Guide

The nature of this study and where it fits in the Newswork series

In 1977, shortly after Jimmy Carter became president, I made a wish list of three books that I wanted to write, a trilogy to be called Newswork. The first volume would be a study of reporters who cover the U.S. government for domestic news organizations and of how they organize themselves to do their work. The second volume would cross the aisle to examine how the government conducts its own press operations. The final volume would focus on foreign correspondents in the United States. I hoped that together these books might begin to define the unique web of relationships that exist between the government and the media, relationships that I felt were of growing importance in understanding public policy. I had never been a journalist or a communications scholar. I was merely curious and could find too few books to sate my curiosity. There were a number of memoirs of the "presidents who have known me" variety written by reporters;[1] an excellent but ancient (1937) sociological study of Washington correspondents;[2] a book about government–press relations based on a modest 1961 survey of thirty-eight public information officers and thirty-five journalists;[3] and a splendid 1963 analysis of the diplomatic beat.[4]

The first of the Newswork series, *The Washington Reporters,* was published in 1981; *The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and Their Offices* came out in 1984. Yet the proposed third volume kept getting pushed aside. My work expanded in other directions, resulting in two books about media coverage of Congress—*The Ultimate Insiders: U.S. Senators in the National Media* (1986) and *Live from Capitol Hill!* (1991)—and another about how the American

media cover the rest of the world, *International News and Foreign Correspondents* (1996).

Part of the reason why the subject of foreign correspondents in the United States got preempted by others has to do with the design of operations at Brookings, which I have been content to call my home for more than three decades. While university-based scholars can choose what they want to write about, they must find the time and other resources necessary to do the writing. Brookings scholars, on the other hand, must seek approval of a proposed project from the institution's trustees, and if approval is forthcoming, they are given the time and other resources needed to complete it. (This approval process represents the sole involvement of the trustees in a scholar's project.) That trade-off is one that I have gladly made. And for a number of years, my employers seemed to feel that the foreign press corps was not a high priority and that I could be more usefully engaged in exploring questions related to the U.S. presidency, elections, and civility in the public arena.[5]

The irony of my late start in studying foreign correspondents is that this book now appears at a time of renewed national attention to how the world views Americans and the United States and of the U.S. government's concern about how other people's perceptions could affect U.S. policies. The news is not good. The 2005 *Sixteen-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey* concluded that "the United States remains broadly disliked in most countries surveyed, and opinion of the American people is not as positive as it once was."[6] Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeatedly lamented that "too few in the world" were aware of the various strengths of the country, such as the "generosity of the American people" or "the protections that we provide for freedom of conscience and freedom of speech," when she announced the appointment of Karen Hughes, one of President George W. Bush's most trusted advisers, as head of the government's "public diplomacy" operations.[7] After U.S. forces entered Iraq, the government's effort to tell its story overseas—public diplomacy to some, propaganda to others—expanded greatly, funded by an annual broadcasting budget of more than $600 million. That effort now included television and radio stations operated by the U.S. government—Al Hurra ("The free one," in Arabic) and Radio Sawa ("Together," also in Arabic) and Radio Farda, in Farsi—and *Hi*, a magazine aimed at Arab youth in their teens and twenties.[8] The State Department even created a web page, "Identi-

fying Misinformation," to respond to conspiracy theories and other allegations.[9]

Surely if foreign correspondents in Washington and New York "significantly influence what foreign audiences in Europe, Asia and elsewhere know and think about the United States," as some scholars note,[10] then a study of who they are, how they work, and what they produce should help explain why the world sees the United States as it does.

The major measuring tool of this study is an extensive questionnaire sent in 1999 to nearly 2,000 men and women whose names are listed in the press gallery section of the *Congressional Directory,* the State Department's *Directory of Foreign Correspondents in the United States, Editor and Publisher International Year Book, Hudson's Washington News Media Contacts Directory, News Media Yellow Book,* and the membership directories of the Foreign Press Association of New York, the UN Correspondents Association, and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. In short, my assistants and I sought out anyone in the United States who desired to be known as a foreign correspondent. The low rate of return—we received 439 usable responses to the survey—reflects both the subjects' generally high rate of mobility and a number of questionable claims to being a "foreign correspondent," which some individuals apparently think of as a prestigious title that one awards to one's self. Nevertheless, the number of respondents is still three to four times larger than that of any previous study and, for the first time, large enough to examine some correspondents by country. The survey was supplemented by 146 interviews, many transcribed.[11] We asked essentially three questions: *Who* are the correspondents? *How* do they work? *What* do they report? Each of these questions is addressed in a separate section.

First, however, there are two introductory matters that must be attended to. One, correspondents do not work in a vacuum; they must be placed in context. Two, what was the state of foreign correspondents in the United States before this investigation?

