

# **The Myopic Neighbor**

*Local and National Network Television  
Coverage of the World*

Daniel R. Amundson  
Linda S. Lichter  
S. Robert Lichter

Center for Media and Public Affairs

This paper was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for the Global Interdependence Initiative, a project of the Aspen Institute. The Initiative gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ford, Rockefeller, and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations; the Carnegie Corporation; and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

# INTRODUCTION

This study examines national and local media coverage of international events and situations. Its goal is to understand how international news is presented to the public. We designed an analysis that would look at how the story was told, rather than evaluating the particulars of how individual events or policy debates are covered. This study drew heavily on the prior research and literature reviews of other participants in the Global Interdependence Initiative (GII).

Previous GII-sponsored research suggests that when the media cover international events, there is a strong tendency to focus on social conflicts and disruption, which are reported as separate, isolated episodes rather than as elements of social processes. Media coverage is also criticized for over-simplifying both the causes of global problems and their potential solutions. Further, the research suggests that ordinary Americans focus on the plight and actions of the people in foreign countries and that they are very concerned with social and moral values in other countries and the world at large. Not surprisingly, Americans also hold a high opinion of the nation and their countrymen, believing that Americans are good and have the know-how to get things done.

Drawing on these disparate threads, this analysis examined national and local television news coverage of foreign countries, in order to assess the degree to which the coverage falls back on long-standing frames of international reporting. These traditional frames would be indicated by a foreign news agenda heavy on conflict and chaos, stories that examined the world one disjointed scene at a time without making broader connections, and a tendency to discuss short-term solutions that addressed immediate humanitarian needs.

International news was defined as all coverage of events in countries outside the US, stories about US foreign policy, and the activities of international organizations. This definition allowed us to include stories as disparate as reports on Boris Yeltsin's health problems, Japanese squid races, Mexican mudslides, British Ferris wheels, the birthday of the King of Thailand, eruptions on Mount Etna, and the war in Chechnya. The study also examined questions of US foreign policy such as the Senate vote on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and discussions of the US position in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In selecting national outlets, we examined ABC "World News Tonight," CBS "Evening News," NBC "Nightly News," and the CNN news at 6 PM. Our examination of local news was guided by a desire to cover a variety of markets from around the country. The local sample consisted of the three network affiliates in Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and Columbia, South Carolina or 15 stations overall. This selection offered us an opportunity to assess news coverage in the number two market (Los Angeles), number three (Chicago), number six (Boston), number 12 (Seattle), as well as a small-market station (Columbia). In each city we taped the hour of local news immediately preceding the national news. Some markets (such as Seattle and Boston) routinely offer full one-

hour newscasts in this time period, while in other cities (such as Chicago) we recorded two 30-minute newscasts.

The sampling period was designed to accomplish two goals. First, we wanted to examine what might be described as a “typical” or ordinary period of news when there were no major international events or conferences that might increase the attention paid to foreign affairs. Secondly, we wanted to see how the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle would affect coverage. To accomplish these two goals, we selected a four-week period from September 29 through October 24, 1999 as our baseline period. To examine coverage of the WTO talks, we taped the same outlets for the week of November 28 through December 5, 1999. This provided a combined local and national sample of 10,243 stories and 206 hours 14 minutes of airtime.

