

Shrinking World

The decline of international reporting in the British press

Martin Moore, with a foreword by David Loyn

November 2010



Foreword

William Howard Russell's dispatches for *The Times* from the Crimean war inspired Tennyson's most memorable poem, led to Florence Nightingale's mission to reform nursing, and brought down a government. Before Russell news from abroad came mostly from official sources – soldiers, diplomats, and messengers sent by traders.

With increasing use of video shot by official MoD cameramen (often not attributed by broadcasters who use it) and 'quasi-journalism' from NGO activists we may be returning to the pre-Russell world.

The decline in foreign reporting in red top tabloids shown in this MST report is perhaps no surprise. But the slide in both column inches and prominence of foreign stories among the 'broadsheets' should ring alarm bells.

This decline has two significant consequences. Firstly it reinforces insular values – prejudices – and discourages understanding among British voters. What is going on for example inside the emerging economies of Asia and Latin America is transforming global architecture. Britain needs to be nimble-footed and flexible to cope – and that requires engagement.

Secondly the decline of foreign news coverage makes those organisations that do still have global news ambitions feel a little lonely and out of step – particularly the publicly-funded BBC. It would be far easier to justify foreign news spending because of robust competition than for more abstract public service reasons.

There is still some brave and distinguished foreign reporting in *The Sun* and Mirror Group newspapers. The last British journalist to be killed in Afghanistan, Rupert Hamer, was after all working for the *Sunday Mirror*. But there is far too little of it, as is comprehensively shown in this report, 'Shrinking World'

Russell, the 'first' war correspondent, liked to think of himself as the father of a tribe. His successors may need to find a new economic model if foreign correspondents are not to become an endangered species.

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Martin Moore

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Introduction

In September 1979 the *Daily Mirror* broke the story of the killing fields of Cambodia to the world. On Wednesday 12th and Thursday 13th September the paper devoted a dozen pages to detailing the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. 'Death of a Nation' was splashed across the front page on the Wednesday, and continued inside on pages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and 16-17 (centre page spread). Written by John Pilger, the coverage was sensational in the sense meant by renowned tabloid editor and *Mirror* editorial director Hugh Cudlipp – 'stimulating thought', 'taking on complicated subjects... and explaining them in language all could understand', and fulfilling the paper's 'democratic responsibility' (Hugh Cudlipp, *Walking on Water*, 1976).

DAILY Mirror
Wednesday, September 12, 1979 8p

WORLD EXCLUSIVE
Report by **JOHN PILGER**
Pictures by **ERIC PIPER**

Death of a Nation

The £11 million ransom mistake
TYCOON Rolf Schid died last night but kidnappers holding his wife and daughter were demanding £11 million.
It may be £1m says tycoon

AN INCREDIBLE human disaster has happened in Cambodia, a once peaceful and gentle land in South East Asia. Perhaps more than two million people—a third of the population—have been killed by a fanatical regime whose apparent aim was to wipe out anyone and anything connected with the modern world and to reform a whole nation to "Year Zero": the dawn of an age of slavery, without families and sentiment, without machines, schools, books, medicine, music.

The evidence of murder is plentiful. Like the countless skulls, others, which were dug out from mass graves near Angkor Wat by villagers who had lost relatives.

For four years there has been almost no contact with people inside Cambodia; its borders were sealed. **JOHN PILGER**, in Cambodia, sends the first of two world exclusive reports.

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 3

Front page of the *Daily Mirror*, 12th September 1979

On Thursday 22nd April 2010, the day of the party leaders' foreign policy TV debate ahead of the General Election, Britain's two largest circulation dailies – *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* – had a combined total of 3 foreign stories, adding up to 257 words. One of these stories was about Michelle Obama showing off her biceps to a class of school children.

This report shows how far the quantity and prominence of international reporting in parts of the UK print press has fallen over the last 30 years. Based on our content analysis, there were nearly 40% fewer international stories across the four newspapers we studied in 2009 compared to 1979. As a proportion of these print papers, the percentage of international news dropped over the same time period from 20% to 11%.

International news reporting, though still a feature of the front page, has almost entirely fallen out of the first 10 pages of the papers. For the so-called 'quality press' (excepting the *Financial Times*) international news is generally contained within a world section somewhere near the middle of the paper. No mid-market or tabloid newspaper has an international section. Instead, they cover international stories intermittently – often following a natural disaster, or reporting on a celebrity, or remarking on our 'weird world', or when there is an obvious direct link to the UK (e.g. British holiday makers abroad).

This report illustrates the scale of the decline and explores some of the reasons behind it. It is based on content analysis of four UK national newspapers, supplemented by further research and a small number of interviews. It is not intended as a comprehensive study; that would require significantly greater time and resources. However, it does give an indication of how international reporting has changed and raises important questions about its future.

You could argue that the decline in quantity and prominence of international news is symptomatic of a wider malaise in traditional news. Yet we live in a far more globalised world than in 1979, one in which our work, our social networks and our travel are vastly more international than they were. Over 5 million Britons live overseas. There were 45.5 million visits abroad made by British residents in 2008 compared to 7.7 million in 1971. News outlets that have appealed to this internationalism – such as the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* – have increased their circulations. Why, then, do other newspapers appear less interested in the outside world?



Methodology

The analysis takes a week in the life of 4 UK newspapers – two broadsheets (*The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*), a mid-market paper (the *Daily Mail*), and a red-top (the *Daily Mirror*) – for the first week in March in 1979, 1989, 1999 and 2009. The weeks were chosen deliberately to avoid major international or domestic events that would have skewed the results (such as major natural disasters, or significant UK stories like MPs' expenses).

For each week, we counted the number of international news reports and features (not comment pieces):

- **On the front page** – the stories of highest priority, on which the newspaper has chosen to lead
- **In the first ten pages** – the stories, after the front page, likely to be of greatest prominence to the reader (pages that were filled with advertisements were excluded)
- **In the whole paper** – the total number of international stories the newspaper has chosen to include

We recognise that some of these newspapers have a special section for 'international news' just as there is a sports section at the back of the paper. But, in the same way that if a sports story is considered especially significant it is shifted to the front of the paper (as many were during the 2010 World Cup finals), so we judged that if an international story were thought to be of great enough importance it too would be shifted towards the front. In addition to which, if the paper considered international news to be noteworthy enough, it might even shift the whole international section further forward.

The *New York Times*, for example, not only has a number of international stories on its front page, but puts its international section at the front of the paper, before 'national news' which follows. Similarly, the recently relaunched *Observer* newspaper has chosen to fill the second page of its news section with an international story – going against the grain of many of those within the UK press.

We checked the results of our analysis by comparing the numbers with another week later in March, to make sure they were not anomalous. Not only did we find those results to be similar but that we had, in fact, been generous to 2009 (because the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was visiting Washington DC in the week we studied). The picture of decline presented here, in other words, could have been even more acute.

Why the press?

The press is only one of an increasing number of ways in which people learn about news from around the world. It is not the most significant – television is (see *The Great Global Switch-Off: International Coverage in UK Public Service Broadcasting* by Phil Harding for International Broadcasting Trust/POLIS/Oxfam). Nor is its (print) readership growing, it is declining.

However, over 10 million national newspapers are still sold each day, with readership twice to three times as high (according to ABC circulation figures, April 2010).

Moreover, newspapers pay reporters to gather news about the world and communicate it to a broad public in a timely and accessible fashion. It is professional newsgathering such as this which is increasingly under threat – not just in the press, but across most news organisations. If international news falls as a priority within the press it follows that so will the resources devoted to it. Less reporting leads to fewer exclusive stories, lower reader engagement, lower priority and so on.

The press is commercial and, compared to broadcast, relatively unregulated. It is not required to provide any international news – unlike public service broadcasters like the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV. It is therefore a better barometer of the market for international news – or rather of news editors' perceptions of the market.

The press also plays a different role from television or radio. The press has the opportunity to provide a depth and breadth of international coverage that is harder to provide on TV. It can present context and analysis beside the reports themselves. It can, though rarely now does, set the news agenda for other media (for example *The Guardian's* investigation into the Iraq hostages, published in December 2009). It is also, for many people, one of their main sources of news and information about the world outside the UK.



