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Glastnost and U.S. News: The Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict

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Abstract

This qualitative-exploratory study is a content analysis of news reports concerning recent events in Nagorno-Karabagh, an autonomous oblast within the Republic of Azerbaijan and from whose authority the region seeks independence. It is an area that American media has virtually ignored in the past, but (following Gorbachev's recent reforms) from which American journalists have been obliged to report without full knowledge of the place or its people. This study found that such indifference to and ignorance about the embattled region generated many weaknesses in reports about the conflict, thus failing to provide the American media consumer with an adequate and accurate picture of the controversy–mainly, absence of background context that Intercultural and international communication scholars find vital in reports of ethnic societies and conflicts; also, flaws common in both domestic news and reports from other foreign fields, e.g., focus on violence, imbalance, conclusions unsupported by evidence, and overrepresentation of elite sources as opposed to non-elite sources. In view of the short supply of theoretical perspectives concerning international news reporting, particularly the quality of conflict reportage, the author encourages attention to this matter noting that no one should expect noticeable improvement in news from abroad unless that literature is made available not only to researchers and news practitioners, but to journalism educators and their students as well.

The political reforms Mikhail Gorbachev initiated in the Soviet Union in 1985 caught the world by surprise. For the Soviet people *glasnost* and *perestroika* held the promise of instant change from deprivation at all levels of human existence. Above all, Gorbachev's turnabout awakened the drive for self-rule throughout the Union's republics. The failed 1991 coup, which sought to overthrow Gorbachev and restore the old order, only steeled the republics against further domination by Moscow's Communist leadership.

Popular resolve also stirred intense ethnic differences between and sometimes even within republics. Nowhere is that more evident than in Nagorno-Karabagh, an autonomous oblast in Azerbaijan where Armenians and Azeris are locked in a bitter dispute concerning Karabagh's future status. Stirred by Gorbachev's reforms, the Armenian majority in Karabagh appealed to Moscow in 1988 and then to the republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan in their effort to win Armenian sovereignty over the region. Gorbachev was indecisive, first placing Karabagh under Moscow control then giving it back to Azerbaijan authority. While peaceful demonstrations were staged in the Soviet Republic of Armenia for both its own independence and reclamation of Karabagh, hundreds of Armenians were murdered in the Azerbaijan cities of Sumgait and Baku, the capitol, while peaceful Azerbaijanis watched in horror daring not to intervene. Retaliation and general warfare followed and occupation by Soviet armies to keep the peace only sustained the violence. Withdrawal of the Red Army and emergency conditions has not ended the warfare between militant groups in Azerbaijan, Karabagh, and Armenia.[1]

If relief from current unrest is tenuous, neither independence nor productive membership in an East European commonwealth or the world community for these three regions will have much meaning. Morever, the fate of the smaller republics such as Armenia and Azerbaijan and the embattled territory of Karabagh may depend to a great extent on the quality of media coverage and the degree of attention given to ongoing events in countries still familiar to the western mind and of minor interest to U.S. media (Fisher, 1988; Galtung, 1971; McQuail, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Schiller, 1976; Semmel, 1977).

The purpose, therefore, of this qualitative-exploratory study is to draw attention to a Transcuacasian area long ignored by international news

researchers and, at the same time, to learn the extent of U.S. media interest in this region as well as the competency of reportage from an area mainly unfamiliar to American journalists. As a move in this direction, we conducted a content analysis of reported events surrounding the Karabagh controversy published in five U.S. media during 1988-1990. However, before describing our research approach, additional background information on the Karabagh issue should be considered along with theoretical concerns that bear on the problem of international news reportage.

The Karabagh Conflict: Some Roots

The population in Karabagh has been overwhelmingly Armenian up to the present time, but over the years migration and recent hostilities reduced their numbers. Although the recorded population in Karabagh showed 90% Armenian presence as late as the 1970s, today it is about 75%. Despite the region's Armenian majority, Stalin proclaimed Karabagh an autonomous oblast in 1923 and sustained its location in Azerbaijan. The area before the 14th century was totally Armenian and part of the ancient Armenian heartland. Armenians protected the area from a variety of anti-Christian invaders, but in the early 1400s the Armenians were overpowered by the Tartars and they never regained ownership.

Countering the premise of majority Armenian presence, Azerbaijan claims legal rights under Stalin's decree and Kremlin support of those rights issued by Moscow in 1988. Fueling this debate is Azerbaijan resentment concerning the Armenian minority who work and reside in the major cities. Some Armenians are long-term residents whose special skills are in demand. Others live in Azerbaijan because work, housing, and other human amenities are available. Still others have migrated to the area to escape the devastation in Armenia, ravaged by the 1988 earthquake.

The Coveted Land

The area Armenia and the Armenian majority in Karabagh seek to obtain is a 1,700 square-mile region that sits like an island in southwest Azerbaijan territory just above Iran's northern border and near the eastern border of Armenia. It is mainly agricultural, known for its superior fruit produce and where wine, tobacco, and woolens are produced and livestock feed on rich mountain pastures. Armenians there and in the republic of

Armenia share no common line with Azeris in either culture, religion, language, or historical heritage. Even the natural environment in Karabagh differs from that in Armenia and other parts of Azerbaijan which reflects on the economic potential of each and their status as independent nations.