# THE NETWORK NEWS AGENDA

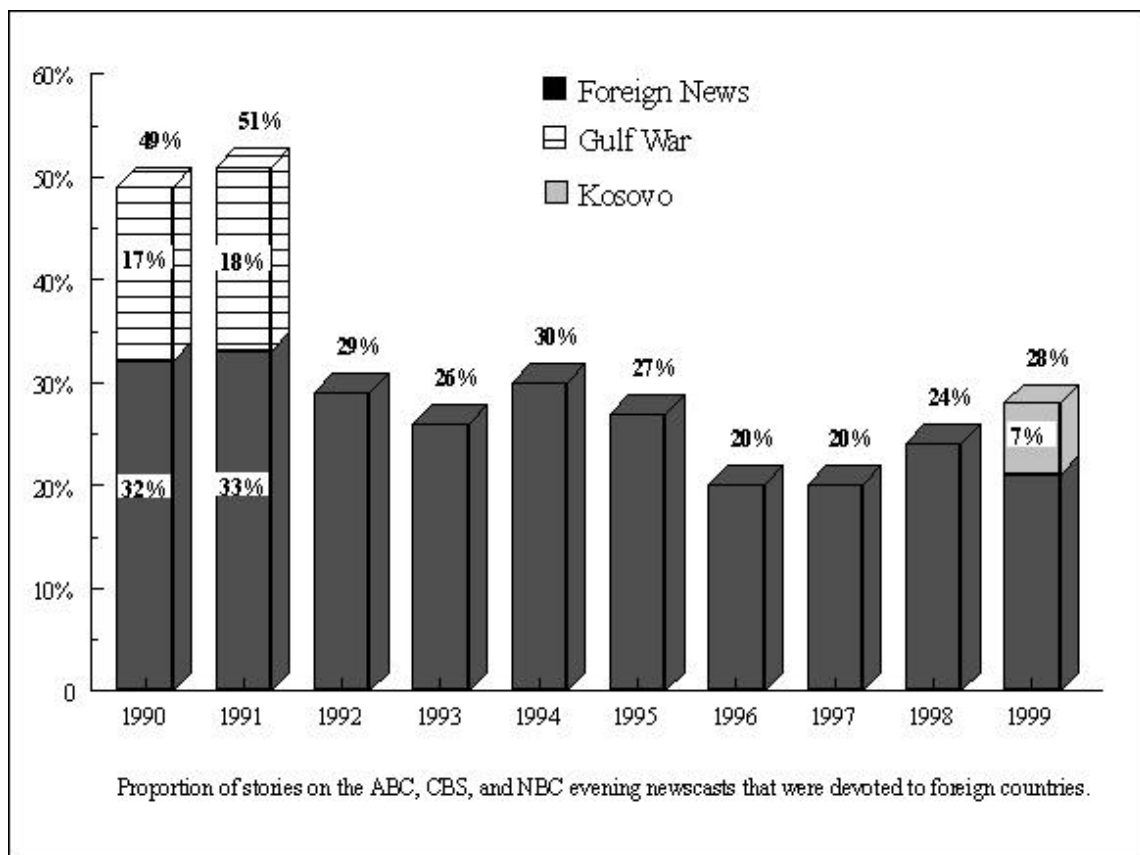
On the network evening news shows, as Table 1 shows, global news accounted for 29 percent of all stories broadcast, or about two out of every seven, representing 476 stories out of a total of 1616 in the entire sample. The WTO meetings in Seattle, and the demonstrations and debates they stimulated, raised the profile of global news only slightly, from 28 percent of stories in the pre-WTO sample period to 35 percent of stories during the period that included the WTO meetings. The focus of the network news agenda was relatively diffuse and probably fairly representative during the time periods we selected, lacking any “big event” (such as a high profile crime or election) that might skew the overall news agenda.

**TABLE 1**  
**AMOUNT OF GLOBAL NEWS – NETWORKS**

	<b>PRE-WTO</b>		<b>WTO</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>	
	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Global	350	28	126	35	476	29
Domestic	908	72	232	65	1140	71
Total	1258	100%	358	100%	1616	100%
	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Global	7hr 4min	29	3hr 9min	39	10hr 13min	31
Domestic	24hr 42min	71	8hr 3min	61	32hr 45min	69
Total	31hr 46min	100%	11hr 12min	100%	42hr 58min	100%

This inference is supported by systematic data from CMPA’s ongoing tracking of topics on the broadcast network evening newscasts. As Figure 1 shows, international news typically accounted for one-fourth to one-fifth of all stories in the latter half of the 1990s, down from about one-third of all stories in the early years of the decade. (These figures exclude the special circumstances of two major armed conflicts in which the United States played a leading role – the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991 and the Kosovo conflict in 1999.)

**FIGURE 1**  
**AMOUNT OF GLOBAL NETWORK NEWS OVER TIME**



The network news agenda is summarized in Table 2, which lists the 10 most frequently covered topics on network news during our sample period. The leading topic was business news with 162 stories, accounting for 10 percent of all coverage. This category was aggregated out of a variety of reports on mergers (such as those between Mobile and Exxon and MCI and Sprint respectively), routine profit and loss reports, Microsoft litigation, etc. Similarly, health issues accounted for 132 stories, representing one out of every 12 (8%) overall.

**TABLE 2**  
**NETWORK EVENING NEWS – TOP TWENTY TOPICS**

	NUMBER OF STORIES
Business	162
Health Issues	132
Election	72
Sports	60
Criminal Acts	56
Mexico	46
Science Issues	44
Trade	44
Economy	42
Arms Control	38
Disaster	36
Space	36
Crime Trends/Policies	34
Education Policies	34
Russia	32
Health Policies	28
Environment	26
Japan	26
China	22
Trials	22
Pakistan	22
Weather	22

Once again, this total was aggregated out of discoveries of new diagnostic tools for diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, reports of new treatments for diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis, etc. (This category does not include health policy issues, which placed 16<sup>th</sup> with 28 stories during this time period.)

There was a substantial drop-off in coverage of the number three topic – election news yielded only 72 stories. This coverage focused on the “pre-season” run up to the 2000 presidential primaries, including such short-term stories as Elizabeth Dole dropping out of the race, early debates among the potential nominees, political maneuvering for the Reform party nomination, and reports of the high-profile New York Senate race. For

those who associate sports reporting mainly with local newscasts, it may come as a surprise that sports was the fourth most heavily covered topic on the network newscasts during our study, comprising 60 stories overall. The baseball league playoffs and World Series, which took place during this time period, accounted for the bulk of them. The coverage was especially heavy on ABC, which (as a sister company of ESPN) carries a sports segment every Sunday.

News of criminal activities placed fifth with 56 stories. Indeed, crime had a relatively low profile on the network news during this time period, owing to the absence of the kind of high profile stories that have periodically dominated the news agenda ever since the O.J. Simpson case. In addition, we separated specific coverage of criminal acts from reportage on crime trends and policies, such as debates over sentencing policies and police corruption. (The latter topic placed 13<sup>th</sup> on the list with 34 stories.) Had we combined all crime-related topics, including reports of ongoing trials, into a single category, they would have placed third on the news agenda with 112 combined stories.

