**International News and Global Integration: A Five Nation Reappraisal**

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*This study challenges the ruling orthodoxy that foreign news tends to be reported in divergent ways, reflecting the interests and identity of the home nation. Instead it concludes that the Greek and American elections in 2012 were reported in very similar ways in the leading news media of five countries located in different continents. In the case of the 2012 Chinese election, there were striking affinities in the news reporting of four out of five countries. Powerful forces that make for global conformity include the dominance of a small number of international news agencies, the emergence of a transnational journalistic culture, the hegemony of market liberal thought, the legacy of the cold war, and the shared perspectives of allied states.*

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The image of the global village, brought into being by new communications technology (McLuhan 1964), has captured the public imagination. Yet, it has engendered an increasingly sceptical response from academics studying foreign news. In their alternative account, the global universe of news is a Tower of Babel with differing tongues, where the media view the world differently and encourage audiences to connect mainly to their own kind.(1)

This debunking account is based on three principal arguments. First, the most significant news providers are still organised primarily as national media. A case in point is television which continues to be the most important source of political information in most countries (Papathanasopoulos et al. 2013). The top national television channels have much larger audiences in their respective countries than international satellite television channels like CNN and BBC World (Hafez 2007); and they concentrate on domestic news. Thus, Aalberg et al. (2014: 8) found that, in eight out of eleven countries, the newscasts of leading television channels allocated less than a quarter of their time to foreign news in 2010. Similarly, Stepinska et al.(2013: 31) concluded that popular television channels in seventeen countries devoted an average of only 22 per cent of news items to purely foreign news in 2008.

The rise of the internet is, it is argued, modifying but not fundamentally changing this domestic focus. Some news websites, like those of the *Times of India*, *Globo* (Brazil) and *Mail* (UK), have an international following. But their news values are influenced by their national origins, and their global reach is uneven. The most viewed *news* websites in most countries are still largely national ones, and they tend to focus on national news. Thus, leading news websites in nine countries devoted, in 2010, only 23% of their content to exclusively international news, a proportion that was not much higher than their press and television rivals (Curran et al 2013: table 5, 889).

The second part of the global village rebuttal is that what foreign news is reported varies greatly around the world (e.g. Aalberg et al. 2013). Although leading international news agencies provide a ‘global’ service (Boyd-Barrett 1998), national media utilise this service selectively. They report only what they think their national audiences will find interesting or relevant. This gives rise not only to divergent foreign news agendas but renders much of the world invisible for much of the time. This recurrent finding has prompted one leading academic observer to ask with evident exasperation ‘Where in the world is the global village?’ (Cohen 2013a: 320).

Third, related to this, foreign news tends to be ‘domesticated’. This is an ambiguous term that can mean merely that foreign news is presented in ways that are relevant to a national audience (Cohen 2013b). But more often, it is interpreted to mean that foreign news is reported through the prism of national interest and identity (e.g. Nossek and Kunelius 2012; Mody 2010). This is exemplified by a classic study of the reporting of Britain’s handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 which showed that the national media of different countries framed the same event in profoundly different ways (Lee et al. 2000; Lee et al. 2002).

In brief, the universe of foreign news is portrayed as being nationally partitioned, divergent and powerfully shaped by national cultures and interests. Some aspects of this debunking account are clearly correct. However, this iconoclasm is in danger of becoming as simplified as the received wisdom it challenges. There are times, we will argue, when national media can generate *moments* of a transnational public sphere, principally through projecting unified meanings to international events. This is because there are powerful forces at work that can lead to international convergence in national news reporting.

Method

Reese (2010: 352) persuasively argues that a ‘thick’ case study approach is a good way of exploring the subtle undercurrents of media globalisation, something that we attempt to do here. As a way of complementing the many existing quantative studies on foreign news (e.g. Curran et al.2010; Ahlberg and Curran 2012; Cohen 2013; Ahlberg et al. 2013), we chose therefore to examine, through a qualitative textual analysis, the way in which three news events were reported in five countries.

The three international events selected were the US Presidential election, the Greek General Election and the election of the President of China by the National People’s Congress, all taking place in 2012.(2) They were all significant elections. The US presidential election determined the leadership of the world’s most powerful nation; the Chinese election marked the generational ‘changing of the guard’ in the country’s communist leadership; and the Greek election had wider implications extending beyond Greece. These elections were each sufficiently newsworthy to provide a basis for examining how national media systems respond to global news cues.

Comparative research is especially suited to assessing the importance of macro-level influences on foreign news reporting (such as national ideologies or transnationally converging news cultures). So, we looked at how these elections were reported in China, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US). These five nations are ranked among the six largest economies in the world (Begman 2014), and in this sense they all have something in common. But they differ in other important respects. China is a communist state, while the other four countries are liberal democracies. Two of the latter (Germany and Japan) have consensual, democratic corporatist regimes and are relatively new democracies, while the other two (United Kingdom and United States) have majoritarian political systems and are old democracies. The five countries differ also in terms of the extent of their military commitments, degree of inequality, and, especially in the case of China, level of income. They are situated in different continents: Asia, Europe and America.

