All the News That's Fit to Print?

New York Times Coverage of Human-Rights Violations

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The so-called CNN effect suggests that the American public has quick access to more information about world events than ever before. To test the prevalence of the effect, this study examines *New York Times* stories on fifty countries that human-rights researchers list among the top violators. Results show that although there is a moderate correlation between the magnitude of political terror and the number of human-rights stories from a given country, the *Times's* overall coverage of human rights is seriously lacking. Attention to abuses occurs primarily in countries that were strategically instrumental during the cold war and in countries where there is clear U.S. involvement.

There has been a lot of talk about the so-called CNN effect (Strobel 1997). The term was first used widely when President Bush sent U.S. military personnel to Somalia, in large part in response to the outcry of the American public that was prompted by the excruciating video images of thousands of starving people shown nightly on the network news programs. Although the ability to expose human-rights violations no matter where in the world they occur would seem to be a very positive development, the term *CNN effect* is often used in a pejorative way. The fear is that U.S. foreign policy will come to be driven by vivid images of human suffering shown by the media. This assumes, however, that the media do in fact provide substantial coverage of human-rights abuses. It is this assumption that the present study tests.

Theory

The importance of our research lies in our ability to understand the mass public's exposure to human-rights issues throughout the world. Because a representative democracy necessarily relies on some degree of public interest to determine the policy agenda, a lack of interest among the mass public almost always translates into a lack of interest by political elites. It is essential, then, to gauge the amount and type of information about human-rights violations that is reaching the public.

Much of the recent political communication literature has centered around how the contextualization (or "framing") of news may impact public attitudes (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). An analysis of journalistic frames will only make sense if we find widespread coverage of human-rights violations. More relevant at this stage is the equally popular consideration of the media's ability to set the agenda for public discussion. From this perspective, the media do not influence public opinion by injecting attitudes on policy preferences or other specific ideas, but instead "influence the priorities the American public assigns to national problems" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987:63). A crucial part of setting the agenda is "priming" the audience. Drawing from information-processing literature in psychology, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder explain that people's attention is selective, giving consideration primarily to the information they are able to obtain (1987:64). In short, "a person's judgment depends in part on what comes to mind—on considerations that are, for whatever reason and however briefly, accessible" (1987:65). If no information about human-rights violations is accessible, it is unlikely that people will judge such issues to be important, and if human rights are not important to the public, political elites are unlikely to devote considerable time to the issue.

Previous Research

Mort Rosenblum relays some compelling stories about reporting on international human rights in his book, *Coups and Earthquakes* (1979:193–202). As a journalistic insider, he explains that coverage of human-rights violations is scarce due to the repressive conditions in states with high levels of political terror. That is, it is difficult to get reliable sources to corroborate reports, as locals fear retribution from their governments. Further, foreign journalists poking their noses into these affairs are generally not well received by the leaders of such regimes. According to his anecdotal account, "The result is that few Americans have any real idea of how a particular government abuses human rights, or how widespread the violations are" (1979:197).

To date, there has been extraordinarily little systematic empirical research on media coverage of human rights. Janice Hanson and Christine M. Miller conducted one such study by examining television coverage of Central America from 1977 to 1980 (1987). Using keywords like *torture, assassination, violence, disappearances,* and *repression* as surrogates of human-rights violations, the authors examined the number of human-rights stories relating to Central America on each of the three major television networks' newscasts in that time period. Among other things, they found that the number of human-rights-related stories did increase during the course of the Carter administration, with the bulk of these stories focused on events in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Using a variation on this approach, Anne E. Geyer and Robert Y. Shapiro came up with slightly different results in their study encompassing 1976 to 1986 (1988). "Human rights" in this study was operationalized through the following four categories: freedom and human rights, torture, political prisoners, and Amnesty International. Data for their study came from the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* the *Los Angeles Times, Newsweek, Time,* and the CBS *Evening News.* According to their findings, human-rights violations received a tremendous boost in media coverage early in the Carter administration but then tapered off after 1977. This led the authors to question the media's—and the public's—commitment to human rights, an interpretation that was subsequently questioned by Kathleen J. Pritchard (1991).

Undoubtedly, the most ambitious and systematic work in this area has been that of Jay S. Ovsiovitch (1993, 1996). Attempting to improve upon previous work by looking at the content of human-rights stories and not simply the amount of coverage, Ovsiovitch analyzed human-rights coverage in the *New York Times, Time* magazine, and the CBS *Evening News* for a ten-year period (1978 to 1987). He created seven categories for identifying human-rights topics: (1) general references to human rights, (2) political rights, (3) civil rights, (4) socioeconomic rights, (5) collective rights, (6) miscellaneous human-rights issues, and (7) human-rights agreements (1993).