The only foreign country to break into the top 10 list was Mexico. America's neighbor to the south generated 46 stories, many of which focused on natural disasters and government corruption. The major events that pushed Mexico into the limelight were the Oaxaca earthquake and subsequent rains and mudslides, along with the discovery of mass graves that were attributed to killings by Mexican drug cartels. This led to stories on how drugs are smuggled into the US from Mexico.

Seventh on the list were science issues with 44 stories. As with business and health topics, this was an aggregation of reports on scientific discoveries, along with the announcements of Nobel prizes for scientific fields. Tied with science issues for seventh place on the list were trade issues, which included trade-related stories dealing with the WTO. Virtually all of these stories occurred during the Seattle meetings, in keeping with the generally low level of news interest in international trade.

Ninth on the list, with 42 stories, were economic topics. These included economic indicator stories and expressions of concern about inflation and interest rates during this period. (This category does not include routine stock market reports.) Rounding out the top 10, with 38 stories, were discussions of arms control. This segment of the news agenda was driven primarily by debate over the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, along with discussions of proposed missile defense systems.

Overall, these 10 topics accounted for nearly half (43%) of all stories on the network newscasts during this time period. As we discuss below, it is notable that the only foreign country to make the top 10 list did so through a focus on natural disasters and a gruesome crime story. Notable in its absence from the list was Russia, which was involved in a bitter conflict against the breakaway province of Chechnya, while dealing with ongoing domestic political and economic conflicts as well. Despite these apparently newsworthy events, Russia placed only 15<sup>th</sup> on the network news topics list with 32 stories.

Given the paucity of stories that focused primarily on foreign countries, we cast our net more widely by noting every instance in which a country was so much as mentioned in a news story. This criterion is much less stringent, allowing for multiple countries to be coded within a single story, as opposed to our topical analysis, which requires that a country be the major focus of a story in order to be listed. For example, a story about Russia's conflict with Chechnya might be coded as primarily a Russia-oriented story topically, while the mentions of both Russia and Chechnya would be included in the latter list.

Even when the bar was lowered to this level, however, we found that no foreign country was mentioned in more than 56 stories, and it took only 16 mentions to break into the top 10 list. As Table 3 shows, the countries that were mentioned most frequently in network news stories were Russia (56 mentions) and Mexico (54); Japan (38), whose coverage centered on a nuclear plant accident and criticism of the government's response to it; China (36), whose coverage ranged from Sino-American relations to the discovery of new dinosaur fossils; the United Kingdom (28), where a commuter train crash led to criticism of railway safety; Chechnya (24); Pakistan (22), which was rarely mentioned despite a political coup that occurred during the sample period; Serbia (20), with continuing coverage of conflicts in the Balkans; France (18); and a tie for 10<sup>th</sup> place between Germany and South Korea at 16 mentions apiece.

	<b>NUMBER OF MENTIONS</b>
Russia	56
Mexico	54
Japan	38
China	36
United Kingdom	28
Chechnya	24
Pakistan	22
Serbia	20
France	18
Germany	16
South Korea	16

In light of the events that proved most newsworthy abroad (war in Russia and Chechnya, natural disaster in Mexico, an industrial accident in Japan, etc.), it should come as no surprise that the most frequent themes of global news were violence and other social



disruptions. As Table 4 shows, the six most frequent topics of global news all featured some variation on these themes: Wars and other armed conflicts tied with natural disasters for the top spot at 40 stories apiece, followed closely by internal political crises (38 stories), human-induced accidents (36), the WTO meetings (32), with their heavy news focus on the demonstrations, and news of crime abroad (28).

Wars/Conflicts	40
Natural Disasters	40
Internal Political Crises	38
Human-Induced Accidents	36
WTO specifically	32
Crime in Other Countries	28
Scientific Issues/Discoveries	28
Bilateral Diplomacy	28
Business Activities	26
Human Rights in General	16
Internal Politics in Other Nations	16

Network news of the WTO talks spent more time on the demonstrations than on the substantive issues that were debated. President Clinton drew coverage when he expressed support for some reforms, as did marches by organized labor. When faced with demonstrations populated by numerous splinter groups and individuals insisting that no one was in charge, however, the networks rarely brought any conceptual order to their coverage of social disorder.

The remainder of the list was drawn from more routine or ongoing social processes. Scientific issues and bilateral diplomacy tied with crime for sixth place on the list, followed by business activities, human rights issues, and internal politics, which rounded out the top 10 topics. The predominance of violence and disruptive topics was not simply the function of the more general criticism that “if it bleeds it leads” on television news. The overall news agenda was headed by more mundane (and in many instances positive) coverage of business and health topics. The only “bad news” topic to make the list was that of criminal activities, which finished in fifth place. Thus, the emphasis on disaster and disruption seems to be more closely associated with the foreign news agenda than with its domestic counterpart.

