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# Reporting from Down Under: Foreign Correspondents in Australia

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## Foreign correspondents in Australia

### Abstract

The findings of this article are based on in-depth interviews with twelve foreign correspondents reporting on Australia. These correspondents work for all media – print, radio, TV and news agencies – and provide evidence that new technology may have changed transmission speeds but not the nature of events they report about. News ranking is still determined by factors such as political influence and trade volumes, news values, and news interest. Australia, medium-sized, geographically on the periphery and politically stable, is not a major player on the world political stage. As a country, it is always more likely to come to the world's attention because of shark attacks, natural disasters and bushfires rather than any decision taken in its capital, Canberra.

### Introduction

International news has and has had its fair share of scholarly attention over the past half century. The interest, on one hand, has focussed on news flows, and on the other on those who have a major input into this flow - foreign correspondents and gatekeepers (Hjavar, 2002, pp.91/92). While the research on the macro level of news flow and micro level of the professional values and media production circumstances of foreign correspondents continues, the interest in gate-keepers has somewhat subsided. This development is an indication of the increasing acceptance of the fact that news flow occurs according to certain determinants, and that its perceived inadequacies and imbalances are difficult to address. Whether new technology, which deeply affects modes of production, modes of delivery and modes of reception, can do so is as yet the largely unanswered question.

This paper will use an inquiry into foreign correspondents reporting from Australia to test the assumption that rapid developments in communication technology have brought changes to their reporting environment. First this paper will discuss in some detail previous studies on news values, news geography, news interest and news flow determinants. This body of literature will then inform the evaluation of twelve research interviews with foreign correspondents working in Sydney. The type of correspondent these people are, whether traditional foreign correspondent working exclusively for one media organization or working on contract for a number of outlets, and the medium they work for, print, electronic media, on-line or news agency, will be assessed as this permits conclusions about the level of interest in Australia as a news generator. So, too, will the correspondents' account on what they report about. With earlier studies on news flow providing points of comparison to these interview results, assertions can be made as to whether new technology has helped Australia to overcome its proverbial "tyranny of distance" (Blainey, 1968) so as to change the world's interest in the fifth continent.

### Literature Review

#### *The Foreign News Debate*

As Paterson and Sreberny write in the introduction of their book, *International News in the Twenty-First Century*, the debate about "the amount, the focus, and the adequacy of international coverage

is not new" (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004, p. 6). In the mid 1970s this debate centred on the perceived imbalance in international news flows. The demand for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), reflective of the fact that in the previous two decades 85 new countries came into existence (Carlsson, 2003, p. 37), brought about several UNESCO studies. The major one was the report of the MacBride Commission, titled *Many Voices, One World* (1980), dealing with the demands of democratization, decolonization, demonopolization, and development in communication (Carlsson, 2003, p. 40-42).

Another study was dedicated to *Foreign News in the Media: International reporting in 29 countries* (1985), authored by Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi with Kaarle Nordenstreng. It was based on the work of thirteen national teams researching the structure of foreign news reporting by way of sampling and analysing selected media's publications of international news. One of the countries represented by a national team was Australia. In terms of regions, though, Australia was counted as part of Asia despite recognition of the fact that "Australia seemed to fit least into its geopolitical region; its strong concern with Western Europe and North America reflected both in its Anglophone heritage and its tendency to identify primarily with Western industrial nations" (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985, p. 39). This is borne out by data that shows Australia's attention greatly more focussed on Western Europe and North America than that of its Asian neighbours (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985, p. 41). While Australia's grouping with Asia makes it harder to properly define its position in the ranking order of regions, it can be said that Australia was then a middle-ranking country with regard to international news, neither as prominent as the United States or Western Europe nor as under-reported as Latin American or African countries (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985, p. 45).

Sreberny-Mohammadi et al.'s data also emphasized that, in a post-colonial world, the status of the United States and selected Western European countries is unbroken. They are "metropolitan centres" towards which the peripheral nations turn their foreign news attention. The peripheral areas "tend to provide the 'hot' news; once the heat has subsided, these areas rapidly disappear from the news spotlight" (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985, p. 42).

