

# What Drives Russia Coverage in the Mainstream American Press?

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Foreign affairs coverage in the mainstream media in the United States--centering on the wire services, the newspapers of record (The New York Times, The Washington Post), and the major television and radio networks--often appears mysterious. Why do specific stories, voices, policy options, opinion data, historical backgrounds, and investigative reporting appear when they do in the news? Why do some stories make big splashes triggering "saturation coverage," while seemingly no less important stories barely register on the news radar? Does the news flow wax and wane--to list only some explanations--due to government news management, economic interests of the principal stakeholders in the media, public demand and curiosity, political culture of media institutions (known in partisan terms as "the liberal media bias"), or the demands of news production?

## **"Indexing" the News to Governmental Institutions**

Systematic empirical research in the last 20 years of news patterns in the United States strongly suggests that these debates are explained for the most part by the fact that journalists follow implicit assumptions about institutional power. These assumptions guide them in opening and closing the news gates. In short, journalists "index" the range, diversity, emphasis, and balance among reported policy positions to levels of public conflict among key institutional decision-makers.

In practical terms, this indexing has three major implications for news reporting. First, in developing their stories, reporters and editors favor official government sources over other sources, especially on foreign policy issues. Official sources provide a steady and efficient supply of daily news befitting media organizational routines such as news beats and recurring assignment patterns. Moreover, reporting official sources satisfies the politically contested norms of objective and balanced reporting. Journalists look to government officials to provide authoritative framing for stories. In the absence of evidence of scandal, the media takes the political positions of officials at face value. As one major study found, even so-called "news leaks" (in more than three-quarters of cases) tend to be initiated by government officials themselves.

These points are demonstrated by the following:

- Research into the 4 years (1983-86) of *New York Times* coverage of US funding for the Nicaraguan Contras established that of the 889 policy opinions voiced in the news, 604 came from US governmental institutions.
- In my study of the coverage of debates in 1990-91 on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, close to 85% of 131 reported policy opinions came from the US government, with nearly 60% coming from the White House.
- A study of CNN coverage of events in Somalia in 1992 refuted the popular notion that the decision to send US troops to that country was keyed by the "CNN effect" of reports on humanitarian disaster. The CNN coverage followed, rather than preceded, key decision points by the Bush administration.
- Several extensive studies of US media coverage of the Gulf War found that the US media did not frame Saddam Hussein as a villain after he seized Helm in 1979, used chemical weapons against Iran in 1984, or gassed the Kurds in 1988, but did so in 1990 after President Bush compared him to Hitler. Moreover, prior to the war--even though criticism of the Bush administration was reported frequently--critical information was less prominently presented than supportive information, and was focused more on procedural issues than policy substance. News space was provided to critics and supporters according to the degree of power they wielded over policy.

The second implication of indexing is that reporters' perceptions of divisions among key decision-making officials open the news gates to a broader range of policy options and arguments. In other words, if reporters "smell" high-level official conflict on an issue they are likely to invite other voices, such as "talking heads" and op-ed writers. Official disagreements provide the media with powerful "news pegs" for their stories. To paraphrase Marx, disagreements among the most powerful people are the most powerful disagreements among people (and hence the most newsworthy).

The third implication is that, as long as official conflict is sustained, the news gates also tend to open to broader "bottom-up" political statements from social groups, organized interests, and independent experts.

To illustrate these last two points, in my study of SDI coverage, 63% of reported opposition voices came from Congress. Expression of opposition views from within the government correlated very strongly with reporting of opposition voices from outside the government over a 15-month period. Peaks in coverage happened when congressional Democrats and the Bush White House debated budget cuts, when the Congress had floor debates on SDI funding, and when President Bush made his 1991 State of the Union address (triggering Democratic opposition in Congress). Moreover, three independent studies in the 1980s and 90s found that the favorable or unfavorable introduction of social groups in the news depends largely on whether their views fall inside or outside the range of debates among officials.

Indexing explains why political news reporting in the US at times appears fiercely independent and hostile to the government (especially during saturation coverage of scandals), and at other times appears subservient to government manipulation (through press releases, news spins, or "leaks"). In practice, policymakers and journalists are interdependent, but both have strong institutional incentives that discourage them from admitting it.

