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ABSTRACT

A study examined the influence of nation states' self-interests on their media's coverage of a major news event, in this instance, the Soviet shooting down of a Korean airliner. It was hypothesized (1) that there would be discrepancies between different accounts of the KAL 007 incident, a complex news event with international political significance, and (2) that the international alignment of a news organization's nation of origin with respect to the United States and the Soviet Union would be reflected in the way that organization characterizes the discrepant issues of the KAL 007 incident. Drawn from the media of 73 nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union, 705 articles, broadcasts and telecasts, appearing between September 1 and December 31, 1983, were coded. Countries were further subdivided into groups based on their relationships to the two superpowers. Results indicated that divergent interpretations of the KAL incident were abundant in the news media, supporting the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis was also strongly supported: every reference to discrepant issues in the Soviet media supported the Soviet version of the incident, and the U. S. media also reflected the U. S. government's position, but to a lesser extent. Findings also showed that the media of nations aligned with the Soviet Union or the United States portrayed events commensurate with their political affiliation, and that the coverage produced in neutral countries fell between the relatively polarized interpretations of the aligned nations. (Tables of data are included, and footnotes are appended.) (NKA)

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UNDERSTANDING DISCREPANCIES IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF
THE KAL 007 AIRLINE INCIDENT

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UNDERSTANDING DISCREPANCIES IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF THE KAL 007 AIRLINE INCIDENT

On August 31, 1983, a Korean Airlines 747 commercial airliner was shot down by the Soviets after it transgressed strategic airspace over the U.S.S.R. Two hundred and sixty-nine passengers and crew members were killed.

Major disagreements arose over the events that actually occurred that evening. The United States and the Soviet Union each blamed the other for the demise of the aircraft. This political maneuvering between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. resulted in major discrepancies in international news coverage.

A content analysis was utilized to discover how international media reacted to this highly ambiguous event. Since information about the incident was limited, it made news coverage of the story difficult. This research was concerned with whether a nation's political alignment was reflected in the way its media interpreted the incident.

Literature Review

Recent literature in political science, sociology and mass communication show linkages between social systems and media content. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien note that all communication is produced under forms of social control.¹ Other scholars demonstrate how mainstream media reflect the political and ideological interests of the major political authorities.² Research suggests that a society's major institutions influence

the media through organizational, political, economic and ideological structures.

First, news organizations rely heavily upon sources who have the political power and resources to generate news stories. News organizations establish routines and cultivate a dependence on "official" sources. The routines of established news-gathering tend to rationalize, defer to and reinforce government, rather than to change it.³

Another important source of news are news agencies which help define events for their subscribers. News agencies of the United States, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union dominate international news flow.⁴

Second, governments are major sources of news. Government controls over the mass media span a wide range of activities from ownership to censorship, from economic sanctions to government subsidies, and from the withholding of information to the dissemination of "disinformation." Government agencies have specific staffs for preparing information and releasing it to the media. Fishman describes this activity as the "bureaucratic subsidization" of the news.⁵ Thus, a symbiotic relationship between the media and political institutions evolves which orients media coverage.

Third, the economic organization of a particular country is a major factor in the ideology and control of the press. For instance, in the communist Soviet Union, the state owns the press and its social role is defined by the Communist Party. In the

United States, the press is private property, and subject to some degree of control through ownership. Murdock and Golding argue that the views and accounts of the media owners receive "insistent publicity."⁶ Economic forces, in all societies, play an important role in shaping social institutions, including the media.

Fourth, ideological factors shape the operation of the media. Each country has an implicit theory of the press which defines the goals and role of the media in society. For instance, the United States is governed by a belief in the values of objectivity and the "free marketplace of ideas." The Soviet Union believes that a free press system is one that has been "freed" from private ownership.⁷

Together the organizational, political, economic and ideological factors culminate in a broad system of beliefs, values and behaviors which are shared to some degree by the members of a society. These shared values help to orient individuals' perceptions and activities and shape, however loosely, a conception of national interests. These values may be particularly salient when dealing with the news coverage of an ambiguous event such as the KAL 007 incident. When there is a lack of information about an important event, news organizations are likely to rely heavily upon established values, beliefs and practices.

