

Global News

TV News Coverage of Global Issues

Major findings:

- **TV Abroad Narrows** Foreign news declined 36% in the 1990's.
Page 1
- **Cable Battle** CNN had the most foreign news after 9/11, but FOX had the heaviest terrorism coverage.
Page 3
- **If It Bleeds It Leads** Two-thirds of all post-9/11 foreign news involved violence.
Page 5
- **Forcing the Issue** Military force was urged 12 times as often as diplomacy.
Page 4
- **No Free Ride** Two out of three sources criticized U.S. foreign policy.
Page 4

This issue of Media Monitor presents results from CMPA's ongoing study on the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on coverage of foreign news. We examined coverage during the month immediately after the attacks (September 11 through October 10, 2001) on the flagship evening newscasts on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and FOX. The results of examining the longer term impact of September 11 on foreign news coverage will be addressed in a future issue of Media Monitor.

The amount of foreign news declined sharply during the 1990's. The proportion of stories declined from about one in three when the decade began to one in five when it concluded. For the first half of the decade (through 1995) foreign news averaged 30 percent of all coverage; during the second half (1999 through 2000) it comprised only 21 percent. From 1992 to 1998 almost 40 percent of all foreign news disappeared from the airwaves. But on September 11, 2001, global issues suddenly acquired a local face. Jeff Sayer, executive producer of CBS's "60 Minutes II," predicted that "people are going to want to know more about how the world is operating, what's going on outside our borders, and there's a lot of reporting to do." Many in the media wondered whether their profession's descent into trivia had come to an end.

To find out, we analyzed the first month (30 days) of news after 9/11 on the flagship evening news shows from five broadcast and cable networks - ABC's World News Tonight, CBS's Evening News, NBC's Nightly News, The Fox news channel's (hereafter FOX) Special Report with Brit Hume, and CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports. (Limited resources precluded our adding MSNBC, whose audience lags well behind those of its cable competitors.) These five shows collectively

(continued on page 2)

Amount of Coverage



ABC	145 stories
CBS	109 stories
CNN	146 stories
NBC	104 stories
Fox	115 stories

ran a total of 619 foreign news stories in the month after September 11. ABC led the other two broadcast network newscasts in foreign news coverage, with 145 stories to CBS' 109 and NBC's 104. This translated into 41 minutes of coverage more than CBS and 50 minutes more than NBC. Whether by virtue of CNN's network of 30 international bureaus or differing editorial priorities, CNN had a 26 percent edge over FOX, with 146 stories on its flagship evening show compared to 115 on FOX. Thus, ABC and CNN emerged as the networks that paid the most attention to events outside the United States.

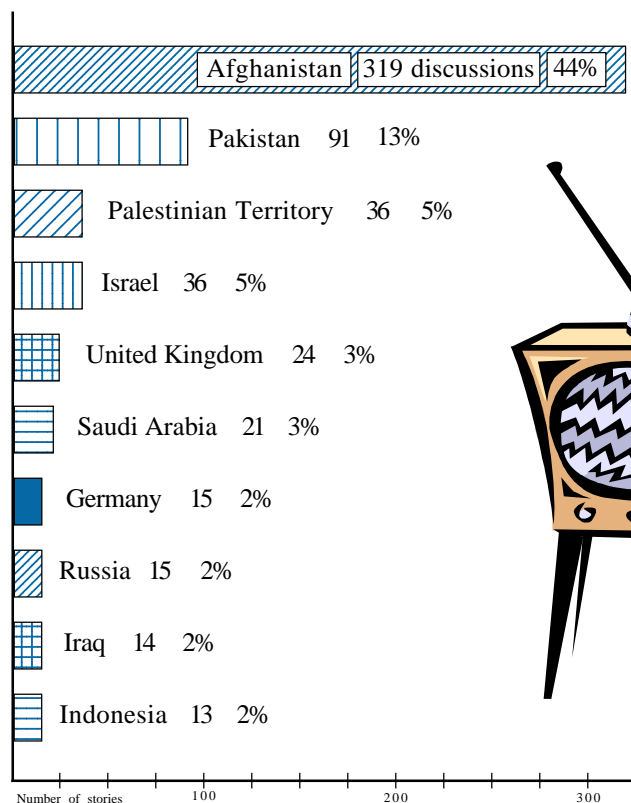
Despite the hopes of many commentators and the increase in the number of stories that we recorded, 9/11 did not immediately alter some deficiencies that have long been noted in television's coverage of foreign news. Surprisingly, for all the coverage of terrorist groups and regimes, the total amount of foreign news on the broadcast evening newscasts in both 2001 and 2002 increased by only five percentage points over 2000, from 22 percent to 27 percent. (We don't have compa-

