

Foreign Correspondents in a Modern World

The past, present and possible future of global journalism

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Abstract

As major American news outlets continue to reduce the number of foreign bureaus in existence, the nation becomes increasingly interconnected with the world and its complex issues. This paper investigates the declines and developments of foreign reporting throughout history, how international news is covered today and what the future of this journalism may entail. Alternative news sources, such as non-governmental organizations and citizen journalist bloggers, have recently become more prominent in the realm of international coverage. However, traditional news outlets struggle with verifying the potentially biased or false information and making stories relevant for their audience. The blogosphere and citizen journalists in general can offer a wealth of knowledge and information with a human element from someone who truly understands the land, language and culture behind these worldwide situations. As U.S. foreign bureaus and fixed foreign correspondents become fewer and other traditional methods of parachute journalism may not be effective in reporting complicated global issues, citizen journalists may fill a void that will keep the American public well informed of news from across the globe.

I. Introduction

In the old days a correspondent was responsible for what he put on the air. As a result, he knew his stuff or he didn't last long... It was his mug and his voice out there, and what he did was his own work, unsullied by the dirty fingerprints of anonymous producers and writers... Today's correspondents so often are limited merely to writing captions for pictures.

From a speech of Charles Collingwood (Cloud & Olson, 1996, p. 363)

Since its "glory days" with the World War II reporting of Edward Murrow and his associates, foreign reporting has experienced definite alteration. Some of the changes have led to an unfortunate truth that American correspondents who do exist now are in a sense simply "writing captions for pictures," as one of Murrow's fellow correspondents Collingwood put it. The divergent realm of journalism and the evolving definition of a journalist may offer some hope of reviving what seems to be the otherwise diminishing foreign correspondent; but the future of reporting from overseas does and likely will look significantly different than

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what Murrow did in his day and probably envisioned for the future of a position he virtually created in our society. In a world where bureaus and fixed foreign correspondents will likely be non-existent and traditional methods of so-called parachute journalism will no longer prove to be effective in reporting complex global issues, citizen journalists may fill a void that will keep the American public well informed of news from across the globe.

This paper will briefly illustrate the declines and developments of foreign reporting throughout history, how international news is covered today and what the future of this journalism may entail. Overall, global journalism has outgrown the traditional bounds of network structure and is now defined not by a single correspondent but made possible through a series of different classifications of journalists fulfilling different needs. One question is whether the general public will accept reformed standards as a new norm and recognize a level of importance for communicating information about different world regions and the events that occur there. The emergence of unconventional outlets of international news will put new and greater responsibilities on traditional news organizations and audiences that are not only informed but also are able to participate in the provision of foreign news.

II. The roots and evolution of foreign reporting

The origins of U.S. foreign reporting can be traced back to colonial times. Unpaid letter writers from overseas would send their news to respective papers and journals coming in on ships and, once in the hands of another nation, stories would be stolen right out of them for news' sakes (Hamilton, 2009). Hamilton (2009) observes that "although there were no editors, let alone reporters, newspapers carried a greater percentage of foreign news than at any time since" (p. 52). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, bureaus for print and broadcast radio companies functioned all throughout the world and operated largely on an independent basis, without government interference or control. The middle of the 20th century was a period in world history – with two far-reaching wars, international political movements and increased interconnectivity – when interest and demand for world news was at its peak.

In these early days of U.S. foreign correspondents, Murrow and other prestigious journalists who helped form the craft were frustrated constantly over various aspects of their positions. One significant frustration was the managements' persistent involvement in their reporting endeavors (Cloud and Olson, 1996). This is an example of what could have been the start of the evolution of correspondents, going from resident reporters telling stories they deemed as most important in the region to puppets of the media corporation stationed in America that decided what would be reported and how. In Murrow's case, CBS News management in Washington, D.C. or New York constantly sought editorial control of the news coming in from overseas, and once World War II was over, the justification for in-depth coverage of those areas like Murrow and others offered was not as much in demand (or so it was perceived).

Since that period of increased control of bureau reports, technology has continued to afford editors back home closer communications with their correspondents, and thus more control over their stories. With that, foreign journalists arguably became "less colorful and less independent, at a time when they were also perceived, like journalists generally, as less credible (Hamilton, 2009, p. 52)." These sorts of interferences by executives combined with economic tensions that began to surface may have contributed significantly to the eventual decline of the foreign news bureaus. The authority shifted to executives when bureaus were once virtually independent entities of the news organization.