## **US Security and Post-Soviet Russia: Indexing Effects in CNN Coverage of Chechnya and Iran**

### *I. Chechnya*

Taking one of the most contentious issues in US-Russian relations, I analyzed news coverage from August 1, 1999 through January 1, 2000 of the war in Chechnya by CNN, the leading TV network for international news, and the one that articulates strong commitment to journalistic impartiality norms. The Lexis-Nexis computerized search of all stories containing the word "Chechnya" in CNN news highlights for that period retrieved 205 stories. Figure 1 (see end of memo) clearly demonstrates the effects of indexing news reporting to government elite voices and debates:

- For more than two and a half months after the August 1, 1999 incursion of Chechen rebel groups into Dagestan--which prompted the rise of Putin and the beginning of large-scale military operations in that area--complex political and military developments in and around Chechnya were almost a non-story on CNN. In a few short blips of reporting in August, for example, events in Dagestan were viewed as a backdrop to the change of prime ministers in Moscow. The coverage spirit was captured by this CNN highlight: "Dagestan Rebellion Poses Threat to New Russian Government." Thus, precisely when the media should investigate and debate issues publicly, CNN stuck to sporadic reporting of primarily Russian government voices.
- The ebb and flow of CNN news was calibrated to high-level intergovernmental debates. News flowed slowly until about October 18, 1999 (almost a month after the beginning of a massive military campaign in Chechnya), when the Clinton administration clearly articulated "concern" about events in Chechnya, starting a debate with the Russian government, which insisted it was conducting an anti-terrorist operation to protect its territorial integrity (the same norm that Milosevic insisted upon in Kosovo). The coverage then peaked again, predictably, in late November 1999, around the time of President Clinton's visit to the OSCE summit in Istanbul, where he had a heated debate with Yeltsin over Chechnya, contesting Russia's right to claim the conflict as an internal affair. The third peak was reached in late December, after Yeltsin warned Western leaders that Russia still remained a nuclear superpower.
- As soon as intergovernmental debates paused, the coverage quickly subsided. During pauses in the debates, non-governmental voices were not brought in to sustain the news flow.

- Pro-independence Chechen leaders appeared only a few times (there was one interview with Shamil Basaev and two appearances of Maskhadov's representative in Moscow). Neither Maskhadov nor any of his representatives appeared in CNN news after Putin insisted in late September 1999 that Moscow no longer considered Maskhadov's government (with which it signed a peace agreement in 1997) as legitimate. No Chechen statements were reported unaccompanied by challenge from Russian government officials; the reverse was not the case.
- Non-governmental voices were only reported as a follow-up to official voices, and became a major feature in CNN news only after sustained and intense intergovernmental debates. To balance Russian official statements, CNN drew on experts--especially former US government officials and, on a few occasions, NGO representatives (including three interviews with Human Rights Watch representatives).
- A CNN Moscow correspondent first went to Chechnya only after debates at the OSCE summit, nearly three months into the conflict. The correspondent, Steve Harrigan, went in with the Russian military. Restrictions on his news-gathering were not reported as an issue. CNN broadcast 37 of Harrigan's stories in which he was with the military, and only two in which no Russian military personnel were present. In addition, CNN relied on other networks' footage, including ORT (the Russian channel loyal to Putin), except for two stories by a free-lance video journalist outside Russian government supervision.

These patterns explain why US media coverage angered the Russian government (many of their views were "counterbalanced" by Chechen or US "talking head" voices), and simultaneously drew criticism both for underreporting the scale of human rights violations by Russian troops, and for its lack of criticism of the Clinton administration's passivity. In reality, the problem with CNN coverage was not straightforward bias nor ignorance of the issues. Instead, it was the nature of the government-media relationship in the US that restricted comprehensive policy debates when they were most needed, despite splurges of intense coverage around a limited set of elite views.

