

# *A View of the World*

*International News  
on  
Local Newscasts*

**September 1999 - February 2000**

*A Report by the Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy*

## Methodology

This report is the result of a six-month study of the daily news broadcasts of three Grand Rapids TV stations: WOOD TV8 (6 & 11pm), WZZM 13 (6 & 11pm) and WXMI 17 (10pm). From September 1, 1999 through February 29, 2000, each day's newscasts were taped and then viewed by Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy staff and volunteers. News logs were kept for each program with specific codes assigned for each of the areas of interest that were documented.

(Part of the data collecting was done by GVSU social work students. A word of thanks to them and Prof. Michel Coconis for their assistance on this research.)

*The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) is an affiliate of the Community Media Center ([www.grcmc.org](http://www.grcmc.org)). GRIID offers Media Literacy training and resources to the community in order to help the public actively participate in the consumption and creation of media and to promote democratic values with all media systems.*

	<b>Total # of International stories</b>	<b>Total # Violence/Disaster-based stories &amp; percentage</b>
WOOD TV 8	251	210 - 83%
WZZM 13	147	122 - 83%
WXMI 17	213	195 - 91%
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Totals	611	527 - 86%

	WOOD TV 8	WZZM 13	WXMI 17
Latin America	39	40	50
Africa	19	12	27
Middle East	32	9	24
Europe/Canada/ Australia	62	44	51
Asia	99	42	61
 <i>Voices</i>			
Station totals	32	11	39
US voices	21	7	28
Foreign voices	11	4	11

## Introduction

During the height of the US War against Iraq in 1991 a very revealing poll was conducted. (see FAIR *Special Report on the Gulf War 1991* [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)) The poll found that the more people watched TV news the less they knew about what was going on. Fortunately or unfortunately this is not how Americans respond to all international news coverage.

During the Gulf War the Pentagon imposed strict press pools limiting how many and which media had access to what was happening in the war zones. It was also a case where US military personnel were directly involved in the war and that tends to reflect some bias on the part of US media, since they clearly took a "patriotic" stance. (see *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, by John MacArthur, *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf-A Global Perspective*, edited by Mowlana, Schiller & Gerbner, and *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting* [www.fair.org/international/iraq.html](http://www.fair.org/international/iraq.html))

However, not all international news is covered in the US the way the Gulf War was. Given that much of international news does not deal with direct US military involvement many people are not inclined to spend a great deal of time looking for information about what happens outside the US borders. Studies from the Annenberg School of Communication and Public Policy Center show that a majority of Americans do not watch with any regularity international news sources such as CNN, Nightline, PBS's News hour or even the nightly network news. Most US television viewers tend to have most of their exposure to international news from local TV news broadcasts. These are stories that are midway through newscasts, generally after the weather and just before sports. While we recognize that these stories are not the bulk of local TV newscasts, a constant exposure to these images and messages can have a significant impact on the public's perception of the rest of the world. Therefore, it is important to investigate what exactly the images and messages the public receives by way of local news programming on international matters. This study does exactly that.

For six months GRIID looked at the international news stories that appeared on three local TV news broadcasts. We tallied the number of stories, how many were violence/disaster-based, whose voices were heard and how the stories were treated in comparison to US foreign policy. The data for this study can be found on pages ( ).

We recognize that international news is not the bread and butter of local TV news broadcasts. Most stations lack the personnel and resources to send reporters abroad. In many cases, local affiliates present modified versions of what appear on the national networks. However, this does not mean that local TV stations are freed from the responsibility to provide accurate information about international news. More importantly there are usually local links to international news stories. Whether a story concerns the local immigrant population, sister city relations or the increasing connections resulting from the globalization of trade, international news can be very important to the local community.

## *The World is a Dangerous Place*

When it came to violence/disaster-based stories, international coverage during our study was twice as bad as the local news stories (see local news violence-based stories report [www.grcmc.org/griid/r\\_methodology2.shtml](http://www.grcmc.org/griid/r_methodology2.shtml)). At an average of 86% for the three stations studied it would probably be easy for viewers to conclude that the world is an extremely violent place. Whether it is war stories from Chechnya or flooding in Venezuela, the images that viewers are given paint a fairly grim picture of life outside of US borders.