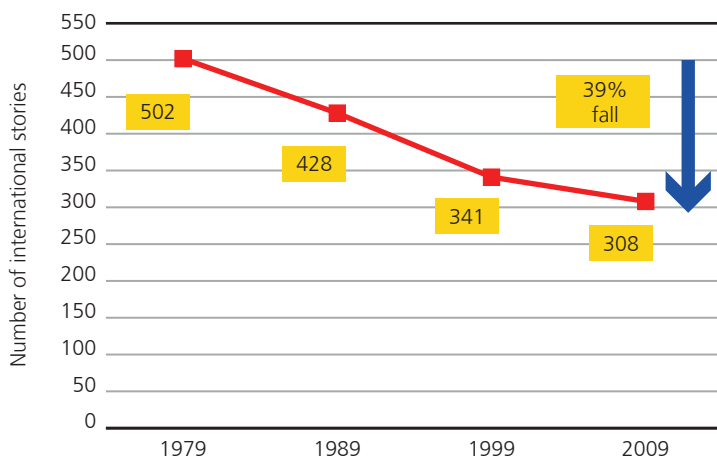
‘[Newspapers] fill an important niche between television and academe, offering an accessible way for busy people to learn about distant events and an outlet for writing that captures the essence of a time and place without polemics or pedantry. They can put events in context, explain human behaviour and belief, evoke a way of life. Foreign correspondents can burrow into a society, cultivate strangers’ trust, follow meandering trails and dig beneath layers of diplomatic spin and government propaganda’

Pamela Constable, *Washington Post*, 18th February 2007

It is also very little studied. Though there has been work on international coverage on television – notably the International Broadcasting Trust/POLIS/Oxfam study last year by Phil Harding, other work done by the IBT, Steven Barnett, Suzanne Franks, Glenda Cooper and others – there is almost none on international coverage in the UK press. In the US there have been a number of good pieces on the decline of foreign correspondents, in the *American Journalism Review*, the *Washington Post* and *Foreign Affairs* (see Bibliography). The Pew Center for Excellence in Journalism has also analysed foreign news coverage as part of its ‘State of the News Media’ reports since 2004, and there is a very good recent selection of essays, ‘Reporting from faraway places’ published online by Nieman Reports in autumn 2010.

Therefore this study is intended to start to fill a gap in our understanding of where international news has come from, and where news is going. But this is not simply an academic exercise. It is meant to inform and shape the future of international reporting, as well as providing a basis on which more work can be done.

Decline in absolute number of international news stories across the whole newspaper



*Total number of international news stories published
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

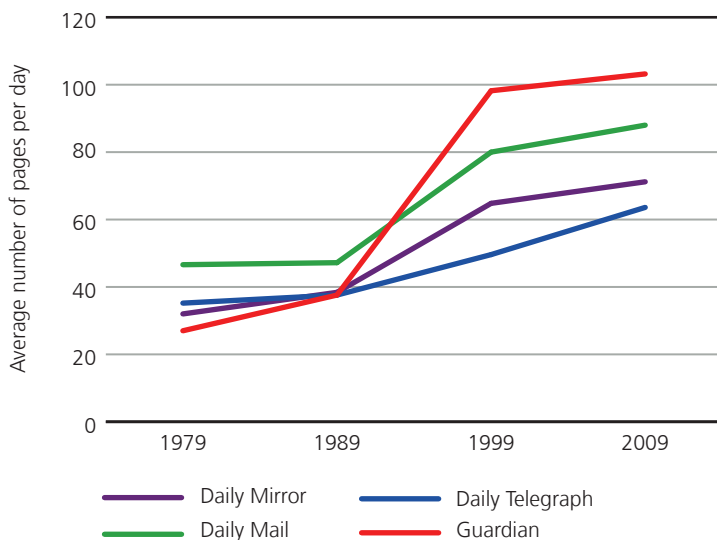
Taking the whole newspaper into account, the number of foreign news stories across the four newspapers in the weeks studied fell – in absolute terms – by just under 40%, from 502 stories in total during the week in 1979, to 308 stories in total in 2009.

The greatest fall happened between 1989 and 1999 when the number of international stories published fell by 20%. But the trend, though less steep, has continued since then, falling by another 10% between 1999 and 2009.

This decline, though still considerable, is more gradual than in the first ten pages of the paper, due in large part to the international sections in the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. Each of these sections can have anywhere from 10 to 20 international stories per day (see page 17).



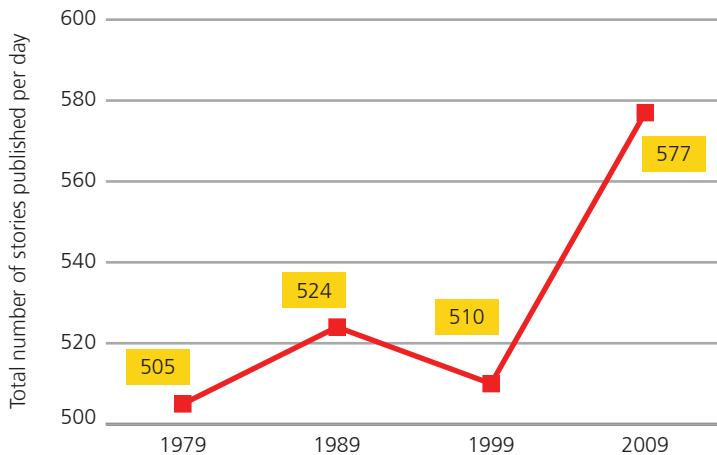
Growth in newspaper size (number of pages and news stories)



*Average number of pages in each newspaper per day (including supplements)
(By newspaper, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

This fall in the absolute number of international stories is in the context of newspapers increasing considerably in terms of pagination.

All four newspapers have grown the number of pages they publish since 1979. Much of this growth happened in the 1990s. In the case of *The Guardian*, when one takes supplements into account, the paper has almost tripled in size. *The Mirror* has more than doubled. The *Daily Mail* has grown by 89% and the *Daily Telegraph* by 81%.



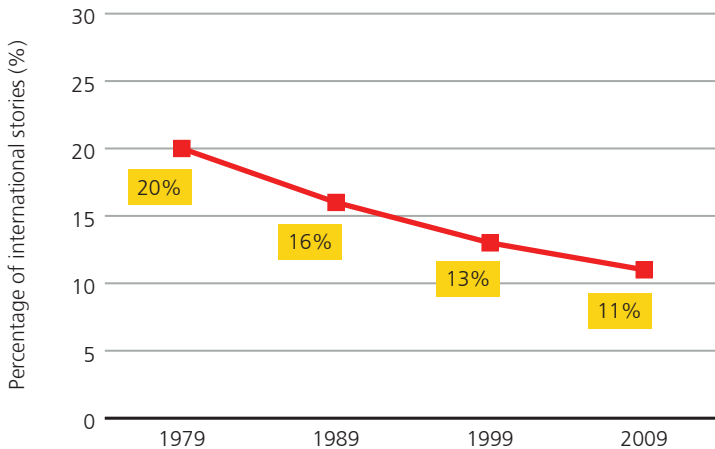
*Total number of stories published per day
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

Three of the four have also increased the number of stories they publish within these pages. The number of stories published in the print *Guardian* has risen from 694 in 1979 to 789 in 2009. The *Daily Mail* published 37% more stories in 2009 than 1979 (from 471 stories in the week to 645). The *Mirror* published 22% more.

The *Telegraph* is the exception, publishing slightly fewer stories, though on a greater number of pages (867 stories across the week in 2009, against 884 in 1979).



Decline in relative number of international news stories across the whole newspaper

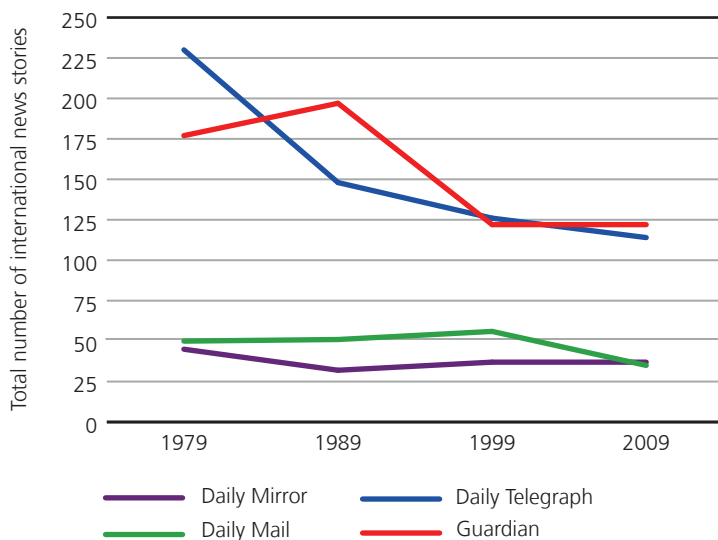


*Percentage of stories within all 4 newspapers that are international
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

International stories have not grown to fill these larger newspapers. As a proportion of the paper, foreign news has shrunk. In 1979 it made up one-fifth of the whole paper, or 20%. This shrank to 16% in 1989, 13% in 1999, and 11% in 2009.