It would be logical to believe that as the United States became more involved in the world, the world became more integrated in our news; however, this has not always been the case. Some would argue that our country is more a part of the international arena than ever before. Former CBS Foreign Correspondent Tom Fenton (2005) states in his book *Bad News* that "the foreign correspondent should be enjoying professional heyday. More than ever, our country is part of 'abroad.' America should be fighting its news industry for the reempowerment of foreign correspondents...." (p. 206).

Yet the general trend in the news business is a decline in both manpower overseas and international coverage in their layouts or newscasts. For instance, U.S. TV networks maintained about 15 foreign bureaus in the 1980s while today they tend to have six or fewer (Constable, 2007). According to Constable's article in the *Washington Post*, "ABC has shut down its offices in Moscow, Paris and Tokyo; NBC closed bureaus in

Beijing, Cairo and Johannesburg.” In addition, there are no network bureaus left at all in Africa, India or South America other than an ABC bureau in Nairobi. Those areas together comprise about two billion people. In regard to U.S. newspapers, the *Baltimore Sun* formerly had correspondents based all around the world and currently has none. *Newsday* once had six foreign bureaus is close to shutting down its last one in Pakistan (Constable, 2007).

The networks and newspaper companies tend to maintain the same argument when it comes to rationale for shutting down foreign bureaus: cost. In a capitalistic strive to cut expenditures, a simple action to take for a quick budget fix is nixing a news production center overseas. Foreign editors say an overseas bureau can cost at least \$250,000 annually to maintain. An operation in an area needing additional security can carry a price tag of one million dollars each year (Constable, 2007).

It's not just the number of reporters, but the amount of foreign news coverage that has suffered. As of June 2009, Pew Research Center's most recent annual report on news media revealed U.S. cable networks spent 8% of their airtime on foreign coverage in the year prior (Blet, 2009). Tom Fenton explains how the editorial judgment of shows has become a strong and cyclical force in a lack of international news:

The gatekeepers of national news turned down one foreign story after another because “foreign news doesn't sell.” (To which the obvious answer, It won't sell until you “sell” it, was rarely heeded.) It was a vicious circle. The less we told the public about the turbulent events beyond our shores, the less interest Americans were likely to develop in foreign news. Such events seemed to Americans ever more isolated and disconnected from their comfortable existence. (2005, p. 31)

Not every news organization has substantially decreased its coverage. Rupert Murdoch actually increased the amount of front-page foreign news and pages committed to reporting it within *The Wall Street Journal* when he bought it (Hamilton, 2009). ABC opened one-person bureaus in seven cities last year (Hamilton, 2009,). Foreign Editor for National Public Radio Loren Jenkins explained that while it does cost a minimum of \$500,000 a year to maintain a correspondent post, NPR's foreign reporting is, in fact, expanding geographically. This is partially in response to the large-scale interest the news outlet has observed from its audience of roughly 30 million (according to Jenkins) for foreign news and partially due to what he presumes to be a social responsibility that was assumed two or three decades ago and is not recognized today (UChannel, 2008).

Nevertheless, in the words of Sherry Ricchiardi, a traditional bureau-based foreign reporter is “a vanishing breed: a foreign correspondent assigned to a country for a prolonged period, with the expertise in the local language, culture, history and customs” (2007/2008, p. 32). This presents a new challenge to today's world with arguably a greater interconnectivity than ever before.

III. Foreign correspondents of today

There seems to be some need and demand for international news. In 2004, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that 52% of people in the U.S. follow international news most of the time and that those who did follow represented a much broader diversity of gender and ethnicity than ever before (“International News Audience”). With traditional bureaus nearly extinct, there must be others providing this information to news organizations. Former correspondent Edward Behr said it this way: “Somewhere, at the bottom of this inverted pyramid, someone was getting a story first hand. But who was he ...?” (Palmer, 2008, p. 814).

There are many players, then, in the realm of modern foreign journalism. In his essay “In the Foothills of Change,” John Maxwell Hamilton describes seven different classifications of foreign correspondent. First of all, there are *foreign* foreign correspondents who work from their native country for American news outlets. A survey conducted in 2000 showed that 69 percent of foreign correspondents for American news sources were in fact not Americans. Part of the reasoning for this is people native to certain countries can move around more freely in those nations and thus more efficiently gather information (Hamilton, 2009). There are also *local* foreign correspondents, those who cover the world's events and issues from their hometowns in the U.S. The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation found in 2004 that “two-thirds of local broadcasters said they integrated world and local news into their shows” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 52), meaning foreign reporting can happen even when the reporters are still in the country. Parachute foreign correspondents are sent around

the globe for short periods of time to gather and disseminate news from that area. While replacing permanent reporters abroad with temporary and less-experienced correspondents arguably creates less informative or researched news, Hamilton (2009) points out that it does allow local media to afford overseas assignments. Also, certain worldly events can benefit from having an expert in a certain subject matter covering them, for instance, sending a music critic to an international music festival, who would not otherwise be based in that area. In addition, *citizen* foreign correspondents are those who utilize technology to more casually report information from firsthand experiences. Similarly, there are *foreign* local correspondents who report for a local outlet in another part of the world but are read or watched by news consumers in the United States. Premium foreign correspondents are those who charge fees for specialized reporting from around the world. This could target topics such as economics, politics, etc. Finally, there are in-house foreign correspondents that are responsible for gathering news exclusively for a corporation.