# THE LOCAL NEWS AGENDA

If international news was intermittent on the network evening news shows, it proved almost non-existent on local newscasts, as Table 5 shows. Only one out of every 14 stories (7%) on local stations concerned foreign countries or international organizations – 564 out of 8627 in all. As with national news, this total rose only slightly during the WTO meetings, from 6 percent in the prior sample period to 9 percent while the meetings were taking place. This is hardly surprising, since local news has long been criticized for its focus on violent crime and “fluff” – stories with little intellectual heft or substantive content.

<b>TABLE 5</b>						
<b>AMOUNT OF GLOBAL NEWS – LOCAL TV</b>						
	<b>PRE-WTO</b>		<b>WTO</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>	
	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Global	435	6	129	9	564	7
Domestic	6720	94	1343	91	8063	93
Total	7155	100%	1472	100%	8627	100%
	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Airtime</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Global	4hr. 56min.	4	2hr. 49min.	8	7hr. 45min.	5
Domestic	122hr. 32min.	96	32hr. 59min.	92	156hr. 31min.	95
Total	127hr. 28min.	100%	35hr. 48min.	100%	163hr. 16min.	100%

This image was certainly borne out by the topics featured most frequently on the newscasts in our sample. As Table 6 shows, the leading topic (with 814 stories) was criminal activities; criminal trials also made the top 10 list with 249 additional stories. Crime was followed by those mainstays of local news, sports (757 stories) and weather (671). The first substantive topic to make the top 10 list was that of health issues with 624 stories, much of it consisting of packages that were virtually identical to those shown in national coverage. Coverage of business finished fifth with 539 stories, many of them focusing on companies of local interest to the community.

**TABLE 6**  
**LOCAL TV NEWS – TOP TWENTY TOPICS**

	NUMBER OF STORIES
Criminal Acts	814
Sports	757
Weather	671
Health Issues	624
Business	539
Accidents	530
Soft News/Human Interest	433
Traffic Reports/Updates	343
Entertainment	266
Children	249
Criminal Trials	249
WTO meetings	211
Civil litigation	155
Police Departments/Procedures	154
Education Polices	138
Environment	135
Elections	118
Disasters	111
Crime Trends/Policies	92
Race Relations	92

In sixth place with 530 stories were accidents, with most of this coverage generated by highway mishaps.

In seventh place was a polyglot category that we called soft news or human interest stories. This consisted of features about a variety of oddities, such as a profile of the last accordion repair shop in Chicago, and a report on a woman who called the fire department to get her puppy out of a mattress. In eighth place was another familiar staple of local news, that of traffic reports and updates, with 343 stories. In ninth place was news about entertainment, with 266 stories. This category has been expanding in recent years, as stations increasingly run tie-ins about entertainment offerings that will appear on the same station, as well as industry trends such as weekly box office numbers. Tied for 10<sup>th</sup> with criminal trials was the category of children's issues, which was less concerned with child welfare than with trends in toy preferences and other pop culture phenomena.

Finally, it should be noted that the WTO meetings barely missed the top 10 list, coming in 12<sup>th</sup> with 211 stories. However, this total was inflated by heavy coverage given to the meetings and accompanying demonstrations at the Seattle stations that were included in the sample. The Seattle coverage made room for discussion of the issues being debated as well as events in the streets. Coverage in other local markets was sparse and focused mainly on the civil unrest.

If the overall local news agenda was less substantive than that of national news, it was just as heavily focused on death and disruption. As Table 7 shows, the leading topics of foreign coverage were natural disasters with 99 stories, followed closely by human-induced accidents with 91 stories, then the WTO meetings (again, frequently focusing on the demonstrations) with 57, and stories about crime in other countries with 28. The only topic of this sort missing from the top 10 is that of foreign wars and other armed conflicts. This category finished in 12<sup>th</sup> place with 12 stories.

<b>TABLE 7</b>	
<b>GLOBAL NEWS AGENDA ON LOCAL NEWS</b>	
	<b>NUMBER OF STORIES</b>
Natural Disasters	99
Human-Induced Accidents	91
WTO Meetings	57
Crime	28
Business Activities	28
Humanitarian Aid	21
Environment	21
Scientific Issues/Discoveries	19
Internal Politics	19
Bilateral Diplomacy	14
Immigration/Emigration	14

Mentions of the various countries were distributed similarly to those on national news, although Russia and Chechnya received even less attention on local newscasts. These results are shown in Table 8. The natural disasters and mass graves in Mexico gave that country the overall lead with 65 mentions, followed by the United Kingdom with 62, Japan with 49, Cuba with 40, Canada with 29, China with 25, France with 23, Russia with 22, Israel with 21 and Taiwan with 18. Six of these 10 are the same as we found on the national news agenda, and the others missed making the list by only a few stories.

More notable than the particular countries is the low number of mentions overall. Recall that Mexico finished second in mentions on the national news by appearing in 54 out of 1616 stories, or about one out of every 30. On local newscasts, Mexico led the list with 65 mentions out of 8627, appearing fewer than once in every 100 stories. This suggests that there was a greater backdrop of information about the wider world on network news than on local news. If a story was not specifically about events in a certain country, then that country was unlikely to be mentioned in the course of a story.