International news has, in other words, not only not kept pace with the growth of news and features in the rest of the paper, but has shrunk – in real and relative terms – as the rest of the paper has grown.

Decline in absolute number of international news stories across each of the four newspapers



*Total number of international news stories published by newspaper
(By newspaper, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

The number of international news stories published has declined across all four newspapers studied, though the drop has been greatest in the two broadsheets (both of which started from a much higher point and still publish many more stories than the tabloids).

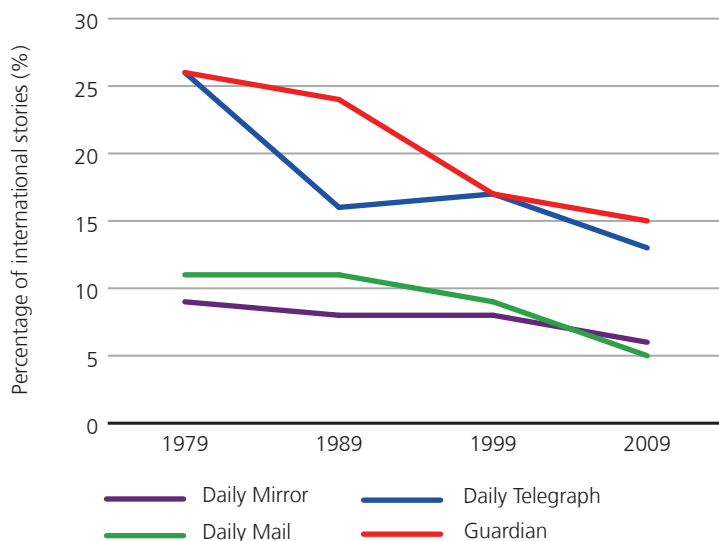
The *Guardian* grew the number of stories it covered slightly in the 1980s, during the last phase of the Cold War. It then dropped off considerably in the 1990s, but has maintained that level since.



The Daily Telegraph, which used to publish more international stories than almost any other paper, reduced its coverage up to 1989, and has reduced it further still since then.

The *Daily Mail* and the *Mirror* have rarely covered more than 10 foreign news items across the whole paper each day. The *Daily Mail* maintained this figure up to 1999, but since then it has dropped to about 7 stories per day (for the week studied). The *Mirror*, whose coverage declined between 1979 and 1989 (from 9 to fewer than 7 stories per day), has maintained a similar number of foreign news stories since then.

Decline in relative number of international news stories across each of the four newspapers



*Percentage of stories within each newspaper that are international
(By newspaper, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

Similarly, the proportion of international news stories within each newspaper has declined. In the years studied it has halved in the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, and dropped by about a third in *The Guardian* and the *Mirror*.

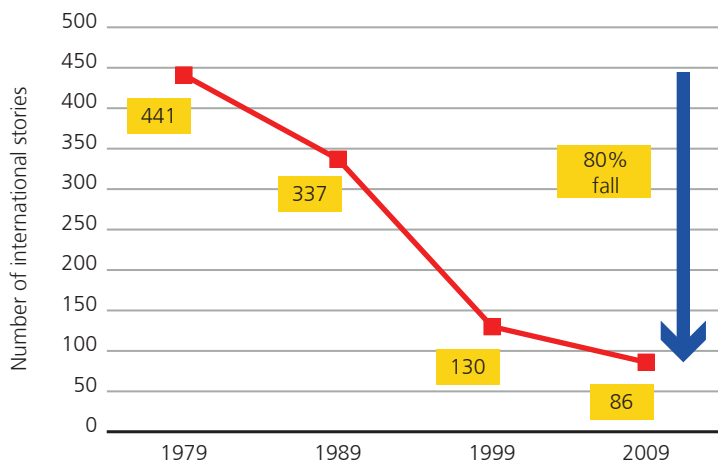
The Guardian has, according to Simon Tisdall - assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the paper - kept the number of column inches devoted to foreign news pretty stable over the whole period. However, as the analysis for this study shows, this represents a decline in real terms since the rest of the paper has grown.



The *Telegraph's* decline is more marked since the total number of stories it publishes in the paper is about the same in 2009 as in 1979 (867 stories in the week in 2009, against 884 in 1979). Yet, of these 867, only 114 were international stories against 230 in 1979.

The *Mail* and the *Mirror* kept a fairly steady proportion of the paper international from 1979 until the turn of the new century. Since then however both have dropped off.

Decline in absolute number of international news stories within the first 10 pages



*Total number of international news stories in first 10 pages
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

International news used to feature prominently within the first ten pages of the newspapers. It now rarely does.

In absolute terms the number of stories published in the first ten pages across the four newspapers has dropped from 441 to 86, or by 80%.

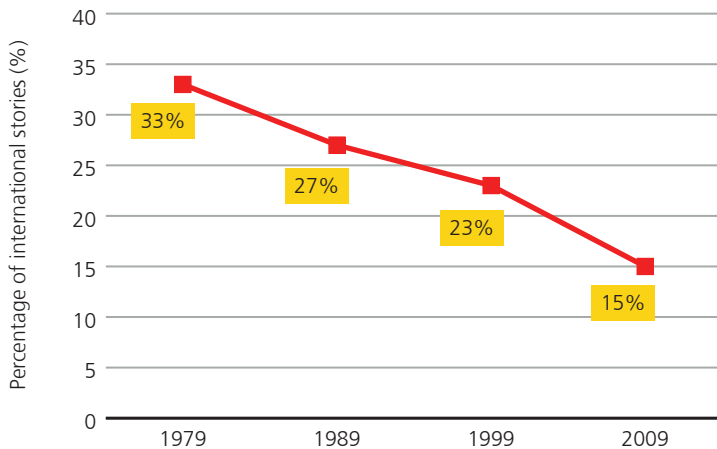
The *Telegraph*, which published 189 foreign news stories in the first ten pages in 1979, published 22 in 2009. The *Guardian*, which published 164 foreign news stories in the first ten pages in 1979, published 33 in 2009. The *Daily Mail* dropped from 45 to 13, and the *Mirror* from 43 to 18 (by proportion the lowest decline).

In the broadsheets foreign news is now mostly contained within the international section of the paper. In the *Telegraph* this section normally begins around page 16 and contains between 10-20 stories. In the *Guardian* this section generally begins around or beyond page 16 and, again, contains 10-20 stories.

There is an argument that grouping international news within its own section makes it more prominent – particularly to the audience that is most interested in international news. However, for audiences who do not have a special interest this also makes it easier to avoid. It should also be noted that when a story is considered important enough – whether it is international, financial, sport or culture – then it is often shifted to the front section of the paper (e.g. coverage of the 2010 FIFA World Cup).

In terms of prominence there are, of course, exceptions. On Tuesday 8th June 2010, for example, *The Guardian* published a story about Somalia on its front page by its award winning journalist Ghaith Abdul Ahad. The story continued on a double page spread across pages 8-9. However, based on the analysis for this study such prominent coverage is the exception rather than the norm.

Decline in relative number of international news stories within the first 10 pages



*Percentage of stories in the first ten pages that are international
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

The decline of international stories in the first ten pages cannot be explained away by changes in format.

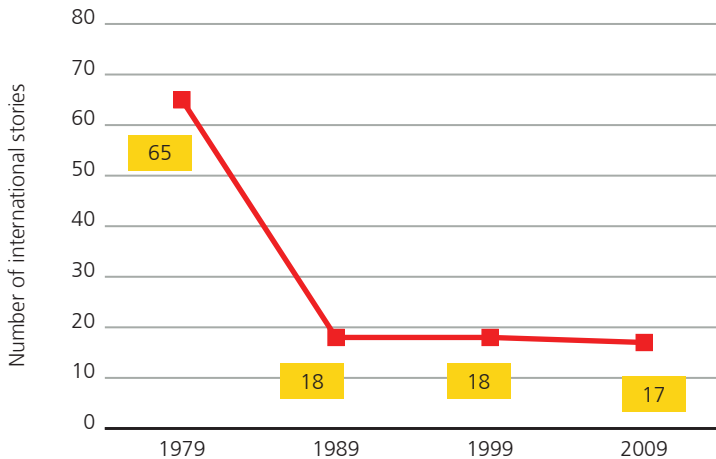
Newspapers have changed a huge amount since 1979: stories tend to be more spaced out, fonts are larger, there are more photographs and many of these photographs are bigger. In the case of *The Guardian* the paper has moved from a broadsheet size to a Berliner format.



