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Bringing Perceptions from the ‘Global Village’ into American Political Science Courses

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought a sobering reminder to Americans about the importance of keeping well informed on international news and the need to understand how American politics, society and culture are perceived abroad. The Iraq war catapulted this issue to the forefront of public debate, with growing concern that United States global policy is increasingly at odds with global public opinion. Such questions about international perceptions of the United States normally have remained on the margins of introductory political science courses, if they are explored at all.

Following September 11, 2001, I developed an assignment that has aimed to change this by requiring the students in my introductory courses to monitor daily newspapers from around the world, published in the English language on the Internet. This initiative underscores how the Internet age has made awareness of public discourse across the ‘global village,’ to borrow Marshall McLuhan’s immortal term, all the more attainable. The challenge lies in helping students—as they are dispatched virtually to all corners of the globe—to reflect upon international news coverage in a way that enhances their understanding of political science and broadens their perspective on the United States.

The assignment works in this way: Each student is required to monitor two newspapers—based in two different countries outside the United States—on a regular basis for at least one month.¹ Students are instructed to focus especially on the content and tone of news coverage regarding the role of the United States in the world.² Reports and oral presentations in class need to address at least four of the following questions:

- How is the United States regarded elsewhere by journalists, government officials, other political and business elites, and the general public?

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- How do perceptions of the United States that seem prevalent in the news coverage compare with what you consider as common American perceptions of ourselves?

- What kind of diplomatic relationship exists between the United States and each of the countries that you have studied?

- What are the main agendas that the newspapers and governments in the respective countries seem to promote with regard to global policy toward the United States and the current crisis? Where do you identify support for America? Where do you encounter criticism or skepticism? Where do you find caution? Where do you observe resentment?

- What sort of interdependence is evident between the countries you have studied and the United States? In what ways do these countries seem dependent on the United States? How does the United States seem dependent upon the countries you have studied?

- What are the major differences in news coverage between the two newspapers you have studied?

- Are the voices of citizens accounted for in the news coverage? What are everyday people saying?

This article explains how the assignment has worked on two different levels: (1) the extent that the student reports have successfully addressed the research questions; (2) the extent that the assignment has motivated students to think for themselves by challenging their assumptions about the position of the United States in the world. The analysis is based primarily on student papers completed at Bryant College during the spring semester of 2002.

In terms of the research questions, the students addressed most readily how the United States is regarded overseas as well as sources of mutual dependence between the United States and other countries. Although it was expected that the range of perceptions from overseas would vary dramatically, the students at times were surprised by the patterns that emerged. Students found it particularly interesting that news coverage originating from countries widely assumed by Americans as overwhelmingly sympathetic toward the United States was, in fact, quite negative at times.

One student who monitored the *Globe and Mail* observed that the coverage became increasingly critical in the early months of 2002, especially after four Canadian soldiers were killed in “friendly fire” in Afghanistan. Even prior to that tragedy, this student noticed considerable discomfort among Canadians at being in the shadow of the United States—an issue that the student said had not previously occurred to her. In the student’s words: “I found that the United States is regarded as pushy. Canada is angry that United States ideology is slowing infusing into the country . . . I still get the impression that in general Canadians do like the United States, but there is definitely some animosity coming from its northern neighbor.”

Meanwhile, students examining news coverage from the United Kingdom discovered internal divisions, partially along ideological lines, that they did not anticipate at the outset of the project. While the student who monitored the *Daily Telegraph*, known for its conservative leanings, reported that the United Kingdom had positioned itself as a staunch American ally, as widely assumed by the American public, the student who monitored the *Guardian*, with its left-wing slant, documented a growing sense of alienation from the United States. A similar mixture of solidarity and ambivalence turned up across the English-speaking world. A student monitoring coverage from the *Otago Daily Times*, a small daily newspaper based in Dunedin, New Zealand, was surprised to discover that public opinion after September 11th was sharply divided, with various editorial columns and letters from readers portraying the United States as an aggressor as the invasion of Afghanistan began. A student monitoring the *Korea Herald* also noted misgivings about United States military action despite continuing gratitude in South Korea for United States intervention a half-century earlier. As the student put it: “Although they respect our country and what we stand for, many Koreans believe America seems to have changed, too, from the crusader of freedom and democracy to a country that is blinded by revengeful thoughts.”

Students who chose to follow one newspaper from a Western country and one newspaper from the Middle East or Asia often yielded the richest sets of comparisons. The student who monitored the favorable coverage of the United States in the *Daily Telegraph*, as noted above, also monitored the *Tehran Times* and documented severe criticism of the United States government following President Bush's classification of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "axis of evil." As this student noted, the writers and columnists of the *Tehran Times* "attempt to influence the paper's readers to condemn the United States" and its military campaign. . . . They find it hypocritical that the United States condemns these terrorist attacks but then answers back with attacks of their own."

