason and emotion (the Cartesian split). The rational side of CAPs is represented by pragmatic self-interest. The emotional side is represented by ideology, moral values and doctrines.

Whatever [Iranian president] Khatami hopes to achieve with smiles for the American people, he has to go about it very cautiously, balancing them with harsh words about U.S. leaders and policies... The anger runs deep in American memories. [*Time*, 1/19/98:34]

- CAPs have a public face and a private self. In accord with the standard American model of person, the intentions of other persons are largely unknowable. The default assumption is that others (in this case other CAPs) are self-interested.

No one is suggesting that [North Korean leader] Kim and his minions have turned nice. Just more pragmatic. [*Time*, 1/13/97:40]

The expert model thus implies that the United States should present a unified front when interacting with other countries, minimizing its internal conflicts.

There is an important exception to the CAP metaphor. In some cases, countries are judged to be either so evil or unknowable that a separate metaphor is invoked, *Countries are Animals* (see point 4).

6. The public is much more concerned with social and moral values. Experts are much more concerned with security and national interest – they are much more macho.

Based on findings from interviews, the public does not tend to think about competition between countries for power or resources. This is the result of several related understandings: First, the public is more focused on foreign populations than governments or countries as political entities. Also, the public is more likely to frame foreign countries as at once distant and insignificant. Furthermore, when other countries are invoked, it is often because of their need, which evokes altruistic rather than competitive feelings.

In general, the public tends to temper its competitive feelings with references to social and moral values, and to reject the opposition between national interest and humanitarian principles. This is in clear contrast to the expert model, which is far more concerned with notions of national interest.

Striking a note of *realpolitik*, Clinton said decisions on when to intervene to save lives will still be driven primarily by national self-interest, rather than humanitarian principles. [WP, 9/22/99:A25]

Experts typically see the world in terms of a constant struggle for advantage, in military, economic or other domains. They tend to invoke, directly or indirectly, the frame of a zero sum game. Experts gloat about failures of foreign countries, such as the demise of communism around the world or Japan's recent trends towards corporate downsizing.

Experts tend to make extensive use of the war frame. For example, in a recent statement, Madeleine Albright, in essence, reverses Clausewitz's famous dictum. In her framing, diplomacy is war by other means:

The result [of cuts in the U.S. international affairs budget], if enacted, would pose a clear and present danger to American interests, because diplomacy is our country's first line of defense. [Madeleine Albright, op-ed in the WP, 9/9/99:A21]

7. Experts are more interested than the public in making other societies more American.

In a variety of ways, from direct to subtle, experts express the idea that the United States should seek to transform other countries to make them more like us.

We should begin a series of programs, as we did with Germany after World War II, to systematically bring young, up-and-coming Russians from various walks of life ... to the U.S. for long visits so they can see first hand how a democratic civil society works. [Forbes, 9/6/99:31]

This idea follows from both major framings used by experts: In the *Discrete Country* model, a country that becomes more similar to the United States is more likely to be an ally, in addition to reaping its own rewards, such as a "higher standard of living" (which may or may not correspond to increased quality of life, as understood within the local culture). In the *Global System* model, making another country more like the United States means eliminating kinks in the global flow of resources, services.

Members of the public did not express this idea in interviews. Instead, they tend to see other countries as essentially and permanently different from us — though individual people are sometimes seen as basically the same everywhere. In the public understanding, other countries can sometimes be taught some of our skills (i.e., "teaching a man to fish"), but there is no particular reason to try to change the country. In addition, the public regularly expresses a certain diffidence about imposing American values on other countries.

A communications strategy emphasizing the transformation of other nations and societies (promoting democracy around the globe, for example) would alienate many average Americans, either because they would see it as presumptuous or because they would not see any purpose in trying to change countries that play no major role in their picture of the world anyway.

8. Experts are much more concerned with American autonomy; the public is much more willing to "play along" with other countries.

Findings from interviews reveal that Americans underplay the existence of other countries, just as they minimize the salience of their own neighbors. This tendency reflects a cognitive bias, however, rather than an ideological position. Indeed, Americans often have an idealized view of community — as something desirable in principle but difficult to attain. Thus, a neighborhood is assumed to constitute a moral

community, defined by rights and obligations, even if day-to-day interaction with neighbors is minimal.

The public carries this attitude into the domain of international relations, assuming the existence of a moral international community, whose members enjoy rights and are bound by obligations. Thus, the public is predisposed, to a far greater degree than experts, to enter into treaty obligations. When they do worry about such relationships, their concern is less with restricting American autonomy than with entering into potentially sticky indefinite engagements with other CAPs.

Expert models, by contrast, often make the default assumption that treaties are by their very nature a losing proposition, since they restrict America's freedom to act in its own interest. This sort of framing affirms that the United States should cooperate with other countries only when absolutely necessary.

This obviously includes treaties (such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) that curtail U.S. military options. It extends as well, however, to self-imposed constraints, such as the recently formulated and quickly repudiated Clinton Doctrine, which included an expectation of moral responsibility for the well-being of others.

