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Two-Nation Press Coverage Of a "Conflict" Between Canada and the U.S.

Both countries' media avoid inflammatory presentations but neither fully explain background issues.

Press coverage of a 1978 "Fish War" between Canada and the United States sparked several media research questions. The incident offered a chance to compare U.S. and Canadian press coverage on an issue of mutual concern between the two nations. It provided the possibility of an exercise in media criticism within the context of international news reporting.

Study of press accounts of the conflict could allow a test of the often-alleged media tendency toward conflict hyperbole and exaggeration. If such exaggeration existed, might it be more pronounced in one nation's press than in the other's?

Might one nation's press offer more comprehensive or issue or-

iented coverage than the other's? Which, if either, better assessed the impact of the issue? Lastly, might one discern any evidence of nationalism (i.e., pro-U.S. or pro-Canadian) in either nation's press coverage?

The problem chosen for this study developed out of longstanding problems of alleged encroachment by commercial fishermen from each country into the waters claimed by the other country. The potential conflict grew during the gradual extension of territorial water claims or fishing rights claims by both countries in the mid-1970s.

Fishing interests on both coasts of both countries became increasingly disturbed by the liberties that the other "side" was supposedly taking in fishing beyond tentatively agreed upon, overlapping limits.

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Dissatisfaction grew among fishermen and officials.

The problem gradually escalated. Finally, June 2, 1978, Canada ordered U.S. commercial fishermen from her waters. The U.S. responded in kind immediately. The mutual bans took effect two days later in east and west coastal waters, as well as in the Great Lakes.

Method of Study

The analysis of press coverage of the incident and its aftermath involved a selection of several Canadian and U.S. daily newspapers published during the period.

Six U.S. papers were selected: the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the *Anchorage Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Bangor Daily News*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The selection gave two West Coast and two East Coast regional papers (one of each pair from a large city, the other a small city) and two "national" dailies.

Four Canadian papers were selected: the *St. John's Evening Telegram*, the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, the *Montreal Star* and the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. The second two represent "national" dailies, the first two regional East Coast dailies. The *Vancouver Sun* was requested for West Coast Canadian representation, but was inaccessible to researchers.

The analysis covers all June, 1978, issues of the 10 papers. Later 1978 issues had so little coverage that they were not included. The content analysis covered all news stories about the event published during June. Editorials were excluded.

During the period under study, 99 news stories on the topic were run in the 10 papers. Among them, 71 content categories were initially isolated. Eventually, these were collapsed to 57 categories that in turn were grouped into five dimensions.

The dimensions were labeled as: 1) conflict activation, 2) conflict avoidance, 3) conflict resolution and potential impact, 4) negotiating process, 5) national perspectives.

Only those categories that bear significantly on the central questions of this study are reported here. Post-analysis calculation revealed an intercoder reliability of .86.

It is in the national perspectives dimension that the present study most closely resembles the work of Canadian researchers Wagerberg et.al.,¹ who approached the same incident as a case study of national coverage of an international issue.

Findings

Most stories on the topic appeared in Canadian papers. Of the 99 stories, 62 were in Canadian papers which averaged 15.5 stories per paper.

The six U.S. dailies averaged 6.2 stories each. This finding is in line with many earlier studies showing that news flows from "dominant" nations (economically, politically, militarily dominant) to less dominant. See, for instance, Schramm,² Hester,³ Lent,⁴ Gerbner and Marvanyi⁵ and Tunstall.⁶ The Canadian-U.S. news imbalance has been brought home graphically in comprehensive recent studies by Sparkes⁷ and Thompson.⁸

Other data showed that nearly all stories in U.S. papers were written by American journalists, most Canadian newspaper stories by Canadian writers.

In the Canadian press, 32 of the 62 stories (52%) were under bylines of each paper's own staff writers or correspondents. Of the rest, 22 (35%) were Canadian Press Wire Service (CP) stories. Only five stories in Canadian papers were from the U.S.-based Associated Press.

In the U.S. press, 15 of the 37 stories (41%) were by the paper's own correspondents and 13 (35%) were AP wire service stories. Only one U.S. story was listed as coming from the CP, and that one was jointly filed by the AP.

Although the content analysis was primarily thematic rather than semantic, some consideration was given to the frequency of appearance of the emotion-laden words "war" and "fish war" in headlines and stories.

"War" or "fish war" appeared in headlines over 11 of the 99 stories—eight times (73%) in Canadian newspaper stories. One or both words occurred within stories 26 times, 20 (77%) of them Canadian accounts.

Usage of the words "war" or "fish war" is, however, put into more reasonable perspective by seven content categories in the study that attempted to ascertain the degree of expectation in the press of actual belligerence.