Given this bias towards violence and disaster viewers might feel that the peoples of other nations are less civilized, less able to conduct themselves by democratic principles. This can easily lead to Americans feeling superior, which can have negative consequences on how they vote or view US foreign policy.

The perception that other nations of the world can not conduct themselves in a civilized fashion makes the media - and thereby the media informed public - less critical of the increasing police role that the US military plays. We saw this evidenced in Kosovo, where neither the mainstream media nor the general public seriously questioned the US military's "humanitarian" intervention.

Lastly, the violence-based view of life around the world is usually not contextualized. Without knowing the causes of war or certain disasters, viewers cannot adequately make sense of the violence. The flooding in Venezuela last fall is a good example. Local news coverage presented the flooding as purely a natural disaster. However, in order to understand what took place it would be necessary to know something about recent socio-economic conditions in Venezuela.

A great deal of the 30,000 deaths from the flooding were caused by mudslides. This was due in part to the significant deforestation that has occurred in Venezuela in recent years, deforestation which cause serious soil erosion. On top of that, there are numerous shanty-towns on the fringes of larger cities like Caracas. These houses are built on hillsides and are susceptible to the dangers of flooding and earthquakes. More importantly, these shanty-town communities exist as a result of the poverty that many Venezuelans are forced to live in due to government policies and foreign interests (see Resource Center of the Americas [www.americas.org](http://www.americas.org)).

## *Who told the Stories*

Quite often, how we understand stories depends on who tells them. From the data, we can see that a disproportionate number of the voices heard on matters outside our borders were US voices. The total US voices from all three stations were 56, while we only heard foreign voices 26 times. The US voices were primarily US government representatives, with an occasional comment from US citizens working as volunteers in places like Honduras, Taiwan and Venezuela.

Foreign voices also tended to be those of government officials, with a few exceptions from England, relatives of the Egypt Air victims and the Cuban grandmothers of Elian Gonzalez. Here you can see that when we do hear foreign voices it is only the result of disasters or political conflict. *Not once* in the six-month study did we hear a

foreign voice speaking about an act of courage or socially beneficial work. Again, you can see how it would be easy for TV viewers to conclude that Americans are somehow more civilized and knowledgeable.

*Is US news in conflict with US foreign policy?*

Many scholars have written about how US news tends to reflect the interests of US foreign policy (*Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, MacArthur; *The More You Watch, the Less You Know*, Schechter; *Unreliable Sources*, Lee & Solomon; *Necessary Illusions*, Chomsky; *The Terrorism Industry*, Herman & O'Sullivan; *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky & Herman). In one section of their seminal work, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the US Media*, Chomsky and Herman compare US media coverage of religious workers killed in US-supported countries in Latin America and Communist Poland in the 1980's.

Looking at the *New York Times* alone the authors show that there were 78 articles about the murder of one Polish priest in 1984. Comparatively, the combined coverage of the murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, four US church workers in El Salvador and 23 religious workers murdered in Guatemala from 1980 to 1985 was only 49 stories in the *Times*. Chomsky and Herman call this a case of worthy and unworthy victims. If you are killed in an official "enemy" country the atrocity is considered greater than if you are a victim in a US-backed "democracy."

Our six-month study revealed similar examples of biased coverage along US foreign policy lines. Let's look at the four countries that received the most coverage: Russia, Kosovo, East Timor and Cuba.

In the fall of 1999, there was lingering coverage of Kosovo on all three stations, for a total of 29 stories. Of those 29 stories only two were critical of the US/NATO actions and one of those was a story about a US soldier caught raping a young Kosovar girl. The other story (on WZZM 13) could have been a lead story, but was on just before sports. In this story a US government study reported that only 26 out of 900 NATO targets were actually hit. Aside from that story, viewers received no critical commentary on the US/NATO mission in Kosovo.

In the case of Russia there was even greater coverage. The three stations combined for 45 stories on Russia, with a focus on the Russian war in Chechnya. The news stories showed graphic footage of the Russian bombing campaigns and some of the estimated 1 million Chechens displaced by bombing. This footage clearly implicated the Russians as the aggressors. However, we never heard the sort of condemnatory notes from the news readers that they directed toward Serbia during the US/NATO campaign in Kosovo.