During the course of the ten years covered by the study, Ovsiovitch found more than six thousand "human rights" news stories in the three sources, with the *New York Times* having by far the largest number of stories (more than 88 percent) (1993:681). Although the number of stories might, at first glance, seem impressive, Ovsiovitch concluded that the coverage of human-rights violations was generally quite sparse:

> Newsworthiness is defined in part by societal values and expectations of the way the world operates. Conflict and crisis also define what is newsworthy. Under these criteria human rights is a newsworthy topic. Yet there is very little coverage of human rights. In the ten years examined, there are less than two stories a day in the *New York Times* mentioning human rights. There are even fewer stories in *Time* magazine and on the CBS Evening News. (1993:685)

We concur with his claims regarding the significance of his findings:

> News coverage of human rights shapes public opinion, influences foreign policy development, and serves as an informal means of documenting abuse. Yet this information is incomplete, thus skewing the public's perception of human rights around the world. If this information is, in fact, helping to set the political agenda, government officials will focus attention primarily on those regions receiving media coverage. (1993:685)

The Present Study

Although it builds upon the work of Ovsiovitch, the present study differs from it in several important respects. Although Ovsiovitch used a wide range of subject headings to locate articles and stories referring to human rights,[1] according to our reading of his work he limited himself to stories where there is a specific reference to "human rights." Rather than attempting to operationalize the term *human rights,* our approach has been to use countries as the unit of analysis. Thus rather than looking at discrete topics such as "torture," "Human Rights Watch," "Inter-American Commission on Human Rights," and so on, we looked instead at individual countries in the developing world. To make sure that we were not missing stories that the Ovsiovitch method would have produced, we checked two of his major entries to make sure that those stories were also in our analysis. Our method of coding also allows us to see how the press covers a particular country in its totality: those stories that are human rights related as well as those that are not. Although we are mainly interested in how the media covers human rights, we also think that it is important to see what other kinds of stories the media does cover. To use a simple example, we would find it puzzling (and more than a bit disturbing) if the media covered a wide range of stories about a particular country but completely ignored the substantial human-rights abuses that occurred there.

One of the major tenants of newsworthiness is the ability of the reporter or the news organization to "personalize" the story for the reader. W. Lance Bennett explains that this process translates into undue focus on "the moment," but "in the meantime, somewhere beyond the moment, there is a reality being forged in the world, and it is likely to be poorly understood" (1996:51). This leads to the second major distinction between our study and Ovsiovitch's. We recognize that a certain "human-rights reality" exists, with our quintessential task being to explore how (and how well) the media covers this "reality." Previous studies have essentially counted how many human-rights stories the press has run, but without providing any guidance in terms of how many human-rights stories one *should* expect, based on the human-rights situation that exists in a particular country.

The "reality" on which we base this study is constructed from the yearly country reports on human-rights practices published by the U.S. Department of State and by Amnesty International (1986, 1996). Since 1984, Mark Gibney has directed the Political Terror Scale (PTS) project.[2] More than 130 countries are coded each year on a scale of 1 (low terror) to 5 (high terror), reflecting the level of political terror according to the description of each country provided in these two yearly reports.[3] In the construction of each index, the data are scaled as if the reports were accurate and complete. Thus any biases exhibited in the annual reports of the two organizations will be evident in their indexes.[4]

We have averaged the Amnesty and State Department ratings for each nation in each year to comprise a single index of political terror. The advantage of combining country rankings should be obvious: Using both scores allows for a truer measure of human-rights abuse, assuming that both indicators tap into the same underlying theoretical construct. Previous research conducted by one of the authors has found this to be true.[5]

Method

Whereas Ovsiovitch used stories within particular categories (as defined by the staff at the *New York Times Index*), we examine all stories about each country under consideration, placing stories in categories we have constructed and operationalized. Besides technical information (date, page, column, length), each story was coded to indicate the general topic. Stories were classified as focusing primarily on politics, economics, culture, a civil war, an international war, or a natural disaster. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and a catchall "other" category was also available. If the story focused on human rights, we recorded the specific type of violation reported (political killing, disappearance, torture, arbitrary arrest, violation of due process, or the taking or holding of a political prisoner). An "other" category was similarly available for any other specific mention of a human-rights violation. If no specific violations were reported, we considered whether the story referred to human rights generally and whether it mentioned a general improvement or a worsening of violations.

Some discussion is warranted regarding our conceptualization of human-rights violations. We have adopted a rather conservative definition of human rights that focuses solely on government-sanctioned physical abuses of citizens. This is particularly important to consider as we examine, for instance, a nation like Algeria in 1995. Certainly, there was a high degree of political terror occurring in Algeria that year, yet the majority of it was a result of the civil war that had been raging since the early 1990s. As mentioned earlier, stories about civil war were recorded as such (there were forty-nine stories on Algeria's civil war in the *New York Times* in 1995—44 percent of all stories) and were not considered to be stories about human rights as we have defined them here.

Our decision rule was to focus our study on countries that experienced gross levels of human-rights abuses in either 1985 or 1995, the two years under consideration. Accordingly, we selected countries that received an average PTS score of 3.5 or higher in *either* of those years. This decision rule produced fifty countries for analysis. A list of these countries appears in Table 1.

Ovsiovitch's (1993) work clearly establishes that human-rights coverage is much greater in the *New York Times* than it is for other media sources. Thus we consider the *New York Times* to serve as a baseline of sorts. We are confident that no other American media source will cover more stories relating to human rights, and in all probability, others will cover substantially less. So the results

provide a generous estimate of what human-rights information reaches the public (and perhaps policymakers as well).[6]

In terms of the years covered, 1995 was the last year that we had access to a full year's index at the time we undertook the study. We then chose to go back a decade to see if there had been any substantial changes in press attention to human rights over time. These two years provide a nice contrast in terms of human-rights coverage during the heart of the cold war (1985) and coverage a few years after the fall of communism (1995).

