

# Global News and Awareness: An Examination of *El País* and *The New York Times* and their Relation to Public Knowledge and Opinion Levels

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## Abstract

*This research examined the content of articles about Brazil in *The New York Times* and *El País* and the correlation between news coverage and students' knowledge and opinion levels on current events in Brazil. Content analysis revealed that American news coverage of Brazil in *The New York Times* had more depth and breadth than Spanish coverage in *El País*. Questionnaires distributed to University of Seville and Elon University students indicated that students in Spain had more limited knowledge of current events in Brazil than American students, reflecting the narrow focus of Spanish news coverage. However, the American students had a much broader array of knowledge and opinion of current events in Brazil, reflecting the more extensive focus of American news.*

## I. Introduction

The relationship between the media and the visibility of certain events and issues in foreign countries is extremely important, especially in this globalized world. Awareness of current events throughout the world is critical to business, politics, and the establishment of an informed, global citizenry. It is difficult for citizens to be fully informed without keeping up with the media, on which the public depends for accurate reporting on current global events.

The relationship between public opinion and the media is closely related to the agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to Besova and Cooley's study (2009), the first-level agenda setting theory reflects the assumption that the public will credit a particular event with more importance if the media covers it more thoroughly than others. The second-level agenda setting theory, also known as attribute agenda, states that the media strongly influences how the public views certain issues as well as what issues the public thinks about in general, known as an issue agenda. According to the agenda-setting theory, a particular nation that is thoroughly reported on with frequency will constantly be in the minds of the public. The depth of this coverage will subsequently affect the attitudes the public has toward that country. However, the public is generally unaware of countries the media neglects.

This study examined the content of articles about Brazil in *El País* and *The New York Times* and the relationship between newspaper content and students' attitudes and levels of knowledge. The researcher chose to examine Brazil because of its perceived mutual level of interest to both the United States and Spain. After analyzing content of the two newspapers for frequency and depth of reporting, questionnaires were cre-

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\* **Keywords:** Brazil, U.S., global news, public knowledge, favorable opinion, relationship  
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ated and distributed to students in Spain and the United States. Student responses are important to measure because today's students will soon be influencers in the work force, impacting the opinions of their peers in the general public. They also provide a convenience sampling for university students who are conducting research.

The study was particularly influenced by Besova and Cooley's (2009) study that examined foreign news and public opinion and the attribute agenda-setting theory. As in this study, these researchers investigated the correlation between media coverage and public opinion. Such studies help to understand why the public is more aware of certain issues than others, and more generally, whether there is a difference in global awareness between Europeans and Americans. Besova and Cooley's work, along with others, will be reviewed in the following section.

## II. Literature Review

International news continues to be the subject of many studies. The most relevant study to this research is an analysis of the media coverage of foreign countries in *The New York Times* and the British periodical, *The Times*. Content analysis and surveys indicated that media coverage and public opinion were strongly correlated. The study also found that coverage of foreign countries is generally brief and stereotypical (Besova & Cooley, 2009).

Besova and Cooley (2009) valued the growing importance of global knowledge in the modern world. They wanted to dig deeper into the relationship between visibility of countries in foreign news and public opinion regarding these countries. As with the case with the present study, Besova and Cooley wanted to examine the correlation between media coverage and opinion. They did so by conducting extensive content analysis of a total of 497 articles. They coded 200 articles from *The Times* and 297 articles from *The New York Times*. Each article was chosen because it mentioned at least one nation, as opposed to the current study, which only looks at articles written about Brazil. The researchers conducted a qualitative content analysis that analyzed whether there was predominantly positive, neutral, or negative coverage. Issues discussed in the news articles were recorded as well.

Besova and Cooley (2009) utilized the TransAtlantic Trends Survey 2004 (Roper Center for Public Opinion) to evaluate public opinions regarding the various nations mentioned in the media. A random sample of an average of 1,000 respondents from 11 countries was obtained by telephone interviews. The survey instructed the participants to indicate their feelings regarding particular countries with a "feeling thermometer." Such countries included: Russia, Israel, North Korea, Turkey, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, and Germany.

As mentioned previously, the Besova and Cooley (2009) study revealed that media coverage and public opinion were strongly correlated and that the negative media coverage has more of an agenda-setting effect than neutral and positive coverage. Furthermore, the media limits news coverage of foreign countries to few stories that are centered on a limited number of stories. This limited scope results in a stereotypical portrayal of these foreign nations.