As a result the absolute number of stories – international and non-international – within the first ten pages of the four papers studied has fallen, from 1,341 stories in the week in 1979 to 561 stories in 2009 (with the steepest fall happening between 1989 and 1999). This equates to a drop from an average of 67 stories in the front section of each newspaper per day, to an average of 28.

Yet, even accounting for this fall, the number of international stories within these pages has dropped even faster. As a percentage of stories in the first ten pages, foreign news stories have declined from 33% in 1979, to 27% (1989), 23% (1989) and 15% in 2009.

International news on the front page (absolute number of stories)



*Total number of international news stories on the front page
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

In the late 1970s, front pages (particularly of broadsheets) looked very different than they did in 2009. There were many more stories – sometimes up to 20, smaller fonts, and smaller and fewer photographs.

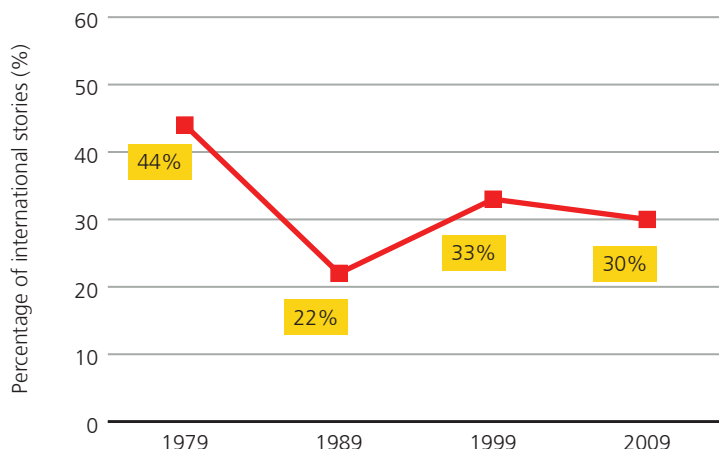
Even taking all this into account the number of international stories on the front page in 1979 was very high compared to today. Of 148 stories on the front pages of all four papers across the week, 65 of them were international.

The number of international stories plummeted, in absolute terms, between 1979 and 1989. It fell from 65 foreign stories a week to 18 across all four newspapers.

However, since 1989, the number of international news stories on the front page has remained relatively steady – at an average of just under one story per day per newspaper.

This relative persistence of international news on the front page runs counter to the decline of international news in the rest of the newspaper. Based on these figures therefore, the front pages are giving a falsely positive impression of the number of foreign stories inside.

International news on the front page (relative number of international stories)



*Percentage of stories on the front page that are international
(All 4 newspapers, Mon-Fri, first week in March)*

This misleading impression is even clearer when you look at the percentage of international news on the front page relative to all stories published.

The proportion of international stories on the front page was at its highest in 1979, at 44%. Not far off half the stories on the front page of these newspapers in 1979 were, in other words, international.

This percentage then dropped to 22% in 1989, but then rose again to 33% in 1999 and fell back slightly to 30% in 2009.

Almost a third of stories on the front page of these papers in 2009 were international (using a relatively generous definition of 'international').

This contrasts with the 11% of the paper that is made up of international news. Therefore, going by the front page, one would think international news was still a big part of each newspaper. This is not the case.



International reporting – what has changed?

What has disappeared?

Logically, if the prominence and number of international stories has dropped significantly, some things are not being reported in the paper.

International politics has been the biggest loser. Many political and diplomatic stories that used to be covered no longer are. In March 1979, for example, the press was dominated by stories about President Carter in Egypt, the Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam, Cubans in the Yemen, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and the trial of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

In 2009, international politics has not disappeared, but there is less of it and it tends to be more focused on the UK. It is rarer, for example, to see stories about relations between states (such as 'Russia seeks to woo Saudis' published in 1979) when the UK is not directly involved.

Perhaps most strikingly, political reporting of the two superpowers of the 1970s and 1980s, the US and the Soviet Union, has not been replaced by extensive multipolar reporting. In particular, our analysis did not show a substantial growth in coverage of some of the world's emerging superpowers – such as China, India and Brazil.

To check this was not an anomaly we analysed all news stories published about India in the online versions of UK newspapers in the first three months of 2010. Three quarters of these stories (76%) were published in the *FT* or on BBC News online. *The Guardian*, the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* combined published a total of only 10 stories on Indian international relations, 11 on political violence, and 6 on domestic politics (not all of which appeared in the print paper) in three months. The *Daily Mirror* covered just two stories on India: the British plane spotters arrested as spies, and Lindsay Lohan's 'life-changing' trip to the country.



Foreign ‘scoops’ It may sound like an obvious thing to say, but it is very difficult to get foreign scoops if you are not there. A reporter on the ground is able to develop contacts, speak to a wide variety of (unpublished) sources, understand how different political cultures and societies work, and doggedly root out information.

Based on our interviews and analysis, there are now fewer professional foreign correspondents working for mainstream media organisations. Without reporters on location it is more difficult to uncover foreign scoops.

In the 1990s, for example, the *Daily Mail* would not have been able to publish a number of scoops about the collapse of the Soviet Union had it not had a reporter – Harry Edgington – on location in Moscow.

In ‘Tanks Storm Rebel City’ (20th January 1990), for example, Edgington scooped the other papers with the news that the Soviet government had surrounded the city of Baku, in Azerbaijan, and was preparing an assault. He got the story because he was in Moscow and knew how the Soviet system worked:

‘There was no official word of what was going on – this was around midnight in Baku – but Azeris in the city were telephoning news agencies to say that the army had attacked. I knew that a statement from Gorbachev would be prepared, and this would have to wait until a translation into English was ready. I had made contact with the English language service of TASS, the government news agency, at the time of the fall of Ceausescu in Romania, and called through to them and was told about the statement they were translating. So I had the news many hours in advance – the bureaucratic channels were to take hours...This was the key to gathering information about Soviet actions, knowing through which channels it was moving, behind the scenes. To the untutored eye, these were “Soviet silences”. Not so – a lot was always going on’

Harry Edgington, *Moscow Memoirs*, not yet published



Front page of the Daily Mail, 20th January 1990

It therefore comes as little surprise that there are fewer 'foreign scoops' in the national press since there are fewer reporters out there.

This is not to say these stories are not published. Nor does it suggest that there are not international stories today that provide a remarkable insight to foreign countries or to international institutions. Rather it is to say that there are fewer of these stories, and those that there are tend to be limited (in the case of the broadsheets) to the international section within the middle of the paper.

What else is different?

The stories that remain have also changed. Below is a list of the international stories covered by *The Guardian* the first Monday in March 1979, compared with the first Monday in March 2009:

The Guardian, Monday 5th March 1979

- Carter calls Sadat for talks (Hella Pick in Washington)
- OPEC cuts profiteering among oil companies (Energy Correspondent, Charles Cook)
- Peking announces withdrawal from Vietnam (Reuters in Peking)
- IMF anger at Mobutu dealings (John Bowell in Kinshasa)
- Amin's position improves (James McManus in Nairobi)
- Spain Election (John Hooper in Madrid)
- Egyptian people disillusioned with peace talks (Irene Beeson in Cairo)
- Iran military shakeup (Martin Woollacott in Tehran)
- Britons leave Iran (Reuters in Tehran)
- Cubans involved in Yemen fighting (David Hirst in Beirut)
- Senators reject SALT (UPI in Washington)
- Blow to East German secret service (Frankfurt Correspondent)
- West heads off Namibian UDI (Johannesburg/Windhoek Correspondents)
- Saudi pressure may save Bhutto (Peter Niesawand in Islamabad)
- Saudis seek to resume USSR diplomacy (Cairo Correspondent)
- Tape threat to Botha (Johannesburg Correspondent)
- Gaddafi still in power (Tripoli Correspondent)
- EEC debates farms subsidies (Europe Editor in Brussels)
- US-Japanese trade gaps (UPI in Tokyo)
- Afghan rebels challenge Soviet regime (Chris Sherwell in Peshawar)
- US police strike (UPI in New Orleans)
- Brezhnev poll news (UPI in Moscow)
- San Francisco sect (Chris Reed in San Francisco)
- Dutch election merger hindered (Brendan Boyle in The Hague)
- Japanese trade (Bruce Wallace in Washington)
- Review of press freedom in Yugoslavia (Michael Dobbs in Belgrade)
- Cambodians spill into Thailand (Reuters)
- Mullah returns (Reuters)
- Borg threat (Reuters)
- US killer grudge (UPI)