**TABLE 8**  
**FOREIGN COUNTRIES ON LOCAL NEWS**

	<b>NUMBER OF MENTIONS</b>
Mexico	65
United Kingdom	62
Japan	49
Cuba	40
Canada	29
China	25
France	23
Russia	22
Israel	21
Taiwan	18

# GLOBAL NEWS FORMATS

Although the networks differed from local stations in the amount and focus of international news coverage, the two genres were usually similar in the substantive character of their coverage, at least on the variables that we measured. Therefore, the balance of this report considers the two in tandem, noting occasional differences as they arise. For example, the format of television news coverage was almost universally that of the stand-alone story, rather than a series or multi-part report. This was true for 99 percent of all network stories and 96 percent of local stories. This reflects a strong tendency to focus on particular events rather than on broader themes or trends, whose reporting can be broken up into several segments.

Also reflective of this approach to reporting was an episodic narrative style that focused on clearly circumscribed events or experiences. Reports that discussed broader or more contextual and thematic information were quite rare. On local news episodic reportage was virtually the only kind that viewers experienced, accounting for 97 percent of all stories. Network stories were somewhat more likely to take a more thematic view of the news, focusing on individual events as examples of broader patterns. Even so, thematic reports accounted for only one out of every seven international news stories, or 14 percent of the global news agenda. All told, out of over 1000 local and national television news stories, only 84 took a thematic approach to international news.

If global news coverage only rarely generalized about the context of current events, neither did it personalize them. A major strength of television news is its ability to make issues and events more vivid to the audience by embedding them in personal anecdotes. Yet neither network nor local news took frequent advantage of the medium's ability to personalize abstract stories through anecdotes about specific individuals. Local news featured a mere eight anecdotal presentations, fewer than one per 70 stories. Network news made only slightly more use of this approach, with 16 anecdotal presentations, or about one every 30 stories. Most anecdotes were built around particular individuals or families. However, the WTO accounted for a disproportionate number, including profiles of Seattle-based business to illustrate how dependent the region is on international trade.

## PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

In examining the substantive aspects of global news, we took the individual sound bite or statement as our unit of analysis rather than the story as a whole, in order to capture the flavor of the discussion more precisely. However, this approach only served to emphasize the paucity of such discussion. For example, we noted every instance in which the impact of a global issue was discussed with regard to its implications for the United States or any other country. The network news ran a total of only 118 statements on the impact of global issues, divided about evenly between the domestic effects on the United States (60 statements) and on all other countries combined (58 statements). On local news the discussion of impact was even thinner, being limited to 71 statements overall. Once again they were about evenly divided between the United States (35 statements) and other countries (36 statements).

In light of the nearly exclusive focus on discrete events, especially events that were violent or otherwise disruptive, it is only to be expected that what little discussion there was of the impact or implications of these events stressed their downside. Thus, as Table 9 shows, the tone of discussion was uniformly negative across both news genres and geography.

<b>TABLE 9</b>			
<b>IMPACT OF EVENTS AND ISSUES (%)</b>			
		<b>NETWORK NEWS</b>	<b>LOCAL NEWS</b>
<b>IMPACT ON USA</b>			
	Positive	27	14
	Negative	67	69
	Mixed	7	17
		100%	100%
	Number	58	35
<b>IMPACT ABROAD</b>			
	Positive	21	25
	Negative	65	69
	Mixed	14	6
		100%	100%
	Number	58	35

On both network and local news, and with regard to both the United States and other countries, about two-thirds of all comments on the impact of global issues pointed to detrimental outcomes. The remainder were divided among those that stressed beneficial outcomes and those that either saw a mixed impact or were unclear or conditional. Thus, when it comes to explaining the impact of global issues to the American news audience, television hewed uncomfortably closely to the principle, “If it weren’t for bad news, there’d be no news at all.”

Having determined that few stories addressed the impact of global issues or problems, we broadened our inquiry to ask whether the coverage either identified causes of the global problems that were described, or proposed solutions to those problems. Once again, we found that only a small subset of foreign news stories addressed either the causes or possible responses to problems that were described. Only one out of six network stories (16%) contained even one opinion on the cause or solution to any problem. For local news the proportion was slightly higher – one out of five, or 20 percent of stories. Moreover, few of these stories contained any real debate or interchange of views. The total number of opinions addressing problems and solutions on network news was only 98 and on local news 107. In both cases this amounted to roughly one opinion per story covering global problems.

Local and network newscasts tended to characterize the time frame of these problems in somewhat different ways, one of the few times that such differences occurred in the study. These results appear in Table 10. Local newscasts presented problems as short-term crises requiring immediate action nearly two-thirds of the time (65%), compared to only 9 percent of instances in which problems were presented as long-term. This reflects the degree to which local news focused on emergencies such as natural disasters and human-induced accidents. Network news was slightly more likely to present problems as long-term (20% of instances). The real difference, though, lay in the tendency of network reports to leave the temporal nature of a problem unstated. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the characterizations of global problems either failed to identify or left unclear the longevity of the situation being described.