In addition, the five countries encompass different television systems. The US has an overwhelmingly commercial TV system; Japan, Germany and the UK have mixed broadcasting systems, with a strong public service component; and China has a broadcasting system that is state controlled. By employing a Most Different Systems Design we seek to identify those explanatory factors that foster news convergence in dissimilar nations.

Our analysis focused mainly on news reports on the three days before, during and after each of the three elections.(3) We looked at the main evening news programmes broadcast by two leading television channels in each country. In Japan, Germany and United Kingdom, these were the principal public service and commercial TV channels (NHK/Asahi; ARD/RTL; and BBC 1/ITV); in China, the principal state channel (China Central Television) and a leading commercialized state-controlled satellite channel (Oriental TV),(4) based in Shanghai; and in the U S (where the public broadcaster accounts for less than 2% of viewing) the two commercial TV networks (ABC and NBC) which had the highest ratings at the time.

In addition, we examined how leading websites (in terms of audience reach and intermedia agenda setting power) in all five countries reported the three elections on the same days as the TV broadcasts. The websites chosen were People and Sina (China); Bild, Spiegel and Focus (Germany); BBC, Guardian and Mail (UK); and New York Times, CNN and MSNBC (US).(5)

Our qualitative approach entailed reading, summarising, rereading and analysing patterns of meaning (for this approach, see Sheufele and scheufele 2012: 122). We ensured the validity and reliability of this frame identification process through collectively formulating analytical categories prior to the analysis, and extensive discussion after the analysis when all collaborators placed their findings in a joint framework.

Crystalizing Moments

The distribution of attention given to the three elections between countries conformed to what was anticipated. The American election received the most coverage, confirming that ‘elite nations’ – in this case the world’s superpower – are the most reported. The Chinese election was well covered in Japan, while the Greek election was extensively reported in Germany and Britain, confirming the importance of geographical proximity. All this is entirely consistent with previous research which shows that foreign news tends to concentrate on powerful nations, those in the same geographical area and countries with political, economic, or cultural ties to the reporting nation (Lee, Wilke and Cohen 2013; Nossek and Kunelius 2012; Curran et al. 2010, Wu 2000 among others).

But what was not expected was that *all* three elections were reported in leading TV channels and websites in *all* five countries. This draws attention to an important phenomenon: some news events receive attention from national media around the world because they are viewed as being inherently newsworthy in terms of international news norms or because they have been signified as being important by leading news sources that are, either separately or in concert, globally influential.

Moreover, convergence occurred not merely in terms of news selection but also at the level of signification. Two elections were interpreted in very similar ways, while the third election was reported in a congruent way in four out of five countries. Although national spin was deployed to interest or relate overseas news reports to national audiences, this was more often a force for uniformity than difference.

These three case studies draw attention to moments when a transnational public sphere is crystallised through the synchronised framing of the same news events. Nations in different continents are brought into communion with each other through being offered a similar view of international events by their national media systems. However, these moments of media convergence owe more – at least, as we shall see, in these three instances – to hegemonic internationalism than to participation by individual citizens and civil society organisations in global dialogue.(6)

Framing the Greek Election

The dominant framework for reporting the Greek election in all five counties was that the victory of a radical left, anti-austerity party could plunge the European economy into crisis. A centre-right, pro-austerity electoral victory, on the other hand, was presented as offering the best chance for economic stability. This was sometimes ‘balanced’ by reports of popular opposition to more austerity measures in Greece where hardship was already widespread.

This claim that news media in different parts of the world issued a barely veiled warning against left-wing political destabilisation of the international economy is so contentious that it requires detailed textual support. This makes necessary, in this particular case study, sometimes repetitive citation.

According to the BBC news in Britain, European and world leaders were worried that an election victory for the anti-austerity Syriza party in Greece could lead to a European economic crisis (June 16). When the centre-right won, the BBC’s Europe editor reported: ‘Europe tonight will heave a huge sigh of relief … The main party committed to the bail-out agreement ...…. has emerged as the winner’ (BBC June 17). The BBC’s main rival, ITV, offered essentially the same narrative, though in a more cautious form. The centre-right’s election victory in Greece had merely moved the situation from ‘critical’ to ‘serious’ (ITV June 17). According to the channel’s economics editor, the markets had concluded that the right’s election victory was the ‘best outcome’ but were concerned about Greece’s ‘wobbly government’ (ITV June 18). ITV’s news report went on to emphasise that Greece was suffering and bitterly divided; and that its new government, with a narrow majority, might not survive.