Armenia is not generously endowed by nature. The summers are short, hot, and arid, the winters long, extremely cold, and severe. The artificially irrigated lowlands produce fruits, cotton, rice, and nuts. Cattle and horse breeding is important in the north. The mountains are relatively rich in minerals (copper, tin, iron, gold, silver, granite, tufa, basalt, marble), but antiquated mining equipment produces only minimal output.

Unlike landbound Armenia, Azerbaijan faces east to the Caspian Sea. Crops grown there require no irrigation and the land produces abundant fruit, wheat, barley, and cotton. The area's rich oil fields near Baku are still productive and a translucent marble unique to that area is in abundant supply.

Future Prospects

Despite their cultural differences, past relations between Azeris and Armenians living in Azerbaijan have been reasonably peaceful, sometimes even protective of one another during outbreaks of violence. However, the issue of Karabagh and the influx of Azeri and Armenian migrants into Azerbaijan in recent years has heightened the friction (*Armenian Reporter*, 1991c; 1991d). Now unemployed Azeris, especially new arrivals without housing, feel they should have the jobs and accommodations occupied by Armenians (*Newsweek*, 1990). While clashes between them are usually attributed to differences in religion, other aspects of the friction, for example, the struggle between the "haves and have nots," frequently goes unnoticed.

No end to the warfare seems to be in sight. Attacks on one or the other group in cities in around Karabagh are common fare, while defense against Azeri infiltration on Armenia's eastern border is a daily occurrence (*Armenian Reporter,* 1991d). Hostilities between the two nationalities will probably not end until some satisfactory solution of the Karabagh issue is realized. Armenians in Karabagh and Armenia seek reinstatement with the republic of Armenia, or at least true autonomy for Karabagh without interference from the Azerbaijan government. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, stands

firmly on its legal rights as the authority over Karabagh and insists that its citizens abide by their constitution and legal precedent.

If relief from current unrest is tenuous, neither independence nor productive membership in an East European commonwealth or the world community for these three regions will have much meaning. Moreover, the fate of the smaller republics such as Armenia and Azerbaijan and its embattled area, Karabagh, may depend to a great extent on the quality of media coverage and the degree of attention given to ongoing events in countries still unfamiliar to the western mind and of minor interest to U.S. media (Fisher, 1988; Galtung, 1971; McQuail, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Schiller, 1976; Semmel, 1977).

Questions and Aims

As importantly, one must ask if communication from Moscow or communication from any of the republics will be any better than it has been prior to *glasnost*. For example, Stevenson, Childers, West, and Marschalk (1990, p. 199), found little change in the staple of news content since Gorbachev's reforms. They learned that the news still contains "the full texts of speeches, greetings and toasts that fall under the category of protocol news, the stories of progress building socialism that are the heart of development news and the orchestrated view of the world ... ."

Furthermore, if American journalists remain Moscow-bound because access to the republics is restricted by government or media budgets, and if sources other than elite members of the government are either ignored or remain beyond reach, what chance do media practitioners have in bringing events in little-known countries to the attention of the rest of the world? And of even more importance, if access is eased and budgets do allow on-scene news coverage, what dimensions of human existence must attach to journalists' understanding of worlds often unfamiliar and inaccessible to them? In that respect, development of current theoretical notions about intercultural as well as international communication will be necessary to provide much needed guidelines for continuing theoretical research (Gudykunst, 1983; Mowlana, 1983, 1986, 1990), research that is awaiting study in journalism classrooms.

Theoretical Concerns

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It is not our aim here to piece together the whole puzzle. Rather, the purpose of this qualitative-exploratory study is to bring attention to matters concerning Transcaucasia, an area long ignored by international news researchers, and to learn the

extent of U.S. media interest in this region as well as the competency of reportage from an area mainly unfamiliar to American journalists. As a step in this direction, we conducted a content analysis of reports concerning the Karabagh conflict published in five U.S. media.

With the rise of new nations from the fires of *glasnost*, it is now more important than ever for U.S. media to understand that international news journalism is a far different country than journalism in familiar environments (Friedman, 1989; *Armenian Reporter*, 1991b). That distance is why it seemed important to provide at least a minimal introduction to the historic-geographic-economic-cultural context of the people and places involved before discussing the nature of U.S. news content concerning the Karabagh dispute.

Nor can we ignore the implications of failing to attend to these aspects of international news reporting and how they bear on the relationship between international and intercultural communication theory. While the complex concept of international communication tends to be used mainly at the political level and the equally complex concept of intercultural communication at the sociological and even anthropological levels, Maletzke (1976, pp. 410-413) finds that the two concepts "can, on occasion, be identical." Maletzke identifies a psychological link between the two concepts saying that to understand a foreign culture one must comprehend the "foreign manner of seeing, experiencing and judging, an accommodating to the alien cognitive structure, and adopting of a foreign frame of reference" and that "every process of communication in the intercultural realm has to deal with these pre-dispositions." Maletzke concludes that these pre-dispositions determine "the content and form of diplomatic, journalistic or private reports on foreign countries, and many other aspects of the intercultural dialogue.