Echoes of Galtung and Ruge's seminal study on news values, which first highlighted the dominance on elite nations in foreign news, in Sreberny-Mohammadi et al.'s findings is no coincidence. According to one of the study's authors, Kaarle Nordenstreng, "much of the research and critical advocacy of the New World Information Order (NWICO) could be traced to Galtung and Ruge" whose "hypotheses and methodology also became paradigmatic for much of the research on international news" (Nordenstreng in Hjavard, 2002, p. 93).

### *News Values*

According to Palmer (cited in O'Neill & Harcup, 2009, p.164), "Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge were the first to provide a systematic list of news values in a paper presented at the first Nordic Conference on Peace Research in Oslo in 1963, and published in 1965." Their criteria have been lauded as "the foundation study of news values" (McQuail in O'Neill & Harcup, 2009, p.164), or as remaining "even today one of the most influential pieces on news making" (Zelizer in O'Neill & Harcup, 2009, p.164).

Ironically, as O'Neill and Harcup point out, Galtung and Ruge's research was not primarily aimed at identifying news values. More importantly, and suiting the context of this paper, it was a study of conflicts in the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus, and how they were reported in Norwegian papers. In other words, it was first and foremost a study of foreign news. Galtung and Ruge's twelve factors, in increasing importance, are (in abbreviated form): frequency; threshold; unambiguity; meaningfulness; consonance; unexpectedness; continuity; composition; reference to elite nations; reference to elite people; reference to persons; reference to something negative.

Galtung and Ruge's criteria have been critiqued numerous times as news values per se, or have been amended (or ignored) as news values determining foreign news. Harcup and O'Neill, in an earlier article, tested Galtung and Ruge's "'predictive pattern' of which events will and will not be reported" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, p. 265) on a selection of British newspapers on all news stories, and not just foreign ones. Unsurprisingly, day-to-day news follows a somewhat different pattern from that of reporting foreign crises. Yet unambiguity, reference to elite people, frequency, reference to something negative and reference to persons (in that order) scored highly in their findings (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, p. 270-273).

Other studies, this time focussed exclusively on foreign news, reached similarly mixed conclusions. Hjavard points to a number of serious flaws in Galtung and Ruge's theoretical and methodological framework, in particular in their conception of the news production process (Hjavard, 2002: 94), yet emphasizes that Galtung's stance on communication imperialism opened the way to uncovering the imbalance in international news flows.

Even if the exact hierarchy of news values is contested, their existence is not. Paterson and Sreberny speak of "a more or less uniform set of news values [being] invoked by key gatekeepers throughout the global system" (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004, p. 7). They give a vignette of foreign news on television as a series of

common stories that are reported with virtually identical pictures and words. These may include one or two disruptive events – the war in Bosnia and Congo, an earthquake in Japan or forest fire in California – one or two predictable political or economic events from the power centres – the presidential election in the United States, the latest directives from EU headquarters in Brussels, the exchange rate of the Euro and Yen – and one or two human interest events that included the bizarre, amusing and courageous – record multiple births, lovemaking between pandas, the lone yachtsman who forfeits victory to save a competitor. (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004, p.8)

One major omission in Galtung and Ruge's criteria, due to the fact that they looked at crises in distant countries, was to assess the importance of proximity as a news value, either in foreign or domestic news. Nor did their study, as only a large scale project can, assess the kind of news dominating foreign reporting.

#### *News geography: geographical and other proximities*

Generally, the value of proximity is undisputed. Paterson and Sreberny write, "selection criteria also emphasize the significance of neighbouring countries and those with whom 'our' country (whichever it is) has close economic, political and cultural ties" (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004, p.8).

Similarly, Kamps in his chapter on news geography in an exhaustive study on German foreign correspondents, emphasizes proximity, drawing on a German study which shows that economic, political, geographic and linguistic proximity is a significant news factor (Kamps, 2008, p.80-98). This study distinguishes between news centres (elite nations in Galtung and Ruge's terminology), such as the United States, Germany, France and Great Britain; news neighbours, such as other EU countries or NATO members or countries with strong trade connections; thematic neighbours, where a particular tie is an ongoing topic, and news periphery from where news is made available only occasionally (Kamps, 2008, pp.88/89).