The categories sought evidence of mention in either country's press of the temptation for conflict among officials or fishermen, or of specific

locations of anticipated violence. Only three such statements were found—two specific mentions of possible violence in East Coast fishing areas and one mention of a West Coast area of potential violence. All three were in Canadian papers. No other categories suggested any textual corroboration justifying use of "war" or "fish war" in stories or headlines.

Charting the content categories that sought to determine the level of comprehensiveness in the press coverage and its concern with *events* as opposed to *issues* revealed some expected similarities between the two press systems, as well as some possibly surprising differences.

Twenty U.S. stories (54%) and 28 Canadian stories (45%) reported that interim talks had broken down. Nearly half (48%) of the Canadian stories mentioned that a long term agreement was needed and only 14 U.S. stories (33%) reported this.

Figures in Table 1 show that a greater percentage of Canadian than U.S. stories mentioned the perceived need for a long term agreement. Conversely, more U.S. stories mentioned the talks' breakdown. More Canadian stories (21%) than U.S. stories (5%) discussed why the long term agreement was necessary.

Two other categories suggested that Canadian papers offered more explanatory material than U.S. papers. One-third of the coded Canadian stories mentioned the relationship of the 200-mile territorial limit to the current dispute, while one-fourth of the U.S. stories did so. Fifteen Canadian stories (24%) mentioned specific problematic

borders and only six U.S. stories (16%) cited any specific areas involved in the dispute.

Categories dealing with the negotiations' progress or lack of it showed little mention of those issues in the press of either country (table not shown). Only three U.S. and two Canadian stories alluded to progress in talks. Two U.S. and four Canadian stories referred to progress or lack of it in specific (East or West Coast) talks.

Only four U.S. stories and no Canadian stories mentioned possible Senate action of the agreements.

(Parliamentary ratification on such matters is not required in Canada.) Four U.S. stories, by quoting officials, alluded to optimism about eventual agreements, and two mentioned that whatever results were achieved would be up to Canada. No Canadian story mentioned either item.

The reason these item/categories did not show up often in the analysis is that negotiations did not start until later in June, the first talks being scheduled for June 19. By that time, most press coverage had slackened.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Selected Topics on Comprehensiveness of Coverage

Topics	U.S. (N=37) % of appearance	Canada (N=62) % of appearance
Interim talks breakdown	54.1 (n ₁ =20)	45.2 (n ₂ =28)
A long term agreement needed	37.8 (n ₁ =14)	48.4 (n ₂ =30)
Reasons for a long term agreement	5.4 (n ₁ = 2)	21.0 (n ₂ =13)
200-mile border problems	24.3 (n ₁ = 9)	32.3 (n ₂ =20)
Specific problematic borders mentioned	16.2 (n ₁ = 6)	24.2 (n ₂ =15)

Note: Percentages equal more than 100% and number more than the total stories because more than one category may have appeared in each story.

TABLE 2. Comparisons on Items Suggesting Optimism, Predicting Outcomes

Topics	U.S. (N=37) % of appearance	Canada (N=62) % of appearance
Both sides making effort	24.3 (n ₁ =9)	30.6 (n ₂ =19)
U.S. Senate action	10.8 (n ₁ =4)	0.0 (n ₂ = 0)
Optimistic of Future Results	10.8 (n ₁ =4)	0.0 (n ₂ = 0)
Decisions up to Canada	5.4 (n ₁ =2)	0.0 (n ₂ = 0)

Fully 70% of all the U.S. stories in the coded papers, and 76% of the Canadian stories, had run by June 9. The remainder were parceled out fairly evenly through the second two-thirds of the month. Most coverage concerned the development of the conflict, not the steps toward its resolution.

More prevalent was story content pinpointing specific problem areas and attempting to assess blame for the problem. About two-fifths of the stories from each country alluded to the East Coast difficulties and the West Coast difficulties specifically. Six U.S. stories and 15 Canadian stories in some way attributed the blame concerning East Coast problems to the U.S. More significant because of the disparity, four U.S. stories attributed East Coast blame to Canada, while no Canadian stories did so. The West Coast breakdown revealed similar discrepancies.

Seven U.S. stories pointed out that the ban did not extend to sport fishing in Canada, while nine U.S. stories (24%) mentioned that in the U.S. it did extend to sport fishing.

In the Canadian press, 12 stories (or 19%, similar to the percentage of U.S. stories commenting on the fact) mentioned that the ban did not affect sport fishing in Canada, while 19 stories (31%) mentioned the U.S. sport fishing ban.

Several item/categories assessed the frequency of mention of potential economic or other impact on one or both countries.

These stories revealed significantly more Canadian than U.S. concern with three specific economic factors: 1) problems relating to fishing quotas; 2) fears of possible increases in U.S. tariffs on fish imported from Canada; and 3) oil, gas or mineral deposits in the disputed areas.