In the past, theoretical propositions have centered on the patterns of international news flow (Galtung, 1971) or how news is defined as "news" in international news flow (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), but little attention has been given to the journalistic responsibility of providing the background context that deals with ethnic pre-dispositions, how these mesh with any re-creation of a reported conflict, and how that re-creation is received by the media consumer. We believe the interrelationship between intercultural and international communication, noted by Maletzke (1976) deserves far more attention than it has received in the past and that any theoretical propositions concerning international news reporting must take that relationship and the psychological characteristics they share into account. It is in this sense that we approached the study of the Karabagh conflict.

For reasons already presented, the dispute over the Karabagh region is a particularly appropriate subject for an initial and descriptive examination. In summary, the conflict involves two former Soviet republics which have claimed independence from Moscow and an enclave which has called for independence from both Moscow and Azerbaijan; all three are in close geographic proximity, yet two of the groups differ from one another in all aspects of human expression (social, political, cultural, religious, historical heritage); all three groups live in areas where the differences in economic potential for development has as strong a bearing on the dispute as other aspects of the problem.

International News Coverage and Intercultural Communication Theory

As some observers have pointed out, there is a "shortfall in the potency of theories on reporting international affairs" (Mohamed, 1991, p. 1). Part of the problem may have its source in the slow development of intercultural theory (Gudykunst, 1983). And that problem may be related to limited attention to the background of diverse ethnic states, "such components as language, religion, cultural heritage, and physical proximity" (Mowlana, 1983, p. 160), as well as past and current events concerning territorial claims. On the subject of social identity, another observer also believes that any single instance involving ethnic conflict and controversy calls for close attention to social, historical, political, and economic differences between the contending groups (Cairns, 1982).

The varied concepts included in the term "culture" may be still another problem (Maletzke, 1976). Where one researcher may regard the many dimensions of culture as subsets of the term, "cultural," i.e., music, art, literature, media, language, religion, social (societal values), historical heritage, political and economic environments, another may see some of these as distinct and separate entities. Aware of its potential for enlargement or restriction, Maletzke (1976, p. 409) defines culture as the, "distinctive way of life of a group of people, their designs for living," and makes it clear that the areas of international and intercultural communication are at once distinctive and unavoidably interdependent in any research concerning one or the other. Suggestion of this interdependency is especially poignant in the work of several intercultural/international communication scholars (Kim, 1979; Kim & Ruben, 1988; Mowlana, 1983, 1986, 1990; Taifel, 1982; Turner & Giles, 1981). But recent developments in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world foreign to western minds make all the more important Gudykunst's (1983) appeal for conceptual frameworks that give direction to intercultural communication theory and, by extension, to international communication theory, particularly as they might apply to international news coverage and the observations of

those familiar with weaknesses in international news reporting (Cairns, 1982; Fisher, 1988; Friedman, 1989; Mowlana, 1986, 1990; O'Brien, 1983).

An Alternative

If there is a "shortfall in the potency of theories on reporting international affairs," there is more than adequate commentary on domestic media for mass communication theorists and an equally abundant supply of studies concerning ways of evaluating news to detect flaws in its content.

Not a few theorists propose frame analysis as a means of evaluating not only U.S. news content (Davis & Baran, 1981; Gamson, 1989; Wolfsfeld, 1991), but also events abroad (Glasgow Media Group, see Harrison, 1985). However, Harrison (1985), in his criticism of bias in the Glasgow studies, found frame analysis confronts too many problems of validity and reliability. Above all, he believes one must always ask: Under what and whose ideological frame is content being analyzed?

Others have proposed a "paymaster" theory of evaluating news content, i.e., identifying who is underwriting the cost of news distribution (Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1987). However, this approach fails to allow for the possibility of journalism achieving the disciplined practice of full and accurate reportage ascribed to by educators and proponents of the profession.

Inglis (1990, p. 100) observes that media theory "must be formal" as well as "experiential" and that Eco's 1976 theory of semiotics provides the formal codes required to accommodate that duo. Unfortunately, his explanations of how those codes apply in practice, particularly in regard to evaluating and measuring news content, are less than specific.

McQuail's theoretical propositions concerning domestic news coverage are more descriptive (1987, pp. 193-194). He identifies a unifying theme in content evaluation research: "Wherever media content may actually lie on the dimension of reality expectation, it is likely to deviate away from reality as conventionally understood or as open to measurement." Among the items on McQuail's list of systematic deviations from reality are the following, some of which find agreement with results in studies of foreign news coverage.

(1) There is "a consistent over-representation of the social, 'top' or elites as *sources* [*sic*] of news," i.e., views of governments, government heads, official spokespersons who provide their versions of reality and/or 'make news'", and these views and persons appear more often than "'lower level' participants in events and 'ordinary people'".