This stability/instability frame shaped also German TV reporting. Thus, on the eve of the Greek poll, ARD-Targesschau news reported that the conservative New Democracy party in Greece is Europe-friendly and ‘internationally stands for stability’, whereas the radical left Syriza party wants to terminate the austerity deal, with potentially damaging consequences for the European economy. The atmosphere in Europe was said to be tense, with German leaders standing by to formulate emergency plans late into the night if the radical left won in Greece (ARD June 16). Similarly its rival, RTL, reported that German and European politicians were ‘relieved’ by the election result (June 18).

The same framing of the Greek election occurred in Japan and America. Thus, Japan’s commercial TV-Asahi channel registered concern that a radical left victory in Greece posed a threat to the international economy (June 15), though sceptical experts were also quoted as saying that there could be a European economic crisis anyway (June 18). The correspondent on the American NBC channel was more sanguine, declaring after the Greek election result was known: ‘The fear was that this election would spark the collapse of the Eurozone’, but the victory of New Democracy meant that the ‘crisis was averted’ (June 18).

The only TV channel to step out of line was the leading state-commercial channel, Oriental, in China, and this was for only one day. Oriental TV’s polling day report gave a left-wing candidate much more time than a right-wing candidate (who was allowed just two seconds); and aired five citizens’ attacks on austerity policies, notionally balanced by a short clip from a right-wing banker (June 17). Yet, this partisan report was followed by an about-turn the next day. The channel hailed the centre-right’s electoral success as a victory for reason and the stability of Europe. But if the centre-right government’s tenure proved short-lived, it warned, Greece could sink back into crisis (Oriental TV June 18).

While the main television channels of different countries deployed different ‘domestication’ strategies to make the Greek election seem relevant to their national audiences, this did not detract from their common interpretation. Indeed, national spin often filled out and reinforced their common message. Thus, in Britain, it was reported that British banks (along with French and German ones) had made substantial loans to Greece, and were critically exposed if the Greek government defaulted. Greece could also leave the Euro, leading to a euro currency crisis. ‘Cracks in the Greek economy’, the BBC’s economic editor warned, ‘could lead to major fractures across Europe’ (BBC June 17). Similarly, a prominent theme of German television reporting was that a centre-right victory was in the interests of the German tax payer since this offered the best prospect of loans being repaid (e.g. RTL, June 18). On Japanese television news, the chain of economic interdependence linking Japan and Greece was spelt out in some detail. Viewers were told on both main TV channels that the Eurozone’s economic problems were contributing to the rising exchange value of the yen, which was making the Japanese economy less competitive **(**NHK and TV-Asahi June 18**).** Victory for the far left party in Greece could deepen the Eurozone crisis. This would hit the Chinese economy, and indirectly that of Japan (NHK June 18). In brief, viewers in all five countries were told that, for *domestic* reasons, a victory for the right in Greece was the preferable outcome.

Across all five countries, sources in Greece opposed to the bail-out/austerity package were reported. But they were often marginalised or placed in a subordinate discursive position. Thus Greek citizens complaining bitterly about austerity measures tended to be situated within news packages which explained why austerity was necessary. Syriza’s central argument that public investment and leftist structural reform was needed to both grow the economy and reduce indebtedness was under-reported. This was because the news focus on the wider consequences of the Greek election for the European and international economy encouraged the nature of the political debate in Greece to be downplayed (with the partial exception of German news media).

Although economic stability/instability was not the only frame used by television news to make sense of the Greek election, it was the most important one. This holds true also for website news reports of the election. Thus, in Britain, Mail Online (June 17) defined the Greek election in terms of whether it would undermine the British economy, invoking imagery from the cold war. ‘Will Greek poll wreck UK’s economy? Knife-edge vote dubbed “financial Cuban missile crisis” which could kill the euro and stall recovery here.’ When the centre-right won, Mail Online (June 18) proclaimed with relief: ‘The Greek bailout is back on: hopes rise for the future of the euro as pro-rescue parties say that they WILL work together’. BBC Online (June 18) reached a similar conclusion, declaring that the Greek election result meant that ‘G20 leaders gathered in Mexico can stop bracing themselves for financial Armageddon in Europe – at least for a while’. Guardian Online offered a ‘negotiated’ version of this narrative. While it highlighted the suffering of the Greek people, it also published an authoritatively sourced warning that the Greek election could lead to a ‘euro collapse’ and a ‘global crisis’ (June 16). The centre-right’s victory was hailed subsequently as a reprieve: ‘Greek Elections: Voters Give Europe and Single Currency a Chance’ (June 18).

Similarly, American news websites framed the Greek election primarily in terms of the European and international economy. ‘The bottom line’ declared CNN Online ahead of the election, is that ‘what happens in Greece will not stay in Greece’ (June 15). New York Times Online (June 16) warned that there was a ‘pervasive sense of dread’ about the impending election result. It later concluded that the centre-right victory was ‘likely to calm world markets and ease fears that the country would leave the Euro Zone’ (June 17).