IV. Alternative channels for foreign news

NGOs as international news providers

Non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, are beginning to have a greater hand in providing international coverage as well. For example, the Human Rights Watch's Web pages were receiving about 60,000 views each day early in 2009. Their organization has reporters in 70 different countries, which is more than the foreign correspondent bureaus of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. At first, the information wasn't so "news-like" or in language comprehensible for the general public, but they have recently acquired grants to help pay serious journalists to work for their cause (Bogert, 2009). With this new development in foreign news, there are arguments of whether these individuals should be considered true journalists (who are traditionally upheld for providing fair, balanced and unbiased information) or viewed as more of "unofficial" journalists that merely provide information with an activist cause. Nevertheless, some believe that these groups are the future of foreign reporting. In an article predicting the future state of international journalism, writer Carroll Bogert explained:

In 2014, just as in 2009, the public continues to hold the media in low esteem, right down there with businessmen and politicians. The nongovernmental sector, meanwhile, still enjoys higher approval ratings than any of them. What we learned is that readers don't rust the information less because it doesn't come from the mainstream media. They trust it more. (2009, p. 31)

Whether or not NGOs prove to be a viable alternative to the traditional foreign correspondent for news from overseas, they are beginning to fill a void, providing news that network bureaus don't offer.

Blogs and foreign reporting

The blogosphere is another realm that has been recently studied as a new inclusion in foreign news gathering and reporting. Many of those deemed professional journalists by traditional terms are wary of the promise that blogs offer as a valuable news source. In the *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, John Hartley explains that alternative journalism like blogging "is simply invisible in journalism studies, in J-school curricula, or in discussions of the 'democratic process' and 'professional journalism'" (Atton, 2009, p. 283) even though it has an increasingly important role in modern media. Bob Dietz of the Committee to Protect Journalists even went as far to say that the line between citizen journalism and online activists is almost non-existent, another perspective that may make trained journalists who are expected to be unbiased cringe (*UChannel*, 2008). Admittedly, citizen-based media originate from individual writers and/or groups invested in public interest that seek to present information usually pertaining to an idea or position (Reese et. al., 2007); however, all types of alternative journalism do not base their credibility or authority with the institution of professional journalism but rely on "living experiences" as trustworthy and credible versions of reporting (Atton, 2009).

Blogger-provided information has typically been set apart from what is identified as "mainstream" media and as separate from that journalistic material coming from formally trained and experienced professionals of the field. However, bloggers could be considered to be a correlating force in journalism rather than a source of competition for traditional media (Reese et. al.). Sometimes, this cooperation comes from a

news network's use of information from a blog source and forming a relationship with that blogger. Trust can be built with a blogger from another country through the constant provision of truthful and factual information. Often, a blogger relies on his or her credibility and reputation as well much like the nature of professional journalism in today's standards (*UChannel*, 2008). This trust and use of information can be mutual. Much of the blog work relies on information provided from mainstream media and could be seen as a way to interconnect those sources. Some claim citizen journalists are not destroying the credibility and authority those networks uphold through their blogs, but actually utilizing that information more broadly, interweaving professional newsgathering with public dialogue (Reese et. al., 2007). There is also a convergence of local hires, such as the *foreign* foreign correspondents discussed earlier, and people who provide information on a grassroots basis in order to create a complete story from a sub-stratum of information from that region (*UChannel*, 2008).

The concerns with blogs providing information to the general public are essentially two-faceted. First, there is a discussion of how this information would be verified and the sources would be deemed credible, truthful and without significant bias. Secondly, there is a concern of localizing international stories that bloggers may not bring to the level of relevance at which the public demands them to be in order for true understanding to occur. Overall, it's often weighing out the benefits and consequences of a wide variety of sources accessible in a short period of time working together to edit a story versus traditional network fact-checking (*UChannel*, 2008).