(2) "The *objects* [*sic*] of news reporting are also more likely to be members of political or social elites. In western media, at least, there is no proportional reflection of the society in any statistical sense." (Regarding items 1 and 2, these are consistent with studies on international news coverage by Pollock, 1981; Semmel, 1977; Sreberny-Mohammadi, Nordenstreng, Stevenson & Ugboajah, 1985; Wilhoit & Weaver, 1982; Verschueren, 1985).

(3) "Events are more likely to figure in the news the more they have a large-scale, dramatic, sudden, or violent character. Such events are by definition untypical and in fact the more events are 'true to normal reality', the less newsworthy they are." (Similar to results in foreign news studies by Lent, 1977; Shoemaker *et al*., 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al*., 1985; Verschueren, 1985; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1980).

(4) "Themes of reporting are likely to show a bias towards dominant (or consensual) social and community values." (Also in Semmel, 1977; Shoemaker *et al*., 1991).

(5) There is "bias in international reporting towards news concerning countries which are culturally, economically and politically 'close', regardless of size or proximity." (Also in Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al*., 1985; Shoemaker *et al*., however, this study showed only partial agreement with the statement, and Weaver & Wilhoit, 1982, in their two-week review of two U.S. news agencies concluded that less-developed countries are not neglected, but note that the attention they do get focuses on conflicts and crises).

An Intercultural Perspective

The similarities in characteristics between domestic and foreign news reportage by American journalists should come as no surprise to anyone even in this brief review. Nor should this veil the absence of an obvious but rarely considered factor in international news reporting research, one that bears on the quality of reportage from places about which American journalists know very little. As Maletzke (1976) has noted, that issue has to do with a "sense of place, or of environment" which in still another observer's view is the most important faculty in communication (O'Brien 1983, p. 6). That is, the only worlds that a human community shares regularly, directly, and sensually are the immediate physical surroundings of any event occurring in a place from which a journalist reports. When this environment, according to O'Brien, is absent in news reports, the communication fails to satisfy the need of the media consumer to be part of the scene.

Within that environment, O'Brien, a journalism educator, includes not only the physical surroundings of a place, but also its history because history (pp. 18-19) "provides a fixed reference point against which the present can be measured and

stimulates by bringing opposites [i.e., the western media consumer and an unfamiliar world] together in a single context, thus suggesting the possibility of synthesis through a 'bipolar dialectic.'" Physical surroundings and the history of a place, O'Brien believes, provide the media consumer with a "landscape" of the event that occurred in a place distant from the consumer's immediate knowledge. O'Brien, then, shares the type of holistic view for covering news events that some researchers hold for the development of intercultural and international communication theory (Cairns, 1982; Gudykunst, 1983; Kim & Ruben, 1988; Mowlana, 1983, 1986, 1990).

A Comparison of International and Domestic News Reportage

It is difficult to say whether one or all, i.e., an underdeveloped conceptual base for intercultural/international communication theory, journalistic process, underreporting, or insensitivity to the obvious and subtle differences between ethnic groups and places accounts for inadequate international news communication. But it is possible to say that there are not a few indications that flaws in international news reporting do exist. Some of these may be found in studies concerning U.S. indifference to events in Taiwan (Gross, 1990); indifference to the plight of the boat people (Bozell & Baker, 1990); various means used by the *New York Times* (including news structures reflecting values of the dominant society and dependence on elite sources) to denigrate and depoliticize the West German Green Party (Carragee, 1991); editorialization in U.S. reports from the People's Republic of China between 1972-1984 (Goodman, 1990); British media's disregard of early events that led to the Persian Gulf war and attending, instead, to domestic news events with more direct "sensational" appeal (Robins, 1988); U.S. media's failures in reporting the "Desert Storm" engagement (DataCenter, 1991; Dennis *et al*, 1991).

The weaknesses cited in these studies are not unlike the types of flaws in domestic reporting identified by McQuail: indifference to threatening events until an explosive event or "newsworthy" event occurs (see also Dupuy, 1980; Protess, 1991; Smith, 1987); themes of reporting show bias towards views and values of the dominant group (see also Cirino, 1971; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989; Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1987); editorializing (see also Cirino, 1971; Lee & Solomon, 1990); over-representation of the "social, 'top' or elites" as sources of information (see also Lee & Solomon, 1990; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989). Although such biases and omissions as absence of balance (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1954; Simon, Fico & Lacy, 1989) and background (Cairns, 1982; Mowlana, 1983, 1986, 1990; O'Brien, 1983) do not appear in McQuail's catalog of deviations from reality, we feel they belong and account for much unrealistic reporting in international news. For other studies concerning criticism of news reports, see Black and Barney, 1990

(professionalism); Dorfman, 1987 (lack of substance and depth); Liebes, 1989 (objectivity); Lundy, 1989 (factual errors); Roeh, 1989 (rhetoric of journalism).

We expect to see these and other weaknesses identified earlier in reports about the Karabagh conflict, particularly (1) media partiality to countries "close" to U.S. values and interests, (2) absence of objective and substantial data; namely, relevant background context (historic-geographic-economic-cultural) on the people and places concerned, (3) focus on sensationalism, (4) lack of balance and fair report, (5) unsupported conclusion(s) and prediction(s), (6) overrepresentation of elite sources reflecting the values and views of the dominant group, (7) factual errors.