rable long-term data for the cable networks.) This still represents less foreign news than there was a decade ago in 1992. Even during the weeks that followed the tragedy, from September 11 through the end of the year 2001, foreign news accounted for only 34 percent of all coverage, equal to its proportion of the 1991 news agenda. The impression of saturation coverage that many people recall reflects the considerable attention paid to homeland security issues, the domestic impact of the war on terrorism, and the spate of anthrax attacks. Of course, it also reflects the presence of additional sources of news, especially the three all-news

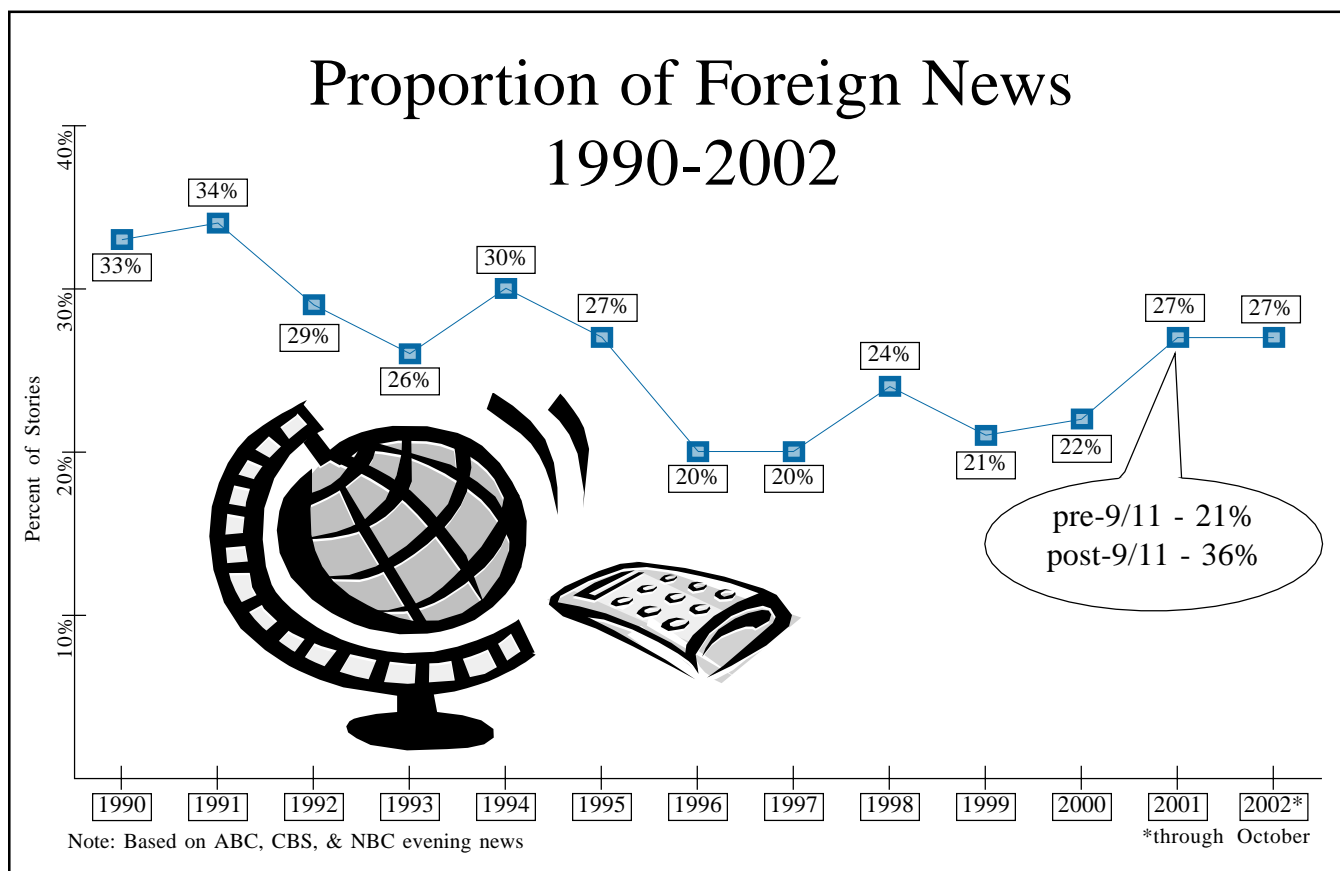
cable networks.

