Current research section

Media coverage of the Gulf crisis
A Survey of Correspondance

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Purpose of the project

For many years, the flow of international news has been a salient issue on the agenda of global political and academic debates. Among other things, Third World spokesmen charged in the 1970s and early 1980s that Western media coverage of their nations was generally negative and crisis-oriented. One researcher noted that the crisis-centered coverage of developing countries by Western media produces a skewed quantity of news rather than a constant flow because those media report by means of “spot” coverage, with the volume of news spurring higher when a crisis draws attention. An American journalist has articulated Western correspondents’ penchant for crisis news when he asked: “Why the hell should anyone but a specialist be interested in the Congo when there is not a crisis there?”

Although crisis reporting by Western media had drawn a good amount of research in the past two decades, most of the studies conducted employed content analysis as a data-gathering method. This type of analysis may be useful in throwing light on the nature of news output. However, it is incapable of showing why that output appeared as it did. Explicating determinants of crisis coverage demands an investigation into the context of such coverage using other data-gathering techniques, one of which is survey research. In this case, data obtained from foreign correspondents reporting a crisis appear to be quite helpful in acquainting us with the perceptions and attitudes of those correspondents and with the problems and issues arising in the context of crisis coverage.

Taking international media correspondents’ reporting of the Gulf crisis (from August 2, 1990 to January 16, 1990) as a case study, this research article seeks to throw light on correspondents’ perceptions of the crisis and
the problems facing them. The study also attempts to identify some of the organizational aspects of crisis reporting as perceived by correspondents. During the past two decades, Western correspondents operating in the Middle East have long complained of such problems as lack of access to and cooperation from Arab officials and information ministries, and getting into the country and obtaining interviews.

Statement of the problem

The general research question addressed by this project relates to the issues and problems arising in the context of foreign correspondents’ coverage of the Gulf crisis from Amman, Jordan. In light of the debates associated with such coverage this work investigates professional, political and organizational factors that may have impinged on reporting the Gulf crisis from Amman, Jordan before evolving into a full-fledged war.

Methodology

A random sample (N=40) of foreign correspondents who were reporting from Jordan on the Gulf crisis before it broke out into a full – fledged war was surveyed by the authors to investigate their perceptions, problems and work practices. According to Jordanian Ministry of Information sources, over 500 foreign correspondents arrived in Jordan from August 2, 1990 to January 16, 1991, to cover the crisis. Data gathered from the sample indicate that Jordan was selected as a base of operation by those correspondents because the country is geographically close to Iraq; public opinion was generally pro-Iraq while official government stands reflected neutrality; Jordan was negatively affected by the influx of hundreds of thousands of Gulf evacuees into its territories and media facilities were conveniently available to correspondents in the capital city of Amman.

A 27-item questionnaire was placed in mail boxes of correspondents residing in three major hotels in Amman. Respondents were asked to return completed questionnaires to hotel receptionists. The questionnaire sought to gather data from correspondents on age, nationality, experience, place of operation, media affiliation, occupational status, education, exposure to the Middle East, foreign language, frequency of filing reports, adequacy of available facilities, reliance on local reporters, sources used, reason(s) for
choosing Amman, degree of cooperation from Jordanian officials, perceptions of coverage, problems faced by correspondents and possible changes in perspective.

Provisional results

Data showed that 65% of respondents were males while 35% were females. In terms of age, the study indicated that 40% of respondents were in their 30s, 27.5% in their 20s and 20% in their 40s. Data on age suggest a generally young sample of correspondents who perhaps had little experience in crisis reporting during the 1970s and 1960s.

As for nationality, the study showed that 27.5% of correspondents were American; 12.5% British; 10% French; 7.5% Greek; and 7.5% Italian. Non-Jordanian Arab correspondents constituted 15% of the sample. The dominance of American-European correspondents in the sample may be explained by two factors: The global media dominance of Western Europe and the United States and the direct involvement of these nations in the anti-Iraq coalition. One more reason that may be cited relates to the centrality of crisis news to Western media as they report international affairs. Another reason concerns the huge capabilities of Western media institutions which have the necessary resources to dispatch correspondents around the world.

Concerning media affiliation the study indicated that 60% respondents worked for television; 25% for newspapers and 7.5% for radio. The high percentage of T.V. correspondents reflects the rising importance of television as a medium of international communication, especially with the introduction of satellites to global television broadcasting. Daily television reports dispatched live by CNN's Baghdad correspondent Peter Arnett and the subsequent rise of this network in U.S. television ratings seem to underscore the growing centrality of television in crisis coverage.

The results of the study indicated that 65% of correspondents were originally based in Western countries before being dispatched to Jordan to cover the Gulf crisis. Those who were originally stationed in the Middle East before the outbreak of the crisis constituted 17.5% while 7.5% were based in Southeast Asia. The main implication of these finding is that the majority of correspondents covering the Gulf crisis did not seem to be familiar with the region's issues and problems. This means that their reporting of a complex crisis of the magnitude of that in the Gulf would
tend to be less than balanced and enlightened, especially when their mother countries are central parties in the anti-Iraq alliance.

Data showed that 87.5% of respondents worked on a full-time basis while 12.5% operated as stringers. The high percentage of full-time correspondents in the sample points out the importance of covering the Gulf crisis for Western media.