Method

For this content analysis, we assembled all the print articles published by five types of print media during 1988-1990, the height of the Karabagh conflict: two metropolitan dailies (*Detroit Free Press* , a morning paper, and *The Detroit News*, an afternoon issue), a national daily (*The Wall Street Journal*), a weekly news magazine (*Newsweek*), and a monthly news magazine (*Insight)*.

Since we were more interested in the nature of disseminated information rather than a comparison of media houses, we assembled a representation of print media types that touched a variety of audiences. The two metropolitan dailies serve one of the largest Armenian Christian and Arab Muslim audiences in the country, the members of which might, therefore, attend more closely to reported events about Karabagh. The daily national, *The Wall Street Journal*, enjoys a reputation for in-depth reporting practices and, unlike *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*, devotes more attention to the economic aspects of most issues. *Newsweek* appeals to a national audience which prefers weekly summaries rather than daily news reports. The national news monthly, *Insight*, represents a periodical that more discriminating and/or ardent news consumers read for its in-depth coverage and reflective analysis of foreign affairs.

Not surprisingly, the yield was minimal for this period and over the span of two years. The most number of published pieces appeared in the *Detroit Free Press*, 41; followed by *The Detroit News*, 26; *The Wall Street Journal*, 21; *Newsweek*, 9; *Insight*, 8 (N=105). The slim numbers in the national daily and the magazines are not surprising and the difference in numbers between the two local metropolitans may be a function of the profile characteristics of each one's specific readership–the *Detroit Free Press* appeals to the ethnic, blue-collar, and Democratic audience component; *The Detroit News*, to the white-collar and long-time Republican component.

Lengths of articles ran anywhere from 300 words to 1,500. Articles in news magazines ran anywhere from one to five pages. Editorials and commentaries were included for their potential knowledge value as well as their analyses. Editorials ran about 300-500 words, commentaries from 800 to 2,000 words. Letters-to-the editor were also included, not only for their audience opinion, but also because they function as media "watch-dogs" (Doder, 1990; Kapoor, 1989). Furthermore, they are often sent in by persons more familiar with the historical background of an event than the reporting journalist and because many of these letter writers are in direct communication with persons in the regions under discussion. Inserts such as "news briefs" were excluded because they were mainly two or three-line announcements too telegraphic to evaluate.

In order to work with a manageable number for descriptive analysis, every third piece from N was drawn from each media group to yield a sample of n=33: *Detroit Free Press*, 13; *The Detroit News*; 8; *The Wall Street Journal*, 7; *Newsweek*, 3; and *Insight*, 2. The group included 30 articles, 2 editorials, 1 commentary, 0 letters-to-the editor.

The sample was coded for the following categories: (1) if background context was provided and if provided whether it was adequate and/or accurate. However, the latter proved to be so few in number that the two categories were collapsed simply as "historical background." We looked on "adequate and/or accurate" historical background as including a "landscape" which would help place the reader in the environment of the conflict, i.e., documented historical events prior to and following Stalin's 1923 decree and substantiated information regarding the geographic, economic environment, and cultural differences/frictions.

We also wanted to see (2) if sensationalism regarding the dispute was the principal focus, in this case, the violence; (3) whether the articles demonstrated balance (i.e., if an account about the Armenians was given, whether the Azeri story was also told and vice versa); also (4) if a conclusion(s) was supported by substantiated and accurate information; and (5) if attempts to speculate about Gorbachev's decrease or increase in power were made.

Still other categories attended to (6) sources used, whether they represented the elite (government officials, political, and military leaders, official news channels of the government, analysts, experts, and the like), as well as non-elite members of Soviet society (eyewitnesses, rank and file members of the popular front, unaffiliated protesters, victims of the disruptions, etc.); whether (7) the sources were identified fully or simply as "officials say," or as "an eyewitness said"; and whether (8) sources were direct or indirect contacts (primary or secondary).

Although we considered failures in the above areas as "bias," we did not code what might be termed as "biased" language because it was difficult to determine, as Harrison

(1985) points out, what and whose bias the terms used denote or connote. Nor did we code, for the same reason, whether overrepresentation of either elite or non-elite sources reflected the social and political biases of the sources most often quoted.

For example, is the descriptive word "Christian" less biased than "Muslim" because it is expressed by an American writer who shares Christian values? Is "dissident" a pejorative because it connotes disruption of the "status quo"? Or, is it a descriptive word for someone courageous enough to voice objection against it? Is placement of a reference to either Armenia or Azerbaijan immediately after an account of violence an indication of writer bias or an editor's slicing? Is use of one or the other type of source a matter of journalistic selectivity, limited accessibility to other sources, or a lack of unbiased and reliable sources?