- US delayed shock (UPI)
- Italian guard killed (Reuters)
- Belgian drug haul (Reuters)
- African landmine toll (Reuters)

The Guardian, Monday 6th March 2009

- We will leave Iraq a better place – British general (Martin Chulov in Baghdad)
- Milan fashion show (Jess Cartner-Moloy in Milan)
- New democratic dawn in Iraq (Martin Chulov in Baghdad)
- Israel may face war crimes trial (Peter Beaumont and agencies)
- Blair calls for end to Gaza blockade (Rory McCarthy in Gaza City)
- Afghan leader accused of brinksmanship (Jon Boone in Kabul)
- EU Summit (Ian Traynor/David Gow in Brussels)
- US fear Iran nuclear capability (Middle East Editor, Ian Black)
- Siegfried and Roy (Dan Glaister in Los Angeles)
- Hollywood goes to Tehran (Robert Tait)
- Michelin launch (Lizzy Davies in Paris)
- Obama chooses governor (Reuters in Washington)
- Bangladesh border guard mutiny murder (AP in Dhaka)
- US deputy assaults girl (Dan Glaister in Los Angeles)
- Hariri tribunal seeks generals (Middle East Editor, Ian Black)
- Spanish poll test (Giles Tremlett in Madrid)



The 1979 *Guardian* has set pieces like the Spanish and Dutch elections as well as news about international institutions like OPEC and the IMF, and diplomatic and military news that has no direct bearing on the UK (e.g. 'Peking announces withdrawal from Vietnam', 'Iran military shake-up'). There is not much levity.

By comparison, in 2009, the front of the paper contains UK relevant international news and light news (Milan fashion show), while the international section, though it covers set pieces like the EU summit and Afghan elections, also has the Michelin Guide and 'Hollywood takes a trip to Iran'. The coverage in the *Telegraph* is similar, though there is the occasional lighter story in 1979.

It should be noted there are important exceptions. *The Guardian* has run lengthy themed pieces about chaos in Somalia, the rise of the far right in central Europe, and violence in Kenya. The *Daily Telegraph* ran an extensive series on Europe in September 2009, with a double spread each day over a fortnight. However, the extent and prominence of international news has, in this analysis, clearly declined.

International reporting – explaining the decline

Editorial resources and priorities

Original foreign reporting is an expensive business. A basic foreign bureau, without capital expenditure, will cost – on average – \$200-300,000 a year, based on a 2007 analysis by Jill Carroll for the Harvard Shorenstein Center. Bureaux in war zones can cost a lot more. Even sending a reporter, with a translator and/or fixer, to a foreign country for a single story can cost £5-6,000 a trip, according to one senior UK journalist. Such expense can be difficult to justify when circulation and profitability are falling across the news industry.

However, it is fiendishly difficult to assess the amount a newspaper spends on international coverage. Even trying to measure the number of foreign reporters is fraught with complications. There are staff foreign correspondents (who are based abroad and on the paper's full time staff). There are freelance foreign correspondents who do the vast majority of their work for one outlet. There are freelance correspondents who will do occasional work for many different outlets. And, there are reporters who travel to foreign countries to cover particular stories (e.g. the US election). This does not include, of course, those based at home on the foreign desk.

Still, one can look at number of correspondents, combined with amount and prominence of coverage, and get an indication of the level of commitment, and how that commitment has changed over time. As Suzanne Franks writes, 'when a regular reporter is replaced by a casual stringer arrangement, this has implications for the way in which stories are covered' (from 'Lacking a Clear Narrative: Foreign Reporting after the Cold War', 2006).

We do know that in October 2008 the *Daily Mirror* closed its foreign desk (from reports in MediaGuardian.co.uk and *Press Gazette*). It no longer has a foreign news editor or any dedicated foreign correspondents on staff – as opposed to correspondents who work on domestic and international stories (according to Mark Ellis, *Daily Mirror*). *The Sun* does not have a foreign desk



and handles foreign news out of the main news desk. It has one or two regular correspondents in North America (according to the news desk) but otherwise relies on freelancers/stringers.

The *Express* does not have any staff reporters based overseas but if a large story breaks will send a staff reporter (or team) from London (according to Jane Wharton at the *Daily Express*). It also has 16 well-established stringers that it can call on, 14 of whom are based in the US or Europe. Otherwise it relies on the news wires and specialist agencies such as Splash (USA), Brown and Bond (Spain), Miller and Maclean (South Africa), and Barcroft Media (India and USA).

The *Daily Mail* has a foreign desk in London with a foreign editor and up to 10 staff working partially or fully on the desk (according to foreign editor David Harding). It also has up to ten foreign correspondents overseas who sit somewhere between staff correspondent and 'super stringer'. If there is a big foreign story it wants to cover the *Mail* will often send a UK based journalist out or rely on one of its super stringers abroad.

The Guardian and *The Observer* have, combined, 18 foreign correspondents. This includes more than one correspondent in the US and China; then one each in Moscow, Delhi, Islamabad, Brussels, Paris, Rome, Madrid, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Tokyo, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Afghanistan, Caracas and Berlin – plus a foreign desk in London (according to previous international editor Harriet Sherwood, now based in Jerusalem).

This number has remained fairly constant historically, based on interviews for this report. However this should be set in the context, since the total number of journalists employed by *The Guardian* and *The Observer* has grown significantly over the last two decades. According to Simon Tisdall, who has been a foreign correspondent and foreign editor at *The Guardian* since 1979, the number of journalists employed jumped from about 140 when he joined the paper, to almost 800 in 2009. Yet the number of foreign correspondents has remained fairly constant (excepting a temporary rise prior to 2007).

The Times has 24 correspondents based outside the UK on staff. This includes four staff correspondents in New York, three in Washington DC, two in Tokyo and Sydney, and one each in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Rome, Moscow, Beijing, Delhi, Mumbai, Baghdad, Jerusalem and

Johannesburg. There are four *Times* correspondents on retainer, in Dubai, Kabul, Barcelona, and Paris (from *Times* foreign editor, Richard Beeston). It also, like other papers, has so-called 'super stringers' and stringers.

The *Telegraph* has, in the past couple of years, based full-time correspondents in a number of places including Shanghai, Dubai, Sao Paulo (shortly), Warsaw and Almaty (according to the foreign editor Adrian Michaels). The paper says it also has new people in Sydney, New Delhi, Islamabad, Kabul, Moscow, Jerusalem, Beijing, New York (coming soon), LA and Johannesburg. The paper would not say how many foreign correspondents it has on staff but according to a source close to the *Telegraph* there are now about eight foreign staff correspondents in total, against 12 for the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* in 2006.

Dominic Lawson, a former editor and columnist, suggested that cuts in international budgets came after the Telegraph Group was bought by the Barclay Brothers, and as the paper sought to reduce its cost base to prepare for a digital future. Speaking in front of a House of Lords Select Committee on Communications at the end of 2007, Lawson said 'The Barclays are more parochial figures and you now find that the *Telegraph* has no full-time staff correspondent in Paris, no full-time staff correspondent in Brussels, and you see then that it is picking up agency copy which appears under the title of "By a *Telegraph* correspondent" which it clearly is not. That is a problem.' The then *Telegraph* editor disputed Lawson's comments.