Within this broad framework, we examined the details of cable and broadcast news coverage in the period of the most intense coverage, the first month after the attacks. Post 9/11 foreign news coverage may have broadened its share of the news agenda, but it also narrowed its focus. This can be seen most clearly in the geographical distribution of foreign news. Afghanistan was discussed 319 times, accounting for nearly half (44 percent) of all discussions of foreign countries; this was followed at a distance by Pakistan with 91 discussions (13 percent). Thus, a majority of 57 per-

Nations in the News



Note: Based on 742 discussions on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, & FOX.



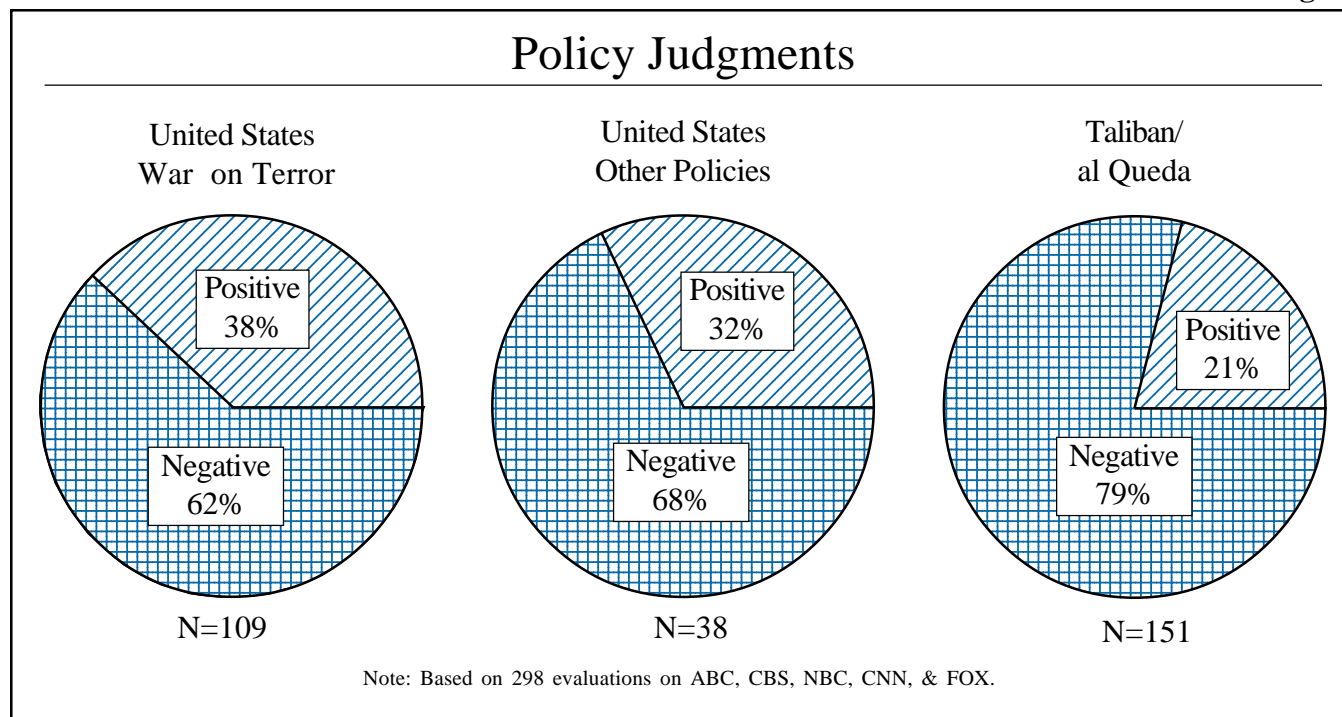
cent of foreign news coverage was allocated to the two countries whose news interest lay mainly in the story of the war on terror. Despite continuing strife in the Middle East, Israel and the Palestinians were each discussed only 36 times, about once every four newscasts, accounting for another ten percent of total international coverage. Beyond that, the United Kingdom got 24 discussions and Saudi Arabia 21. But only ten countries received more than a dozen discussions. Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific Rim, and much of Europe simply disappeared from view. If one of the lessons of September 11 was to pay more attention to what was happening in the rest of the world, the lesson didn't take -