Much of any decision on the above depends on the values and views of the evaluator and with no available standard of assessing bias in international reporting that we could find, it was decided "biased" words and biases of societal and political values would be excluded from the coding operation. We did look into standards for evaluating domestic mass media (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Lowry, 1986), but found their applications did not meet our needs or overlooked the concepts of interest to us. We, therefore, relied on our own judgment to evaluate the categories of content named and avoided areas most susceptible to evaluator bias. Two undergraduate students, one trained in journalism and another in journalism and East European history, coded the data. A reliability rate of 72% was achieved with the researcher's coding in the first case and 77% in the other.

Results

As expected, a majority of journalists, 25 of the 33 (76%) either omitted relevant historical context, provided insufficient background, or made errors of documented historical fact. In 5 cases (15%), the concept did not apply, and only 3 journalists (9%) included and/or provided adequate and/or accurate information. Also as expected, 30 of the 33 news reports (9l%) focused on the sensational aspect of the Karabagh dispute–the violence. Violence was mentioned in the remaining 3 reports (9%), but was not the focus in any of them (see Table 1).

Balance was absent in over half of the sample (21/64%), present in less than a quarter (7/21%), and did not apply in only a few cases (5/15%). Where conclusions were drawn, less than a quarter of the journalists substantiated their information (7/21%), slightly over a quarter failed to provide supportive information (9/27%), and the issue did not apply in the remaining cases (17/52%).

Speculation about Gorbachev's rise or fall in power appeared in about half of the reports (9/27%), with 1 saying his power had increased, 8 saying his power had decreased, which is not unlike the "who's gaining/who's losing" approach in domestic coverage of political campaigns and sports events. However, the majority of journalists made no attempt to estimate Gorbachev's hold on his leadership (24/73%).

Not surprisingly, we found a total of 96 references to separate elite sources in the sample of 33 reports (see Table 2). They appeared both as objects of content (Gorbachev, Kremlin leaders, republic leaders, and the like) and as sources of information and/or quote (Gorbachev via Soviet media, Kremlin/military leaders directly or via Soviet media, also, analysts, experts, and the like). In contrast, the frequency appearance of separate non-elite sources used were few in number (29).

Of the elite sources, a majority number were identified (58/60%), the rest were not (38/40%). Journalists had direct contact with about a third of the elite sources (31/32%), but with more than half, contact was indirect (56/58%), and in the remaining cases the source was either unnamed, referred to as "a government official," etc., or origin of the source was not indicated (9/9%). Of the non-elite sources, the majority were identified (15/52%), slightly less than half were not (14/48%). Less than half the contacts were direct (14/48), about a quarter were indirect (7/24%), and the remainder were unnamed or the origin was not indicated (8/28%).

Discussion

This study suggests, as Cairns (1982), Fisher (1988), Friedman (1989) and, particularly, O'Brien (1983) have noted in other instances, that reports about the Karabagh conflict fell far short of providing the American media consumer with the appropriate "landscape," or the historical-geographic-economic-cultural background context unique to the people, place, and event being covered and, instead, applied reporting orientations conditioned in more familiar environments, thus subjecting the American media consumer to less than a realistic, accurate, fair and balanced account of this conflict event.

Absence of background appropriate to the region and event was apparent in the majority of the reports about the Karabagh conflict. Most reports failed to make reference to the 1923 decree and/or Kremlin support of that decree concerning Karabagh and all reports completely ignored historical data prior to Stalin's proclamation. One editorial, in fact, identified Armenians in the disputed area as a minority which drew indignant letters-to-the-editor from readers blasting the *Detroit Free Press* for the editor's error and his/her ignorance (from letters-to-the editor, none of which fell into the

sample). Interestingly, news reports from abroad concerning the conflict and published in the same newspaper consistently identified the Armenian population in Karabagh as a majority, not an uncommon type of factual contradiction between editorials and news reports appearing in the same publication (Lee & Solomon, 1990).

Nor did a single report give the reader other features of the "landscape" that might contribute to an understanding of the dispute. Although a few reports included a rarely intelligible 2"x2" map along with the story and a few noted Karabagh's location in the content, most ignored explaining the proximity of Armenia and Azerbaijan to each other and the surrounding geography.

As expected, much of the space was devoted not only to details about the violence (Dupuy, 1980; Lent, 1977; Protess, 1991; Robins, 1980; Shoemaker *et al.*, 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al.*, 1985; Smith, 1987; Verscheuren, 1985; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1980), but also reactions by elites to the violence. Remaining space was lost to editorializing (Cirino, 1971; Lee & Solomon, 1990), drawing unfounded conclusions and/or speculation about Gorbachev's hold on leadership power. The delicate tensions within the fabric of the conflict were ignored.

Nor were any clues given in reference to environmental and economic differences. However, frequent references were made to religious differences leaving the suggestion that this factor alone was at the root of the friction. In one instance, a reporter did indicate a reason other than religion–competition for jobs and housing and mainly because violence, the focus of the story, broke out following an Azeri attempt to dislodge an Armenian family from their apartment in Baku. No reference at all was made to migrations by both Armenians and Azeris in search of better living conditions.

