

# AGENDA SETTING AND INTERNATIONAL NEWS: MEDIA INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN NATIONS

By Wayne Wanta, Guy Golan, and Cheolhan Lee



*A national poll and a content analysis of network newscasts examined if coverage of foreign nations had an agenda-setting influence. The more media coverage a nation received, the more likely respondents were to think the nation was vitally important to U.S. interests, supporting the agenda-setting hypothesis. The more negative coverage a nation received, the more likely respondents were to think negatively about the nation, supporting the second level of agenda setting. Positive coverage of a nation had no influence on public perceptions.*

Research examining the agenda-setting function of the news media has undergone a dramatic reconceptualization in recent years. No longer is research based on the notion noted by Cohen<sup>1</sup> that "the press may not be successful in telling us what to think but is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about." Indeed, researchers now argue that, under certain circumstances, the news media do tell people what to think by providing the public with an agenda of attributes—a list of characteristics of important newsmakers. Individuals mentally link these mediated attributes to the newsmakers to a similar degree in which the attributes are mentioned in the media.

The present study attempts to examine agenda setting in a new context. The focus of the study will be foreign nations and not individuals in the news, as previous studies have used.<sup>2</sup> Data come from a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that has conducted surveys every four years since 1974. The media agendas come from a content analysis of network newscasts.

The analysis here, then, will first test whether coverage of foreign nations in the news influences how important these nations are viewed to be by individuals. Next, the analysis will test whether positive or negative coverage of foreign nations influences individuals' evaluations of countries—a second-level agenda-setting test.

Second-level agenda setting offers new challenges and opportunities for mass communication researchers. It implies a deeper, more thorough processing of information in media content. While the first

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Wayne Wanta is a professor in the School of Journalism and executive director of the Center for the Digital Globe at the University of Missouri. Guy Golan is an assistant professor at theanship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Cheolhan Lee received his doctorate in the Missouri School of Journalism.

level examines the transmission of issue salience cues from media coverage of issues to public concern with issues, the second level investigates the transmission of attributes of actors in the news from media coverage of these attributes to the public's recall of the same attributes—a much more subtle level. By examining international news coverage, we hope to find insights into how public opinion is constructed in the increasingly important area of foreign affairs.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Television news programs serve as an important source of information for most Americans about events that occur around the world every day. Limited by time and space, news directors often have to select only a handful of stories, while leaving dozens of news stories off the air. News selection is at the heart of the agenda-setting process since the issues that fail to pass through the gatekeepers of the news also fail to give salience cues regarding the relative importance of the issues. This is especially true of international news events that happen beyond the direct experience of most news consumers.

Following the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the world entered an era of global economics that would make international events more salient than ever before. In this new era of globalization, knowledge about events from around the world became a necessity.

In addition to presenting new opportunities, globalization has also created new threats. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, revealed a web of terror that spun across many different nations of the world. The emergence of the Al-Qaida terror organization in such countries as Sudan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Yemen demonstrated to policymakers, the mass media, and the public the need for a more global perspective in coverage of international news.

U.S. television news media, however, continue to focus their coverage of international news events on a limited number of nations and regions.<sup>3</sup> This lack of balance in coverage provides strong support for the new world information order perspective<sup>4</sup> and is likely to impact Americans' view of the saliency of international events.<sup>5</sup>

Since the early days of television news, communication researchers have investigated the role of international news. The emphasis on television is of particular importance due to its role as the key source of news in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

***Foreign News on the Network Agenda.*** Research consistently indicates that international news stories account for a significant percentage of broadcast news content. Larson and Hardy's<sup>7</sup> content analysis of news content from three network news programs revealed that international news accounted for 35% to 39% of news content. Larson's<sup>8</sup> content analysis of more than 1,000 television news stories from 1972 to 1981 revealed that about 40% of the content dealt with international news. Whitney, Fritzler, Jones, Mazzarella, and Rakow<sup>9</sup> found that nearly 34% of all network television news content between 1982 and 1984 was composed of international news. Recently, Riffe and Budianto<sup>10</sup> identified a decrease in the proportion between international and domestic news. Despite the differences in findings, most studies point to

the importance of international news in network television news content.