V. The potential future of foreign correspondents and international reporting

Regardless of whether or not widespread convergence between "unofficial" citizen journalists and the ranks of professional reporters occurs, Peter Berglez (2008) explains a desirable step of foreign reporting in his article "What is Global Journalism?". Global journalism is defined most generally as the journalistic process of interrelating issues throughout the world in order to make them relevant (Berglez, 2008, p. 846). On a very basic level, this method of worldwide reporting "interlocks peoples and their practices worldwide" by connecting events and processes of worldwide organizations, identities (such as widely-accepted social-economic classes) and political and economic institutions (Berglez, 2008, p. 848-849). In Berglez's opinion, "[Global journalism] is the natural consequence of increasing connectedness, boundarylessness and mobility in the world: it is the form of journalism needed in times of globalization" (Berglez, 2008, p. 855).

Similarly, Kai Hafez (2009) argues that "we must seek to enlarge the space for international coverage for a broader agenda and more contextualized and intertextualized news" in order to "try and understand the complexities of such world regions, their multiple histories and current often paradoxical developments" (p. 331). This can prove difficult in a world where headline news is all businesses have time for. Those who are typically subscribed to international news services sometimes decide whether to buy or sell based on a slug or breaking news lead (Palmer, 2008).

Some news organizations like NPR continue to maintain a strong correspondent presence on foreign terrain and a strong tradition in international coverage. GlobalPost, for instance, was created at the beginning of 2009 with a mission of "redefining international news for the digital age". The organization claims to "believe in an old school tradition" of correspondents residing in the countries they report from and provides a wide variety of news coverage from all around the globe by those means (GlobalPost.com). The founders look to generate revenue through advertising on the Web site and through subscriptions to their premium service and syndication to other news outlets (Hamilton, 2009, p. 54).

GlobalPost also offers an example of how modern foreign news outlets can attempt to overcome the financial burdens that networks claim hinder their ability to maintain reporter presence in certain countries. There are resources available. For example, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting has been providing travel grants to journalists (mostly freelance) since 2006, mostly for overlooked stories about war or people in need around the world (Guensburg, 2008). One financial solution that Hamilton (2009) offers is to establish tax breaks to offset the expenses brought on by maintaining bureaus or tax credits to encourage people to buy premium-service news. He asks, "If government can support schools, why not news, which is essential to voter education?" (p. 54).

Nevertheless, these financial resources have been available for some time now without being realized or utilized to their full potential. Today's professional news organizations are stuck in somewhat of a paradoxical situation: While they will not support as many foreign bureaus as in the past, they do not seem ready to fully trust an army of worldwide citizen journalists without traditional training and potentially with activist sentiments.

In *Bad News* Fenton says, "Americans are too broadly underinformed to digest nuggets of information that seem to contradict what they know of the world. Yet whose fault is that, and whose responsibility is it to correct?" (2005, p. 21). It's almost as if newspapers and networks today want to take the responsibility in moralistic terms but to reject that responsibility in financial terms. If this minimalist trend of fewer bureau-based correspondents continues, the choice will either be no foreign news or at least a partial reliance on alternative journalists in the regions of news generation. The latter circumstance could be considered more desirable over the utilization of parachute foreign correspondents around the world because there is a greater chance that the context missing from news, as Fenton sees it, will be fulfilled by information from individuals who understand the culture, language, etc. of what they are reporting on. Yet, the challenge of balancing questionably credible sources with getting the news quickly and from those who experience the area and its events firsthand will still persist. There will be traditional standards that may need to be slightly altered in the process of incorporating citizen journalists in the newsgathering process or even in the dispersion of international news directly to the public.

As the world becomes increasingly integrated and the issues and relationships of the world more complex, the desire and necessity for foreign correspondents and news from around the globe would be unlikely to fade. However, the nature of and sources providing the information about the international community will likely shift to a more grassroots effort of reporting with a greater emphasis on use of the Internet and other new technologies. Consequently, modern mainstream media will have to be prepared to evolve their methods of newsgathering and verification of facts if they want to uphold their "authority" over the seemingly random voices of citizen journalism. These measures would have to address the concern of validity of information from alternative reporters and bringing a sense of relevance to the story being told. Foreign correspondents from the U.S. attempt to offer a concrete connection between foreign news and the interests of the American public. How alternative journalists will effectively become part of that reporting as more than an interviewee or tip for further investigation is still somewhat unknown; however, alternative reporters have been vital content providers (with video and text) in certain situations, such as the 2009 election riots in Iran. News audiences probably shouldn't expect to see a drastic change in the outward appearance of foreign news. However, over time there could potentially be a shift in the amount of leverage citizens journalists have in providing foreign news to networks which could provide for a return to days of widespread international reporting but on a less "official" scale. Resident homes or local Internet cafes may become the bureaus of the 21st century.