Still, a comparison of the *Telegraph's* international articles – bylined and non-bylined – on Friday 9th March 1979 and Friday 6th March 2009 gives an indication of the change:



Daily Telegraph, Friday 9th March 1979

- Brandt seeks divorce (Staff Correspondent in Bonn)
- Hess in Hospital (AP)
- 25m for ex-wife in divorce (Ian Brodie in Los Angeles)
- Carter talks subdued (Stephen Barber in Cairo)
- Amin to fall in days (John Bulloch in Nairobi)
- 9 Police Shot in Paris (Our Paris Correspondent)
- Chinese out of Vietnam in weeks (Ian Ward in Singapore)
- China leaders attack Mao (Nigel Wade in Peking)
- Rhodie tapes sought (Chris Munnlon in Johannesburg)
- China steps up satire (Nigel Wade in Peking)
- Russia seeks to woo Saudis (Richard Beeston in Moscow)
- Campaign for Reagan (Our Washington Staff)
- Shots fired at women's rights demo (Guy Rais in Tehran)
- Fuel costs force up air fares (Ian Ball in New York)
- 30,000 vanish in Argentina (Our Geneva Correspondent)
- Threat to Stag (Our Jammu Correspondent)
- Romanian rent-a-crowd greets Giscard (Michael Field in Bucharest)
- Support in Iran for new democratic front (Staff Correspondent in Tehran)
- Challenge to Zia's regime (Bouce Loudon in Islamabad)
- Home threat ends strike by white miners (Our Johannesburg Correspondent)
- Monastery blaze in West Germany (AP)
- West German round-up of spies (David Sheans in Bonn)
- Dutch reject inquiry call (Our Correspondent in The Hague)
- Mobutu buys gold waistcoat (Reuters)
- Canada digs for oil (Diplomatic Correspondent, David Adamson, in Alberta)

Daily Telegraph, Friday 6th March 2009

- Obama visits UK (Political Editor, Andrew Porter)
- Pariah who clings to power in Sudan (not credited)
- Lack of security is lie, say Pakistan (Isambard Wilkinson in Lahore)
- China ready for Taiwan talks (Peter Foster in Beijing)
- Gibraltar row (Fiona Govan in Gibraltar)
- World Bulletins (not credited, appears to be from the wires)
- Russia bar dissent over Stalin (Adrian Blomfield in Moscow)
- Chavez seizes US Rice Company (Latin America Correspondent, Jeremiah McDermott)
- Model agency arrests for drugs (Henry Samuel in Paris)



Location of *Daily Telegraph* correspondents, Friday 9th March 1979



Location of *Daily Telegraph* correspondents, Friday 6th March 2009



There are 13 named correspondents in the 1979 paper, another 7 un-named (e.g. 'Our Correspondent in The Hague'), plus credited agency copy from AP and Reuters. By contrast, in the 2009 paper there are 7 named correspondents (including Andrew Porter, the *Telegraph's* political editor reporting from London), one uncredited article, plus 'world bulletins' – uncredited briefs, presumably from agency copy.

The Independent continues to publish a higher proportion of international news and features than most, but has had to cut its foreign staff back due to financial difficulties – recently shifting senior journalists out of staff positions (according to interviewee). The paper no longer has staff correspondents in Germany, Moscow, Rome or Brussels. *The Independent* did not respond to questions about specific numbers.

Broadcasting is not covered by this study, though in his report last year Phil Harding found the BBC alone had about 200 foreign correspondents plus freelancers and stringers. The BBC and Channel 4 have also maintained their international coverage despite economic and structural pressures. International coverage at ITV, however, dropped by 73% between 2007 and 2009 according to the Harding report (there are no figures for the number of foreign correspondents at the station). Channel 5 coverage has also dropped, but not as drastically. Sky News has 10 foreign bureaux – in Brussels, Moscow, Dubai, Johannesburg, Washington DC, Delhi, Jerusalem, Beijing, New York and Sydney, along with 11 foreign correspondents and bureau staff (from Sky).

International framework

Coverage of international news in the 'quality press' declined in the period after the end of the Cold War. In the ten years after 1989 the average number of international stories in *The Guardian* fell by over 60%. The *Telegraph* declined too, though not by the same extent. This paralleled a similar drop in the US (according to *American Journalism Review*).

The Cold War had provided a clear framework and rationale for covering international affairs. A war in Angola, for example, could immediately be placed in a bipolar Cold War context – as evidence that one side was winning and the other one losing. Who was winning and who losing similarly had a direct bearing on the UK thanks to the assumed ambitions of Soviet communism, and the over-arching threat of nuclear war.



After 1989 there was no such easy framework. It therefore became much more difficult to put military coups, diplomatic wrangling and complicated wars in a context that was immediately recognisable to a domestic audience.

International news coverage has also lost its imperial context. Large swathes of the world are no longer coloured pink (as British colonies used to be identified on atlases). Even though Britain lost its grip on empire during and shortly after the Second World War, there were still many Britons who had been born and lived in countries governed by the UK, or still had relatives in those countries. This was reflected in the location of some foreign correspondents, and in coverage of certain countries. Zimbabwe and South Africa, for example, were covered extensively in the 1980s and 1990s.

Neither has a simple international framework emerged since 1999. For a period between 2001 and 2005 the US and some European governments claimed there was a global threat from terrorism, but neither the threat nor its coverage ever proved to be cohesive.

Yet one could argue that the global threat of Cold War has been replaced by global resource and environmental threats. The British Empire may be all but gone, but there are more than 5 million Britons living abroad. Moreover, many of the challenges we now face cannot be understood unless they are put in a global context (the 2007-2009 financial crisis, for example). Despite this, the papers studied are reporting the world less.

Access to alternative sources of international news

It would be short-sighted not to put the decline in international coverage in the print press in the context of the increased access to international reporting elsewhere.

There are now a range of 24 hour news channels that present things from non-British perspectives: Al Jazeera, Fox News, France 24, Press TV, Russia Today, Al Arabiya, CCTV, GEO, NDTV, STAR, DW-TV, Euronews, and CNN amongst others. These are accessible to many in the UK via satellite, cable and, in some cases, online.

Moreover, thanks in part to the internet people now have access to more international news than ever before. '[W]e've never had faster access to more world news than we do today,' Evgeny Morozov writes in *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2010). 'Aggregators like Google News ...[have] equalized the playing field for thousands of niche and country-specific news sources, helping them to reach global audiences. How many people would be reading AllAfrica.com or the Asia Times Online were it not for Google News?'

As long as you have an online connection or a mobile phone you can, so this argument goes, find any international news you want. 'Today, anyone with enough interest to make the effort', Peter Osnos writes in *Foreign Affairs*, 'can be well informed about the world.'

Therefore why should a UK newspaper write a report on President Obama's healthcare policy when people have such easy – and in many cases free – access to a detailed report and analysis online? If another news organisation can cover a story more quickly, and in more depth, than you can – why do it again? Why not just link to it? Certainly, from the perspective of minority or specialist interests, it is hard to see how a mainstream publication could match the breadth or depth of the internet.

When asked by a House of Lords Select Committee why he chose to focus his editorial resources at home, Will Lewis, editor of the *Daily Telegraph* until May 2010, replied:

"are we better off deploying our resource there [abroad] or working on our own added value scoop material over here [within the UK], I am always going to ask the journalists to try and come up with our own material rather than redo a report that has already been done by someone at Bloomberg to a very high quality"

**House of Lords Communications Committee report on
The Ownership of the News, q.1381, 9th January 2008**

Yet Lewis' argument does not hold for UK news where the same story is regularly covered by multiple outlets, often with quite a similar approach.

There is also a strong counter argument to Morozov and Osnos. In most countries outside the US the proportion of people who find their news on the internet remains small (less than 10% in the UK). Moreover, there is evidence



to suggest that, although the British public has access to countless international news sources, they are not accessing them, at least not in high numbers. Using Google Ad Planner, a system for working out which websites potential customers are likely to visit, it is possible to estimate the reach of foreign news websites to UK audiences. The *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, two of only a handful of US papers committed to international news, have a monthly reach of only 0.3% in the UK. This contrasts with the reach of the *Telegraph* and *Guardian* sites in the US, of 1.2% and 1.1% respectively. In South Africa the same two UK sites have a reach of 2.3% and 2% (data for April 2010, accessed 4th June 2010).

These figures, which suggest the public do not seek out foreign news online, appear to be supported by recent qualitative research about British online use for the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT). 'Audiences rarely encounter the wider world online,' the report found, 'and personal relevance drives all encounters' (from 'The World Online: how the public uses the internet to find out about the wider world', TWRResearch for the IBT).

International news in everything

It could be argued that simply measuring the decline of stories that are primarily international does not take into account the integration of international perspectives across all stories.

Adrian Michaels of the *Telegraph* says that it is important 'to consider not only the foreign news pages in the *Daily* and *Sunday*, but the foreign subjects given more regular prominence in our business sections, on comment, as leaders, and as features'.

Similarly, Suzanne Franks notes the perspective of writer Thomas Friedman and others that 'the lines which previously divided foreign and home reporting are now being reconfigured', and that there is a 'convergence between what is perceived as domestic and foreign coverage' ('Globalising consciousness: the end of 'foreign reporting and foreign coverage', *Ethical Space*, Vol 7, No 4, 2010).