However, Chang<sup>11</sup> notes that not all countries in the world are created equal. While most powerful core nations consistently receive coverage from U.S. news media, small peripheral nations remain largely uncovered. Research on international news coverage by U.S. network television news programs reveals a lack of balance in the coverage of the world's different geographic regions.<sup>12</sup>

A content analysis by Larson<sup>13</sup> reveals that between 1972 and 1981, coverage of Western Europe accounted for 23.8% of international news references. The Middle East came in second at 22.7%, while Asia came in third with 21.8%. Latin America and Africa trailed far behind with 8.6% and 5.6%. His study also indicated that some nations received much more coverage than other nations. Stories about the USSR, Israel, Britain, and South Vietnam dominated international news coverage on U.S. newscasts.

A ten-year analysis of foreign news coverage on network television news<sup>14</sup> indicated that the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks covered the world in an unbalanced manner. Their results show that between 1972 and 1981, the three networks focused 32.4% of their coverage on the Middle East, 21.1% on Western Europe, 10.8% on Eastern Europe, 9.5% on Asia, 6.7% on Africa, and only 6.2% on Latin America.

In a more recent study, Golan and Wanta<sup>15</sup> examined how 138 elections held between 1 January 1998 and 1 May 2000 were covered by U.S. network television newscasts (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN). They found that of the 138 elections, only eight received coverage on all four newscasts, ten received coverage on more than one newscast, eighteen received coverage on one newscast and 102 received no news coverage. The study indicated that the majority of elections that received substantial coverage from U.S. television networks occurred either in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East. Only one election that took place in Latin America was covered by more than one network, and none of the elections in Africa was covered by more than one network.

Understanding the nature of international news coverage by the news media is of great importance when considering its possible implications. As suggested by previous studies, international news coverage has a direct influence on U.S. public opinion. For example, a study by Salwen and Matera<sup>16</sup> found correlations between foreign news coverage and public opinion that suggested that international news coverage does indeed have an agenda-setting effect. Wanta and Hu<sup>17</sup> examined the agenda-setting impact of international news and found a strong effect on American public opinion, especially for conflict-related stories and concrete presentations. McNelly and Izcaray<sup>18</sup> found that news exposure was significantly related to positive feelings towards countries and to perceptions of those countries as successful. Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver, and Willnat<sup>19</sup> found that attention to foreign affairs news was a better predictor of positive perceptions of nations than simple exposure to newspapers.

The implications of international news coverage by the news media are further highlighted when considering the possible impact of

coverage on U.S. foreign policy. Bennett<sup>20</sup> notes that the nature of international news coverage by news media is often consistent with the foreign policy of the nation. The potential agenda-setting effect of television programming on audiences was recognized by Theodore White: "No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform, can succeed in the United States unless the press prepares the public mind."<sup>21</sup> Cohen<sup>22</sup> identified three major roles of the press in the field of foreign policy: role of observer of foreign policy news, role of participant in the foreign policy process (along with policymakers), and the role of catalyst of foreign news. This final role might perhaps be the most central to the press and its agenda-setting influence over the public agenda.

**Agenda Setting.** The original agenda-setting hypothesis proposed a moderate media influence on social cognition—how individuals learned about the important issues of the day. Extensive media coverage supplied media consumers with salience cues regarding the relative importance of these issues.

Few individuals have direct experience with news events in foreign countries. For many, the sole source of information about world events is the press. Media coverage of international news then should play an important agenda-setting function.

Agenda setting has been the focus of hundreds of systematic studies, the vast majority of which have found support for the idea that the public learns the relative importance of issues from the amount of coverage given to the issues in the news media. Recent studies, however, have looked at the influence of media coverage at a more detailed level.<sup>23</sup> These "second-level" agenda-setting studies, which merge traditional agenda-setting with framing research, suggest that the attributes linked to newsmakers influence the attributes members of the public link to the newsmakers. Thus, the "agenda of attributes" covered in the media sets the "agenda of attributes" for the public.

The dependent variable in first-level agenda setting is object salience. As Ghanem<sup>24</sup> notes, object salience typically involves issues. Media coverage of an object increases the importance of that object among members of the public. Thus, the public learns the importance of issues based on the amount of coverage that those issues receive.