While unconventional, these new "reporters" and "bureaus" may offer something to international news that parachute journalists cannot provide as aptly in the stories they tell: an in-depth pre-existing knowledge of the peoples and regions they are reporting on. Even in the time of Edward Murrow, CBS News discovered that a human element would be "intimately connected" to their success (Cloud & Olsen, p. 333). The trusted foundational news organizations of the U.S. have the opportunity to utilize the resources they need to more effectively cover international news with a basis of humanity that comes from knowing the surroundings, experiencing what occurs, understanding the story and telling it as one's own.

VI. Conclusion

Foreign reporting has changed significantly since its start, but the basis and purpose still continues to be providing information to the public of important occurrences overseas. In the earliest stages, foreign reporting was the publication of random letters from abroad. In some perspective, news organizations of today have regressed to that sort of news gathering by sorting through various online posts from people living in their respective countries across the globe and using that as information to investigate, if not report on. Yet the modern use of citizen journalists did not come without building up bureaus all around the world in the time of Murrow, virtually deserting them and ultimately opting to do the majority of foreign reporting by flying American journalists to the site of international news with little knowledge of a complicated story or the region

itself. It may be cheaper, but questionable whether it is the most effective means of informing the public on international matters.

As with many aspects of journalism, economic resources and technology played a major role in the evolution of international correspondents and how they report. The bureaus of the past, fixed locations from which networks and newspapers operated, are few and far between due to cost. Therefore, it is likely that those news outlets will rely on journalists from the area in the future to provide them with essential information to pass on to their public. In the case of the United States, this phenomenon has already been happening and will probably expand. This reliance does not and will not only pertain to journalists but also the scope of stories that is reported and/or aired. The dependency demonstrates the increasingly important role of online content – particularly blogs – as a way of accessing information in otherwise underreported or sometimes inaccessible countries, a situation most recently demonstrated with the election protests in Iran and text and video content being streamed to U.S. bureaus from participants.

There will come a time when the public and news organizations of this nation will realize that there is information vital to us from other parts of the world and understanding to be had about those circumstances that cannot be reported on by parachute journalists. Not knowing the culture and language of an area can completely mask even the most effective of a reporter's ability to comprehend and effectively express what is going on. While entrusting more and more citizen journalists involves ethical issues and challenges to the current, more common perspective about the professionalism and necessary training of journalists, there is potential to organize these individuals and reward them for solid, unbiased reporting. Websites like GlobalPost, where about 100 citizen journalists (or "correspondents") agree to abide by high standards of journalism and provide online international news content, are an example of this sort of organization (GlobalPost.com). A multitude of voices and stories that were once not heard or told will be shared with the public, and a human element in the stories that our public seems to rarely seek and often ignore will be enhanced. The amount of ground one news outlet can cover suddenly expands exponentially.

Maintaining newscasts of totally verified information will be one of the greatest challenges to news organizations with citizen journalists. Information gained from blogs and other more experimental sources still continue to be investigated by official news outlets before it is published as credible. However, with the competition between news sources now centering on timing and quickness in breaking news and the public's appreciative reaction to that, the audience will have to take on a new civil responsibility as news consumers. The sources in a foreign news story of the future may be as significant as the story itself and the public needs to be well aware of that potential change.

There is a lot of new responsibility on the part of news providers and news consumers in allowing the blogosphere to become a new realm of potentially valid information. It is important for journalists to remember, however, that blogs are someone's reality but not necessarily the most reliable, unbiased or accurate reality. As aforementioned, blogs can and should be used as sources of information but also put into context. The public needs to be made well aware that blogs are providing information that may or may not be verified, and the journalists should make all attempts to check that information as thoroughly as possible and be certain that the source is credible. Bloggers will potentially need to assume a greater sense of responsibility as well. A news organization may only have access to a particular region through the information that is available online; in this context, anyone blogging can be considered a citizen journalist and thus is possibly an important asset to informative foreign news.

All in all, international news coverage will likely have to be entrusted to citizen journalists to keep effective foreign reporting alive. Journalists need to know about not only the event or situation they are being sent to cover, but the cultural context of that event. If networks and newspapers cannot (and will not) pay to maintain foreign bureaus, the state of the international community still must be understood by those who live in it. The public may not be able to rely on our major news outlets that provide information with only their American-based staff and the few correspondents at work. Therefore, it will be the job of those organizations to employ the help of other less traditional journalists to make sure the U.S. public is informed of world news. Overall, the definition of a journalist will have to shift in order for international news to be reported as fully and effectively as possible. It will be a shift necessary to enhance our knowledge of this interconnected and ever-changing world we live in.

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