Besova and Cooley's (2009) study inspired the researcher to mirror their methods on a much smaller scale. She saw how well their content analysis revealed the information the public was consuming and its relationship to public opinion and decided to examine content of *The New York Times* and *El País* of Spain for depth and breadth of coverage of Brazil. Limitations restricted the researcher to analysis of news coverage of only one foreign nation. Limitations also forced the researcher to analyze the opinions of a small sample size from two nations only. Finally, limitations forced the researcher to obtain data by creating and distributing a questionnaire rather than utilizing a more elaborate survey.

International news coverage across various channels of media is shrinking. Less than 25% of newspaper coverage is devoted to international affairs (Adams, 1982). According to an analysis of American mainstream newspapers between 1963 and 1964, as well as between 1998 and 1999, foreign hard news decreased from 5% to 3%, a strikingly low percentage (Stepp, 1999). In addition to the declining amount of news coverage of international events, studies indicate a decline in the quality of such coverage. Not only are there inaccurate and incomplete news reports, but they also focus on topics of human interest, such as violence, crisis and disaster (Goodman, 1999; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1981; Wilhoit & Weaver, 1983). Not every foreign

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nation receives equal coverage by the media. Certain countries are covered with more depth and breadth than others. The amount of coverage devoted to a particular foreign country depends on the country's position in global politics, culture, and economy (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1996).

The decreasing priority the media in the United States places on foreign affairs is out of proportion to the large impact that media coverage is thought to have on public opinion (Golan & Wanta, 2003). A study by Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver and Willnat (1992) indicated that the higher a country's visibility in U.S. news reports, "the stronger the media attention and exposure measures will be as predictors of public opinion about a country." News coverage of international affairs can alter public opinion with regard to assessing danger but cannot set the agenda "in terms of friends and enemies of the United States" (Salwen & Matera, 1992). Such studies are related to the agenda-setting theory. According to McCombs (2004), such studies look at the prominence placed on events from the media and public opinion. Ultimately, agenda setting has been defined as "the idea that the news media, by their display of news, come to determine the issues the public thinks about and talks about" (Severin & Tankard, 1988).

### **Research Questions**

This research, propelled by past studies mentioned, looks at the international coverage of Brazil in *The New York Times* and *El País* and the opinions of American and Spanish students. Based on this discussion, this paper posed the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do topics, lengths and sources vary in coverage between *The New York Times* and *El País*?

RQ2: To what extent are American and Spanish students informed on events in Brazil?

## **III. Methods**

This study used content analysis as well as surveys to examine the depth and breadth of media coverage of the country of Brazil in the United States and Spain and the effect of that media coverage on students' levels of knowledge and opinions.

### **Content Analysis as a Form of Inquiry**

Content analysis is "the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods" (Rife, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). By performing content analysis, researchers are able to make inferences from the data. "The researcher can gain access to communicators who may be unwilling or unable to be examined directly" (Rife, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). There are other advantages to content analysis as well. For example, in quantitative content analysis, longitudinal studies can be achieved, and coding teams can be easily trained and formed to ensure that a great volume of content is analyzed that a single researcher would have difficulty performing individually. By creating definitions for what exactly the researchers are coding for before the process begins, researchers ensure more accuracy in their results. Intercoder reliability allows the researcher to make sure that each coder is coding the content consistently, contributing to the accuracy of the findings.

This study used *The New York Times* and *El País* to analyze the media coverage of Brazil in the United States and Spain. The researcher chose to focus on news coverage of Brazil. These publications were chosen because of their large circulation and prestige within the media industry. *The New York Times* has been used in previous studies to analyze international news coverage (Chang, Shoemaker, & Brendlinger, 1987). It has won 104 Pulitzer prizes and hosts the most popular American online newspaper website (Adams, 2011). *El País*, like *The New York Times*, has the status of a "newspaper of record" (Besova, Cooley, 2009), and not only has a great online and print following, but a strong social media presence as well. Therefore, the value of these papers is that the information they provide may be direct or indirect. They are primary content providers, particularly with respect to international news, and the information they carry seeps into other sources of information as well. The students don't necessarily have to read these newspapers directly to get the news they provide. These newspapers are key players in the overall news industry.

Before research was conducted, the researcher defined exactly what would qualify as an article on Brazil. Specifically, Brazil must be the main subject of the story. If it is not mentioned within the first two

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paragraphs, the story would not fall into the category of an article about Brazil. The subject of the article must be about Brazilian culture, economy, government, natural disasters, a person or group of people within Brazil, or a variety of other topics. If the article was focused on an aspect unique to Brazil, it was analyzed by the researchers." A sample of articles about Brazil from *The New York Times* and *El País* was collected from the time period between January 1 and March 22, 2011 through the Lexis Nexis database. A coding sheet was also formulated, which listed three columns for coding. Each article was coded in an identical process for length, number of sources, and subject. Length was divided into three sections. Articles that contained between 1 and 500 words were considered short, those with 500 to 1,000 words were considered medium, and articles with over 1,000 words were considered by coders to be long. By looking at the number of sources, length and topic of the articles, the researcher was able to analyze the amount as well as the depth of the coverage.