Whereas the general value of close economic, political and cultural ties is unchallenged, opinions are divided about the importance of geographic proximity. Robert L. Stevenson's research concluded that "Geographic proximity is the overwhelming factor in foreign news. Regional news dominates news from all other parts of the world" (Stevenson in Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985, p.80).

Wu, on the other hand, who investigated the determinants of international news flow as a meta-analysis based on 55 research papers, finds that geographic proximity alone has no impact on international coverage (Wu, 1998: 500). According to Wu, results are only "overwhelmingly supportive ... of regionalism" when they included trade ties, cultural affinity and political relations (Wu, 1998: 498/99). With this, Wu redirects the idea of proximity beyond the notion of shared borders and emphasizes economic, political and historical proximities instead. For an island continent like Australia, which does not have any immediate neighbours, this is an important distinction. Equally important, however, is the fact that Australia, with the exception of New Zealand, does not have near neighbours with whom it shares cultural and historical ties. This makes it difficult indeed for Australia to score in the proximity stakes.

### *News interest*

While there are many studies on foreign correspondents (Hannerz, 2004; Willnat & Weaver, 2003; Wu & Hamilton, 2004; Hamilton & Jenner, 2004; Hahn, Lönnendonker & Schröder, 2008), few have followed up on the aspect of ranking countries according to the news interest they attract. One such paper is Yoel Cohen's "Foreign press corps as an indicator of international news interest" (1995). Cohen takes elitism and proximity as the two most important theories that explain patterns of foreign news coverage. By collating data on foreign press corps received from 103 countries, he established a list of 53 nations which had at least ten countries represented in their press corps. Cohen's survey lists these nations not only according to the number of foreign countries in the press corps but also according to the number of news organisations in the press corps. The data yielded in this list confirms Cohen's first hypothesis, "that news organisations are inclined to have foreign correspondents in elitist countries" (Cohen, 1995, p.90). The United States leads that list with 944 news organisations from 82 countries, followed, at some distance, by the EU, Brussels, with 606 news organisations from 58 countries. Almost on par is Great Britain, which hosted 599 organisations from 60 countries. The next ten places, in descending order according to the number of news organisations, are Italy; France; Germany; Austria; Russia; Japan and Israel. In terms of number of countries in the press corps, the US is followed by France, Germany, Russia, Britain, the EU, Brussels, Italy, Austria, Spain and Sweden. The 'elitism' of the United States and Western Europe

could not be demonstrated more clearly. However, it has to be remembered that this data is almost 20 years old (it was collected in 1993). Cohen also sees the pattern of 'proximity' confirmed, as long as proximity is interpreted as "closeness' ... in geographical, political, economic or cultural terms" (Cohen, 1995, p.96). "An example of political proximity is the large presence of Israeli media in the US" (ibid), whereas an example of cultural or religious proximity is the strong presence of Catholic countries in Italy. Cohen's hypothesis that "news organisations faced by limited financial resources will prefer coverage of elitist countries over proximate countries" was also proven. "Only ten of the 84 foreign bureaux of Black Africa are in geographically proximate countries, while 52 were in Western Europe and the US" (Cohen, 1995, p.98).

How did Australia fare in that list? In terms of numbers of news organisations, it occupied 28<sup>th</sup> place out of 53, which is almost right in the middle. Its rank in terms of number of countries in the foreign press corps was lower than the middle in 33<sup>rd</sup> place. Australia shared this rank with Singapore and Pakistan. While Australia and Singapore most likely still hold similar rankings, it can be assumed that Pakistan, due to its frontline position in the war against terrorism, is today of far greater news interest than it was then.

Another way of measuring news interest is to look at what Hamilton and Jenner have called the 'typology of foreign correspondence', as "economic forces have hastened the demise of conventional foreign news" (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004, p.313). According to Hamilton and Jenner, investment in bureaux is less likely, leading to the traditional, well-trained correspondent being replaced by different types of correspondents. Apart from an increase in parachute journalism, Hamilton and Jenner foresee that foreign nationals will increasingly be relied upon to cover events overseas. They predict that, via the Internet, sourcing foreign news can take multiple forms, whether local journalists functioning as foreign correspondents, or using a foreign journalist already working as a foreign correspondent, for one's own reports (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004, p.313).

