

America's Reflection

International Communication, Democracy, and Perception in the Information Age

Ryan Grandison, Ariel Solomon, & Soren Peterson

ELON UNIVERSITY | Phoenix Policy Institute

Abstract

As the world has become more interconnected, news media outlets and conglomerates have never had greater reach. For the last century, American media has led this global expansion, with government broadcasting organizations and private companies alike advancing American soft power across the airwaves. As the US' relationships with traditional allies are bent by the second Trump administration, several questions emerge: How does the administration interfere in other states' internal politics? How is this reflected in America's portrayal in non-American media? And, what does this mean for the future of American soft power?



Table of Contents

PRESS AS FOREIGN POLICY



INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

FRAMING THE DEBATE

CASE STUDY: U.S. INFLUENCE IN BRAZIL

FOREIGN FRAMING

CONCLUSION

Introduction

World War II is often seen as the core event that shaped many modern concepts, social dynamics, and technologies, but one of its most significant impacts was establishing the new world order as we know it—a world order dominated by the United States. **The Information Age**, however, presents new challenges for **diplomatic engagement**, where information flows—and therefore influence—can no longer be managed with such a careful eye.

Instead, a dynamic exchange has emerged in which information is produced, disseminated, perceived, and responded to with little restraint. Each step adds a layer of complexity and contributes to the broader impact of the information, shaping the way in which nations interact with one another and operate within themselves. The US leads the spread of **democracy** and **Western ideology** through a variety of methods, but one of the strongest actors on the public-opinion battlefront is the **news media.**

Key Policy Question:

As the American-centered media sphere continues to expand, how can the international community preserve geopolitical and informational balance?

Historical Background

The Globalization of American Media

During the 20th century, national media ecosystems largely remained **siloed**, with broadcasts and publications targeted at audiences within a single country or region (Rantanen,2005) Despite this, groundwork had been laid for a **global media landscape** to take shape, as multinational conglomerates such as the Hearst group. Following the WWII, the reach of American news media began to spread globally along two parallel tracks: **privately owned conglomerates** chasing new markets, and what would become the **US Agency for Global Media,** harnessing news broadcasting as a weapon in the Cold War (Osipova-Stocker et al, 2021).



In print media, the private sector globalized slowly, as the consolidation that would create media empires capable of globalizing began in earnest in 1945 as technological, labor relations, and regulatory changes led American print media to be dominated by a shrinking number of newspaper chains (Neiva, 1996). Radio's ownership was far more consolidated far earlier in four companies (RCA, Marconi, Generale de Telegraphie Sans Fil, and Gesellschaft fur Drahtlose Telegraphie) dominating the ownership both within their countries of origin and their overseas territories (US, UK, France, and Germany, respectively) and across the world in agreed upon **spheres of influence** (Shoup, 1929). This represents an early manifestation of the dynamics we see today, wherein global media ownership and production is centralized in the same states as other forms of geopolitical power.

Historical Background

International Broadcasting and American Power

During the 20th century, national media ecosystems largely remained **siloed**, with broadcasts and publications targeted at audiences within a single country or region (Rantanen,2005) Despite this, groundwork had been laid for a **global media landscape** to take shape, as multinational conglomerates such as the Hearst group. Following the WWII, the reach of American news media began to spread globally along two parallel tracks: privately owned conglomerates chasing new markets, and what would become the US Agency for Global Media, harnessing news broadcasting as a weapon in the Cold War (Osipova-Stocker et al, 2021).



The advent of television saw similar dynamics emerge as in the early 1980s, CNN became the first fully private television broadcaster to achieve a global reach (The BBC was simultaneously globalizing), The creation of CNN International in 1985 established that the United States' position as a news exporter transcended medium and laid the groundwork for a post cold war media landscape dominated by American publishers, broadcasters, and ownership groups (Gilboa, 2005). It also cemented that the private sector would have a massive role in spreading American influence, both political and commercial, as the media ecosystem adopted new technologies.

Framing the Debate

Defense of Democracy vs. Global Threat

Democratic-threat

Under the democratic-threat framework, U.S. influence is portrayed as **coercive** and **destabilizing**. Democratic allies, foreign rivals, and ideological adversaries have advanced this narrative in different ways, for different reasons, and to pursue distinct domestic and international agendas.



Democratic-defense

Under the democratic-defense framework, U.S. influence abroad **supports** democratic institutions, protects allies, deters authoritarian aggression, and promotes **political stability**. This perspective presents American diplomatic, economic, and military engagement as necessary to preserve democratic governance and the rules-based international order.



Why the Distinction Matters

Distinguishing among these motivations matters; treating all criticism of the United States as a single, unified response obscures the differences. Analyzing them together leads to two kinds of error: policymakers may **dismiss** legitimate allied grievances as hostile propaganda, or they may **respond** to hostile disinformation with concessions meant for partners.

A differentiated reading enables tailored responses: engagement and reassurance for allies, counter-messaging and alliance-building against rivals, and support for civil society and independent information in states where the narrative is a tool of repression. It also helps U.S. decision-makers distinguish criticism that reflects real policy failures worth correcting from criticism that reflects strategic opportunism.