at least in the first month.

The absence of geographical diversity in global news was further underlined by the issues that were discussed most frequently. The U.S.-Afghanistan conflict and the broader war on terror overwhelmed all other issues in foreign coverage, accounting for 52 percent of all issue discussions. The flagship news shows of the cable networks were only slightly more focused on these topics than were the broadcast networks, by 53 to 51 percent. But this similarity masks a significant difference in the news agendas of the two cable networks. FOX led the pack with over two out of three of its discussions (68 percent) focused on Afghanistan and terrorism, against

only 42 percent for CNN.

Given the recent catastrophic events and the international situation associated with them, it is hardly surprising that a majority of discussions concerned issues related to America's response to terrorist attacks from abroad (including the debate over war with Afghanistan). But this pattern is also in keeping with the long-range trajectory of foreign news coverage, which has long treated violence, conflict, accidents and natural disasters as the most newsworthy aspects of the world beyond our shores. Among the 862 issue discussions in the sample, we found that two out of three concerned death and destruction. Most of this coverage concerned armed



conflicts around the globe; the remainder dealt with crime and natural disasters. Once again, there was little overall difference between broadcast and cable news, but a substantial difference between CNN and FOX. CNN devoted one out of every six discussions (17 percent) to violent events apart from the war on terror, compared to only seven percent on FOX. That brought CNN's total to 59 percent violence-related discussions, still below the broadcast networks' 67 percent and FOX's 75 percent of discussions related to some violent event. Turning to the other one-third of the global news agenda that was devoted to non-violent news topics, about 10 percent of all discussions dealt with diplomacy, five percent with other political matters, three percent with all issues involving business and economics, and two per-

cent with human rights.

The coverage also continued the media's longstanding practice of presenting the United States as the principal actor on the world stage. Among all the calls to action and solutions put forward to resolve terrorism and other international problems, the U.S. government was called on to provide a solution 63 percent of the time. As journalist Fred Barnes put it, "What is needed here is a strong exercise of American power." (FOX, 9/19) This is all the more impressive in light of the fact that the coverage included frequent instances in which U.S. government sources called for other nations to assist in the war on terrorism.

Further, the types of solutions that were proposed were heavily dominated by the use of military force. The use of military force by

the U.S. was urged 12 times as frequently as any type of diplomatic activity. For example, Secretary of State Colin Powell told FOX, "Voluntarily or involuntarily... Osama bin Laden has to be put under control and turned over to authorities." (9/30) Indeed, military force accounted for 71 percent of all solutions that were put forward for all problems discussed in global news stories.

In light of the America-centric nature of the coverage, one might expect to see considerable support for US government policies in response to the terrorist attacks. Yet this was not the case. When a source articulated clear support or opposition to U.S. policies used to combat the terrorists and their supporters, criticism prevailed almost twice as often as support (62 percent to 38 percent). This negativism partly reflects the fact



Coverage of Foreign Topics

	All	Network News	Cable News	CNN	Fox
Afghanistan	28	25	32	26	40
Terrorism	24	26	21	16	28
Other war/violence	15	17	13	17	7
Total Violent	67%	68%	66%	59%	75%
Diplomacy	10	9	10	10	10
Other	23	23	24	31	15
Total Non-Violent	33%	32%	34%	41%	25%