Local and national newscasts were more similar in their portrayals of the causes and potential solutions of international problems. In both cases the bulk of all characterizations of causes were divided about evenly between acts of nature and human error. On local news these two categories together accounted for nearly four out of five (79%) statements that identified the cause of a problem. On national news they accounted for a smaller proportion, but still a majority (53%). The remaining presentations of the sources of problems were divided among historical conflicts, religious conflicts, government laws or regulations, business activities, and military actions. None of these was mentioned more than 10 percent of the time in either news genre, with the sole exception of military acts, which were identified as the source of the problem 18 percent of the time on network newscasts.



**TABLE 10**  
**PRESENTATION OF GLOBAL PROBLEMS (%)\***

<b>DURATION</b>		<b>NETWORK</b>	<b>LOCAL</b>
	Acute	14	65
	Chronic	20	9
	Unclear	14	6
	Not Stated	51	21
		100%	100%
	Number of Cases	98	107
<b>NATURE</b>			
	Act of Nature	25	41
	Human Error	29	38
	Laws/Regulations	10	5
	Business	10	8
	Military	18	1
	Other	8	7
		100%	100%
	Number of Cases	98	107
<b>AGENT</b>			
	US Government	10	1
	US Business	8	3
	Foreign Government	10	5
	Foreign Business	20	22
	Foreign - Other	14	9
	Not Stated	37	59
		100%	100%
	Number of Cases	98	107

*Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.*

Similarities in presenting the causes of problems extended from the type of problem to the agent involved. For the most part, particular agents were not named as the source of international problems. This was true for a majority of statements on local newscasts (59%) and a plurality (37%) of those on network news. In addition, the single most frequent source of blame for both news genres was foreign corporations, which were named about one time out of five – 22 percent of statements in local news and 20 percent in national news. It is also worth noting that foreign agents of change were named far

more often than those originating in the United States – by 37 percent to only 4 percent in local news, and 45 percent to 18 percent in national news.

The same pattern that we identified in discussions of the causes of problems was repeated with regard to potential solutions, as Table 11 shows. On local and national news alike, there was little discussion of either the character or the source of solutions to global problems. Although we noted whether sources allocated responsibility for solving international problems to either the United States or other countries, only 44 such opinions were expressed on network news, and an even more minuscule 23 on local news.

<b>TABLE 11</b>			
<b>PRESENTATION OF SOLUTIONS (%)</b>			
<b>NATURE</b>		<b>NETWORK</b>	<b>LOCAL</b>
	Government Assistance	8	8
	Change Laws/Regulations	16	7
	Private Sector	6	4
	Other	13	10
	None Stated	57	71
		100%	100%
	Number of Cases	98	107
<b>AGENT</b>			
	US Government	6	4
	US - Other	8	6
	Foreign Government	20	8
	Foreign - Other	4	1
	International Government	6	3
	None Stated	55	78
		99%	100%
	Number of Cases	98	107

*Note: Percentage not equal to 100% due to rounding error.*

Specifically, no agency was suggested in a majority (55%) of instances on network news. Among the few cases in which one was specified, foreign governments and other non-American agents (including international organizations) were named twice as often as agents in the United States, by 31 percent to 14 percent. On local news an overwhelming 79 percent of statements expressed no opinion, 12 percent were directed toward foreign governments and international organizations and 9 percent toward the United States.

Indeed, the number of solutions broached on local news was so low as to render comparisons meaningless. On network news the most frequently voiced solution was a change in laws or government regulations, which accounted for one sixth (16%) of all statements.

## THE UNITED STATES ROLE

In addition to examining America's international role in comparative context, we also recorded all statements that specifically evaluated the character and impact of American involvement in global issues. Given the shallowness of much global news coverage, we did not expect to find much discussion in this realm. Nonetheless, it could hardly have been predicted that network news evaluations of America's role in the world would be nearly non-existent. A mere eight statements on the network evening newscasts evaluated America's global role, rendering statistical analysis meaningless. In contrast, local news produced enough evaluations (45) to warrant further examination, although even this represents only a smattering of comment across 564 stories. These results are seen in Table 12.

Overall, this segment of the coverage dealt mainly with unilateral government action, much of it directed toward disaster relief or other assistance programs, and the tone was generally supportive. Specifically, nearly three out of four (73%) American actions that were evaluated were unilateral, with the remainder divided among bilateral and multilateral activities. Two out of three (67%) concerned government activities, along with occasional instances of corporate and non-profit involvement.

The reasons given for involvement clustered in four areas – to deal with armed conflict, including terrorism as well as military actions (33%), accidents and disasters abroad (29%), humanitarian aid in other international situations (18%), and international trade issues (20%), of which about half (11%) dealt specifically with the WTO. The types of activities evaluated were primarily those of disaster relief (42%), the lending of expertise abroad in other situations (e.g., expertise in nuclear accidents), efforts to change laws or government regulations (20%), and the use of military force (11%). The impact of such activities on other countries was rarely stated explicitly, with no clear impact expressed in 71 percent of statements.