Prominent German websites also framed the Greek election in terms of how it would affect the Eurozone economy. Thus, Focus reported that the authorities are braced for a possible ‘Euro-quake’ if Syriza won (June 15). A major concern of some German websites was also that Greece might prove to be a bottomless pit soaking up further financial support. ‘When do we get our money back?’, rhetorically asked Bild Online (June 18). Chinese website coverage also framed the Greek election in terms of how it would affect the stability of the Euro zone and the stock market. The election result was presented as positive, provided that the new administration proved to be united and durable.

In brief, the Greek election was interpreted in very similar ways by our sample news media around the world. They warned that a Syriza victory in Greece would have harmful consequences for the European and international economies. Yet this was not self-evidently the only way in which the election could have been reported. A conventional approach would have been to have reported the rival policies of the main parties in Greece, and to have portrayed the election as a horse race that was too close to call. Post-election analysis might have noted that the Greek election was the latest example of centrist parties in Europe losing ground to protest parties on the left and right. The far-left Syriza party (a coalition of previously minor groups) won the second largest vote in Greece, while the neo-fascist New Dawn also gained increased support.

Yet, notwithstanding the availability of alternative frameworks of analysis, and the inherent differences between our sample countries, one script dominated.

Hegemonic Narrative

This script derived from authoritative sources. Those quoted in news reports as warning that a radical left victory in Greece could lead to an economic crisis and that the left’s defeat had diminished this danger included the heads of the German, British, Spanish and Italian governments, numerous finance ministers and representatives of European state institutions. Their voices were amplified as a consequence of the coincidence of a meeting of G20 nations in Mexico, on June 18-19, 2012, shortly after the Greek election, which was attended by the international press corps. The views of European political leaders also concurred with the reported views of the European Central Bank (ECB), World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the consensus of market opinion as relayed by journalists and financial analysts.

Underlying this convergence was the shared conviction that Greece was a badly managed, irresponsible state (Lewis 2012). It was the most indebted nation in Europe which had been bailed out once already. Greece only warranted further financial support, it was widely argued, if its government embarked on further public spending reductions and restored the competitiveness of the Greek economy by lowering wages through unemployment. Failure on the part of the Greek electorate to vote for fiscal responsibility posed a threat to the wider European community. It would send the wrong signal at a time when the sovereign debt crisis was spreading from the periphery to the heartland of Europe; it could lead to Greek debt defaults weakening Europe’s banks, which needed more time to recapitalise; and a full-blown crisis in Greece could destabilise the Euro and the willingness of financial markets to buy government debt.

This consensus had democratic and intellectual legitimacy. Market liberal governments had been elected to office throughout much of Europe. Neo-liberals also dominated leading economic institutions from the ECB to the major credit agencies, underpinned by the ascendancy of classical neo-liberal economics. This ascendancy was to be challenged subsequently, with the belated revival of Keynesian economic analysis. The IMF, previously a fierce austerity enforcer, shifted in 2014 towards a crisis of demand analysis (IMF 2014), while Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, went further, arguing that the Eurozone should spend and borrow more to promote growth in a speech that was widely interpreted as an attack on German-led austerity politics (e.g. Peston 2015). But the convergent way in which the Greek election was reported in 2012 reflected the international neo-liberal hegemony of that time.(7)

Dire warnings from European political leaders also ensured that the Greek election was widely reported. Their jeremiads offered in effect a ‘meta-domestication’ narrative, a way of making relevant an election in a country that was of limited interest to many people outside Europe. All had a stake in economic stability that was seemingly imperilled by what was happening in Greece.

The dynamics of source-priming varied in different countries. In British news media, for example, the shared view of the British government and financial markets received most attention, and helped to define the wider significance of the Greek election. In the case of German media, it was the conjunction between the German and European states which proved formative. Thus, on June 16, 2012, the German ARD-Tagesschau newscast mentioned German Chancellor Angela Merkel three times and Jean-Claude Junker (then President of Eurozone Finance Ministers) once, and their positions defined the narrative of its Greek election report. On June 17, ARD-Tagesschau cited the German government three times and ‘Brussels’ twice, and together these shaped its Greek election story. And on June 18, ARD-Tagesschau’s report of reactions to the Greek election began with the Berlin government, and was followed by Brussels, both almost identical in terms of content.

Derivative Narrative: US Election

Leading television channels in all four democratic countries (and to a considerable extent, in China)(8) ‘narrated’ the 2012 American election in a similar way. They went on the campaign trail with the two presidential candidates, Romney and Obama; converged on the same places (Chinese, British, American and German TV all visited New York state, recently devastated by Hurricane Sandy); reported that the two parties were straining to get out their vote; relayed the last speeches of the two presidential candidates; depicted the election outcome with poignant screen shots revealing the joy of victory and the agony of defeat, followed by clips of conciliatory speeches by the defeated candidate (Romney) and the victorious candidate (Obama). This was followed by an inquest examining why Obama had won, what the election revealed about the state of America (and the future of the Republican Party), and the political challenges that lay ahead for the government. In short, television journalists from the different nations worked from the same recipe book.