Context

What may or may not appear in the world media

Correspondents may come from countries where the practice of journalism differs from the so-called "objective" model; where employers'

political or ideological positions shade reporting; where various consumer and commercial considerations must be heeded; where the government owns or controls the media; and where special circumstances exist related to the national literacy rate, level of technology, and even geography. And then, of course, correspondents must take into account any and all overriding national interests. If, as in this study, the country being reported on is the United States, then one of a story's starting points may be anti-Americanism, a sentiment that predates the Constitution.

Then

What we know about foreign correspondents in America, 1955–88

A sizable, permanent foreign press corps took shape in the United States as reporters arrived in 1946 to cover the newly founded United Nations. Based largely in New York and predominantly from Western Europe, these journalists favored analytical pieces that could survive slow transmission by mail. The high cost of sending cables and making telephone calls limited their contact with their editors. They lived by what became known as Barber's axiom, formulated by Stephen Barber, a *Daily Telegraph* (United Kingdom) correspondent: "Happiness is in direct proportion to one's distance from the home office."

The section *Who They Are* includes four chapters that suggest how much "typical" foreign correspondents in America have changed since the days when some had a "special relationship" with the secretary of state.

Patterns

Some findings, 1999–2003

The robust growth in the press corps during the last thirty years or so of the twentieth century was a result in part of TV's coming of age and in part of the arrival of correspondents from Asia, especially from Japan. It was accompanied by a shift in the focus of attention from New York to Washington, reflecting the world's increased interest in the United States as a political power. An unexpected trend also appeared, toward replacing the "classical" foreign correspondent, who circles the world in three- to four-year tours, with journalists who come directly from and return directly to the home office. The latter increasingly are complemented by "foreign correspondents who never leave

home": American citizens or others who are hired locally or who are full-time freelancers.

Irregulars

The other foreign correspondents

Our survey turned up a substantial number of respondents—one in five—who considered themselves foreign correspondents although they were not full-time journalists. This group usually flies under the scholar's radar. Many are permanent U.S. residents from other countries. A New York bookseller, for example, wrote about opera for a Hungarian magazine; a Staten Island teacher covered art exhibitions for a Portuguese magazine. Even if their reach is modest in that they are less likely to write for the mainstream media, their output is considerable. Because they often choose to write on cultural topics, their work enriches the scope and diversity of what is reported from America.

Hollywood

A subject the world loves

In 1943 a group of writers banded together to form the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, and by creating a generously distributed award called the Golden Globe, they now play a significant role in film marketing. Often scorned by establishment journalists, they write mostly exuberant celebrity profiles—"Nicole Kidman Is the Epitome of Class," for example, for a Singapore magazine—and interviews that follow a simple question-and-answer format. Their output has expanded with the increased economic importance of movie exports.

In America

It's not like being in any other country

Some correspondents' first impressions of America derive from their earlier experiences as students in the United States, but the first impressions of most come from what they have seen in the movies and television. Notes the distinguished British scholar Jeremy Tunstall, "The media are american."[12] The correspondents find New York, Washington, and Los Angeles cosmopolitan and comfortable places in which to live. Very few of them live outside of those three areas, but

today's cheaper air fares and lighter television equipment allow them to cover a vast country, even its small towns, better than previous generations of foreign correspondents could. For some, the process of Americanization—the longer they are in the country, the more "pro-American" they see themselves—may create conflicts with their nation's stereotypes of the United States. Their editors may worry that they are "going native."

The *How They Work* section, consisting of five chapters, begins by making an important distinction between foreign correspondents and most other journalists. The time zone in which foreign correspondents work is almost always many hours ahead of or behind the zone where their home office is located.

Time

Adjusting to deadlines around the world

In this chapter, European and Asian correspondents illustrate the difficulties involved in working ahead of or behind the home office by telling how the time warp affects a typical day. The result is almost always that they work more hours, under more stress, than their domestic counterparts.

Contact

Whereby the home office gains on correspondents

E-mail and cheaper telephone rates now allow editors and producers to stay in constant contact with their correspondents. The Internet and cable TV send headquarters instantaneous and continuous news reports from the United States, and bosses in Europe can now read the *New York Times* before their correspondents in New York City wake up. But the news priorities of foreign desk editors watching CNN may not be the same as those of their correspondents in Washington. Who will be the ultimate judge of what is important—or what is true? There are some variations in the tug-of-war between headquarters and field. Bureaus from small countries continue to maintain considerable independence, as do some highly esteemed correspondents from larger countries. At the major news organizations, however, the distance from the home office is growing shorter and reporters' independence is shrinking.