However, there was a greater tendency to see a positive impact on the United States itself. Although a slight majority of statements expressed no opinion (51%), effects on the US were otherwise presented as almost uniformly positive (42%), compared to only 7 percent that emphasized negative effects domestically. When the costs of America's global involvement were addressed, they were most frequently expressed in terms of dollars and cents. A plurality of 42 percent cited economic costs, compared to only 16 percent who mentioned human costs; another 29 percent did not reference any costs of American global intervention. Finally, explicit evaluations of America's international involvement were supportive more often than not. A majority (51%) expressed support, compared to 36 percent who voiced opposition and 13 percent whose opinions were mixed.

**TABLE 12**  
**US INVOLVEMENT IN GLOBAL ISSUES ON LOCAL TV**

<b>CONTEXT</b>		
	Unilateral	73
	Bilateral	4
	Multilateral	22
		99%
<b>ACTOR</b>		
	Government	67
	Corporations	7
	Non-Profits	11
	Other	15
		100%
<b>REASONS</b>		
	Armed Conflict	33
	Accidents/Disasters	29
	Other Humanitarian	18
	Trade	20
		100%
<b>TYPE</b>		
	Disaster Relief	42
	Expertise	22
	Change Laws/Regulations	20
	Military Force	11
	Other	5
		100%
<b>COSTS</b>		
	Economic	42
	Human	16
	Other	13
	Not Stated	29
		100%
<b>IMPACT ABROAD</b>		
	Positive	11
	Negative	18
	Mixed	7
	Not Stated	64
		100%

<b>DOMESTIC IMPACT</b>		
	Positive	42
	Negative	7
	Mixed	4
	Not Stated	47
		100%
<b>EVALUATION</b>		
	Positive	51
	Negative	36
	Mixed	13
		100%

*Notes: Local News only, n = 45; too few statements on network news to evaluate percentages. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.*

# GLOBAL VOICES

Finally, going beyond the form and substance of international news, we sought to determine whose perspectives were being represented, by coding all sources who were quoted in news stories. This was the only major area of the study whose results were skewed by events surrounding the WTO meetings. Coverage of the meetings themselves, and the demonstrations and protests that they provoked, brought numerous statements from demonstrators and other activists into the news. This was particularly true of the local news sample, which included the three network affiliates in the Seattle market. As a result, the findings almost surely overrepresent the typical representation of non-governmental American sources in the news mix.

In fact, “US non-government” was the largest source category for both network and local news, as Table 13 shows. On the networks, sources were about evenly divided between those in the United States (49%) and those in other countries (50%), with the residue devoted to journalists or media reports that were cited as sources of information. US non-government sources accounted for nearly one-third (32%) of the overall total. About three-quarters of this group came from the elite sectors of various foreign policy experts, academics, think tank scholars, etc. However, 66 out of the 216 non-government sources were representatives of activist groups such as environmental organizations and organized labor, or demonstrators who were shown offering their opinions or shouting slogans during the protests.

<b>TABLE 13</b>			
<b>SOURCES CITED (%)</b>			
<b>UNITED STATES</b>		<b>NETWORK</b>	<b>LOCAL</b>
	Government	17	18
	Activists	7	16
	Experts	25	15
	Other	0	4
	(S/T US)	(49)	(53)
<b>FOREIGN</b>			
	Government	21	20
	Other	22	15
<b>INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS</b>		7	9
<b>MEDIA</b>		1	3
		100%	100%
	Number of Cases	874	523

By contrast, only about one out of six sources (17%) were affiliated with government at

the federal, state or local level. The most frequently cited government source was President Clinton, who accounted for nearly one-fifth of these statements. Foreign sources were divided more evenly between those that were government affiliated (21%) and citizens or opinion leaders from outside their governments (22%). The latter group included numerous victims of the natural disasters in Mexico, the commuter train crash in England, and the nuclear accident in Japan that took place during the sample period. The remaining sources came from officials of international organizations including those affiliated with the World Trade Organization itself.

The source mix of local news was generally similar to that of network news. American sources accounted for a slight majority of 53 percent, with the proportion of non-government sources (35%) nearly doubling that of government officials (18%), and the proportions of foreign government, non-government, and international organization sources quite similar to those of network news. However, this overview masks significant differences in the mix of non-government American sources quoted on the local news. In contrast to the predominance of expert sources on the networks, the various experts quoted on local news accounted for only a minority of non-government sources (80 out of 183). They were outnumbered by the 83 quotes from activists and demonstrators (23 and 60 respectively), a difference that was partly but not wholly accounted for by inclusion of the Seattle stations.

In another noteworthy difference the local news included 20 statements from ordinary citizens who had no affiliation with activist groups and no “expert” credentials. These examples of what used to be called “man in the street interviews” were entirely missing from the source mix of network news. This illustrates the adage that what is not reported can be as significant as what is reported on the news. Ordinary individuals are represented in global news primarily as the victims of large impersonal forces such as wars and natural disasters.

Indeed, *vox populi* was rarely represented even collectively in our sample – polls of public opinion on international issues were cited only twice in network newscasts and three times on the local news. Finally, even among the average citizens who did appear as sources in the local news, several were Seattle residents who were interviewed to illustrate stories on how little ordinary people knew or cared about the debates surrounding the World Trade Organization.