9. Expert frames are much more polarized than public frames.

In cognitive interviews, the differences between self-described conservatives and liberals were subtle, and sometimes even hard to find. In this respect, there is a sharp contrast between public understandings and expert rhetoric, as represented in the press. The conservative view that the United States should withhold U.N. dues, for instance, is expressed regularly in the mainstream press, but shared by few members of the public. In general, the discourse of experts tends to exaggerate certain aspects of the public's model, while diminishing others. As a result, the public is typically left with a stark choice — for example whether U.S. foreign policy should be based largely on humanitarian concerns or national self interest.

I cannot endorse the Republican nominee as of now... My party at the national level has become a Xerox copy of the Democratic Party. It is pro-NAFTA, pro-GATT, pro-WTO, pro-MFN for China, in favor of intervention in Kosovo and Bosnia, in favor of NATO expansion, in favor of open-borders immigration. [Patrick Buchanan, speaking on NBC's "Meet the Press," 9/12/99, quoted in the *SF Chronicle*, 9/13/99:A3]

That expert models should be more polarized than public models is not surprising, given that experts are typically engaged in politics for a living. They may find advantages in maintaining strong positions that contrast with those of opponents, and they may feel compelled to have strong opinions on matters about which members of the public are largely indifferent. In addition, their stronger opinions reflect the fact that they have a more explicit awareness of the models, and thus of their natural implications.

The polarization of experts is reflected in the models they tend to use: The *Discrete Country* model involves often intense competition between *Countries-as-Persons*, a scenario that is more likely to evoke a zero sum frame than the *Global System* model, or for that matter public models, which do not frame other countries as competitors. And the strong distinction between the *Discrete Country* and *Global System* models (neither of which is strongly represented in public understandings) is, in itself, a source of polarization. Experts who chose one of these models for reasoning about an issue will differ sharply with experts who use the other model.

Moreover, as media scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson has pointed out, the news relies on frames that are overwhelmingly confrontational in nature, with the dualism between “two sides” now an expected mode of political coverage. Experts, in fact, may be positioning themselves for coverage by anticipating and playing to this media frame (See Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall

Jamieson, "Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good," New York, Oxford University Press, 1997).

The difference between the expert and public models suggests that most people will be more deeply persuaded by communications that do not take an extreme position, particularly on either side of the usual defining fault lines of American politics — liberal vs. conservative and so forth.

10. Experts are more likely to make use of *the Global System* frame, and to treat it as an abstract thing in itself.

The *Global System* frame shifts the focus of attention away from individual countries or CAPs and onto an abstract entity that transcends national boundaries and is sometimes treated as though it were alive. The economy, for example, is treated by experts as a *Global System*, one that can be more or less healthy, whose lifeblood is capital pumped through the system by such supranational institutions as the IMF, and whose functioning may be adversely affected by any of its parts.

Local conflicts can have global consequences. [WP, 10/31/99:B03]

An important implication of this frame is the tendency to see the *Global System* as an end in itself.

[B]ankers and officials made promises for fundamental change in how the world does business... [I]t will be crucial that we not turn our backs on the goal of a safe and sustainable, truly global financial system. [WP, 9/23/99:E14]

... an event [the independence of Kosovo] that the U.S. has previously discouraged out of concern it will destabilize the region. [WP, 9/24/99:A1]

By treating *Global Systems* as important entities in themselves, this frame effectively trumps some impediments to the goal of interdependency, such as the "tragedy of the commons" — the tendency for the public to treat shared resources with less care than an individual owner would. On the other hand, the *Global Systems* frame downplays the importance of actual people. For example, what is good for the global economy, e.g., harmonizing of wages, is not necessarily good for American workers.

The *Global Systems* frame may be applied to many issues, including terrorism, disease, military power or systems of values, such as democracy.

The public does use this frame occasionally, typically in cases, such as the environment, disease or natural disasters, where the idea of "one humanity" is relevant — i.e., the idea that people are people everywhere.

Conclusion

Considering that expert models of the world dominate public discourse, and that these models entail a high awareness of other countries, the fact that the American population in general continues to have low awareness of other countries is an important puzzle. This report suggests one important reason for the discrepancy: Expert models, no matter what their political bent, all make the assumption that there are many countries acting on a single world stage. American folk models, which derive from basic understandings of social relations (see Aubrun & Grady, "American Understandings of the United States' Role in the World"), make the opposite basic and unconscious assumption, namely that we are alone in the world. The expert models fail to sway public opinion because they fail to counteract the basic assumption of solipsism.

It follows that simply saturating the media with expert framings will do little to raise public awareness of other countries. And similarly, communications campaigns that focus on narrow, formulaic, calamity-based stories generally fail in the long run. (The discouraging results are discussed in Susan Moeller's work on media coverage of international events.) These sorts of framings are eventually rejected as manipulative for the simple reason that they do not engage the public's deeper and more complex cognitive models. If framings designed with human interest in

mind often leave people feeling *less* interested in international engagement, and if presentations of expert models in news analysis have little effect on public understandings, then a "third way" is needed. This approach, which we explore in future work, blends expert models with basic cultural assumptions.

About the Author

Cultural Logic, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment. Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.