U.S. Intervention in Brazil

Policy Actions and the "Terrorizer" Narrative

Section I: U.S. Policy Actions & Election Influence

- **Case Study Context:** Brazil's October 4, 2026, presidential election provides a case study of how this framing of American interference develops. According to *The Washington Post*, President Donald Trump actively shaped the political environment for the election.
- **Targeted Sanctions & Tariffs:** Dias reports that Brazilian officials are increasingly concerned about possible U.S. interference in the presidential election (Dias, 2026). The administration imposed tariffs on Brazil partly in response to the prosecution of former president Jair Bolsonaro's allies and showed its support by hosting Bolsonaro at the White House before the vote (Dias, 2026).

Section II: Lawmaker Reactions & Strategic Impact

- **Congressional Warning:** A group of populist U.S. lawmakers later issued a warning letter, saying the administration was "pressuring Brazil through diplomatic, economic, and political channels on behalf of the Bolsonaro camp" (Rogero, 2026).
- **The "Terrorizer" Narrative:** U.S. intervention in foreign political affairs, specifically, aiding authoritarian governments, contributes to the "terrorizer" narrative. Strategic interference damages relations with a vital democratic ally and major economic partner (Rogero, 2026).

> **Marco Rubio:**
> "Acts as an agent of interference and destabilization - using diplomatic, economic, and political pressure in ways that risk weakening the country's democratic institutions."
> — Marco Rubio (Private note to President Trump; (Rogero, 2026)

U.S. Intervention in Brazil

Policy Actions and the "Terrorizer" Narrative, cont.

Without naming names, President Lula told the General Assembly that Brazil was **"no one's backyard,"** clearly aimed at the United States.

Even Lula's campaign ads **focus on the U.S.** One says, "Flávio Bolsonaro is Trump's candidate, and what Trump wants is to colonize Brazil, take our riches, steal our future, and leave us in the dust."

Brazilians fear American politics is **shaping their country**, and the media reflects those fears for Western audiences.

The danger lies in applying this America-centered foreign policy to issues that should remain regional, pulling the **Great Power**s into what might otherwise have been an easily contained conflict or ordinary domestic tension.

Policy Takeaway:

How the United States is portrayed in internationally accessible media reflects its relationships with other nations. It shows American readers what the US means to them and how the world views the country.

How the World Reflects America

Foreign Media Coverage and U.S. Public Opinion

Interference is not received quietly. The influence and information the United States projects are reflected back, filtered through the **perceptions** of foreign allies, friends, and adversaries. These perceptions are communicated to their own citizens, **shaping public opinion** on the US and its actions.



In addition, American citizens consume **foreign-produced media**, and as trust in domestic news sources declines, the views shaped by that information become even more **pervasive** in US public opinion.

Public engagement is influenced not only by how information is presented, but also by what is **included** and **omitted**. In Iran, major news outlets take a negative stance in their limited front-page coverage of the US, emphasizing **American failings** in the war.



On popular Chinese-produced news websites, the front page rarely mentions the US, instead promoting China's technological, agricultural, and political advancements. This suggests an effort to shift attention away from the US and toward positive Chinese achievements, in line with its goal of becoming a **competitive world power**.

BBC, a major **British** and world news source, has a designated section for "US & Canada."

Brazilian news network Folha de São Paulo, which is celebrating 105 years in print, has a headline section on its website dedicated to the Trump administration.

Even the **Times of India** publishes pieces concerning domestic American politics, such as commentary on Mayor Zohran Mamdani's actions (Times of India, 2026).

This signals a **distinct perception** of American involvement in politics and the economy in these nations and demonstrates the United States' **gravitational pull** on international affairs.

Conclusion

Implications for American Soft Power

A state's ability to effectively wield **soft power** only goes as far as its reputation will carry it. For the United States, its global media footprint and relationships with the international press are key shapers of that reputation. As it stands in 2026, that reputation is floundering. As historical allies distance themselves from the Trump administration by reducing dependence on **American trade** and security cooperation, international audiences are likely to become less receptive to American media and increasingly hostile towards **perceived meddling** in their domestic politics. Data from the Pew Research Center published this June finds that the majority of the population of **16 of the 17 countries** designated as "middle income" by World Bank lending groups feel that the US interferes in a fair amount or great deal of their country's affairs. Even more troubling, in the same survey, **50% of people across the 36 surveyed** countries find the US an unreliable partner.

When evaluated alongside the aforementioned decline in **trust** in American media, the picture becomes clear: American influence is unwelcome, and the media is becoming increasingly unable to repair it. As a result, the US is not only losing its ability to control its international image, but its media is losing ground at home, as evidenced by the growing number of **foreign media outlets** covering American domestic politics in English or targeting American audiences, similar to how **Radio Liberty** and **VOA** target international audiences. The global media landscape is becoming multipolar, and rather than trying in vain to reverse these trends, American policymakers must adapt or risk losing a cornerstone of American soft power.