Russian human rights activist Sergei Kovalyov recently said, "In Chechnya, Russia is using NATO methods to achieve Milosevic's ends." This is pretty much understood around the world, and there has been near unanimous condemnation from the United Nations for several years now. Unfortunately, any such condemnation was entirely absent from the news reports in our study. These stories also did not ask the question, "If the US/NATO effort in Kosovo was to stop aggression, why did we not

intervene in Chechnya?" A question that seems quite simple, but has evaded news reporters in many other cases.

We now turn to coverage of the Indonesian repression in East Timor last fall. The three stations combined for a total of 47 stories on the plight of East Timorese after an August referendum. The Indonesian army, particularly the murderous Kopassus units, unleashed a bloodbath that saw 3-5,000 East Timorese killed just before the referendum and an estimated 260,000 persons forced into refugee camps. These numbers exceeded those of the Albanians prior to the US/NATO bombing, and yet the question was never asked once by any of the newsreaders as to why the US nor NATO did not intervene militarily.

With reporting on East Timor, there was an insidious element at work. No mention was ever made in the 47 stories of the ongoing US military and diplomatic support of Indonesia since 1965. There was even a local angle, since just hours before Indonesia's initial invasion of East Timor in 1975, President Gerald Ford met with Indonesia's leaders in Jakarta to offer complete support. Again, these are questions or commentaries that seem to elude news readers.

Lastly, we need to say something about the coverage of Cuba and the Elian Gonzalez case. This story won the prize for the most covered foreign news story with a total of 74. ( We recognize that this could be classified as a domestic story as well, but the origin and implication are overridingly international) Aside from the legal questions that surrounded this case, the media had a tremendous opportunity to educate the public on significant historical factors in US/Cuban relations. Sadly, this did not happen.

One of the underlying aspects of this story was that it was just assumed that life in the US is better than in Cuba. That may be the case, but no evidence was provided to support this assumption. Most of the 74 stories we viewed tended to show the point of view of the Miami family, with little perspective from Cuba or the boy's father. This was true of most US media. Just as important, however, was what wasn't said in these stories.

At no time did they mention the 40-year US embargo on Cuba. This may have helped viewers understand certain economic conditions that would have prompted the mother to leave in the first place. And since the embargo was not reported, viewers did not learn that it is condemned by most of the world's nations. Finally, no comparison between INS treatment of Cubans and other refugees - for example Haitians - was ever made. This would seem to be simple and logical issues that any reporter would raise, but they were no where to be found in the 74 news stories on Elian Gonzalez and Cuba during the period of the study.

In all four cases we looked at the news coverage tended not to conflict with the US government position. It is not our task to draw conclusions as to why that is, but it is worthy of contemplation, and would be a sensible question to put forth to the news directors at the stations we studied.

*Conclusion*

The areas discussed in this report are quite limited. To discuss the coverage of each and every country in the world would require a much more exhaustive approach. Our intention was to look at certain themes and countries that received the most coverage. We could have looked at countries like Colombia (the largest recipient of US military aid in the hemisphere) which has been embroiled in a civil-war for over a decade. Colombia only appeared once in the study, despite it being a major concern of US foreign policy, instead we choose a more focused approach.

Those who follow foreign policy and global news will see some interesting trends in the data that appears here. Other conclusions could be drawn, which we encourage. Regardless of whether or not you pay much attention to these matters we encourage you to communicate with the news directors (see page 11 ) and encourage them to consider the recommendations included on page 10. We also welcome your comments, ideas and endorsement of the report findings. You can e-mail Jeff Smith at [jsmith@grcmc.org](mailto:jsmith@grcmc.org) or call 459-4788 x122.