As for news experience in general, it was found that 32.5% of correspondents had a 6–10 years experience while the experiences of 22.5% ranged from 11–15 years; 17.5% from 11–15 years. Ten percent of the sample had a general news experience of 25 years and over. On the other hand, the foreign news experience of 40% of the sample ranged from 6–10 years and of 17.5% from 11–15 years. The fact that a large percentage of correspondents 72.5% had a foreign news experience of 10 years or less indicates their limited familiarity with international issues in general and those of the Middle East in particular.

In terms of education, the study found that 70% of correspondents had a bachelor degree; 20% had a masters degree and 5% were Ph.Ds. As for area of study, the results showed 25% of the sample majored in journalism; 20% in social/human sciences and 22.5% in literature/linguistics. Data on education indicate a good percentage of respondents were well-educated, especially in areas of communication and social sciences. However, the question of whether those subjects of academic training were related to foreign affairs has yet to be investigated.

The finding that 77.5% of correspondents had either lived or worked in the Middle East may suggest a previous exposure to Middle East culture and politics, but it should in no way suggest acquisition of insights into the region’s problems.

Data on foreign languages mastered by the sample showed that English was spoken as a foreign language by 28.7% of respondents, French by 30.3% and Arabic by 6.06% only. The high percentage of English and French language users among non-native speakers in the sample reflects the growing expansion of both languages as media of communication. On the other hand, the low percentage of users of Arabic as a foreign language among correspondents suggests a serious shortcoming in reporting news from foreign countries. This finding may be well-understood by noting that the majority of correspondents were originally based in Western countries where they did not have to use Arabic in their newswork.

The results of the study also indicated that 77.5% of respondents used to file their news reports on the Gulf crisis on a daily basis, while 22.5% had
no answer. As for means of dispatch, the study showed that 27.4% of correspondents used telephone; 40.17% used satellites; 9.80% used facsimile and 15.68% used personal computers. Data on correspondents' use of modern communications technologies seem to explain the high frequency of report dispatch; something that turned the Gulf crisis coverage into an instantaneous reporting operation.

In reporting the Gulf crisis, 45% of the sample said they sought help from local reporters while 32.5% said they did not. This moderate reliance on native newsmen to collect and report the news may be explained by foreign correspondents' non-mastery of Arabic. However, the finding that over half the sample did not resort to local reporters for help may be understood by noting that a large number of Jordanians do not speak English as a second language.

As for sources used by foreign correspondents in covering the Gulf crisis from Jordan, the study showed that 37.5% of correspondents relied on private sources and 25% used both private and official sources. For foreign correspondents, the relatively low usage of official sources vis à-vis private sources may be explained by limited access accorded to them by government officials. Private sources were more conveniently accessed. This assumption, however, seems to go counter to the results of the study in which correspondents gave high rating to the cooperation on the part of Jordanian officials. For example, on a scale from 1–10, 32.5% of the sample gave a full mark to levels of such cooperation. This may indicate high degrees of official cooperation with correspondents already given access to those offices.

With respect to their views on alleged distorted coverage of the crisis, 55% of correspondents disagreed with such allegations, while 22.5% agreed. The high percentage of correspondents denying charges of distortion may be explained by the fact that an opposite position would suggest a self-condemnation on the part of correspondents. Disagreement over potential distortion did not rule out possibilities of modifications and changes in news reports dispatched by correspondents. Indeed 80% of respondents admitted those changes do take place in the gate keeping chain while 12.5% seem to think those editorial changes, despite their frequent occurrence, should in no way imply a distortion.

As for the critical issue(s) underlying the Gulf crisis, 7.5% of respondents thought it was the Palestinian problem; 7.5% thought it was the occupation of Kuwait; another 7.5% believed it was the presence of U.S. – led forces in the Gulf, and 10% believed it was oil. Lack of consensus on the issue(s)
underlying the Gulf crisis seems to reflect varying perspectives held by correspondents on the problem. This variation will certainly have a bearing on the type of coverage correspondents offer to their audiences around the world. A news report based on the view that the whole conflict was about Palestine would certainly be different from another reportedly premised on the view that it was all about oil.

The results of study indicated that 40% of correspondents thought the newsworthy components of the crisis were political, military and humanitarian. Those who thought political aspects only were the most important constituted 35%; those who thought of military aspects accounted for 10% and those who thought of humanitarian aspects made up 15%. The high percentage of correspondents giving priority to political/military news over humanitarian news seem to be compatible with the findings of previous research in which Western media were shown to be highly attracted to news rife with political and military drama as that in the Gulf.

As for the persistence of correspondents’ views on the conflict since its outbreak on August 2, 1991, 47.5% thought their perspectives underwent certain changes while 37.5% said no changes took place. This finding system seems to underscore the significance of time-series studies of newsmen (over time) as one-shot studies, may not always reflect enduring attitudes and values.

When asked about the general problems facing them in covering the Gulf crisis in Jordan 17.5% cited language; 15% cited lack of official cooperation; 15% cited access to Iraq and 5% cited inadequate media facilities. For the most part, such problems seem to have an organisational rather than a political nature, and thus may be alleviated by media institutions themselves.

Notes