For both years of this study, we chose not to consider one or two countries that simply threatened to overwhelm our data gathering, as well as our findings. Thus in 1985, we did not code the Soviet Union. Suffice it to say that there was considerable press coverage of the Soviet Union in 1985 (in fact, fourteen full pages in the *New York Times Index*), and much of it related to human-rights violations of one sort or another. We made the same decision in 1995 with the Russian Republic and with the countries in the former Yugoslavia. In terms of the latter (and in many respects the former as well), anyone who reads the newspaper (and it does not have to be the *New York Times*) would attest to the fact that there has been an overwhelming amount of press coverage of events in that part of the world, and the vast majority of it would involve "human rights." We see these as anomalies—countries that, for one reason or another, have received a disproportionate amount of coverage in the media. Our interest is to understand the general trends of human-rights coverage, and these cases would clearly compromise that goal.

We proceeded to assign several countries to each of our coders. These individuals read the descriptions in the *New York Times Index* for the countries assigned to them and coded each story according to the criteria set forth in the appendix.

As a final point, although we are interested in media coverage of human-rights abuses in all nonwestern countries, by the nature of our study we have focused on countries experiencing very high levels of political violence. Our point here is really quite simple. Our expectation is that countries with high levels of political violence will (and should) receive substantial amounts of media coverage. Human-rights violations are transgressions of both international and domestic legal standards. They are also a testament to our inhumanity. Finally, and perhaps more practically, human-rights violations (or at least certain kinds of human-rights violations) are "good" news stories because such stories invariably involve crises and human drama of some kind (Bennett 1996).

Findings

Table 1 is an attempt to provide a road map. Listed are the fifty countries that have a PTS score of 3.5 or higher for either 1985 or 1995. The first column lists the countries; the second column is the 1985 political terror score (the average

Table I

New York Times stories about nations with high levels of political violence

COUNTRIES THAT FOLLOW EXPECTED TRENDS

	1985 PTS	No. of 1985 Stories	No. of 1985 Human-Rights Stories		1995 PTS	No. of 1995 Stories	No. of 1995 Human-Rights Stories	
Algeria	2.0	6	0		5.0	111	6	(5.4%)
Burundi	2.5	0	0		5.0	37	15	(40.5%)
Chad	5.0	5	4	(80.0%)	4.0	1	0	
Chile	3.5	73	49	(67.1%)	2.0	16	4	(25.0%)
Cuba	3.0	83	3	(3.6%)	3.5	126	24	(19.0%)
Egypt	2.5	33	0		4.0	55	41	(74.5%)
El Salvador	4.0	212	78	(36.8%)	2.5	9	5	(55.6%)
Ethiopia	4.0	77	12	(15.6%)	3.5	6	1	(16.7%)
Guatemala	4.5	57	25	(43.9%)	4.5	65	45	(69.2%)
Indonesia	4.0	16	5	(31.3%)	4.0	13	9	(69.2%)
Kenya	2.0	4	0		3.5	14	6	(42.9%)
Laos	3.5	10	5	(50.0%)	1.5	8	1	(12.5%)
Lebanon	N/A	12	3	(25.0%)	4.0	7	0	
Mexico	3.0	69	5	(7.2%)	4.0	365	15	(4.1%)
Morocco	3.5	8	1	(12.5%)	3.0	3	0	
Mozambique	4.5	26	7	(26.9%)	2.5	0	0	
Myanmar[a]	3.5	7	4	(57.1%)	4.5	37	16	(43.2%)
Namibia[b]	4.0	28	14	(50.0%)	2.0	2	0	
Pakistan	3.0	61	13	(21.3%)	4.5	55	24	(43.6%)
Paraguay	3.5	7	0		2.5	1	0	
Peru	4.5	95	36	(37.9%)	4.0	17	4	(23.5%)
Rwanda	2.0	0	0		5.0	95	42	(44.2%)
Sierra Leone	2.0	2	0		4.0	11	5	(45.5%)
Somalia	3.0	2	2	(100.0%)	4.5	45	28	(62.2%)
Sri Lanka	4.5	77	69	(89.6%)	4.5	63	42	(66.7%)
Syria	3.5	5	1	(20.0%)	3.0	1	0	
Turkey	3.5	39	11	(28.2%)	4.5	61	20	(32.8%)
Uganda	5.0	76	34	(44.7%)	3.5	6	4	(66.7%)
Zaire	3.5	0	0		4.0	3	1	(33.3%)
Zimbabwe	4.5	39	16	(41.0%)	2.0	6	1	(16.7%)

between the score generated from Amnesty International and that generated by the State Department); the third column is the total number (and percentage) of stories on that country that were printed by the *New York Times* in 1985; and the next column is the total number of stories dealing with human-rights violations printed by the *New York Times* for that year. The fifth column is the 1995 terror level; the next column represents the total number of news stories for

Table I   (continued)