## CONCLUSION

Television coverage of global news has often been criticized as overly brief, superficial, and otherwise ethnocentric, providing an abbreviated and simplistic portrait of a complex and interdependent world through an American lens. These criticisms take on renewed import at a time when “globalization” has become a catchword of public discourse and the United States is muddling its way toward finding a new international role in the post-cold war world.

This is also a time when the American public is becoming less interested in news altogether, much less foreign news. And after a generation of unchallenged preeminence as the nation’s premier news provider, the broadcast networks have seen viewing audiences turn increasingly to all-news cable channels, particularly in times of international crises, as well as to their local television stations. For example, a 1997 Harris Poll, commissioned by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), found that Americans were twice as likely to select local TV news as network news as their “most important” news source (by 34% to 17%), with CNN not far behind at 10 percent.

Against this backdrop of rapid change and great uncertainty, the Global Interdependence Initiative (GII) commissioned CMPA to examine the amount, form, and substance of global coverage on local and national television news. We examined just over a month of coverage in the fall of 1999, a period which included the controversial meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle. The 19 outlets included the evening newscasts on the “big three” broadcast networks and CNN, along with 15 network affiliate stations in five cities (including Seattle) around the country. The combined network and local samples totaled over 10,000 news stories and 200 hours of airtime. To provide long-term context, we also tracked the amount of global news coverage on the broadcast networks over the past decade, drawing the information from CMPA’s television news archive.

The results of our analysis were dispiriting. Little of the material we found on local or national television news could reasonably be expected to increase either the comprehension ordinary citizens have of global issues, or their representation in the public debate over America’s role in the wider world. The sheer volume of global news has gradually declined on the networks and remains minuscule on most local newscasts. The coverage that does exist is largely episodic in format, prosaic in presentation, and shallow in context. Television news typically emphasizes the “otherness” of the world outside our borders, portraying the international arena as a subsidiary sphere of little concern to most Americans except as a place where bad things happen, and the United States occasionally needs to intervene to set them right.

Over the past decade, the proportion of global news has declined from about one-third to only one-fifth of the network news agenda. (These figures exclude the Gulf War and Kosovo coverage, whose inclusion would have exaggerated the drop-off.) The coverage was slightly heavier – about 30 percent of the newscast – during the relatively brief

sample period for our intensive study, but it dropped to a mere 7 percent of local news. Even these figures were slightly inflated by inclusion of the WTO meetings in the sample period. No foreign country made the top 20 list of local news topics, and only Mexico – beset by natural disasters – made the network top 10 list.

Just as important is the type of event that generated the most attention. The global news agenda was skewed heavily (and more so than domestic news) toward topics such as war, natural disasters, industrial accidents, crimes, and demonstrations. Moreover, the news was overwhelmingly episodic, focusing on discrete events and short-term crises rather than broader trends and processes or long-term problems. And despite the emphasis on stories involving human suffering and victimization, the human face of news was rarely personalized in vivid anecdotes or case studies that might engage viewers on a personal level.

Global news rarely conveyed the impression that Americans had a stake in global issues, beyond a humanitarian interest in assisting disaster victims. Only a small proportion of stories dealt with the causes of international problems, and those that did focused mainly on the obvious, such as natural disasters and accidents attributed to human error, rather than more complicated historical, ethnic, religious, or socio-political processes. Attention was directed mainly to what was about to happen, not why a particular event was happening and how it fit into broader patterns of similar events. As a corollary, there was even less attention to political solutions for the problems that were reported. The United States was rarely seen as the cause of international problems, and even more rarely was it seen as part of the solution, on either local or network newscasts. Even the WTO protests generated little discussion of ways to resolve the problems that the protesters thrust into the news agenda.

In keeping with a news agenda that gave little play to American involvement abroad or cooperation in dealing with international issues, discussions that specifically addressed America's role in the community of nations were almost non-existent. Moreover, such discussion were even more rare in network news than on the generally more parochial local stations. What little discussion there was dealt mainly with American participation in humanitarian relief efforts and technical assistance programs. And the United States' role abroad was most frequently portrayed in a unilateral rather than multilateral context.

It appears that genuine debate over America's world role breaks into the news agenda mainly at times of intense domestic controversy, such as the debate that preceded the Gulf War and NATO's military intervention in Yugoslavia. This America-centric perspective accords with our finding that global events and issues were rarely presented as having an impact on the United States, and such an impact was usually presented as being mainly negative in character. The rare evaluations of American involvement abroad were positive more often than not, but this reflects the focus on relatively non-controversial activities such as disaster relief.

Finally, global news was presented in terms of a debate among elites, with heavy representation of government sources and academic and other foreign policy experts. In general, the voices of ordinary people were heard only when they were interviewed as

victims of natural disasters or social disorder. The one exception to this pattern was coverage of protesters and other opponents of WTO policies, although the impact was greater on local news (especially the Seattle stations) than on network reports.

Even in Seattle, however, apart from the demonstrators, ordinary citizens were interviewed mainly to illustrate their lack of knowledge and interest in the WTO meetings and international trade issues generally. But insofar as television news assumes that the American people know little and care less about the world around them, the danger is that this may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.