In such circumstances it would be very hard to establish the number and composition of the foreign correspondents' corps. What can be said is that the number of bureaux remains an expression of news interest. According to Hannerz (2004, p.74), "Freelancers and stringers make up what one might see as the informal sector of foreign correspondence." A large 'informal sector', indicating the decrease of the numbers of traditional foreign correspondents and the increase of freelancers can be as much a sign of changing economic times as of fluctuating levels of news interest. Also, the number of correspondents working for news agencies compared to foreign correspondents working for one media outlet only gives an indication of the importance assigned to that country. Here, it would further have to be established whether these are full-time or part-time correspondents. However, it remains to be seen whether the ongoing decline of specialised foreign correspondents, "coupled with the proliferation of alternate sources of foreign news" (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004, p.301) heralds a different distribution of foreign news or whether the same pattern of news flow is merely fed by different sources.

### *News flow determinants*

News flow determinants have been much studied and written about by H. Denis Wu (Wu, 1998; Wu, 2000, Wu, 2004; Wu, 2007). His 1998 article presented a meta-analysis of 55 research papers,

testing “the GNP of each nation, volume of trade, regionalism, population, geographic size, geographic proximity, political/ economic interests of the host country, ‘elitiness’, communication resources and infrastructure, and cultural affinity” (Wu, 1998, p.507). Wu found that the “magnitude of economic interaction [was] one of the most conducive factors” (Wu, 1998:498). However, unlike Galtung and Ruge, Wu does not establish a hierarchy of factors. Regionalism, cultural affinity, political relations and number of news agencies stationed in a country are all seen as increasing the news flow, but geographic proximity, GNP value, population and size are not seen as influential factors.

Wu’s 2000 article looked at “Systems Determinants of International News Coverage”, using data collected over a sample period of two weeks in September 1995 in 38 countries. Outstanding events in that time were the conflict in Bosnia and France’s intention of trialling atomic bombs on the Muroroa atoll in the South Pacific. In Wu’s findings the top ten countries, in terms of receiving coverage, were the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Bosnia, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Spain (Wu, 2000, p.121), though the chart actually shows Israel in tenth place. In this list, Australia is in 15<sup>th</sup> place, below South Africa and above Switzerland (Wu, 2000, p.122). Wu reasserts his earlier finding that “trade is the leading predictor of news coverage” (ibid.), adding that the presence of international news agencies is the second most important predictor (Wu, 2000, p.124), and detecting “a pervasive regional flavour in many countries’ news diet” (Wu, 2000, p.126). In other words, the news flow and its determinants, compared with earlier studies, had remained stable.

Taking the same data, Wu (2004, p.98-105) listed for 44 nations between eight and eighteen countries they reported about. In these lists Australia appears six times. It is reported most prominently in New Zealand, where it ranks third behind the United Kingdom and the United States. It ranks eighth in the British media, the same as in China and South Africa. Interestingly, it ranked fifth in Thailand and also gets a mention (17<sup>th</sup>) in Slovenia.

Wu’s most recent study (2007) takes in online media in that it looks at the determinants of coverage of foreign news in two US traditional media and two news websites. Using the earlier established criteria of economic interaction; presence of international news agencies; traits of the nation; and cultural and geographic proximity to the US, Wu found that despite the technological advantages of the Internet, “the new professionals in the web department appear to be still under the reign of international news agencies as their colleagues in the traditional media ... in fact, a stronger impact was found in the web model” (Wu, 2007, p.542/ 548). However, the “prediction power of trade volume in the regression model for online news seems not as strong as in the traditional media counterpart” (p. 547). Wu concluded a “high resemblance between traditional and online media” (p. 549). The most covered nations during two composite weeks between September and December 2003 showed that “Middle Eastern countries, economic elites and military powers still dominate in the news space on the web” (ibid). Australia, most likely as part of the coalition of the willing, managed to squeeze into 20<sup>th</sup> rank in the traditional media with eight stories, but did not appear on the web (p. 548).

### *Literature conclusions*

The literature about news values, news geography (which encompasses geographical and other proximities), news interest, and international news flow determinants produced results that are largely compatible rather than contradictory. Galtung and Ruge's early observations about and critique of (international news) news values, such as elite nations, elite persons, and lack of ambiguity have been confirmed in nearly all of the subsequent studies. While they centred less on news values than on trying to explain what made a country an elite nation, they nevertheless showed the as yet unbroken dominance of the United States and the major Western European countries in the international news. Economic activity and status have been consistently highlighted as a major determinant of news flow, as has to a degree regionalism and other cultural, historical and religious proximities.