Similarly, a student who tracked the *Middle East Times*, based in Egypt, reported how "one article said that it was amazing that we have all this money to fight the Taliban but when the issue of (global) poverty is brought up, that money disappears." A student who followed the *Turkish Daily News* documented concern about the usage in the United States of the label "Islamic terrorism." As the student summarized the view presented in the newspaper: "They say that naming a religion as an adjective before 'terrorism' is disrespectful to all religions." A student monitoring the *Pakistan Observer* found, in his words, "large amounts of hatred towards America and what our country stands for. . . . In fact, they have gone as far as saying that they feel we are entering into a propaganda war in which we are trying to place our thoughts and ideas onto other countries of the world, ultimately manipulating them."

Some students also were successful at identifying sources of mutual dependence between the United States and other countries. The student monitoring the *Turkish Daily News* provided a succinct analysis of the relationship between the two countries, noting the interplay between United States dependence on Turkey, with its strategic location in the Middle East, and Turkish dependence upon the United States for economic aid as Turkey rapidly expands its energy infrastructure. United States dependence upon other countries for military support and access to airspace was a recurring theme. Repercussions of September 11th on global financial markets and national stock exchanges as well as tourist industries heavily dependent upon visitors from the United States were also frequently cited. Perhaps the single most visible controversy

related to economic interdependence, during the time period under investigation, was reaction overseas to President Bush's imposition of steel tariffs.

When the United States went to war in Iraq in March 2003, the assignment proved a useful vehicle for students to take an instant pulse of global public opinion in relation to the war. Rather than waiting until the end of the semester for students to compile their findings, I asked my students to write brief preliminary reports that compared how the war was portrayed in each of the countries that they were studying.³ This provided some immediate insights as to how multiple prisms of the war emerged around the world.

One student, for example, compared how the *Jerusalem Post* and the *Daily Dawn* (based in Pakistan) reported on the bombing of a market in which numerous Iraqi civilians were killed. While the *Daily Dawn* described the massacre in graphic detail, especially with regard to the death of a pregnant woman, the *Jerusalem Post* made no mention of the pregnant woman's death and instead questioned at length whether the attack came from United States cruise missiles or Iraqi explosives. Another student noted how photographs from the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed mainly troops in combat, while photographs from the *Jordan Times* depicted mainly the deaths of Iraqi civilians.

Turning to questions of economic interdependence, a student monitoring the *East African* analyzed public debate in Kenya over whether or not African countries ought to back the United States government for the sake of receiving or securing international development aid, while the political establishment in Ireland, unwilling to fall out of favor with the United States, chose to "sit on the sidelines and hope no one notices," in the words of an *Irish Independent* columnist. From independent newspapers in allied countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia to official government propaganda outlets in China and North Korea, the articles the students compiled provided vivid documentation of massive global distrust of the Bush administration and its motives for going to war.

Although the international news coverage assignment is quite simple in terms of logistics, thanks to the vast availability of English language newspapers on the Internet, it has presented some challenges in teaching. For starters, students often need to be encouraged to bring the two countries under investigation into dialogue with each other. In the shorter preliminary

papers written immediately after the start of the Iraq war, several of my students discussed their newspapers and countries in isolation from each other. As a result, we had a discussion in class about the *comparative* nature of the assignment. Moreover, the students needed encouragement in bringing news accounts from abroad into dialogue with coverage as presented in the United States news media. Repeatedly, I have asked my students to reflect critically on *all* of the news coverage they have monitored, whether the news outlets are based in the United States or overseas.

In some cases, students have seemed too willing to accept critical news content and commentary from abroad as gospel, without thinking about whether or not such negatively slanted coverage might be distorted. On the other hand, some students, not surprisingly, have summarily dismissed critical articles and columns without stopping to ask themselves *why* the United States might be viewed negatively in these countries. One student, for instance, dismayed by negative coverage in the *Daily Excelsior* (based in India), wrote the following in a report:

So if America is to do a better job, then we would have to take on India's policies which are: insane racial and religious hatred, use these feelings to border on war with Mexico and Canada, reduce our economy to 3rd world status, take as many rights from women as we can, be so broke that when we have a natural disaster we have to wait for a country like us to come to the rescue, stop all humanitarian aid to the rest of the world . . . and the list goes on. At this point, I don't know why we listen to these brains over in India.