Since the seminal work by McCombs and Shaw,<sup>25</sup> hundreds of studies have examined this media effect on the public. The vast majority has found support for the notion that media coverage influences the perceived importance of issues. In other words, media coverage of objects influences the perceived importance of those objects.

The second level, however, implies a more subtle form of media effect. The focus has shifted from coverage of objects to coverage of attributes of those objects. While coverage of the object continues to influence the perceived importance of that object—as first-level agenda setting argues—second-level agenda setting implies that the attributes linked to the object in the news media are mentally linked to the object by the public. Thus, while first-level agenda setting suggests media coverage influences what we think about, second-level agenda setting suggests media coverage influences how we think.

McCombs, Llamas, Escobar-Lopez, and Rey<sup>26</sup> found support for a second level of agenda setting during the 1996 Spanish general election on two attribute dimensions—substantive and affective descriptions. Substantive attributes dealt with information about qualities of the candidates: experience with foreign affairs, for example. Affective attributes dealt with positive, neutral, or negative comments about candidates: “good leader,” for instance.

Golan and Wanta<sup>27</sup> conducted a similar study during the 2000 Republican presidential primary in New Hampshire. Results show that John McCain was covered much more positively than George W. Bush. The findings also show that respondents linked four of six cognitive attributes—akin to the substantive attributes of the McCombs et al. study<sup>28</sup>—to candidates in direct proportion to media coverage. The results show less support for media influence on the affective (positive) attributes individuals linked to candidates.

Several other recent studies have found support for the second level of agenda setting. Tedesco,<sup>29</sup> for example, content analyzed 1,479 candidate press releases and 756 network news stories using key words in context frames during the 2000 presidential primaries. Candidates and media issue agendas were positively correlated, especially for the Republican candidates. Tedesco further examined the direction of influence by examining autocorrelations, which suggested the relationship between candidates and media is reciprocal. However, the process frames were significantly correlated only for Republican candidate John McCain and the networks, which Tedesco explains may demonstrate that McCain and the media had a “love-affair” during the primaries.

Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban<sup>30</sup> examined the second level of agenda setting through two experiments that manipulated media portrayals of candidate personality and qualification traits. They found subjects’ impressions of candidate personality traits mirrored media portrayals of those traits. However, media portrayals of personality traits did not affect a candidate’s overall salience. Results also indicate that candidate qualifications influenced affective perceptions of politicians.

Rhee<sup>31</sup> examined how news frames in campaign coverage affect individuals’ interpretation of campaigns. Results suggest that both strategy-framed and issue-framed print news stories are effective in influencing interpretation.

Shah, Domke, and Wackman<sup>32</sup> examined the relationships among media frames, individual interpretations of issues, and voter decision-making. They found media frames and issue interpretations substantially influence the type of decision-making strategy that voters use.

Finally, Takeshita and Mikami<sup>33</sup> examined first- and second-level agenda setting simultaneously. They found significant evidence for the transfer from the media to the public of both issue salience and attribute salience.

Previous studies, however, have limited their analyses to newsmakers as the object in media coverage. Our present study focuses on nations as the objects under investigation. Thus, the hypotheses for the study are:

H1: The more overall media coverage a nation receives, the more individuals will think it is of vital importance to U.S. interests.

This modification of the original hypothesis first proposed by McCombs and Shaw<sup>34</sup> has some notable differences. Instead of coverage of issues leading to issue salience among members of the public, our study proposes the coverage of nations will lead to the nation becoming more salient among the public. As Ghanem<sup>35</sup> argues, coverage of an object will lead to more concern with an object. Here, coverage of a nation will lead to more concern with the nation. Second, the “public” variable is not concern with an issue, but respondents’ perceptions of how vital a country is to the United States. Thus, the dependent variable is not personal issue salience but a perception of importance related to the country as a whole—in other words, an affective evaluation of countries. The independent variable—coverage of an object (country)—is similar to first-level agenda setting, while the dependent variable—perceptions of the vital importance to the United States—is akin to second-level agenda setting.

H2: The more negative media coverage a nation receives, the more individuals will think negatively about that nation. The more positive media coverage a nation receives, the more individuals will think positively about the nation.