This pattern of news flow has survived the end of the cold war and 9/11. It remains to be seen whether it will also survive the re-ordering of economic powers after the global financial crisis. This may well signal the emergence of new elite players and reduce the dominance of others.

## **Methodology**

The studies looked at, with the exception of the one on news interest, are methodologically based on media content or content analysis. They therefore were done, to use Hjavard's distinction, from the selection perspective rather than the production perspective (Hjavard, 2002, p.92). Hjavard further distinguishes between micro and macro level analysis. For the selection perspective, gate-keeper studies are seen as micro and news flow research as macro level. For the production perspective, Hjavard lists as micro level ideology critique of foreign news content and analysis of news media organisations (ibid).

Although this paper does not directly use either approach, it has to be counted at the micro level of the selection perspective. The findings of this paper are based on in-depth interviews with twelve foreign correspondents working in and reporting about Australia. The correspondents were chosen from the members list of the Foreign Correspondents Association, Australia and South Pacific (FCA, 2009).

The first stage of research was carried out with four German-speaking correspondents for a study on German correspondents world-wide (Josephi, 2008; Hahn et al., 2008). The same questionnaire, which covered the correspondent's background, work particulars and routine was subsequently used for a further eight interviews with correspondents from Asia and Europe, and one working for the United States. These correspondents were chosen as a strategic sample in trying to achieve a geographical and linguistic mix, as well as regional representation. The sample contains correspondents working for all types of media outlets: print, radio, television, and news agency. One also contributed to an online site.

A qualitative, and to a small part quantitative, analysis of their answers allows conclusions with regard to the news interest, and by extension, news flow generated in Australia. Looking at their work particulars and work routine gives insights into what kind of correspondent can predominantly be found in Australia, the type of media organisation represented and the type of news sought from Australia.



## Findings

### *Who are the correspondents?*

Of the twelve correspondents interviewed, seven are European – German, Swiss, Spanish and Russian. Three are Asian – Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese – and one South Asian, and the chief of the Associated Press Bureau in Sydney is Australian. Linguistically they represent six languages and geographically all continents apart from Africa since the Spanish correspondent's agency also has many Latin American clients.

While numerous studies on foreign correspondents emphasize the economics of foreign correspondence (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004, pp.303-306; Wu & Hamilton, 2004; Hannerz, 2004), it has been proven very difficult, if not impossible, to work out the percentage of fully employed correspondents, or those permanently employed but on fractional time, full-time on contract, part-time on contract, and variants thereof, or as stringers paid per story in any given country. Even if such a census were done at a certain point in time, it is likely that research a week or a month later would yield different results. The careers of the twelve foreign correspondents show that, in their time in Australia, they shifted from fully employed for a news agency to freelance for print, or one oscillating between freelance and full-time for a news agency depending on the amount of news generated of direct interest for her country.

At the time of interview only four of the twelve correspondents were fully employed and worked full-time for the same media organisation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, three of these worked for news agencies and one for the international channel of his country's radio network. The fact that only one quarter of the interviewed correspondents is a so called 'traditional foreign correspondent' permits two conclusions. On one hand, it can be seen as showing the decline of the 'traditional foreign correspondent' under the impact of changing economic times for media organisations and new technology opening other foreign news information venues (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004; Wu & Hamilton, 2004). On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a barometer of news interest in Australia which, according to this percentage, can at best be described as of medium interest.

Wu and Hamilton's list of top ten postings of American foreign correspondents shows a pattern very similar to that of news flows. They are in the UK, Germany, Mexico, US, France, Russia, China, Japan, Italy and Israel (Wu & Hamilton, 2004, p.524). The only surprise in this list is the high ranking of neighbouring Mexico, and notable also is the fact that China now outranks Japan. Australia does not come anywhere near these countries in political importance, trade volume or geographical proximity.