Yet another student objected to coverage in the *Khaleej Times* (based in the United Arab Emirates) and the *Straits-Times* (based in Singapore) that characterized the Iraq war as an American invasion. As this student argued:

The goal of the United States is not to conquer Iraq as if we want it to become the 51st state, but to remove a corrupt and incompassionate leadership to free the people of Iraq. Therefore, I believe the word 'invade' is used incorrectly and has no relevance to the current situation. As a citizen who supports the disarming and freeing of Iraq, the articles I read tend to strike an angry nerve inside of me.

Instructors trying out this sort of assignment, then, should be prepared to encourage students to channel any initial

anger into heightened understanding. Some students need encouragement to attempt to consider global issues from the perspectives of citizens in the countries they are studying, setting aside, if possible, their initial assumptions. It also is helpful, obviously, to remind students to think independently and carefully about *all* the articles and commentaries they read, whatever the sources.

How, then, has learning about international perceptions of the United States, as articulated in newspapers from abroad, influenced the students' perceptions? Although this question should not be taken as a normative claim that the perceptions of American undergraduates necessarily ought to change as a result of this sort of exercise, several students did seem to reconsider their prior assumptions as they completed the assignment. For example, monitoring news coverage in Canada prompted one student to think more carefully about the United States global policy:

For the first time I tried to think of what it would be like if a bigger country came and told us how to think. The strangest part about reading newspapers from different countries is that being from the United States, I have to really step outside of myself to see how this country is viewed from a different point of view. I never realized how arrogance has much to do with being an American. This is not an intentional reaction, but just by being born here I have become blind to it.

Some students directly challenged the critical statements they encountered in

the international news coverage while also rethinking their own perceptions of the United States. One student, who happened to be a member of the campus ROTC unit, took offense to a commentary that referred to the hijackers of September 11th as "actually appallingly



News from Abroad. Using foreign newspapers in the classroom can enhance student understanding of political science and broaden their perspective on the United States. Photo: istockphoto.com/Kemie Guida.

brave soldiers" rather than as cowards, as depicted by President Bush. This same student, however, candidly acknowledged his own inability to evaluate news coverage from a completely unbiased vantage point: "After learning about different views of how people portray the United States, I realize that you do not see the entire picture until you are on the outside. There is no way that you can really say that you are not biased when you are on American soil." Conversely, some students who made an effort to look at the United States from an outsider's perspective were surprised to learn that public sentiment in the countries they studied turned out to be more supportive of the United States than they had expected. One student who monitored the *Viêt Nam News* and

the *Irish Times* said that he was surprised to learn that political circumstances in Viêt Nam have shifted gradually to the point in which public opinion was relatively favorable toward the United States following the September 11th attacks. As this student wrote:

"From my education in history I have always thought that the United States were enemies of Vietnam and vice versa because of the war. I was obviously wrong because the Vietnamese were just as sympathetic as the Irish were."

In many respects, the students who emphasized in their reports the importance of trying to evaluate the United States from an outsider's perspective echoed Martha Nussbaum's argument that "cosmopolitan education" fosters greater self-awareness on both personal and collective levels. As Nussbaum has emphasized: "By looking at

ourselves through the lens of the other, we come to see what in our practices is local and nonessential, what is more broadly or deeply shared. Our nation is appallingly ignorant of most of the rest of the world. I think this means that it is also, in many crucial ways, ignorant of itself" (1996, 11). Endeavoring to view the United States through the lenses of other countries amounts to a logical extension of the quintessentially American tradition of free and open exchange of ideas. It is increasingly important for introductory political science courses to explore how the United States and its global influences are perceived from afar. Incorporating the study of international news sources into undergraduate survey courses is one helpful strategy in furthering this end.

Notes

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of the American Political Science Association.

1. My classes are small enough so that no two students are allowed to use the same newspaper as a primary source. This has ensured that the project can be seen as a collective fact-finding endeavor and that each in-class presentation has its own unique

perspective. Links to the scores of English-language newspapers around the world—a global phenomenon in itself—are posted on the course web site and assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis.

2. To be more specific, the students are asked to gather at least 50 relevant news

articles, editorials, and opinion pieces—all originating from newspapers chosen by them. News articles from wire services or newspaper syndicates are not acceptable. This requires some explaining in class, as several students initially do not understand enough about the workings of the news media to differentiate between articles generated in-house and articles provided by external news sources. Students are encouraged to

approach me whenever they are unsure about whether an article they have retrieved is acceptable for the project. (Students are required to submit printed copies of each news article along with their reports.)

3. This exercise turned out to be useful not only in terms of identifying how citizens around the world were reacting to the war in Iraq, but also in terms of catching, at an early

stage, some problems that students were having in approaching the assignment. Some students, for example, were having difficulty distinguishing articles from wire services from articles produced by journalists from the newspapers, while other students needed to be encouraged to analyze the articles rather than simply provide summaries of the news coverage.

Reference

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