COUNTRIES THAT DEVIATE FROM EXPECTED TRENDS

	1985 PTS	No. of 1985 Stories	No. of 1985 Human-Rights Stories	1995 PTS	No. of 1995 Stories	No. of 1995 Human-Rights Stories
Afghanistan	5.0	125	72 (57.6%)	5.0	34	4 (11.8%)
Angola	4.0	88	20 (22.7%)	4.5	14	0
Bahrain	2.5	0	0	3.5	0	0
Brazil	3.5	92	0	4.0	27	7 (25.9%)
Cambodia	3.5	137	109 (79.6%)	3.5	27	8 (29.6%)
Colombia	3.5	42	32 (76.2%)	4.5	39	6 (15.4%)
Equatorial Guinea	1.5	0	0	3.5	0	0
India	3.5	230	99 (43.0%)	4.5	87	35 (40.2%)
Iran	5.0	151	93 (61.6%)	4.5	102	9 (8.8%)
Iraq	5.0	94	84 (89.4%)	5.0	163	33 (20.2%)
Israel^c	2.5	110	2 (1.8%)	3.5	60	1 (1.7%)
Liberia	3.0	32	16 (50.0%)	5.0	16	5 (31.3%)
Nicaragua	4.5	584	276 (47.3%)	4.0	15	1 (6.7%)
Nigeria	2.0	34	21 (61.8%)	4.0	62	22 (35.5%)
Philippines	4.0	270	108 (40.0%)	3.5	19	5 (26.3%)
Saudi Arabia	2.5	26	1 (3.8%)	3.5	8	5 (62.5%)
Senegal	2.0	1	0	3.5	0	0
South Africa	4.0	452	200 (44.2%)	4.0	91	35 (38.5%)
Sudan	3.0	91	40 (44.0%)	4.5	10	6 (60.0%)
Venezuela	2.0	6	0	3.5	7	2 (28.6%)

Note: If a country received an average Political Terror Score (based on State Department and Amnesty International reports) of 3.5 or higher in *either* 1985 or 1995, it was included for analysis. Numbers in columns three, four, six, and seven are the raw number of stories appearing in the *New York Times* for the respective years. Numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of stories about that country that focused on human rights. (See the appendix for coding schemes.)
NA *indicates that data were unavailable.*
^a Myanmar was known as Burma in 1985.
^b Namibia was known as Southwest Africa in 1985.
^c Stories on Israel do not include the Occupied Territories.

1995; and the last column is the total number of stories related to human rights published by the *New York Times* for that country for that year. The table is broken into two sections: those countries that were quantitatively covered as we expected (as the level of terror goes up, the coverage also goes up; as terror decreases, so does coverage), and those that deviated from that expectation. We address this in more detail later in this article.

To try to remove some of the abstractness from this table, but also to provide examples of what we expected the data to show, we consider Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. Sierra Leone experienced only moderate levels of human-rights violations in 1985. According to the Amnesty International Report for Sierra Leone that year:

> The two prisoners of conscience adopted by Amnesty International were released in January, but there were disturbing reports of ill treatment of people detained by the security forces in the Kono district. Some of those held there were considered likely to be prisoners of conscience. (Amnesty International 1986:84)

The *New York Times Index* for 1985 lists two stories as follows:

> Voting starts in Sierra Leone's first democratic presidential election; nearly three million voters are expected to turn out to elect Maj Gen Joseph Momoh of All People's Congress. (Oct. 2:3)
>
> Maj Gen Joseph Saidu Momoh is sworn in as President of Sierra Leone succeeding Siaka Stevens, who retired after ruling country for 17 years. (Nov. 29:5)

By 1995, human-rights conditions had deteriorated significantly in Sierra Leone. The following is a summary provided by Amnesty:

> Suspected government opponents were subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill treatment and extrajudicial execution. Those held included prisoners of conscience. . . . Armed opponents of the government committed gross human-rights abuses, including deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture and hostage-taking. (Amnesty International 1996:268)

There were only eleven stories in the *New York Times* about Sierra Leone in 1995, but nearly half of them concerned the political violence afflicting the country:

> Government troops in Sierra Leone kill 23 rebels during six-hour battle; military Government has taken offensive against rebel bases, despite efforts of foreign envoys to end civil war that began in 1991. (Feb. 19:18)
>
> Seven Roman Catholic nuns seized by rebels in Sierra Leone two months ago are freed. (Mar. 23:7)
>
> Ten Europeans held by rebels in Sierra Leone are freed; guerrillas demand peace talks with military Government. (Apr. 21:12)

>Hundreds of people are reportedly starving to death as thousands continue to flee civil war in southern Sierra Leone. (Aug. 31:6)
>
>Brutal civil war in Sierra Leone has already killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians, and leaves many people suffering from starvation and disease. . . . (Sept. 26:3)

In line with this, Zimbabwe received a combined PTS score of 4.5 in 1985. According to the State Department report:

>Political killings increased in 1985. . . . Dissident attacks on civilians continued during the year and on a somewhat larger scale than in 1984. The government has estimated that the dissidents killed over 100 civilians, including many local ZANU [Zimbabwe African National Union] party officials. . . . Youth members of ZANU, the ruling party, have been responsible for between 150–200 deaths over the past year, according to the estimates of knowledgeable sources. . . . Between 300 and 400 civilians in Matebeland disappeared earlier this year, and there has been no word on the fate of the large majority of them. . . . Informed sources report that government security forces, including the police, the military and the CIO [Central Intelligence Organization], have been responsible for a broad range of mistreatment of suspected dissidents. . . . Types of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment which have been alleged include repeated beatings, rape, and torture involving electronic shock equipment and water suffocation. . . . Informed sources report that the use of torture is routine in a few government facilities, particularly during interrogation of suspected dissidents and dissident sympathizers. (U.S. Department of State 1986:390–91)