The media in which the twelve correspondents work can be seen in a similar light. Three work predominantly in print, two in radio, two in television, and five in newsagencies. This list shows telling divergences with Wu and Hamilton's results in as much as they can be compared, given that their data is on the correspondents *of* one country rather than *in* one country. Wu and Hamilton found that 42% worked for magazines, 28% for newspapers and 24% for news services. Radio was a low 7.5% (Wu & Hamilton, 2004, p.522). From this comparison it can be concluded that news agencies with their event driven news rather than in-depth reporting for print media, be it newspapers or magazines, dominate in Australia.

With respect to gender, three of the twelve interviewees were women. This percentage accords with Wu and Hamilton's findings of a female proportion of 22% among American foreign national correspondents (Wu & Hamilton, 2004, p. 523). Also with regard to education, all correspondents held college degree or had at least spent time at university, which is in line with Wu and Hamilton's finding that foreign correspondents are well educated. Wu and Hamilton put the average age of American correspondents at 44 years, which is somewhat higher than the average age of journalists (Joseph, 2009, p. 146). While the interviewees were not asked to specify their age, their average would similarly lie between early to mid-forties.

One characteristic stands out among the correspondents interviewed. Most of them, while already working as journalists or correspondents, *first* chose to live in Australia and *second* made arrangements about finding work in this country, either with their then employer or by approaching other media organisations. Of the twelve correspondents, discounting the one Australian national, only two were posted to Australia. All others either asked specifically to be posted to Sydney or came to live in Australia for personal reasons.

Australia is not the place for correspondents to make a big mark, nor does it make them rich. One correspondent mentioned that an international agency has different pay rates for stories emanating from the UK compared to those coming from the Asia-Pacific region because the former have a higher on-sale value. This difference in pay rates has not changed over the past decade. It has to be concluded that Australia as location is largely a lifestyle choice for correspondents, and is not predicated on the amount of news flow generated by the country.

#### *How do they work?*

All but three of the interviewed correspondents work from home, and for one of these three the office is in the apartment adjacent to the one serving as living quarters. For several of the correspondents the work from home is necessitated by the hours at which they have to deliver their live broadcasts which, due to the time differences, could be very late at night or early in the morning. The two who did not work from home are at news agency offices. The circumstance that so many of the correspondents work from home highlights two aspects. One, it underlines the fact that most of the correspondents in Australia are on fractional employment or freelance, and second, that technological changes permit a home-office set up.

Their work routines are remarkably similar. The day begins with checking emails while listening to the radio, most likely the news channel of Australia's public broadcaster, or viewing television news channels. The local print media, in particular the two national newspapers, The Australian and the Australian Financial Review, plus the Sydney and Melbourne papers are studied on the Internet or in hard copy before making a story/ stories selection. The stories are pursued during the day through further Internet research, attendance of press conferences, or pursuit of interviews and comments. All said that the Internet permits them to access information much quicker, which accords with Wu and Hamilton's findings. Unlike their American counterparts, no one spoke about the need to "monitor competitors' coverage" (Wu & Hamilton, 2004, p. 526). This type of pressure did not rate a mention.

Nearly all foreign correspondents interviewed needed to travel, some frequently, because generally their geographic 'beat' includes all of Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. In some instances this includes the former French colonies in the Pacific and East Timor. However, most frequently the travel was along the east coast of Australia, including Canberra, with the occasional foray into the other states and territory.

The rapid technological developments in the time most of the correspondents have been in Australia did not change their overall task. Not one remarked that technology is having a major impact on his or her work, although researching and information gathering has become easier according to all correspondents. Only one is contributing regularly, among other outlets, to a website.

### *What do they report on?*

There was a great deal of agreement among the interviewees on what can be reported from Australia. Especially, there was unanimity about one point: Australian politics are of little interest to the rest of the world. As the Chinese correspondent put it, "Australia is not a hard news country." The German correspondent for commercial television, in his ten years in Australia, had sold only one political story – that of the Tampa crisis. The only other political event, which got consistent mention in the interviews, was the change of government in November 2007 after eleven years of conservative rule.