Among the content categories on the question of national perspectives in the press, two in particular shed light on the issue. Three Canadian stories and no U.S. stories contained specific negative words against Americans. Specific negative words against Canadians showed up in five U.S. stories and two Canadian stories.

TABLE 3. Comparisons on Attributing Blame

Topics	U.S. (N=37) % of appearance	Canada (N=62) % of appearance
General problems in East	29.7 (n ₁ =11)	29.0 (n ₂ =18)
General problems in West	29.7 (n ₁ =11)	25.8 (n ₂ =16)
Whose fault—U.S. East	16.2 (n ₁ = 6)	24.2 (n ₂ =15)
Whose fault—Canada East	10.8 (n ₁ = 4)	0.0 (n ₂ = 0)
Whose fault—U.S. West	8.1 (n ₁ = 3)	3.2 (n ₂ = 2)
Whose fault—Canada West	21.6 (n ₁ = 8)	6.5 (n ₂ = 4)

TABLE 4. Comparison of Mentions of Impact

Topics	U.S. (N=37) % of appearance	Canada (N=62) % of appearance
No impact at all on U.S.	10.8 (n ₁ =4)	0.0 (n ₂ = 0)
No impact at all on Canada	0.0 (n ₁ =0)	3.2 (n ₂ = 2)
Impact on U.S. tourism	8.1 (n ₁ =3)	8.0 (n ₂ = 5)
Impact on Canadian tourism	8.1 (n ₁ =3)	5.0 (n ₂ = 3)
Economic impact on U.S.	21.6 (n ₁ =8)	11.3 (n ₂ = 7)
Economic impact on Canada	24.3 (n ₁ =9)	21.0 (n ₂ =13)
Economic impact on both	13.5 (n ₁ =5)	6.5 (n ₂ = 4)

Conclusions

Lacking conclusive evidence from the coded stories that any real concern existed over the possibility of an actual war developing from the dispute, one concludes that the use of the term "war" in the headlines and stories of both countries' press is a clear example of media hyperbole. "War" is a catchy headline word geared toward grabbing the reader's eye. Its appearance in 9 U.S. stories (24%), contrasted with the 28 appearances in Canadian stories (45%) suggests that, on the score, U.S. papers were more circumspect.

Judging from other words employed and items covered in the stories coded, both press systems were fairly restrained in their portrayal of the incident as a conflict.⁹ The reverse, however, was not necessarily the case. The press of neither country dealt much with items relating to resolution of the crisis.

Major press interest was during the early stages of the incident, when the possibility of a serious

dispute looked more likely. When that did not develop, papers on both sides of the border backed off.

The findings do indicate that, although far from comprehensive, the press of Canada did a somewhat more thorough job of covering the issues behind the events (see Table 2). As the items analyzed revealed, Canadian papers generally dealt with more topics that could be called issue-oriented (as opposed to event-oriented) than did the U.S. papers. Such items as why a long term agreement was necessary and an explanation of the link between the 200-mile limit and the current problem address what is here labeled an issue-orientation.

Some differences between the two approaches thus can be pinpointed. Nevertheless, readers from either country would have a difficult time trying to comprehend issues involved—the background, the gradual development, the context within which the mutual ban was imposed, the attempts at resolving the problems.

The foregoing analysis shows also that nationalism can creep into

the newspaper stories of two countries whose press systems profess to be dedicated to the "ideal" of fair,

balanced, impartial coverage of events.

NOTES

1. R.H. Wagerberg, W.C. Soderlund, W.I. Romanow and E.D. Briggs. "The Case of the Canada-U.S. 'Fish War'," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Fall, 1979, pp. 1-21.

2. Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Media and National Development*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

3. Al Hester, "International News Agencies," In Alan Wells, (ed.), *Mass Communication: A World View*, (Palo Alto, Calif: Mayfield, 1974), pp. 207-226.

4. John Lent, "Foreign News in American Media," *Journal of Communication*, Winter, 1977, pp. 46-50.

5. George Gerbner and George Marvanyi, "The Many Worlds of the World's Press," *Journal of Communication*, Winter, 1977, pp. 52-64.

6. Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

7. Vernone E. Sparkes, (ed.), *News Flow Between Canada and the United States*, (Syracuse: Communications Research Center, 1976).

8. David C. Thompson, "The Coverage of Canada in the U.S. News Media," *Carleton Journalism Review*, Summer, 1978.

9. Evidence of restraint also formed one of the conclusions to the Fish War study of Wagerberg, et. al., cited earlier. About Canadian coverage of the issue, the researchers conclude, "... in a situation in which it would have been easy to play on Canadians' anti-American inclinations, the press was without exception remarkably responsible."

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