The *New York Times* ran thirty-nine stories on Zimbabwe in 1985, and a substantial number of these (41 percent) were devoted to human-rights issues. In 1995, the turmoil from the previous decade had long since passed. For that year, Zimbabwe was coded as a level 2. The Amnesty summary reads in its entirety:

>Three journalists were held briefly as prisoners of conscience. The police reportedly injured at least 135 people, some seriously, during student protests. At least six people were sentenced to death and there was one execution. (Amnesty International 1996:334)

The *New York Times* ran only six stories on Zimbabwe for all of 1995, with one of these involving human rights: a story on student riots.

The Algerian and Zimbabwe examples examined above conform to what we expected: High levels of political violence will translate into high levels of

press attention, and low levels of political violence will generally mean the opposite. A perusal of Table 1 shows that although some other countries meet this pattern, others do not.

We now turn to a more systematic analysis of our data. One of the more striking findings from Table 2 is simply how varied the number of stories, and the number of human-rights stories, can be, even when countries are experiencing comparable levels of political terror. In 1985, for example, five countries had a PTS score of 5 (Chad, Uganda, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq). By definition, these are countries experiencing the very highest levels of political terror. Yet the number of stories reported in the *New York Times* that year ranged from only 5 (Chad) to 151 (Iran).

We acknowledge that level 5 countries might be unique because there is no limiting principle. Using a hypothetical example, a country where two-thirds of its citizens were systematically eliminated would receive a 5, but so would another country where "only" a few thousand were killed. What we did not expect to find, however, is that the other levels have just as much range, and many have greater. For example, the range of the total number of stories on countries with a PTS score of 4.5 in 1985 went from 26 to more than twenty times that; the range for level 4 countries in 1995 was from 1 to 365. To reiterate, these are countries that experienced approximately the same level of political violence. Yet as Table 2 indicates, there were vast differences in terms of both the

Table 2
New York Times stories by level of political terror

PTS (No. of Countries)	Range of Total Stories	Mean No. of Total Stories	Range of Human-Rights Stories	Mean No. of Human-Rights Stories
1985				
5 (5)	5–151	90.2	4–93	57.4
4.5 (6)	26–584	146.3	7–276	71.5
4 (7)	16–452	163.3	5–200	62.4
3.5 (12)	0–230	54.2	0–109	25.9
1995				
5 (6)	16–163	76.0	10–68	38.7
4.5 (11)	10–102	52.6	5–59	26.0
4 (12)	1–365	55.6	0–49	15.1
3.5 (13)	0–126	21.2	0–25	4.6

Note: The first column indicates the PTS level under consideration, with the number of countries scoring that level in parentheses. The second column contains the range of the number of stories about countries scoring that level in each year, while the third contains the mean. Columns 4 and 5 represent the range of human-rights stories appearing for countries of that level and the mean number of human-rights stories, respectively.

total amount of press coverage of these events and the number of stories related to human rights specifically.

Another finding from Table 2 that warrants some discussion is the connection that exists between general levels of political terror and the number of stories run by the *New York Times*. The data for 1995 confirm what we originally expected to find: The higher the level of political terror, the greater the amount of press coverage and the greater the number of stories related to human rights. The Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient for 1995 was a robust .583 ($p < .01$).[7] The data presented in Table 2 suggest that there was more going on in 1985. For example, there are substantially more human-rights stories for countries with a PTS of 4.0 than there are for countries with a PTS of 5.0. The primary reason for this is that two countries—South Africa and Nicaragua—received enormous levels of press coverage that year. Running a Pearson's *r* without those two outliers boosted the correlation from .442 to .505 ($p < .01$).

Although we have found a moderately strong connection between levels of political violence and the amount of press coverage received by that country, it is our feeling that the publishers of the *New York Times* have very little reason to pat themselves on the back. We say this, essentially, for two reasons. First, there are simply too many countries experiencing extraordinarily high levels of political violence that receive little to no attention from the *New York Times*, and second, we are very concerned with the sharp decline (comparing 1985 and 1995) in press coverage of countries experiencing gross levels of human-rights abuses.

Ignoring human-rights violations is the proverbial tree that falls in the forest, only now the "tree" represents human beings who are being killed, tortured, or imprisoned or who have disappeared. Chad offers a classic case of this phenomenon. In 1985, Chad was coded as a level 5 country according to data from both Amnesty and the State Department. According to the State Department report for 1985:

> With the North firmly under Libyan military occupation, the fighting in 1985 was mostly between the Government and rebels in southern Chad. . . . There were many examples of both government and rebel violence in 1985. In February, in villages near Danamadji, government troops killed 50 civilians. . . . In April, presidential guards reportedly killed 17 villagers in Gondey. Early in the year, government forces executed 55 Democratic Revolutionary Council rebels. . . . In May, a seismic testing crew discovered 17 bodies in a stream bed. . . . Dissension between Libyan and [rebel] forces . . . resulted in well over 60 deaths with many wounded. In late October, . . . rebels attacked a group of nomadic herders outside of Beinamar and killed about 80 people. . . . Many incidents of torture and degrading treatment reportedly occurred in 1985 in connection with the fighting. (U.S. Department of State 1986:68–69)

Despite these widespread atrocities, the *New York Times* published only five sto-
ries on Chad in all of 1985, although each of these stories focused on human-
rights issues.