Access

Who sees whom, when, and why

Foreign correspondents' access to U.S. government officials is based on a sliding scale. Pity the correspondent from a small country of no strategic importance. Niche access may be granted to some, such as Mexican reporters, whose country has produced a sufficient number of American voters. Although lack of access is the press corps's primary complaint, it is a serious problem only when correspondents are trying to reach the highest levels of government.

Help

Foreign correspondents as clients of the U.S. government

The Foreign Press Centers are a small unit of the State Department whose offices in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles once were a sort of social club where correspondents gathered to obtain services that they can now get through C-SPAN, CNN, and the Internet. But its special briefings, tours, and logistical assistance received good grades from our respondents, and such services are an inexpensive component of public diplomacy.

Borrowed News and the Internet

Where correspondents turn for information

Foreign journalists can be no better than the local media, or so it's been said. Some complain that in the United States that suggests too-heavy reliance on the liberal-leaning *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The Internet, however, with its speed and broad availability, presents remarkable new research opportunities—and the added problem of verifying information. Most troubling, perhaps, is that increasingly correspondents are tied to their computers and the ubiquitous cable news channels and therefore have less time and fewer incentives to leave their office to fraternize with the natives.

The *What They Report* section presents a difficult methodological problem. The world's media consist of thousands of outlets publishing in scores of languages. How does one dam such a vast stream of data in order to measure output and content from America?

One Day

The stories and the categories that they fit in

This chapter presents our solution to the measurement problem, which was to ask correspondents to give us their most recent story and answer questions about how they wrote it. Where did the idea come from? What events were attended, interviews conducted, or documents used to write it? Was the home office involved? Was its involvement typical?

The objective was to create a file of one day's reports from the United States. The material was then sorted into various categories, such as Government: International (foreign policy, diplomacy, military affairs), Dangers (guns, drugs, crime, accidents), and Culture (movies, theater, sports, art, books, society). For one set of correspondents—those from Mexico, Canada, Taiwan, South Korea, and Israel and the surrounding Arab countries—the primary mission was to take the pulse of relations between their country and the United States. Another set, usually from small countries like Finland, sought stories with a "home angle"—in the case of Finland, a reunion of Thomas Jefferson's descendants, some of whom are of Finnish descent. The major western European media had the least interest in folksy news. The Japanese press featured well-researched economic stories. Stories on science and technology were idiosyncratic—some serious, some frivolous, with no discernable pattern. There were cultural stories on everything from vacationing in Key West to the comeback of a Japanese baseball player, although our sample overrepresents this category. In the largest category, stories of breaking international news, there was little evidence that correspondents did much digging for anything other than news that they could borrow.

Now

What we know about foreign correspondents, the present

This chapter reviews the changes that have occurred since our story began. Over the half-century from 1955 to the present, the foreign press corps has become bigger and less print oriented. The percentages of whites, males, and Europeans have declined, as has the practice of "salon journalism" over a glass of brandy and a fine cigar. Because of growth in both government and the domestic press corps, foreigners await access at the back of a longer line. The composition of the

foreign press corps differs also in that there are more local hires, freelancers, irregulars, and those who drop in for short visits ("parachutists," in the trade) and fewer correspondents who spend their entire careers moving from one foreign assignment to the next. The wonders of technology—the Internet and cable TV—connect them more firmly to their home offices, creating new tensions and at the same time opening new avenues of information.

At least a third of what foreign correspondents report is breaking news—and in Washington, that means what the government is doing. Employers want their own brand on the top stories, a desire that reflects organizational ego more than good editorial judgment. Such stories may resemble doctored translations, which in many cases is what they have to be. Even the greatest foreign operations do not have the time, access, or resources of their U.S. counterparts. But such reporting by translation can be done in other places, releasing the correspondents to do what only they can do, the kind of stories that rely on personal observation.

Our firm impression of foreign correspondents' reportage is that while it can be critical of the United States, it lacks the vituperative edge that characterizes the domestic media's views in many foreign countries, thus offering a balance that otherwise would not be present. At their best, foreign correspondents combine an insider's knowledge of their own country with an outsider's insights into the country that they are assigned to cover. That is a rare opportunity and an important one, especially when the other country has a profound impact on the rest of the world.

With prayer and good luck, there will be a seventh and concluding volume of the Newswork series to bring the enterprise full circle. It will explore the question of what has changed, what has stayed the same, and what the consequences of change or stasis have been since *The Washington Reporters* was published in 1981. This researcher no longer has the time or the eyes and ears to do the job alone. But there is a plan. The Brookings trustees in 2004 honored me with emeritus status and an office (and other services) to continue writing, while the George Washington University honored me with a professorship, a fancy title, and, most important, a group of keen and enthusiastic students to act as surrogate eyes and ears, so that together we can propose some answers for others to question in the future.