### ***Survey as a Form of Inquiry***

Surveys are often used to discover opinions. However, survey questions must be carefully worded so there is no confusion about their meaning. Simple and clear wording is crucial to conducting surveys so that the respondents understand what the researchers are asking and in turn provide accurate information.

This research examines opinions and levels of knowledge of students in Spain and the United States. A convenience sample of students from Elon University and the University of Seville was selected to answer questions about their media use, as well as their knowledge and opinions of current events in Brazil. The participants were students that the researcher met while studying at Elon University and the University of Seville in Spain. The survey was distributed electronically and completed anonymously by 45 out of 100 solicited Elon University students. Ten students who studied either engineering or English at the University of Seville completed the survey in Spanish. Survey questions asked the participants to rate their feelings toward the current, recently elected president of Brazil as well as her predecessor. By doing so, the research examined their opinions as well as their levels of knowledge about Brazil. There were also open-ended questions regarding the number of hours each participant used various types of media. The responses to these questions reveal what types of media students are using to get their news.

## **IV. Findings**

### ***Content Analysis of Newspaper Articles***

#### ***The New York Times***

The researcher performed content analysis on 22 articles from *The New York Times* to test for depth and amount of coverage of articles about current events in Brazil. After coding for length, sources and article topics, the researcher discovered that there is variety in news coverage in *The New York Times*. There were seven short stories printed under 500 words, eight medium articles containing between 500 and 1,000 words, and seven long articles of over 1,000 words. The most frequently published article was between 500 and 1,000 words. Analysis of the number of sources used revealed that although there were as many as eight sources used in some articles, the average number of sources used was 3.18. The most prevalent topic, appearing in eight out of the 22 analyzed stories, was natural disasters. Other topics included human interest, international relations and race and gender (two articles each). Also included were national politics, the environment, international politics, law enforcement, crime, business, the Olympics, and travel (one article each).

#### ***El País***

The researcher coded 15 articles from *El País* about Brazil for length of article, number of sources used and topic of article in exactly the same way that *The New York Times* was coded. However, unlike *The New York Times* articles, there was not much variety in the length of articles coded. There were four short articles, 10 medium articles, and one long article. Although the largest number of sources used was 10 sources in one article, the average number was only 2.53. On average, *El País* referenced fewer sources than *The New York Times*. The examination of article topics revealed that there was not one truly predominant topic in the Spanish news coverage. Of the 15 articles analyzed, the economy, society, and international relations of Brazil were each addressed in three articles; the business and culture of Brazil were each addressed in two articles; and the national politics, international politics, law enforcement, and, trade and commerce of Brazil

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were each addressed in one article.

### **Survey of Students of Elon University Students**

A 10-question survey asked questions about media use, knowledge and opinions about current events in Brazil. The majority of Elon students (64.4%) get news from print and online newspapers. Students also frequently look to television (60%) and social media (60%) to retrieve news. Students also indicated that they spent a great amount of time using social media. On average, Elon students spent 9.45 hours on social media a week, as well as 1.05 hours reading print newspapers, 2 hours reading online newspapers, .95 hours reading print magazines, .74 hours reading online magazines, 2.93 hours reading books, and 6.47 hours watching the television.

Questions on the students' knowledge of current events in Brazil revealed mixed results. Although the most devastating natural disaster that has occurred in Brazil most recently was a series of mudslides, 46.7% of students responded that the answer was floods. However, the greatest number of respondents correctly indicated Brazil as the eighth largest economy in the world in terms of GDP. Most Elon students correctly indicated which word best describes the police in Brazil, with 60% of respondents choosing the word "corrupt." Over 55% of respondents correctly indicated that Ronaldo is the Brazilian soccer player who has dominated the news most recently. However, students failed to demonstrate knowledge of why he has been in the news. Although the answer was that he retired, most Elon students chose the response, "He donated thousands of dollars to victims in Japan."

Elon students did not have strong feelings toward events in Brazil. Although 48.9% of respondents felt that Brazil is a strong emerging market, 22.2% of students lacked an opinion about the subject. When asked to indicate the strength of the relationship between the United States and Brazil, 51.1% of respondents believe that the relationship is improving. However, a striking 42.2% of students did not have an opinion. Finally, when asked to rate the current president Dilma Rousseff, the first woman president of Brazil, 55.6% of students did not know the individual and 40% lacked an opinion. Such results are similar to responses about Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva, the past president of Brazil. Only 11% of respondents had an opinion, whereas 53% had no opinion and 35.6% did not know the individual.