Not unexpectedly, journalists fell back on journalistic orientations internalized on the domestic front, mainly focusing on the violence and depending on elite sources for information while ignoring members of the non-elite population. Reports of the Karabagh controversy demonstrated an overwhelming representation of elite sources (Lee & Solomon, 1990; McQuail, 1987; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989; Pollock, 1981; Semmel, 1977; Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al.*, 1985), which may have been a function of old habits left over from pre-*glastnost* days or the cost of traveling to the region under fire in order to tap other sources.

Still, reliance on elite sources, attention to sensational aspects, and distance from the reasons and events that triggered those aspects seem to be lingering habits in either domestic or international news coverage

In the Karabagh case, a majority of the journalists centered on the number of killings by either one side or the other, also the nature of murders committed by the Azeris which were characterized by some journalists as "brutal" and "savage," prompting

Azeris to say in a few reports that American journalists supported Armenians and showed only negative bias toward Azeris. Concentration on the sensationalism of violence consumed space that could have been devoted to additional and more useful content such as adequate and accurate background. Missing, instead, was the kind of professionalism (substance and depth, objectivity, accuracy) researchers have found consistently lacking in foreign news reports (Black & Barney, 1990; Dorfman, 1987; Liebes, 1989; Lundy, 1989; Roeh, 1989).

Absence of "landscape" and attention to violence indicates a lack of sensitivity to the subtleties in this study of the Karabagh conflict that intercultural and international communication scholars have found lacking in reports from other regions of the world (Cairns, 1982; Fisher, 1988; Friedman, 1989; Gudykunst, 1983; Mowlana, 1983; O'Brien 1983). That absence also may answer why well over half the reports about Karabagh showed imbalance in news coverage, why conclusions were unsupported by facts in nearly a third of the cases, and why information from elites was taken at face value rather than demonstrating knowledgeable evaluation of information given.[2]

Along with overrepresentation of elite sources, another old habit reappeared. The bulk of information obtained from elite sources came through indirect channels rather than direct contact. Moreover, the imbalance of source types seen here leads to a report that reflects the values and views of the dominant group (Carragee, 1991; Cirini, 1971; Galtung, 1971; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989; Schiller, 1976; Semmel, 1977; Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1985) and blocks out the undercurrent sounds existing within the unrepresented group where explosive events usually originate. Interestingly, of the non-elite sources, a higher percentage were direct contacts as opposed to non-direct, and a higher percentage of elites were identified than non-elites, suggesting that *glasnost* may have emboldened some members of the non-elite class, but not enough for some to release their identity.

Of course, excessive dependence on elite sources in the Karabagh case also may indicate that pre-*glasnost* relations with the press still persist (Stevens, Childers, West, & Marschalk, 1990), or that travel to distant republics is too difficult or still limited, or that journalists' tight budgets rule out travel, or, in order to get copy on the wire, it is simply less frustrating to work out of Moscow and use familiar sources or pull information from Tass news releases (its international news branch is now named the Russian Information and Telegraph Assn., or RITA), *Pravda*, *Isvestia* and Soviet news broadcasts. The preponderance of datelines originating in Moscow and the frequent reference in articles to news in Soviet media suggests any one of these possibilities.

Reporters working in a closed society may be excused from the responsibility of having to depend mainly on elite sources, directly or indirectly, or even being anchored

in locations distant from the scene of an event, but some independent basic research (Parsigian, 1992) prior to going abroad, or during slow news periods while abroad, would provide the background needed to introduce the "landscape" in news reports that Maletzke (1976) and intercultural/international communication theorists have noted is vital to understanding ethnic differences. That understanding, in large part, would not only help reporters evaluate information from elite sources in foreign places, it would also help them determine which issue among the myriad of issues apply to any one event in an ethnic conflict.

Of course, history alone is not news, as O'Brien points out, but he believes that news without history and its current environmental links become "meaningless" circumstance and disengage the media consumer from roots on which the recipient must draw in order to understand the reported event. As importantly for journalism educators, O'Brien recognizes that such a perspective "will demand a reemphasis on history, especially cultural and intellectual history, in the preparation of journalists" (1983, p. 18). Fisher (1988), in fact, would have any westerner working abroad prepare to the extent of developing a multicultural psyche. Such a mindset, he says, is all important if one is to cope with contrasting mindsets. It is a type of journalistic readiness for foreign news reporting that Verscheuren (1985) concludes no longer can be ignored.

Finally and as we expected, coverage of the Karabagh conflict was minimal (a total of 105 pieces over two years in 5 frequently read American media, the bulk of it appearing in only one of the 5 publications and whose audience includes the specific groups concerned about the conflict). That inattention again suggests American media's indifference to countries not "close" to U.S. views and values (Galtung, 1971; McQuail, 1987; Schiller, 1976; Semmel, 1977; Shoemaker *et al*., 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al*., 1985).

Although attention has been given to certain "less developed" countries in the recent past (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1980), the advent of *glasnost* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, has introduced American journalists to still more "less developed" nations anxious for independence and freedom, not the least of which are the Transcaucasian nations of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Karabagh, mainly ignored by both editors and researchers prior to *glasnost*. The growing sphere of democratic world communities and the expanding interdependence of nations make it all the more important for foreign news journalists to have at least a basic knowledge of the region from which they report.