In 1995, Chad was still plagued with high levels of terror (PTS score of 4),
yet the *New York Times* published just one story related to Chad that year. The fol-
lowing description of that story appears in the *New York Times Index:*

> Paris Club of creditor nations says it has reworked $1 billion worth of sov-
> ereign debt of six countries, including Chad, under terms advocated at
> meeting last year of leaders of Group of Seven. (Mar. 1:18)

There are a host of other countries that fall into the pattern of having very
high levels of political violence but little press coverage of that violence. For
instance, in 1985, Peru had a PTS score of 4.5, and the *New York Times* carried
95 stories on the country. A decade later, political violence remained quite high,
but there was only a fraction of the previous press coverage (17 stories).

Brazil is a country that warrants special mention. In 1985, Brazil had a PTS
score of 3.5, but none of the 92 stories run by the *New York Times* related to hu-
man rights. Consider this passage from Amnesty International:

> Amnesty International was concerned about continued reports of torture
> and ill-treatment of criminal suspects and prisoners in many parts of Bra-
> zil. There was an increase in the number of politically motivated killings of
> rural trade union leaders, peasants and others during land disputes, alleg-
> edly carried out by gunmen hired by local landowners. Amnesty Interna-
> tional was concerned about persistent allegations that the authorities failed
> to investigate such killings effectively. (Amnesty International 1986:129)

Of the 92 stories reported, 51 were concerned with the presidential and may-
oral elections, the illness and subsequent death of newly elected President
Neves, and the new leadership of President Sarney. Another 26 stories focused
on Brazil's huge debt to foreign banks. Although these are by no means insig-
nificant events, we are disturbed by the *Times*'s neglect of conditions described
by Amnesty International. A decade later, human-rights conditions had deterio-
rated, yet in 1995 the *New York Times* ran only 27 stories, with 7 of them related
to human rights.

As indicated by Table 3, there was a notable decrease in press coverage of
human-rights violations in the developing world from 1985 to 1995. In every
region of the Third World was a considerable drop in the number of total sto-
ries, the mean number of stories, the total number of human-rights stories,
and, most important, the mean number of human-rights stories.

Table 3

New York Times stories by region of the world

Region (No. of Countries)	Range of Total Stories	Mean No. of Total Stories	Range of Human-Rights Stories	Mean No. of Human-Rights Stories
AFRICA (19)				
1985	0–452	50.4	0–200	20.3
1995	0–95	22.1	0–68	12.9
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (11)				
1985	6–584	120.0	0–276	45.8
1995	1–365	62.5	0–50	14.4
EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (5)				
1985	7–270	88.0	4–109	46.2
1995	8–37	20.8	1–16	8.0
EUROPE AND CANADA (1)				
1985	39	39.0	11	11.0
1995	61	61.0	36	36.0
NEAR EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (10)				
1985	0–151	44.5	0–93	18.5
1995	0–163	51.0	0–55	14.6
SOUTH ASIA (4)				
1985	61–230	123.3	13–99	63.3
1995	34–87	59.8	24–59	36.8

Note: The first column indicates the region under consideration, with the number of countries under analysis in parentheses. The second column shows the range of stories appearing for each region, while the third shows the mean number of stories. Columns 4 and 5 contain the range and mean number of human-rights stories appearing for each region, respectively.

To focus on the latter for a moment, while the mean number of human-rights stories for the African countries in our study was 20.3 in 1985, by 1995 this had declined to 12.9. For Latin America, while the mean was 45.8 in 1985, it was only 14.4 in 1995. This, no doubt, reflects improved human-rights conditions in a number of countries, particularly the Central American countries. Still, human-rights conditions deteriorated in a number of other Latin American countries (Brazil, Venezuela, Columbia, and Peru, most notably), but the *New York Times* provided very little coverage of these phenomena. Overall, although there was more political violence in the Third World, there was actually less—substantially less—press coverage.[8] In addition, as Table 4 shows, the coverage that appeared was often quite cursory and seldom run on the paper's front page.

Table 4

Size, location, and perceived importance of human-rights stories in the *New York Times*

| | | Size | | Front- | Importance |
	Small	Medium	Large	Page Location	Highlighted
1985	803	713	9	38	155
1995	425	296	13	24	60

Note: Raw numbers of human-rights stories are reported. Some human-rights stories are not included because they did not have a length identifier (particularly if they were editorials). The size of the story is determined by the *New York Times Index*. A small story indicates an item occupying less than one column, a medium story occupies between one and three columns, and a large story is an item that is more than three columns. The *New York Times Index* highlights stories of "unusual interest."

Cold War Politics

What might explain this drop in press attention to human rights? One of our expectations was that countries that were thought to be central to the cold war conflict would receive a great deal of press attention in 1985, while those viewed as being in the periphery would receive far less. Along with that, we also expected that after the end of the cold war there would be far less press coverage of those once "vital" countries, notwithstanding their human-rights situations. The data seem to support this hypothesis.

Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan had been a key country in the cold war struggle. In 1985, the *New York Times* published a substantial number of stories about Afghanistan. Since that time, what really has changed in Afghanistan is not so much the political violence—it remains at extraordinarily high levels—but the level of attention in the U.S. press to that country.

Angola was another country with a cold war legacy. In 1985, Angola was very much in the news, receiving 88 stories from the *New York Times*. In 1995, political violence in Angola was slightly greater than it had been in 1985, yet the *New York Times* published a total of 14 stories on Angola that year, only a handful of which touched on human rights.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not mention the Central American countries, particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador. The first observation we make is simply the number of stories carried on these two countries. In 1985, the *New York Times* printed nearly 600 stories on Nicaragua and more than 200 on El Salvador. A decade later, there was almost no press attention to either of these two countries. Granted, not only had the strategic significance of both of these countries diminished significantly with the fall of communism in the former Soviet Union, but in both instances, levels of human-rights abuses decreased substantially as well. What surprises us, however, is that there was less of a lingering effect from American involvement in both countries than we had expected.

American Involvement

Because of the *New York Times*'s large American audience, we expected to find greater coverage of countries where the United States was involved, or had been involved, militarily or politically. With some exceptions (such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, as mentioned earlier), the data seem to bear this out. For example, in 1985 Iraq received 94 stories in the *New York Times*. In 1995, violence in that country remained high, but after the direct American involvement in the Persian Gulf War, substantially more stories on Iraq were filed. The continued press attention to Iran also seems premised on past American involvement in that country—in this instance, the hostage crisis of nearly two decades ago.

Somalia seemingly presents the same type of scenario. In 1985, it warranted only 2 stories in the *New York Times* that entire year. In 1995—a few years after American military involvement in that country—Somalia received far more press attention (although, admittedly, we expected it to receive more than 45 stories).

Finally, a country that has been virtually removed from the American consciousness is the Philippines. There were 270 stories on the Philippines in 1985, when the country was closely aligned with the U.S. government and with national security interests. A decade later, with a slightly better human-rights scenario, there was only a fraction of this number of stories.

Conclusion

How well does the *New York Times* report on the "reality" of human rights around the world? Ovsiovitch claims that there is "very little coverage of human rights," or an average of fewer than two stories a day in the *New York Times* (1993:685). According to our analysis, there is considerably more coverage than this. For the fifty countries included in our study, there were 1,570 "human-rights stories" in the *New York Times* in 1985, and 772 in 1995. It is important to note that if we were to include all countries—and not just those with the highest levels of political terror—we would get many more stories than this. In addition, we must also be mindful of the fact that we have excluded certain countries from this study that actually met our threshold level of political violence (i.e., Russia and Yugoslavia); their inclusion certainly would have increased the number of human-rights stories reported. Finally, there seems to be some correlation between levels of political terror and the amount of news coverage provided by the *New York Times*. That is, the higher the PTS score, the greater the degree of coverage. This, to us, indicates some attention to human rights.

Having said all this, we believe that the *New York Times*'s coverage of human rights is seriously lacking. As Ovsiovitch and others have pointed out, it is conflict and crisis that receive press coverage. We generally found this to be true.

Thus if the media are apt to pick up on a "human-rights story," it will generally be in the form of X number of deaths from some discrete event. What this also means is that more systematic forms of human-rights abuses will be ignored.

For example, each year both the State Department and Amnesty International describe the atrocious prison conditions that exist in much of the Third World. We are not even talking about "routine" torture here. Rather, we are referring to the inhumane living conditions that take the lives of tens of thousands of prisoners each year in countries all over the globe. Yet this is not the kind of human-rights story that the media would generally pick up on. In their view, we surmise, there is no real "event" as such. From our perspective, however, these conditions oftentimes amount to a form of deliberate killing that involves thousands and thousands of people.

Also disturbing to us is the rather sharp reduction in the number of human-rights stories from 1985 to 1995. We began this article by commenting on the so-called CNN effect, which led us to expect to find various media sources roaming around the world looking for human-rights stories on which to report. Instead, we found the opposite. We found too many instances where countries had experienced very high levels of political violence, but that violence was ignored, apparently because it is not considered to be "fit to print."

This begs the question: Where is the kink in the hose? That is, it is possible that correspondents are writing home frantically about human-rights abuses daily, but editors, driven by a "market model" of journalism, are unconvinced that such stories will generate interest in their readership. Editors might be sensitive to what Susan D. Moeller has called "compassion fatigue" (1999). That is, it would be unwise for an editor to print a story about the dismal prison conditions in Peru each and every time that someone died as a result of those conditions. People become desensitized after a while, and the story is no longer "new." One *New York Times* foreign correspondent suggests, however, that if such editorial decisions are being made, they are made when assignments are distributed, not when the stories come in to the bureau, as the vast majority of articles written by *Times* staff correspondents end up being published.[9] Such early decisions generally center around space limitations, as well as limitations in time and the expertise of the correspondents. In short, it is more important to a news organization to report adequately and comprehensively on the stories that are covered than it is to try to make mention of, say, every human-rights abuse throughout the world.