However, this argument assumes that international news in the past was less integrated, something which is unproven and does not appear to be borne out by a general reading of the papers over the last 30 years.

Nor does it address the issue of prominence. It assumes that the reader gets as much exposure to international news if it is integrated to articles about domestic news, business and comment as they would if the primary emphasis is on the international aspect of the story. This seems unlikely.

Neither does it counter the fundamental issue this study is concerned with: the decline in international news reporting, as opposed to comment, editorial or features.

A ‘fundamental lack of confidence’

Lacking a clear contextual framework, deprived of editorial resources, and with international news freely available online (if not necessarily frequently accessed), many papers appear to have lost confidence in how to do international news.

‘Newspapers have lost their way’, author and foreign correspondent Alan Philips says; they feel ‘under pressure to provide something jollier and more attractive’, or risk losing their readers’ attention. International politics is often neither jolly nor attractive. There is also a perception, Philips suggests, that ‘the British public has lost its appetite for serious foreign affairs coverage’. George Brock reiterated this in an interview for this study, saying that it is only ‘natural that people should be less interested [in foreign affairs] after 1989’, without the looming threat of nuclear war.

Still, such perceptions form the basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If news outlets believe the public is less interested in foreign affairs, then they will publish less foreign news, and the public will become less interested.

The accessibility of information sources, particularly via the internet, has led to a gravitation of power to the centre of newsrooms. The more information the central news desk has (or believes it has), the less reliant those on the desk feel on the knowledge and expertise of the correspondent on the ground. By the time a newspaper’s Washington correspondent has woken up, for example, there is a good chance the London desk will have sent them an email telling them which stories to follow up, having already read the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* online. As the editors’ reliance flags, so does the power and status of the foreign correspondent. It is salutary to note that, according to one reporter, back in the 1960s foreign correspondents used to travel first class, such was their status. No longer.



Without confidence in the importance of foreign news – both to the public interest and the public – newspapers are less likely to put an international story on the front page or in the first few pages of the paper, as the analysis in this report shows. Front page billing can only be assured when the news is of such magnitude that it is a ‘no-brainer’ – major natural disasters, for example, or US elections. Otherwise, as Harriet Sherwood says, it is ‘harder and harder to get stuff into the front of the paper’ (interview for this study).

Given all the reasons outlined above, perhaps rather than being surprised at the decline in prominence and breadth of international news in the papers, we should be surprised it has not almost disappeared altogether. Or at least that the ‘international section’ has not been removed, and replaced with occasional individual stories. Its survival, George Brock suggests, may be due to legacy beliefs that a newspaper ought to cover the ground. Beliefs that are eroding with the growing success of the dictum espoused by journalist and academic, Jeff Jarvis: ‘do what you do best and link to the rest.’

Foreign ‘reporting’ in the 21st century – a new news ecology

So where is foreign reporting going? How will international news be gathered in the first half of the 21st century? Based on current trends, this appears to be the emerging shape of international reporting:

A rump of professional foreign correspondents

The *Financial Times*, *The Times* and *The Guardian* appear committed to maintaining double figures of foreign correspondents on staff. Outside the broadcasters, they will form the rump of professional UK journalists based overseas.

The agencies and the BBC will continue to provide the vast majority of professional international reportage. Thomson Reuters has ‘196 bureaux serving approximately 131 countries’ (*International News Reporting: Frontlines and Deadlines*, by John Owen and Heather Purdey). The Associated Press has bureaux in more than 120 countries (Owen and Purdy). The BBC has around 200 foreign correspondents plus many hundreds more stringers (from IBT/Polis/Oxfam report). They are the bedrock of international news reporting. They are likely to come under increasing pressure to gather more news for more platforms in less time.

‘Parachute journalism’

When a big foreign news story breaks (a tsunami, earthquake, or terrorist attack), news organisations will send out small ‘SWAT teams’ to cover it. This is the way in which many news organisations already operate. They will then rely, for context and background, on whatever freelancers and fixers they can find at very short notice.



Partnerships

Many news organisations have formed partnerships with news outlets overseas. This allows them to access video and audio footage, and syndicate content. *The Independent*, for example, agreed deals in 2008/09 with France 24 and with Al Jazeera English to screen international video footage on its website. This type of partnership is likely to increase as editorial resources shrink and technology becomes even faster and cheaper.

The one-man bureau

The availability of inexpensive, sophisticated media equipment with which you can record, edit, and send video has encouraged the development of the 'one-man bureau'. ABC in the US has recently experimented with seven of these (though they call them 'mini bureaus'). These are, by their nature, highly flexible, mobile and cheaper than teams.

However, Ben Hammersley, who has experience of being a 'one man bureau', warns against the sustainability of trying to do everything yourself: 'as you get more tired, your stuff will get weird, and then get spiked' (Owen and Purdey).

The virtual foreign correspondent

There are now many correspondents who knock together an international story from central office using wire copy, Googling, reading news sources from the country of origin, and finding visuals on YouTube, flickr etc. Though much less expensive, these stories are almost bound to be similar to many others published elsewhere, being based on similar online sources. They help fill the 'news hole' but are not distinctive and do not provide a competitive advantage. One former foreign correspondent referred to this as desk bound journalists 'rewriting wire copy about countries they've never visited'.

NGO as ‘news organisation’

NGOs will often find they are the only ones with the motivation, the funds and the equipment to record news in faraway places. Some of them have embraced this opportunity to communicate what they see. ‘[A]id agencies have turned themselves into reporters for the mainstream media, providing cash-strapped foreign desks with free footage and words’ (Glenda Cooper). And, as Cooper discovered, material from NGOs is often now published or screened by news outlets almost unchanged. The problem being, as Cooper notes, that NGOs’ role as advocates can compromise their fairness.

NGOs also provide support for professional journalists – travel, lodging, transport. Again, this can jeopardise the independence of the reporting. ‘It is hardly surprising’, journalist and author Michela Wrong wrote in the *New Statesman* in 2005, ‘that, seeing the crisis of the day from the aid worker’s perspective, we then draft articles that faithfully reflect the NGO view of the world.’

Data leaks

After the ‘stateless news organisation’ Wikileaks published over 92,000 previously secret records about the Afghan war online, it dominated news across the world.

The ease of publishing on the net suggests that there will be many more such leaks or ‘data dumps’ in the future, both international and domestic. Some news organisations will analyse and summarise this data, and develop tools that the public can use to make the data relevant to them.

Citizen journalists, filters & aggregators

Citizen journalism is much disparaged, mainly because it has been used as a catch-all term for all news content that has not been captured by a professional news organisation. However, clearly there is, and will be, a role for citizen or ‘accidental journalism’. In other words, public interest news that is recorded by people who just happened to be there – photographs of natural disasters, election rallies, wars. The difficulty will be finding these, filtering them, and making them available to a wider public. This is where filters, like Demotix (a wire feed of citizen journalism, mainly photographs) and others, will play an important role.



Equally, people who are recording their own experience and self-publishing will make up a critical part of the mix, though will be of much greater benefit to the wider public when organisations endorse, encourage, and promote them for the sake of the public interest. Organisations like Global Voices Online.

Platforms are also emerging that structure information from citizens, making it much more useful and even giving it a narrative. Ushahidi began as way of tracking reports of incidents of violence around Kenya. It is now a platform used across the world for 'information collection, visualization and interactive mapping', and is transforming the way in which crises are reported.

From foreign correspondents to foreign correspondence

'Citizen journalism', in the sense of relaying news to your community, is as likely to come via social networks than through blogs or traditional media platforms. In the years to come, people are likely to pick up international news via email, through their colleagues, and via their Facebook friends, or via their twitter network, as well as via traditional sources. In some ways this will represent a return to the origins of 'foreign correspondence' – letters and reports sent from aboard to named recipients but not necessarily available to the wider public (as opposed to a Facebook or twitter network).

Does it matter?

Does it matter if there is less foreign news in the print press and that which is left is less prominent? Does it matter that there are fewer professional foreign correspondents gathering news on the ground?

One could argue that this is simply a reflection of the changing way in which news is gathered, published, distributed and consumed. That we are moving from an era of foreign correspondents to one of foreign correspondence in which people will pick up international news from multiple sources, in multiple ways. And that rather than lamenting the decline of traditional international news reporting we should be excited by the emergence of a new international news ecology online and via people's mobile phones.

Moreover, if news outlets decide to give up trying to cover the whole world, and instead focus on stories where they have particular expertise, this could be argued to be a good thing. *Der Spiegel*, a German weekly magazine, does not cover stories where it does not have correspondents. If there are riots in Bangkok, for example, but it does not have a correspondent in Thailand, it will not cover the riots. It may miss out on many parts of the world, but it will be able to go into much greater depth in others.