There were also commonalities in the way television channels signified the American election. An attempt was made to define the choice facing the American people in terms of the policy differences between Obama and Romney, and between the Republicans and Democrats. This was especially pronounced in German and British public service broadcasting; a significant feature of American coverage; and applied to some degree also in reporting in Japan and China. Romney was said to favour cutting tax, smaller government, repeal of the new health law, and regenerating the economy, drawing on his experience as a successful businessman. Obama, by contrast, was portrayed as standing for more spending on things like energy and education, greater state stimulus for the economy, higher taxes on the rich, speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the embrace of change.

Television channels in the four democratic countries also affirmed the sacral nature of the election. This was typified, for example, by interviews on German television with voters waiting in line to vote who stressed the importance of the election (ARD Tagesschau, November 6, 2012) and by a British TV report on polling day which proclaimed that power no longer resided with the President: ‘power is with the people’ (ITV November 7).

This affirmation was combined with a civics ‘thread’, explaining the nature of the US electoral system. This was conveyed in American coverage in a way that assumed some degree of public knowledge but in a more extensive way in Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. In the latter, TV newscasts explained the principle of winner-takes-all, the location of red, blue and ‘battleground’ states, the role of the electoral college, and even the difference between the House of Representatives, Senate and White House. It was an indication of how important the American election was judged to be that viewers were briefed about how the American political system worked.

Election coverage was also spiced with entertainment. TV reports in Japan, Germany, UK and US built up the excitement of the contest by emphasising the predicted closeness of the result. Implicitly likening the contest to a sporting event, they also featured attempts by both sides to mastermind the outcome. The drive to enliven was especially prominent on American and German commercial television, and led to the inclusion of numerous human interest stories, such as an examination of the personalities and styles of the wives of the presidential candidates (e.g. RTL November 6).

If there were similarities in the way in which the course of the election was narrated and signified in different countries, there was still greater convergence in the interpretation of the result. Obama was reported to have won because he had gained disproportionate support from ethnic, female and young voters, and had a superior electoral machine. The Republican Party was said to be in trouble because its electoral base was shrinking due to demographic change, and because its Tea Party wing had repelled some voters. The election had lacked the fervour of the preceding presidential election, it was agreed, and revealed America to be a deeply divided society. The country faced severe challenges: political deadlock, a ‘fiscal cliff’, rising debts, unemployment, Iran’s nuclear programme, and (in some countries’ reports) climate change.

But if these were the common denominators of TV coverage, there was also some national variance. Much the most important was the difference in the volume of reporting. Coverage of the US election was extensive in the US; substantial in Japan, Germany and UK; and limited in China.

Some post-election TV reports also related the American election result to their country’s national interest. Thus, a Chinese TV report concluded that it would not change the relationship between America and China (CCTV November 7); a German TV report expressed concern that America, led by Obama, might pivot more towards Asia, and away from Europe (RTL November 6**)**; and Japanese TV had an extended discussion about how the election would affect the future of the US-Japanese alliance, and impinge on Japan’s territorial dispute with China (NHK November 7; TV-Asahi November 7).

There were also subtle differences of reporting, almost like an underlying national watermark. Thus, when a German TV correspondent reported that some religious Republicans thought that the conventional social market approach was ‘socialism’, he was assuming that German viewers would know the difference (RTL November 6, 2012). Similarly, when a Japanese reporter said that she envied the way in which candidates for the American Presidency were groomed and publicly scrutinised over a long time, she was contrasting this implicitly with the Japanese parliamentary system (TV-Asahi November 7). Likewise, when a BBC TV presenter interviewed his cousins, who had lived in the United States for a generation, about the American election, he was implicitly invoking ties of kith and kin between Britain and America (BBC November 6). In each case, TV reporters were addressing a national audience, with the assumption that they shared something in common with their viewers. However these differences were not substantive: they were much less significant than the overall similarity with which the contest was reported and interpreted in all five countries.

When comparison is extended to news websites, the difference between countries is only a little greater. This is principally because some top German and British websites are part of a tabloid tradition, unlike those in the Chinese and American sample. Consequently, the style of British and German websites was more colloquial, typified by Bild Online’s comment (November 5): ‘Romney doesn’t drink or smoke – a nightmare’. The political orientation of these websites was also more partisan than that of others examined in our study.

But apart from some differences of style and approach, the substantive content of websites was similar. They stuck to the same narrative template from campaign trail to post-election speeches. They signified the election in comparable ways, as a political contest and as an entertainment. Above all, they asked the same core questions - why did Obama win, what does the election reveal about America, and what are the challenges facing the new administration? And they came up with similar answers.

One part of the explanation for the convergence between news reporting of the five nations, on both television and news websites, of the American election is the emergence of a transnational journalistic culture.(8) This has established conventions about how *extensively covered* elections should be reported. These conventions provide cues about where journalists should go, what questions should be asked, what aspects of the campaign should be reported, and how its outcome should be interpreted. Crucially, each step is facilitated by the public relations teams of contending candidates.