These hypotheses address the affective attribute agenda noted by Ghanem.<sup>36</sup> If a nation receives negative coverage, the negative attributes mentioned in the news reports will cause individuals to mentally link these negative attributes to the nation. Thus, when asked how they feel about this nation, respondents will recall the negative news coverage and respond that they think negatively about the nation. The reverse should be true about positive coverage.

The analysis of the present study compared responses to a public opinion survey and media coverage in the period leading up to the survey period. Both looked at countries as “objects” and whether media coverage of the individual countries set the agenda for public perceptions of those countries.

**Public Agenda.** The public agenda came from data collected during a survey in 1998 by the Chicago Council for Foreign Relations. The Council is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that has conducted similar surveys every four years since 1974. The 1998 survey is the most recent data available. The surveys examine the extent that the American public supports an active role for the United States overseas and addresses which nations the public believes are most important to the United States and which nations are threats to the United States. The Council commissioned the Gallup organization to conduct the polls. The survey was conducted between 15 October and 10 November 1998, and included 1,507 completed surveys.

## Method

Two series of questions were used for the present study. First, respondents were read a list of 26 countries and asked if the United States had a vital interest in each. The percentage of the respondents answering “yes” determined the score each country received on the public agenda. For example, 87% of the respondents believed the United States had a vital interest in Japan—the largest total in the survey—while 27% believed the United States had a vital interest in the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—the lowest in the survey. Thus, the foreign nation agenda for the public ranged from 87 for Japan to 27 for the Baltic countries.

Next, a series of questions dealing with a “feeling thermometer” for countries was used in the analysis. Respondents were asked to rate 21 countries on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. The more positive an individual felt toward a country, the higher the “temperature” that country would receive. Thus, the responses to these questionnaire items showed the public’s affective attribute agenda. Scores ranged from 72 for Canada to 25 for Iraq.

**Media Agenda.** Four network newscasts were content analyzed for the period of 1 January to 15 October 1998. Previous time-lags employed in agenda-setting research have ranged from one week<sup>37</sup> to nine months.<sup>38</sup> Watt, Mazza, and Snyder<sup>39</sup> found that issue salience memory can decay as slowly as 300 days. Previous research, however, has mainly focused on issues rather than countries. Given the nature of international news coverage, we wanted to ensure that countries in our analysis would have ample opportunities to appear in the media agenda. Thus, we extended the content analysis period to include media coverage from the beginning of the year to the starting date of the survey. With the extended time period, the number of news stories per nation ranged from 342 for Russia to two for Haiti. However, because the time lag employed here was longer than that used in most previous research, we ran additional tests with shorter time lags of three months and six months.

All coverage of foreign nations on ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN was included in the analysis. Stories were downloaded from the Vanderbilt University television News Archive.<sup>40</sup>

The unit of analysis was the individual news story. Stories were coded first for the nation or nations involved in the story. Stories from the United States involving domestic issues were not coded. The frequency for individual nations mentioned in news stories determined the score they received for the content analysis.

Each country was also coded for valence—whether the country was covered in a predominantly positive, neutral, or negative manner. If an international newscast reported that a foreign country is involved with activities that threaten the interest of United States (e.g., terrorism) or values that the United States wants to protect (e.g., human rights or democracy), the story was coded as negative. If a foreign country was involved with activities that are consistent with U.S. interests or values that the United States wants to promote, it was coded as positive. Neutral stories or stories that demonstrated a balance of both positive and negative information were coded as neutral.

**TABLE 1**  
*Media Coverage of 26 Nations and Public Views  
on the U.S. Vital Interests in Nations*

Country	Media Stories	Public View as Vital U.S. Interest
Japan	208	87
Russia	342	77
Saudi Arabia	36	77
China	282	74
Canada	134	69
Israel	195	69
Kuwait	30	68
Mexico	95	66
United Kingdom	296	66
Germany	106	60
Iran	99	61
South Korea	63	54
South Africa	85	52
Bosnia	64	51
Taiwan	27	51
Cuba	152	50
France	132	47
Egypt	26	46
Afghanistan	92	45
India	173	37
Brazil	49	33
Indonesia	140	33
Turkey	25	33
Haiti	2	31
Poland	12	31
Baltic countries	18	27