<i>Regional Data</i>	WOOD TV8	WZZM 13	FOX 17
Latin America:			
Cuba	26	23	30
Mexico	5	8	5
Venezuela	2	2	4
Ecuador	1	4	2
Chile	2	0	0
Haiti	1	0	0
Panama	1	0	1
Puerto Rico	1	1	0
Peru	0	0	2
Brazil	0	0	1
El Salvador	0	1	0
Colombia	0	0	1
Bahamas	0	0	1
Honduras	0	0	2
Argentina	0	0	1

	WOOD TV8	WZZM 13	FOX 17
Africa:			
Egypt Air crash	14	11	15
Egypt	2	0	3
Morocco	1	0	0
Kenya	1	0	2
South Africa	0	1	4
Libya	0	0	1
Algeria	0	0	1
Asia:			
Russia	23	5	17
Indonesia	1	0	1
Afghanistan	5	3	5
Vietnam	1	0	0
Japan	8	7	6
Sri Lanka	1	1	0
India	5	1	5
Pakistan	5	0	2
Thailand	2	0	1
South Korea	1	1	2
East Timor	31	3	12
Armenia	1	1	2
China	4	1	4
North Korea	1	0	0
Taiwan	7	8	4
Philippines	0	2	0
Bangladesh	0	1	
Europe:			
Kosovo	19	4	6
Belgium	1	1	1
Portugal	2	3	0
Greece	4	3	3
Italy	4	4	1
Austria	4	0	2
Germany	4	2	6
Ireland	2	3	4
England	14	11	12
Bulgaria	1	0	0
France	0	2	5

	WOOD TV8	WZZM 13	FOX 17
<i>Europe cont.</i>			
Norway	0	1	0
Romania	0	0	1
Denmark	0	0	2
Switzerland	0	0	1
Middle East:			
Turkey	7	3	6
Iraq	2	0	2
Kuwait	1	0	1
Palestine	9	1	5
Israel	6	4	10
Yemen	1	0	0
Jordan	0	1	0
Canada	4	4	6
Australia	0	0	1
Antarctica	1	3	1

# International News/Media Coverage Resources

## Books

- *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*, Herman & McChesney, 1997
- *Propaganda Inc., Selling America's Culture to the World*, Nancy Snow, 1998
- *Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda*, Herman, 1992
- *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Chomsky, 1989
- *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Herman & Chomsky, 1988
- *The Terrorism Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape Our View of Terror*, Herman & O'Sullivan, 1989
- *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, 1992
- *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf - A Global Perspective*, Mowlana, Gerbner, Schiller, ed., 1992
- *By Invitation Only: How the Media Limit Political Debate*, Croteau & Hoynes, 1994
- *The Torturers Lobby: How Human Rights-Abusing Nations Are Represented in Washington*, Pamela Brogan, 1992

*Some suggested web addresses:*

Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting - [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

Project Censored - <http://censored.sonoma.edu/ProjectCensored>

Institute for Public Accuracy - [www.accuracy.org](http://www.accuracy.org)

Foreign Policy in Focus [www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org](http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org)

Third World Resurgence [www.twinside.org.sg/](http://www.twinside.org.sg/)

## **Recommendations to the Media**

- 1) When covering international news, always cite sources.
- 2) Use a variety of sources to ensure more balanced coverage.
- 3) Utilize local individuals and organizations for commentary on international issues (university educators, human rights workers, businesses, workers' rights groups, World Affairs Council, Institute for Global Education, etc.)
- 4) Investigate more of the local connections to international news stories: businesses, refugee populations, human rights campaigns, sister city relations and local Congressional voting on US foreign policy.
- 5) Do not demonize nations or citizens of nations.
- 6) International stories need to be put into context.
- 7) Minimize violence/disaster-based stories, particularly those not put into context.
- 8) Provide more positive stories about events outside of the United States.
- 9) Do post-crisis news coverage. Give ongoing coverage to areas that have ended a war or signed a peace accord. For example, what has life been like for the Albanians since the end of the US/NATO air raids?
- 10) Provide more information on the US government's role in international relations. This would give viewers greater opportunity for an informed role on electoral and legislative issues.

## **Who to Contact**

**WOOD TV 8  
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Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503  
456-8888  
News Director: Jim Loy**

**WZZM 13  
645 3 Mile Rd NW  
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49544  
785-1313  
News Director: Sheryl Grant**

**WXMI 17  
3117 Plaza Dr. NE  
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525  
364-8722  
News Director: Tim Dye**