The second part of the explanation is that reporting of the American election was highly mediated. News media (and some news agencies like Xinhua) drew heavily on major wire services such as Reuters and Associated Press. These dominant wire services provided a common feed for stories about the US election around the world. For example, the leading Chinese news website, People.com, reported over our sample three days 17 stories about the US election. Only one of these was attributed explicitly to its US correspondent.

News media outside the US also drew extensively on the US media, and international broadcasters like CNN. The derivative nature of much coverage can be detected through the traces it left. For example, Oriental TV (7 November) showed excerpts from Obama’s victory speech, and Romney’s concession speech, in a report misleadingly presented as coming from the channel. The speech footage was derived, and the reporter only appeared at the end to conclude the story. It was followed by an analysis of the voting pattern of the election results, and the challenges facing Obama that cleaved very closely to American media coverage and indeed explicitly quoted the *Wall Street Journal*.(9)

In brief, coverage of the American election around the world was strongly influenced by shared news conventions, dominant wire services, and American media. Reporting was based on the same cook book, used some of the same ingredients and was sourced by some of the same suppliers.

Ambivalent Images of a Rising Rival: Chinese Party Congress

The news media in the US, UK, Japan and Germany used the occasion of Xi Jinping’s election as President of China in the 18th Party Congress to make an assessment of the state of the Chinese nation and of its Communist regime. Their evaluations were broadly similar and ambivalent, drawing a contrast between the democracy of the West and continuing authoritarianism in China, similar to earlier Cold War framings of the Communist ‘Other’, focusing on social problems, but at the same time acknowledging economic accomplishments, presenting a relatively favourable personal image of the new leaders, and expressing hope for reforms that would advance China's integration into the liberal capitalist world.

Coverage in the western countries was limited, probably reflecting the judgement that the result of the ‘election’ was preordained. U.S. and German television had especially limited coverage: NBC did not cover the election of the new leader at all, and ABC had a brief trivial story that focused on Xi Jingping's pop star wife, who also featured prominently in Germany's commercial RTL.

Media coverage in the four nations emphasised the undemocratic nature of the Chinese Communist state and of the leadership transition. The US’s MSNBC website contrasted ‘the power of the ballot’ in the recent American election with ‘the tightly orchestrated . . . transfer of power’ within the Chinese communist party elite (November 15, 2012), while one of its blogs drew attention to the self-immolation of Tibetan dissidents under the headline ‘Behind the Wall’, a symbolic reference to the former Berlin Wall (MSNBC November 15). The German Spiegel website invoked different symbolism, that of royal power, by referring to the ‘Coronation of Xi Jinping’ (Spiegel November 15). It also reported ‘several self-immolations’ in Tibet, claiming that these ‘overshadowed the start of the Congress’ (November 15). A critical perspective was also conveyed through visual means such as the image of uniformed soldiers saluting a portrait of Mao (MSNBC November 15**)** andofChina’s leaders, wearing dark suits, standing like a row of waxworks (BBC 15 November 2012). The media in all four countries also made extensive reference to a variety of social and political problems - growing inequality, endemic corruption, censorship and repression, an ageing population and a public estranged from its government. The strength of this negative tone reminiscent of the Cold War varied. It was strongest in the British coverage. The BBC’s report on the eve of the leadership announcement was deeply critical, based on interviews with dissidents and critics of the communist regime with no balancing interview with a supporter of the government. It questioned, on the basis of comments from two unnamed ‘senior Communist officials’, whether the Chinese Communist party would even be in existence in ten years’ time (BBC November 14). Right-wing popular media in Britain and Germany--the Bild and Mail websites--also emphasized nationalist framings of China as threat. One typical Bild headline read: ‘How dangerous is China for our prosperity: blatant plagiarism, unfair competition, and extremely low wages’ (Bild November 13). Japanese television also portrayed China as an economic rival, with a huge potential for growth (e.g. TV Asahi November 15).

If the coverage in these four countries was generally critical, it was not consistently hostile in the pattern of Cold War reporting of an earlier era. The regime's accomplishments were acknowledged. ‘China's economy quadrupled in size’, *The New York Times* Online reported, ‘leapfrogging to No. 2 from No. 5 in global economic ranking, and amassing the strategic global clout that the country wields today’ (November 14). The new leaders were presented as potential partners, and the Chinese leadership was portrayed not as monolithic, but as contested, pitting ‘reformers’ against ‘conservatives’. The BBC’s world affairs editor, John Simpson, proclaimed that ‘the west’ cautiously welcomed the new leader without anticipating great change (BBC November 15). Its principal rival, ITV, reported that Xi Jinping was ‘seen as a reformer’ but was also a committee man whose family had profited from his success. The New York Times Online described the new Premier, Li Kequiang, as speaking ‘confident English’ and ‘exposed to a rich palette of liberal thinking’, though he would be ‘hemmed in by stability-obsessed conservatives’ (November 15). MSNBC described Xi Jinping as the man who will ‘co-manage with Obama the delicate course of Chinese-American relations’ (November 15), while Japan’s NHK TV news described China’s new President as a ‘serious and well-balanced leader’ (November 15). Criticism of the regime was thus balanced by approval, sometimes guarded, for the new leadership.