There are other explanations, as well. It is costly to keep American journalists abroad (Rosenblum 1979:9). Accordingly, the major news sources have come to rely on "stringers," locals who report back to the agencies in return for a stipend. These folks are often "unwilling to risk unemployment, jail terms or worse for the sake of a few dollars" (Rosenblum 1979:10). Further, stringers often feel pressure from their government to report favorable news (Rosenblum

1979:10). When a "big" story does break, journalists parachute in from home or from a large foreign bureau to cover it and then get out as soon as it is over (Rosenblum 1979:11)[10]. This is not conducive to reporting on the above-mentioned systematic forms of human-rights abuses. First, the journalists are not in place long enough to contextualize the story properly. Second, having established no relationship with "insiders," reliable information about human-rights violations is difficult to obtain. Further, abusive governments are suspicious of the foreign press and do not look kindly on reports of institutionalized violence from within their borders. Finally, unlike organizations such as Amnesty International, news organizations have more to cover than human rights, a fact that our data clearly reveal.

We nonetheless find this pattern disturbing because the agenda that is being relayed to the public—the signal of what is important—virtually ignores large amounts of human suffering every year. The "reality" is nowhere near being accurately represented, even by our nation's "paper of record."

Appendix: Coding Scheme

The unit of analysis is the individual story. Each country's entry in the *New York Times Index* was reproduced for each of the two years under consideration.

Each country was assigned a three-digit code, and groups of stories were distributed to coders. The coders recorded the following information about each story:

Date

Type (news story, editorial, letter, syndicated column)

Section

Page

Column

Length (small, medium, large)

Whether highlighted by *Index* staffers as important

The coders then used dummy variables to indicate the general topic of the story. These categories are not mutually exclusive:

Politics

Economics

Culture

Civil war

International war

Natural disaster

Other

If the story was related to human rights as we have conceptualized it, the coders indicated, by these nonmutually exclusive dummy variables, which types of specific human-rights violations were mentioned:

Political killings

Disappearances

Torture

Arbitrary arrest

Due-process violation

Political prisoners

Other specific human-rights violation

Because some stories are about human rights but mention no specific violations or events, the coders had the option of indicating that a story was about human rights with a "general" focus. They did so through the following dummy variables:

General focus on human rights

General focus—improvement of human-rights conditions

General focus—increased violence

Notes

1. Ovsiovitch used the following subject headings to locate articles referring to human rights: America's Watch; Amnesty International; Asia Watch; Dissenters (*Time* magazine only); European Court (and Commission) on Human Rights; Freedom and Human Rights; Freedom House; Freedom of Religion; Freedom of Speech; Freedom of the Press; Genocide; Helsinki Watch; Human Rights, International League for; Human Rights, Lawyers Committee for; Human Rights Watch; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; Inter-American Court of Human Rights; International Committee of the Red Cross; Organization of African Unity; Organization of American States; Political Prisoners; Torture; United Nations (1993).
2. The PTS has served as a database for a number of human-rights projects, including these: Apodaca (1998); Carleton and Stohl (1985, 1987); Gibney (1988); Gibney et al. (1992); McCann and Gibney (1996); Poe (1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992); Poe and Sirirangsi (1994);

Poe and Tate (1994); Poe et al. (1994); Poe et al. (1999); and Stohl et al. (1984). These data are available on the Internet at (http://www.unca.edu/~mgibney/pts.html).

3. For a more in-depth analysis of the coding scheme, see Gibney and Dalton (1996).

4. The "terror scale" originally was developed by the Freedom House organization (see Kaplan 1998, or online at www.freedomhouse.org), although the coding itself has no connection with the human rights reporting produced by Freedom House. The language provided to the coders for each level is taken from the 1979 edition of Freedom House's annual publication, *Freedom in the World* (Gastil 1979):

Level 1: "Countries . . . under a secure rule of law, people are not imprisoned for their views, and torture is rare or exceptional. . . . Political murders are extraordinarily rare" (31).

Level 2: "There is a limited amount of imprisonment for nonviolent political activity. However, few are affected, torture and beatings are exceptional. . . . Political murder is rare" (31, 37).

Level 3: "There is extensive political imprisonment, or a recent history of such imprisonment. Executions or other political murders and brutality are often common and go largely unpunished. . . . Unlimited detention, with or without trial, for political views is accepted" (37).

Level 4: "The practices [of Level 3] are expanded to larger numbers. Murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life. . . . In spite of its generality, on this level violence affects primarily those who interest themselves in politics or ideas" (37).

Level 5: "The terrors of Level 4 have been extended to the whole population. . . . The leaders of these societies place no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals" (37).

5. James A. McCann and Mark Gibney found the political terror scores generated from each source to correlate (Pearson's r) at an average of .75 and found high Chronbach's alpha measures for each year (17) (1996).

6. This article is a first cut at data that are part of a more ambitious project that will include all developing countries across a longer time span and that will include the electronic media as well—and perhaps CNN in particular—because this is where most private citizens receive their news (Larson 1984).

7. If we correlate PTS and number of stories in 1995 without including Mexico, the only notable outlier in that year, the coefficient climbs to .596 ($p < .01$).

8. McCann and Gibney find that the level of political violence in 1995 (2.83) is slightly higher than that in 1985 (2.79) (1996).

9. Howard W. French of the *New York Times,* interview, Nov. 16, 1998, St. Louis, Missouri, and subsequent electronic correspondence.

10. For a more contemporary discussion of foreign correspondents, see Hess (1996).

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