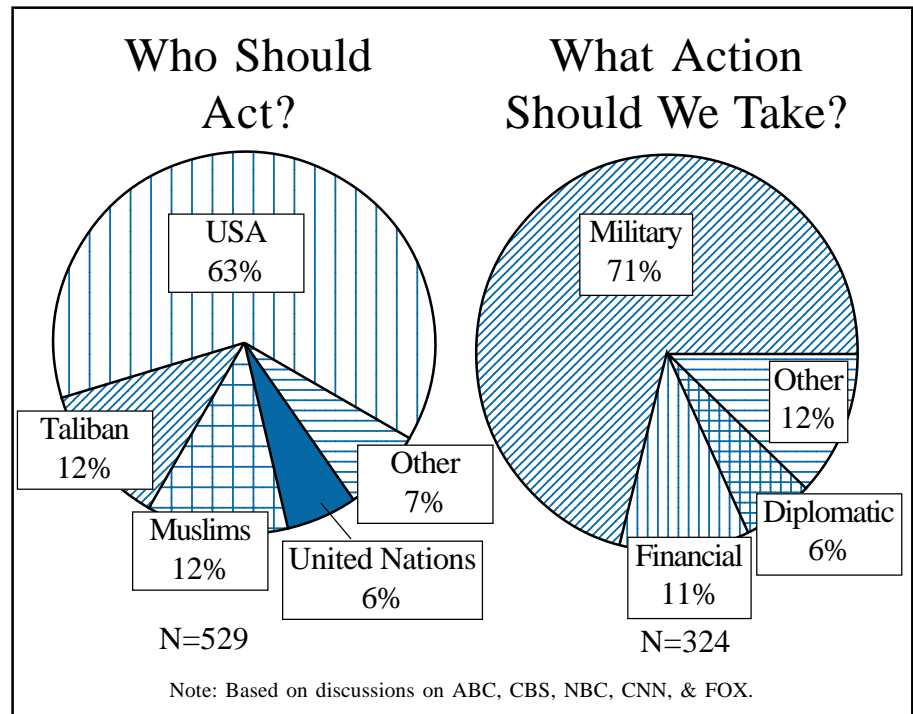
Note: Based on 862 discussions on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, & FOX.

that our sample was restricted to foreign news coverage, which included criticism from America's enemies as well as our allies abroad. Domestic stories contained much greater support for President Bush and his homeland security policies. But it also reflects a more general network negativism on policy issues. Thus, evaluations of all other issues in American foreign policy (e.g., the Middle East) were even more critical, with only 32 percent supportive comments and 68 percent in opposition.

The tone of terrorism coverage was unusual in its lack of partisan differences. In our sample, Democrats and Republicans alike were highly supportive of government policies, with a combined 83 percent positive evaluations, a six to

one positive margin. Indeed, elected officialdom presented such a united front in support of the administration that the newscasts had to go to sources outside the

government and the parties to find critics. Non-partisan domestic sources (i.e., those not identified as having an affiliation with a political party) were tilted toward



the negative, with a majority of 58 percent criticizing US policies. For example, CBS quoted the President of the US Institute of Peace: "If we intervene too directly, too overtly in many places, we can destabilize, ...existing governments and... play into the hands of the terrorists." (10/10) When partisan and non-partisan sources were combined, we found that a slight majority of 53 percent of domestic sources took a favorable view of Bush administration policies. When it came to

world opinion, however, the result was more negative. Among sources from nations who were seen as America's allies in the war on terror, the tone of opinion was similar to that of the domestic debate -- a slight majority of evaluations (53 percent) supported US government policies and criticism. But a larger group -- about one out of five opinions overall -- came from America's enemies. Various representatives of the Taliban or al Qaeda and their supporters abroad who were quoted

accounted for about one-fifth of all policy evaluations. Unsurprisingly, these sources were unanimous in condemning U.S. policy (100 percent negative). For example, an Afghan resident told FOX, "The Americans, this is just an excuse to blame Osama bin Laden. They are fighting with the Muslims." (10/10) As a result the overall body of foreign opinion was strongly critical of US policies on terrorism, by a margin of 71 negative to 29 percent positive judgments.

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