Another indication of the relative unimportance of Australian politics is the fact that by far the majority of correspondents are in Sydney rather than the capital, Canberra. The Russian news agency ITAR-Tass, for example, shifted its correspondent from Canberra to Sydney in the mid 1990s. Of the six Chinese bureaux in Australia (CCTV; CRI – Chinese International Radio; Xinhua; China News Agency; People's Daily and Guanming Daily) three are in Canberra and three are in Sydney. The Vietnamese News Agency has correspondents in Sydney and Canberra, with those in Canberra envious of those working in Sydney. One German-speaking correspondent struck a compromise by living half-way between Sydney and Canberra.

As in other places in the world (Willnat & Weaver, 2003, p.414), foreign correspondents complain about having less access to politicians and official news sources than local journalists. Australia's former Prime Minister, John Howard, was known to assign foreign correspondents less importance than a reporter from the smallest local newspaper as there are no votes to be won overseas. One correspondent took to listening to talkback radio where Howard regularly appeared to know what was on his agenda and to get quotes.

So what do they report about? One of the few interviewees who could be labelled a 'traditional foreign correspondent' and who works for a newspaper with a wide net of foreign correspondents, put the percentages of his articles as such: politics 20%; economics and business 60%, and social and cultural articles making up the remaining 20%, with a few sport stories thrown in. These percentages are in marked contrast to the ratings of news topics covered by American foreign correspondents, where politics rate highest, closely followed by economics (Wu & Hamilton, 2004, p. 524).

Economic and business reporting has by far the largest share of news coming out of resource-rich Australia. Especially for those correspondents working for print or news agencies, any matter that touches on common trade links, existing or prospective, is newsworthy. This fact is clearly in accordance with Wu's findings that economic interactivity between countries continues to be the most significant determinant of international news flow (Wu, 2007: 549; Wu, 1998, pp.498/499).

Australia demands more ingenuity of its foreign correspondents than other places. Two correspondents with previous posting in the US and in London respectively, said that there they were inundated with stories whereas in Australia they sometimes have to scratch to find the next newsworthy item. Many prefer to write about environmental and social issues, with the latter frequently being Australian Indigenous issues. Another constant is sport. The Indian correspondent has written more cricket stories than she cares to remember; the Australian Open Tennis Championship is another annual high profile event. In soccer Australian clubs belongs to the Asian Champions League and Rugby connects Australia to South Africa, Great Britain and France.

There are three types of stories from Australia which always will be reported globally: natural disasters, bush fires, and shark or crocodile attacks. They are stories that, using Galtung and Ruge's news values, answer to many of their criteria: unambiguous, unexpected yet frequent enough to provide continuity. These events can be seen in personal terms and are negative. In particular the two correspondents working for commercial television are beholden to these criteria. Using the sample television news cited earlier (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004, p.8), the news from Australia would either fall into the category of disruptive event or the one or two human interest stories which may also involve one of Australia's furry animals. But rather than event news, the television correspondents are more likely to be asked to report on Australia's best beaches, golf courses or stories about Australia's wildlife.

Also in other media, the news from Australia often has diversionary character. As one of the correspondents said, "My listeners like it when I tell them about riding along the beach while watching a whale." According to a number of the correspondents, Australia has managed to generate an image of itself as a beautiful and safe country, diverting attention away from its problematic areas such as Indigenous affairs, immigration and environmental problems.

## **Conclusion**

The twelve interviews validate the findings on international news flows and Galtung and Ruge's much earlier discovery of 'elite nations' in the news, and those who move on the periphery of the world's attention. Australia, geographically speaking, has always been seen on the periphery, and its status of a developed, resource-rich nation at best contributes to making it a middle-ranking nation with regard to news interest. The question asked was whether new technology has broken this 'tyranny of distance' which defined communication with and about Australia for so long. The answer, however, is in the negative.

New technology has done little to change the news flow pattern. In fact, the results of the interviews confirm other research that the new technology increases dependency on agency

material, and this material continues to be selected according to established criteria. While the criteria have remained unchanged over the several decades, this does not mean that the directions of news flows will remain stable. The global financial crisis has hastened the redistribution of global economic power and this, more than any other factor, is destined to redirect international news flow.

Australia's position in the news interest, however, is unlikely to change in any major way. As a politically stable country that is not a major player on the world's political stage and whose historical and cultural ties do not lie in the region, it is for the foreseeable future far more likely to come to the world's attention because of bush fires, floods and shark attacks than any decision taken in its capital, Canberra.

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