### **University of Seville Students**

University of Seville students were asked in Spanish the same 10 questions that the Elon University students answered. The students did not have a strong opinion regarding Brazilian current events. When asked to rank the current and past president of Brazil, nearly 100% of respondents did not have either an opinion or complete knowledge of the individual. When asked to indicate their opinion of the strength of the relationship between the United States and Brazil, 50% of respondents expressed they that did not have an opinion on the subject.

University of Seville students had some general knowledge about Brazil. The majority of students (60%) seemed to know which soccer star was dominating the news at the time, yet only 20% of respondents knew that the Brazilian economy was ranked number 8 in the world in 2010. No respondents knew that mudslides had been the most devastating natural disaster.

## **V. Conclusion**

The researcher performed content analysis on media coverage that showed that *El País* and *The New York Times* cover current issues in Brazil differently. The Spanish newspaper emphasized the economic and political aspects of Brazil, whereas the U.S. newspaper painted a broader picture of the country, including cultural aspects as well as the political and economic side of the country. This difference in reporting reflects the differing public interest of the two countries. Such reporting went against the researcher's hypothesis that Spain would be more interested in cultural and human aspects of Brazil, such as traditions, sporting events and the upcoming Olympics, as well as the devastation of the mudslides and their impact on the people of Brazil.

The researcher discovered that the two newspapers covered current issues in Brazil differently. *The New York Times* offered a breadth of topics ranging from business and international relations to the environment and racial tensions within Brazil. The combination of diverse topics and variation of depth provide readers with a whole picture of Brazil and the events that take place there. However, *El País* focused on fewer

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articles and fewer topics, but the majority of its reporting consisted of articles of medium depth of about 500-1,000 words that reflect few topics. Therefore, the readers of *El País* and those influenced by the publication are well informed about select issues in Brazil. However, although readers of *El País* should have a great deal of knowledge about the economy and Brazil's society and relations with other countries, they showed a lack of knowledge of the big picture issues that really shed light on current issues in Brazil as a whole.

Results of a student survey reflected differences in knowledge and opinion levels between American and Spanish students. Survey results revealed that most American students knew there was massive devastation in Brazil due to mudslides. However, there were no Spanish students who indicated that mudslides were the most devastating natural disaster. Such discrepancies were also evident in knowledge about the country's economy in comparison to others in the world. Generally speaking, however, students from both Elon and the University of Seville both lacked knowledge and opinions on the past and current presidents of Brazil. Lack of opinion likely reflects a lack of knowledge about the subject. Therefore, stronger reporting on the country of Brazil could increase both students' levels of knowledge and opinions regarding current events in that country.

Unless it reports on an array of topics, the media are in the danger of painting only a stereotypical portrait of a country, as Besova and Cooley (2009) indicated. Such reporting could be responsible for narrow views and ignorance of real issues occurring in foreign countries. U.S. students' level of knowledge and opinion was higher than that of Spanish students, reflecting the amount, depth, and breadth of news coverage in *The New York Times*. Such findings uphold the issue agenda setting theory that suggests that "the media are influential in telling us what issues to think about" (Besova & Cooley, 2009; Wanta, Golan and Lee, 2004).

There were a number of limitations to this study. A future study may analyze news coverage of multiple countries and examine the public opinion of a large, random sample of residents in various countries, much like the Besova and Cooley (2009) study. Since the research was conducted in North Carolina and in a short period of time, it was extremely difficult to recruit participants from the University of Seville. The distance between the researcher and students at the University of Seville also affected control and regulation. Originally, the researcher wanted to personally distribute surveys and proctor the students as they completed them; however, time restrictions and a lack of direct supervision of Spanish participants forced the researcher to create a Survey Monkey questionnaire instead. By having participants answer questions about their knowledge and opinion levels about Brazil over the Internet, the researcher risked getting inaccurate findings. Participants could have easily looked up the answers to questions on websites such as Google, thus distorting the results.

Content analysis of *El País* and the creation or interpretation of the survey for Spanish students required extensive knowledge of the Spanish language so translation may also have led to inaccurate findings.

## Acknowledgments

The author is thankful for the guidance provided by her mentor, Dr. Glenn Scott. She also is grateful for Dr. Barbara Miller's support, which encouraged her to pursue her passions in international affairs. In addition, the author appreciates the counsel provided by Dr. Byung Lee.

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