## *II. Iran*

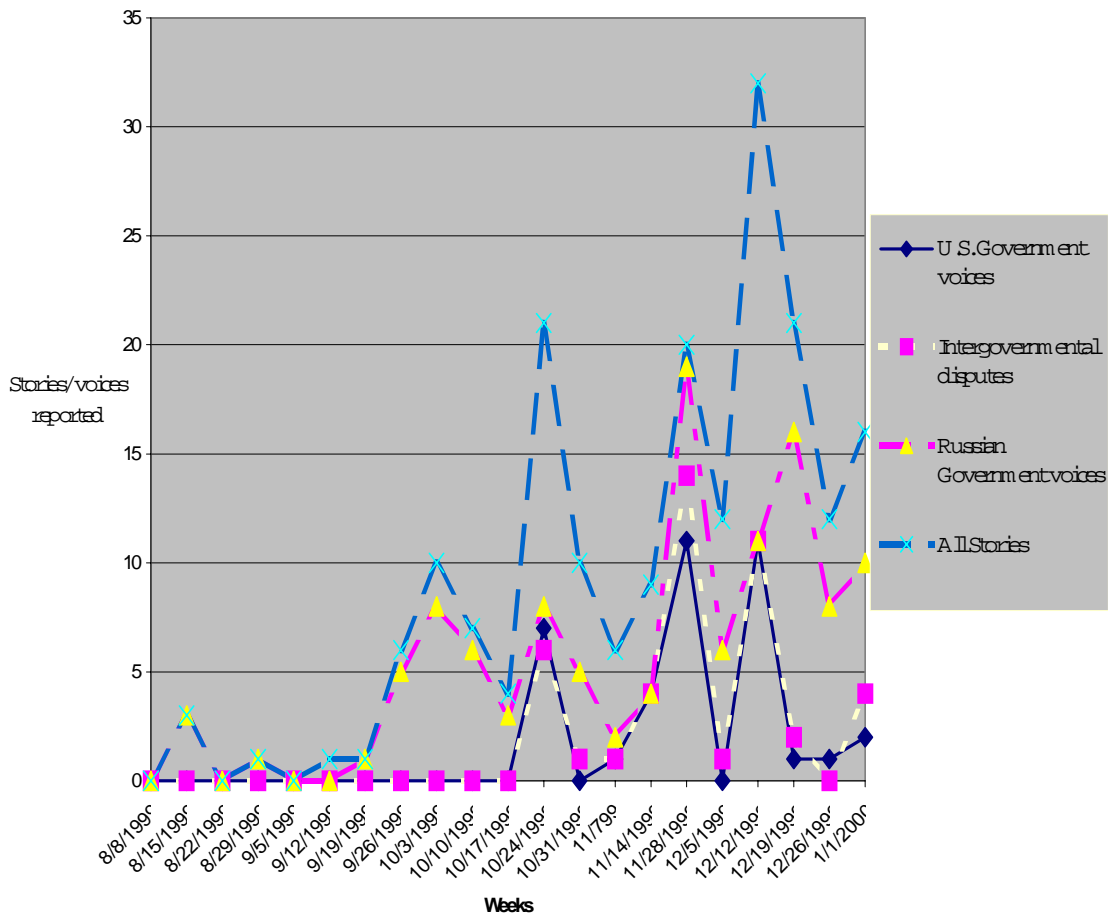
The importance of sustained public debate--with a clear willingness to participate by US elites--for opening television news gates is especially well illustrated by CNN coverage of Russia-Iran relations from January 2000 through mid-March 2001. For this time period, a Lexis-Nexis search retrieved only 8 stories broadcast by CNN on this issue:

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Action:</b>
1	2/24/01	Upcoming Powell-Ivanov talks (Iran as an issue)

2	6/2/00	US General says Iran ready to test MRBM
3	4/14/00	State Department imposes sanctions on Iran
4	3/27/00	Putin elected as Russia's president; US concerned over Russia-Iran nuclear cooperation
5	2/4/00	Russia demands release of US-seized vessel in the Gulf
6	2/3/00	Russian tanker in the Persian Gulf boarded by US Navy
7	1/19/00	NMD dealt a blow, test failed (Iran poses missile threat, Russia opposes NMD)
8	1/17/00	US officials worry Iran may build A-bomb

Seven of these stories involve actions by top-level US administration officials, with the exception of a report on the US Navy seizing a Russian oil tanker in the Persian Gulf. Unlike the case of Chechnya, the Clinton administration during this time did not have intense public debates with Moscow over arms trade with Iran. Reports about Russia's violations of the secret deal with Iran came out at the time of the US presidential election campaign when CNN resources were overtaxed by one of the closest and most controversial presidential election campaigns in US history. While inter-elite debates are a necessary condition for opening the news gates, they are not always a sufficient condition, as the Russia-Iran coverage suggests. The media has many high-level political debates to choose from and their airtime is limited. When inter-elite debates are low-key they are more likely to enter the news on what journalists call "slow days." For example, in the Russia-Iran case, no stories were broadcast between June 2000 and February 2001--that is, not until the presidential election in the US was resolved. Again, precisely at the time when the Russia-Iran issue challenged the rationale and the conduct of US foreign policy, it was phased out of the television news flow.

Fig. 1 CNN Coverage of the War in Chechnya, 8/1/99-1/1/00



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