All media data: Pearson's correlation:  $r = .568, p = .002$

Six-month media time lag: Pearson's correlation:  $r = .629, p < .001$

Three-month media time lag: Pearson's correlation:  $r = .559, p = .003$

A randomly selected 10% of the news stories were coded by the main coder for the study and a second independent coder to determine intercoder reliability. Coder reliability as determined by the Holsti formula is .92.<sup>41</sup>

Table 1 lists the number of stories aired on the four network newscasts and the percentage of respondents saying "yes" to whether each of 26 individual countries is of vital interest to the United States. As the table shows, the correlation for the two measures is statistically significant (Pearson's  $r = .568, p = .002$ ). In other words, the more media coverage a nation received, the more vital to U.S. interests the country was seen to be. This relationship also held true for the shorter time lags.

## Results



Both correlations using media coverage in the three months before the poll ( $r = .559, p = .003$ ) and six months before the poll ( $r = .629, p < .001$ ) were statistically significant. Thus, the results support the first hypothesis.

While the overall correlation was significant, some notable differences in the two agendas are apparent. Saudi Arabia tied with Russia as the second highest on the public agenda, but received the fourth lowest number of media stories. Kuwait received only 30 media stories, yet ranked ahead of the United Kingdom as a vital nation. Respondents apparently equated “vital interest to the U.S.” with oil. India received 173 stories and Indonesia 140 stories, ranking them in the upper half of the media agenda. Both, however, were ranked near the bottom of the public agenda.

Table 2 shows the media attribute coverage and public “nation temperature” results. Recall that these ratings are for 21 countries, and not the 26 of Table 1.

Here, the Pearson correlations for positive ( $r = .328, p = .146$ ) and neutral ( $r = .210, p = .380$ ) coverage of nations did not correlate with how the public felt about individual nations. Negative coverage of nations, however, did correlate negatively with public views of nations ( $r = .578, p = .006$ ). In other words, the more negative coverage that nations received, the more likely respondents were to rate the nation low on the thermometer scale. Negative affective attributes, then, led to negative views of the nation by respondents, supporting the second hypothesis.

As with the results of the first hypothesis, the public’s ratings of nations and media coverage had a number of large differences. Mexico, for instance, received a relatively high number of negative stories (22) yet was a relatively “warm” nation with a mean of 57 on the respondents’ thermometer. Cuba, on the other hand, received only 6 negative stories, yet was a “cool” 38 on the respondents’ thermometer.

## Discussion

The results show a clear relationship between media coverage of nations and how individuals viewed those nations.

Although media coverage and the public’s view of how vital nations were to the United States were highly correlated ( $r = .568, p = .002$ ), coverage patterns for certain nations did not appear to match public perceptions. Notably, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait received relatively little media coverage, but both were relatively high on the public’s vital interest agenda. Kuwait, of course, was at the center of the 1991 Gulf War with Iraq. Since U.S. armed forces fought to regain Kuwait’s independence, respondents may have felt that this nation was still vitally important to the United States. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is a leader among the oil-rich OPEC nations. One reason for the high public ranking of Saudi Arabia—and Kuwait—could be that since oil is vitally important to the United States, members of the public may view these nations as vitally important as well. The news media, therefore, did not have to show the importance of the oil-providing nations to the public for the public to understand their significance.

**TABLE 2**  
*Media Coverage of 21 Nations and Public Feelings toward Countries*

Country	Media Stories			Public View: Nation "Temperature"
	Pos.	Neut.	Neg.	
Canada	4	130	0	72
United Kingdom	40	256	0	69
Italy	0	146	0	62
Mexico	0	73	22	57
Brazil	0	49	0	56
Germany	0	106	0	56
France	1	128	3	55
Israel	5	185	5	55
South Africa	4	76	5	54
Poland	0	12	0	50
South Korea	4	53	6	50
Russia	1	336	5	49
China	0	245	37	47
India	3	85	85	46
Saudi Arabia	1	22	13	46
Turkey	2	22	1	45
Pakistan	7	41	83	42
Cuba	8	138	6	38
North Korea	0	36	25	36
Iran	0	71	28	28
Iraq	4	169	329	25

Pearson correlations:

Positive coverage/public view:  $r = .328, p = .146$

Neutral coverage/public view:  $r = .210, p = .360$

Negative coverage/public view:  $r = .578, p = .006$

Indonesia and India, meanwhile, ranked very low on the public agenda but in the upper half of the media agenda. Both of the countries faced serious political conflicts during the time frame of the content analysis. In India, violence marked the election of Prime Minister Atal Bihan Vajpayee and the vote by the Congress Party to make Sonia Gandhi its president. In Indonesia, demonstrations against the government of President Suharto turned violent. Suharto eventually stepped down. The main stories from these countries, therefore, dealt with political changes in the countries, which showed very few links to the United States. While political changes are important events for the news media, perhaps the lack of a significant tie to the United States limited the countries' appeal to the U.S. public.

Most of the other nations, however, followed clear trends. Japan and Russia, the top two countries on the public agenda, were among the nations receiving the highest amount of media coverage. The Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Poland, and Haiti were at the bottom of the public agenda. They were also at the bottom of the media agenda.

These same trends also were consistent across different time lags. The shortest time lag examined here (three months of media coverage before the poll period) produced a slightly smaller correlation and the mid-range time lag (six months of media coverage before the poll period) produced a slightly larger correlation. Further research is needed to determine the optimal time lag for future studies.

The affective attribute agenda also showed a clear trend. Only one of the six “warmest” nations on the thermometer (Mexico) received any negative coverage. Iraq, the coldest nation on the public agenda at 25, received the most negative media coverage, 329 stories.

As with the earlier tests, not all nations correlated perfectly. Mexico did receive 22 negative stories, yet was the fourth warmest nation at 57. Turkey received just one negative story, but was relatively cool at 45.

Mexico, as a neighboring country, could have been viewed warmly because of geographical proximity. It also could have been viewed warmly because of the relatively high number of Mexican immigrants in the United States.

Geographical location also may have been at the heart of why Turkey was viewed as a cold nation. Because of its proximity to Iraq and Iran, the two nations at the bottom of the nation thermometer, Turkey may have been linked mentally to these other cold nations.

While the negative affective attributes showed a clear agenda-setting trend between media and respondents, the positive and neutral affective attributes did not. The finding on the neutral attributes is logical. More neutral stories should not have influenced how positive or negative the public views a nation. Neutral coverage would imply neutral reactions from the public. Moreover, the vast majority of stories aired on the four networks were neutral stories, which demonstrates the balanced style of reporting that has been the goal of American journalism.

The lack of an influence of positive affective attributes, however, is more puzzling. Since the more negative news stories a nation received the more negatively it would be viewed, it is logical to assume that the opposite relationship would be found with positive attributes: The more positive news stories a nation received, the more positively it would be viewed. This was not the case.

This lack of a significant correlation can be attributed to the fact that several “warm” countries received no positive coverage. Among these countries are Italy, Mexico, Brazil, and Germany. Of these four countries, only Mexico received any negative coverage. Thus, many of the nations viewed most positively by the public actually received nothing but neutral coverage in the media. This may have given individuals the impression that while these nations are not overly positive in their relations with the United States, neither are they negative threats to the United States.

In addition, Iraq and Pakistan, two countries low on the public agenda, received some positive coverage. This may have been an attempt by the news media to show some balance toward these countries, since both received extensive negative coverage.

It also should be noted that the analysis here involved only two agendas: the media agenda as determined by coverage on four networks newscasts and the public agenda as determined by responses to a national poll. The analysis did not include any potential influence on the media agenda by outside sources, such as U.S. public officials. The U.S. president, for example, could have been the source of the media agenda, influencing coverage through his policy statements. In his role as the nation's number-one newsmaker, the president is an important source for foreign affairs stories and could raise or lower nations on the media agenda by publicly announcing his policy priorities. This would appear to be a fruitful area for future research.

Future research also may more closely examine stories that have a mix of positive and negative information, since the majority of stories here were either balanced or neutral. Were these stories balanced because of journalists' objectivity or because of the type of events that were deemed worthy of coverage?

Overall, then, the results here show that media coverage of countries may have an impact on how those nations are perceived by the public. In other words, the news media can show the public both how vitally important countries are to the United States and how negatively the countries should be viewed.

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#### NOTES

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