However, there are downsides to the decline, many of which will not be addressed by the new news ecology. These include:

Fewer professional journalists 'bearing witness'

There was a time when British correspondents would almost always be there, witnessing: George Orwell in Berlin in 1945, James Cameron in Korea in 1950, John Pilger in Cambodia in 1979. This is no longer the case. There are now large areas of the world that are not covered by a British correspondent – unless that person is working for Reuters, the AP, or the BBC.

If s/he is not there, a reporter cannot question those involved, cannot record what is happening, and cannot properly illustrate the story to readers, listeners or viewers. As John Owen writes:



‘no website, however worthy or informative, or no packaged report, slickly produced in London or New York, will ever be able to surpass the impact of original journalism, the discoveries of a single reporter or documentary maker or photojournalist on assignment somewhere in the world’

Quoted by Owen and Purdey, page 2

This is not to say others will not see, and potentially record, what is going on. But their primary purpose is likely to be different, they are unlikely to be following a set process, there is a fair chance their actions will not be informed by the same principles of journalism, and they may not have the same expertise or experience. Nor are they likely to have direct access to a mass audience.

Increasing reliance on a small number of on-the-ground reporters

With fewer reporters on the ground, but more news and information being published, the structure of international news is becoming like an inverted pyramid.

A 2006 study by Chris Paterson at Leeds University found that international news on the internet relied increasingly on a small number of agency sources. Coverage of ‘international events of consequence within the global public sphere’, Paterson wrote, ‘is substantially determined by the production practices and institutional priorities of two information services – Reuters and the Associated Press.’

Inverted pyramids are not stable. There is clearly a risk here that, if one of these agency sources makes a mistake, that mistake is multiplied hundreds, if not thousands of times. It also means – as Paterson suggested – that the news is shaped by the particular concerns and practices of the two institutions that are gathering it.

Nor is a lack of competition healthy. Professional journalists thrive on competition from their peers – not only to be first with the news, but to be better than their colleagues at digging out news. It is not yet clear if the emerging complex ecology will provide a comparable stimulus to good journalism.

Foreign reporting becomes almost entirely reactive

Without people on the ground, sniffing out the news before it happens, news organisations are always going to be reacting to events and playing catch up. Journalists, parachuted in to disaster or conflict zones will be ‘boxing blind’ – unaware of where the story started, who the best people to speak to are, or how it is likely to play out.

Prior to the Israeli assault on the *Mavi Marmara* – the aid ship trying to break the Gaza blockade in May 2010 – only one UK newspaper had written about the flotilla and the boat. The attack therefore took the public, and the press, completely by surprise and came without any prior context. Yet as soon as the flotilla set off it must have been apparent to any seasoned observer that it would not dock in Gaza without some action by the Israelis.

Fewer scoops are an almost inevitable consequence of having fewer correspondents on the ground. Yet scoops attract attention – and often revenue – to a news outlet, they motivate reporters, and they promote the accountability of governments and organisations.

Less effort to emphasise the significance of international news to a broad audience

When the *Daily Mirror* decided to splash John Pilger’s world exclusive about Cambodia across the pages of the newspaper over two days, it made a great deal of effort to illustrate the importance of the story. Three human skulls illustrated the story on the front page with the headline, ‘Death of a Nation’. ‘Echoes of Auschwitz’ read the centre page spread. Over two days there were stories of genocide, social engineering, disease, malnutrition, and refugees, set in the context of Cambodia’s history. Had the story been tucked inside on page 16, the *Mirror* would, naturally, have committed less space, less time, and less editorial emphasis on it.

Prominence matters not only because readers are more likely to see prominent stories, but because, once the decision is made to make the story prominent more effort is put into hammering home its significance, into giving it context, giving it legs, and making it accessible to the wider public.



Foreign affairs becomes the preserve of the few, not the many

‘If newspapers stop covering the world,’ Pamela Constable wrote in the *Washington Post* in 2007, ‘I fear we will end up with a microscopic elite reading *Foreign Affairs* and a numbed nation watching terrorist bombings flash briefly among a barrage of commentary, crawls and celebrity gossip.’

As foreign affairs falls down the editorial agenda, so it follows that it will be read only by those who have a particular interest in the subject. The rest of the public then only see foreign news that – literally in some cases – blasts itself to the front page.

Fewer intelligent filters

If foreign affairs becomes the preserve of the specialist, we risk losing those whose job it is to help us navigate between international news sources.

‘The real danger in the changing face of foreign news is the absence of intelligent and respected moderators’, Evgeny Morozov writes in *Foreign Policy*. ‘The Internet may be a paradise for well-informed news junkies, but it is a confusing news junkyard for the rest of us. Even fairly sophisticated readers might not know the difference between the *Global Times*, a nationalist Chinese daily produced under the auspices of the Communist Party, and the *Epoch Times*, another China-related daily published by the Falun Gong dissident group’ (‘Think Again: the Internet’, Evgeny Morozov, *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2010).

Rise of campaign driven reporting

As more foreign reporting comes from advocacy groups in the future, there is a danger that our news becomes increasingly subjective, over-simplified and unbalanced.

Advocacy can be very important in raising people's conscious and engagement with an issue, especially if you agree with the perspective of the advocate. But, even if you agree, you want to be aware that the piece comes from a particular perspective. It is possible this could be done through clear sourcing and labelling, '[j]ust as reporters who accept company freebies are expected to add health warnings to their articles' (Michaela Wrong, 2005), though such labelling is highly sporadic at the moment.

The future of international news, and what you can do to change it

Is the future of international news reporting necessarily one of diminishing resources, declining prominence, niche interest, and subjectivity? No.

We will not see a return to the era of extensive foreign news reporting across the UK press from established foreign correspondents that characterised the latter half of the 20th century. Many of the changes in reporting of international news are structural: shrinking resources, increasing availability of international news sources online, competing alternative media. Nor should we over-romanticise 20th century foreign reporting, which could suffer from being dull, inaccessible, and overly worthy.

But we should not ignore the dangers of losing reports from those whose purpose is to bear witness and who are informed by journalistic principles.

Therefore what can we do to sustain international reporting?

- Demonstrate that on-the-ground foreign reporting can be a commercial advantage. The *Financial Times* and *The Economist* show how international reporting can be lucrative. The *New York Times* makes a virtue of its internationalism. Perhaps *The Guardian* or *The Times* should consider following the *New York Times* and shift its international section to the front of the paper?
- Emphasise the need for much clearer sourcing. In the new news ecology news may be sourced from a professional journalist, an NGO, a citizen journalist, a filter or aggregator, or... someone else. Without knowing where the information has come from, and whether that source has a particular agenda, it will be much more difficult to know whether to trust it

- Recognise the value of those who know about foreign news sources and can bridge the gap between sources on the ground and the public at home. 'Curating' news sounds like the function of a librarian or archivist. Yet as international reporting by UK-based news organisations declines we will increasingly need 'curators' who can help us find good news reports from foreign outlets, and to give those reports context. Global Voices Online, for example, has 300 bloggers who 'aggregate, curate, and amplify' the voices of those who are not normally heard in international mainstream media
- Maintain funding for public service international news reporting, particularly by the BBC World Service. The World Service is in an especially vulnerable position, funded by a Foreign Office grant and currently under threat from cuts of up to 25%
- Maintain the quotas for international reporting and current affairs for public service broadcasters like the BBC and ITV/ITN
- Extend the principles of journalism to NGOs, bloggers, and 'accidental journalists'. NGOs need to be aware that they now have a responsibility to report fairly from the ground when they are the only witnesses. And they should realise that with that responsibility comes an opportunity. If they embrace journalistic values and strive to be accurate, independent and fair they – like the BBC in the Second World War – stand to gain a much greater following than those who just do propaganda

The future of international news will inevitably be more complex, but news organisations need to acknowledge that complexity and see it as an opportunity rather than something to shy away from.



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Shrinking World

The decline of international reporting in the British press

In parts of the British press foreign coverage has fallen by almost 40% since 1979, now making up only just over a tenth of stories in the paper. In an increasingly globalised world how can this decline be explained? Does it matter? Is a new foreign news ecology emerging? This report, the first of its kind on foreign reporting in the UK press, analyses how coverage of the world had changed over the last 30 years in four UK national newspapers, and explores what implications this has for how we get our foreign news in the future.

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