Flaws in foreign news content, such as those found in this study, rob media consumers of the very aspects of communication that encourage understanding between peoples and nations. In future studies of ethnic conflicts it will be necessary to include a broader distribution of both print and broadcast media channels in order to offset the

chance of confronting American media indifference to events abroad involving people and places of little interest to the fourth estate. In any case, more research is sorely needed that would help develop the meager literature on international news reporting and encourage theoretical studies that attach to international news reporting and its cognitive link to intercultural and international communication.

No one should expect noticeable improvement in news from abroad unless that literature is available not only to researchers and news practitioners, but to journalism educators and their students as well.

Reportage in Five U.S. Print Media on the Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict

Table 1

Total %	Yes	No	N/A
Historical background[1]	3/ 9%	25/ 7%	5/15%
Violence	30/91%	0/ 0%	3/ 9%
Balance	7/21%	21/64%	5/15%
Conclusion--fact supported	7/21%	9/27%	17/52%
Re Gorbachev's power	9/27%[2]	24/73%	----

Table 2

Frequency use of elite sources = 96[3]; frequency use of non-elite sources = 29[4]

Total/%	Identified	Unidentified	Direct	Indirect	Unknown
Elites	58/60%	38/40%	31/32%	56/58%	9/ 9%
Non-elites	15/52%	14/48%	14/48%	7/24%	8/28%

1. Historical background: Historic, geographic, economic, cultural background of people and place discusssed.

   Violence: If violent acts were main focus over and above other factors.

   Balance: Whenever one side of the dispute (Armenian or Azerbaijani) was presented, whether the other was as well.

   Conclusion: If verifiable facts supported conclusion(s) made.

   Re Grobachev's power: Mention of and including decrease in, *i.e.*, predictions of his loss of or weakening power; increase in, predictions of his gain of or trengthened power on the basis

of reported events.

2. Eight journalists out of 33 judged Gorbachev's power had decreased; 1 judged his power had increased.

3. Elite: Gov't., political, military leaders; Soviet news reports, broadcasts; U.S. news agencies, historians,analyists, *etc*.
   Identified: If source name and full ID was given.
   Unidentified: If the phrase "official sources said," and the like was used without reference to a specific person.
   Direct: Primary source, *i.e*., reporter's personal review of a document, on-scene observance, or one-on-one interview.
   Indirect: Secondary source, *i.e*., information from a third party, *e.g.*, Soviet/American news agencies, broadcasts.
   Unknown: Source is either named, referred to as "gov't. officials said," or source origin is not indicated.

4. Non-elite: Eyewitnesses, rank and file members of the popular front, unaffiliated protestors, victims of the conflict.
   Identified: If source name and full ID was given.
   Unidentified: If source was identified merely as an eyewitness, activist, victim, *etc*.
   Direct: Primary source, *i.e*., reporter's personal contact.
   Indirect: Secondary source, *i.e.*, information from a third party, *e.g*., Soviet/American news agencies, broadcasts.
   Unknown: Source is neither named nor origin indicated.

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Notes

1. In the first weeks of September, 1991, the parliament of Nagorno-Karabagh declared itself an independent republic. Neither Soviet authorities nor Azerbaijan recognized the declaration (Armenian Reporter, 1991a). Weeks after Azerbaijan's declaration of independence, Armenia claimed independence on September 23, 1991, the 12th Soviet Republic to sever relations with Moscow. That decision followed peace negotiation meetings with leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan arranged by Boris Yeltsin and the president of Khazakstan, a Soviet republic that lies just north of Armenia and Azerbaijan. A cease-fire agreement was reached and it was decided that Karabagh would remain in Azerbaijan and maintain its status as an autonomous oblast. Despite the cease-fire order, however, Azeri shelling of Karabagh continued and attacks on cities surrounding Karabagh occupied by Armenians also continued (CBS and ABC television news broadcasts, September 25 1991).

2. American journalists are aware they are not covering the Transcaucasian area fully or even accurately. At a recent media panel discussion sponsored by the Armenian Assembly of America in Washington, DC (Armenian Reporter, 1991b), discussants agreed that covering events in the area is fraught with problems such as distance, shortage of credible, unbiased observers, difficulties with electronic links, and dealing with cultures with which they have little familiarity. David Ignatius, foreign editor of the Washington Post, who manages 21 foreign correspondents worldwide, including tow based in Moscow, revealed his staff's frustrations. "For correspondents sitting in Moscow there's a feeling of being far from events in the Transcaucasus, far geographically, much more so than Vilnius or other Baltic capitals and also far emotionally, psychologically. There is a feeling that Transcauscasia is somewhere else, it is a place like Lebanon, where you

have ancient feuds that it's very hard for outsiders to understand." Anne Garrels, who reports from Moscow and Washington for National Public Radio agreed. "It is now very difficult to report in Transcuacasia because so much is going on. There are so many players with so many agendas. For those of us who are sitting in Moscow to try and figure out what is going on is really impossible. If we get even near the truth half the time we're lucky."

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