Chinese news coverage was in certain respects the mirror opposite of western reports in that it went to great length to affirm the regime’s legitimacy. This was conveyed partly through public acclamation: through the praise of Congress delegates and representatives of different tiers of the Communist party, through the ardently expressed support of individual citizens (from different regions, ethnicities and social backgrounds), through the admiring comments of experts, through the heavily filtered excerpts from foreign media and through praise from foreign leaders, principally in Asia and Africa. The legitimacy of the regime was also underscored by a stress both on continuity and renewal. Xi was projected as the rightful heir to Mao, Deng, Jiang and Hu. At the same time intra-party democracy was being extended, it was stressed, because Congress delegates could now determine the nomination of most members of the Central Party Committee.

Above all, it was emphasised that the regime was creating a ‘comfortable society’ (‘xiaokang shehui’) due to ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. This was backed up by statistics recording the rise of living standards, and by a commitment to greatly increase national and individual wealth by 2020. This theme was given visual expression through images of wealth and power such as Shanghai’s skyscraper landscape (CCTV 13 November). Indeed China’s economic success, it was suggested, should be a model and inspiration for other countries (CCTV 14 November).

This theme was linked to the leadership’s commitment to environmentalism – something that was largely ignored in western news reports. Economic growth, it was proclaimed repeatedly, had to be balanced by environmental protection (e.g. Oriental TV 13 November). The regime’s green credentials were endorsed by ‘vox pop’ interviews: morning joggers in interior Yinchuan praising better air quality, Beijing citizens celebrating better parks and more green land, workers in construction and industry speaking up for ‘green ecology’ (CCTV November 13).

The new President also promised to tackle corruption and bureaucracy in a speech that was extensively reported (e. g. Oriental TV 15 November). Perhaps to allay public scepticism, Sina.com (13 November) stressed the increasing efficacy of China’s justice system, including provision for legal aid to enable the poor to seek legal redress and a decrease of abuse by lawyers, judges and public prosecutors.

A further underlying difference lay in the style of reporting. Chinese media coverage of the Greek and American elections had been similar to that of other countries, and seemingly drew upon shared news conventions. But Chinese TV reporting of the Chinese Congress belonged to an entirely different genre, reflecting the propaganda role assigned to the media in Chinese Communist ideology (Lee 2010).

CCTV’s coverage was ceremonial and ritualistic, making few concessions to entertaining the audience. Its news report devoted 10 minutes to the orderly procession of the retired and new leaders of the country into the monumental Great Hall of the People to the thunderous applause of 2,268 delegates. It then devoted 13 minutes to the reading out of the names of Politburo members, reserve members, and members of the Party’s disciplinary committee (CCTV 14 November). The next day, CCTV regaled its viewers with 24 minutes devoted to the reading out of the detailed CV’s of Xi and six leading colleagues (CCTV 15 November 2012). The commercialised, state-controlled Oriental TV channel followed a similar format, though in a more condensed form. Even so, it devoted almost 15 minutes to Xi’s first press conference (Oriental November 15).

The coverage of two leading websites was extensive: 122 news stories about the Congress in People.com, and 58 news stories in Sina.com, over three days. While the tenor of reporting was similar to that of television, the format of presentation was more inventive. People.com included photos, videos, games, blogs and forums as well as news reports.

The defining feature of Chinese news reporting of the 18th Congress was its uncritical nature, in sharp contrast to western reports. Out of the vast outpouring of relevant content generated by our Chinese sample over three days, just one critical item was identified. Towards the end of a long reprinted article about the Party’s stand against corruption, anonymous legal experts were quoted as saying that existing anti-corruption laws and regulations were numerous but little enforced. Local cadres and local government, it was also suggested, were the worst offenders (Sina.com 15 November).

In brief, reporting from the four liberal democracies was critical but ambivalent, while that in China was laudatory. The conformity of the latter is easy to explain. Chinese media, both public and commercial, are controlled by the state (Lee, He and Huang 2007). How a generational change in China’s leadership was presented was an exceptionally sensitive issue, about which little latitude was permitted. Both the commercial Sina.com website and the commercialised TV channel, Oriental, cleaved very closely to the line of their state equivalents, CCTV and People.com (a subsidiary of the foremost party mouthpiece, People’s Daily). Indeed, the reporting of Sina.com drew very heavily on state owned Xinhua.com and People.com, which relied in turn on official documents (sometimes quoted verbatim).

In the case of the Chinese Party Congress, the media of the four liberal democracies were broadly consistent in representing China as a system in need of reform: deficient from the point of view of democracy and liberal modernity, potentially threatening as a rival, but at the same time more an economic and political partner than an enemy. This common framing reflected the combined effects of ideological difference and adjustment to the reality of increased global economic integration. It was consistent with elite consensus on policy toward China. News agency input, especially important in the case of media with limited resources, was another source of homogeneity. Thus, all but three Chinese reports on the German Focus website derived from wire services.

Retrospect

A post-McLuhanite vision, powerfully expressed by Frances Cairncross (1997), argues that international telephony, satellite broadcasting and the internet are ‘killing distance’ and knitting the globe ever closer together. This opens up allegedly the prospect of greater global understanding. ‘People will communicate more freely and learn more about the aspirations of human beings in other parts of the globe’, according to Cairncross (1997: xvi), and ‘the effect will be to increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote world peace’.

This humanist vision has been challenged by foreign news specialists who stress that media report different foreign news, depending on where they are located, and see the world through different perspectives. There is clearly much to this. Indeed, our third case study highlights a sharp divergence in the way in which the Chinese Congress was reported by communist and liberal democratic media. Doubtless if we had chosen a case study that touched upon religious and political differences, with a sample that included democratic Christian and authoritarian Islamic states, we might have encountered a similar contrast of perspective.

However, the broad thrust of this investigation qualifies the standard foreign news orthodoxy by drawing attention to moments of news convergence. The Greek and American elections in 2012 were framed in very similar ways in the leading news media of five countries located in different continents. In the case of the Chinese election, there were striking affinities in the reporting of four countries.

Powerful influences seem to be at work, fostering convergent reporting. The shared perspectives of leading European governments, endorsed by prominent economic agencies and prevailing economic thought, encouraged a common framing of the Greek election. Transnationally shared news norms, news agency input, and the influence of American news formats and content fostered a highly derivative rendition of the US election. Shared political values, wire service input and a western elite consensus on policy towards China promoted a common representation of the Chinese election.

But in questioning the standard, revisionist view of media globalisation as mere myth (e.g. Hafez 2007), we are not seeking to return to the McLuhanite vision it replaced. Convergence of news reporting did not come about as a consequence of the meeting of minds in a higher plane of enlightenment, envisaged by techno-humanists. Nor was this convergence the manifestation of a globalised version of the public sphere, conceptualised by Habermas (1989), in which agreement is achieved through deliberation in a public arena open and accessible to all. Rather, the similarity of news reports arose from the interplay of power in which the privileged access of governments to the media, the hegemony of market liberal thought, the dominance of a small number of news agencies and the legacy of the cold war all played a part. Global integration was fostered in these instances more by political, media and economic elites than by popular participation.

ENDNOTES

1. There are of course dissenters from this sceptical assessment: most notably Volkmer (1999) who focused on CNN; and numerous analysts in the critical social theory tradition, most notably Fraser (2007) who advances a plausible understanding of an emergent transnational public sphere built through interlocking networks of communication. However, Fraser was largely unaware of the obstacles to the creation of a globalised public sphere documented by media specialists. For a reappraisal of the Fraser thesis, and related work, see Nash (2014).
2. We also examined foreign reporting of the opening of the Olympic Games in 2012, which is presented separately because it raises different issues from the reporting of elections. For the record, it revealed a divergent pattern of reporting, in line with current orthodoxy.
3. Our thanks go to Vana Goblot (Goldsmiths, University of London) for help in analysing British news websites; and Sunyoung Kwak (Tokyo University) for help in analysing Japanese television news.
4. Its Chinese name is Oriental (‘Donfang’) but its website uses ‘Dragon TV’ as its English name. We have opted here for the literal English translation of ‘Donfang’.
5. Japan opted out of the website analysis.
6. This is comparable to a pioneer study of the Gorbachev-Reagan summits in the 1980s which concluded that American and Italian coverage promoted the semblance of an international public sphere, albeit in a limited form in which the voice of two superpowers was overwhelmingly dominant. See Hallin and Mancini (1994).
7. These elite disagreements, and a view that the traditional political class had failed in Greece (with 27% unemployment), modified the way in which the 2015 Greek election, won by Syriza, was reported.
8. The emergence of international conventions about how foreign news stories are reported should not obscure the fact that journalists in different countries can also have divergent perceptions of their role (see Hanitzsch et al. 2012; Esser and Umbricht 2013). This can affect how news stories are reported in the home country, as we will see in the next case study.
9. China’s television and website coverage of the US election was more neutral than before, failing even to respond to Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney’s campaign attack on China. This was probably because no pressing issue divided the two countries in 2002; the Chinese government had learnt not to take American election rhetoric too literally; the US election was eclipsed by preparations for a smooth transition of power in the forthcoming 18th Congress; and the long term objective of the Chinese government has been not to antagonise the US in a way that could impede China’s rise to power.

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