Journalists hold many unquestioned assumptions. The existing social system itself is usually taken for granted and as

a result, international issues are viewed ethnocentrically. This underlying system of assumptions has been called a "journalistic paradigm."⁸ Gans describes eight "enduring values" in the "world view" common among American journalists, including faith in the altruistic nature of democracy.⁹ As Gerbner points out, the basic decisions about what to print and what not to print are impossible to make without being influenced by ideological perspectives.¹⁰ Journalistic paradigms may differ somewhat within countries, but in general, they are influenced by existing social forces.

These organizational, political, economic, and ideological forces form a different configuration in each nation, which in each case contributes both to system maintenance and social change. These forces transcend national borders and align nations with one another. Thus, a global perspective is essential to understanding the construction of an international news event.

This study to examines the extent to which news coverage of an ambiguous event reflects government interests vis a vis political alignments. The literature provides ample justification to expect such a relationship.

HYPOTHESES:

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of nation states' self-interests on their media's coverage of a major news event. When such a news event is very complex,

conflicting accounts of it may occur. In addition, an event with international political significance may foster the emergence of discrepancies.

H₁: There will be discrepancies between different accounts of the KAL 007 incident.

The primary concern of this study is to determine the extent to which national interests guide the media's interpretation of reality surrounding the discrepant issues of the KAL 007 incident. Assuming that discrepancies are found, one would expect the political orientation of a nation to be reflected in its media's coverage. Because this event involved a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the relationship of other nations to these two superpowers was adopted as the major independent variable.

H₂: The international alignment of a news organization's nation of origin with respect to the United States and the Soviet Union will be reflected in the way it characterizes the discrepant issues of the KAL 007 incident.

METHODS:

Seven hundred and five articles, broadcasts and telecasts, were coded from the media of 73 nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union. The nations were further subdivided into groups based upon their relationships to the United States and the Soviet Union. The alignments were determined by examining trade patterns and military aid, tempered by subjective judgments.

The alignments were as follows:

- Soviet-aligned: Afghanistan, Angola, Bulgaria, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Iraq, Kampuchea, Laos, Mongolia, Mozambique, North Korea, Poland, Rumania, and Vietnam
- Neutral: Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ghana, India, Iran, Lesotho, People's Republic of China, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Zambia and Zimbabwe
- U.S.-aligned: Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ecuador, France, Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Liberia, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama, Philippines, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, and West Germany

The source of the articles was the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) which translates foreign affairs news from major news media around the world. All articles reported from September 1 to December 31, 1983 were coded, except articles from the Soviet Union for which every fourth article was sampled. The FBIS does not report media coverage from the United States, so every fifth article on KAL 007 printed in the New York Times was coded. Source indices indicated a lack of media interest in the incident after December 31.

To test these hypotheses, a coding scheme was developed based on eight discrepancies (see Table 1) which were discussed in various analyses of the KAL 007 incident.¹¹

If a discrepancy was found in an article, the coder judged whether it reflected the Soviet or the American position. If the article merely raised the issue inconclusively, or presented both sides of the issue, it was coded as neutral.

The following information was also coded: the article's date, the new organization responsible for the story, the type of story, the story length, the nation from which the story originated, and the relationship of the country to the United States and the Soviet Union. Intercoder agreement for the application of the coding scheme was 96%.

Results:

As expected, divergent interpretations were found for each discrepancy category (Table 1). The most prominent controversies were whether the plane intentionally flew over the Soviet Union and whether the Soviet actions were acceptable. However, many of the articles coded focused on diplomatic implications, the banning of Aeroflot flights to international airports, and the search for the wreckage, as opposed to the downing of the airliner itself. Discrepant issues were mentioned in 72.6% of the articles.

The findings strongly support our second hypothesis. Every reference to discrepant issues appearing in Soviet media supported the Soviet version of the incident (Table 2). The U.S. media also reflected the U.S. government's position, but to a lesser extent. In both cases, opinions of the opposition were presented, but in some cases in a manner which cast aspersions on their veracity. These discrepancies were coded to reflect political orientation.

The media of nations aligned with the Soviet Union or the

United States portrayed events commensurate with their political affiliation. On the whole, the coverage produced in neutral nations fell between the relatively polarized interpretations of the aligned nations. Because, these figures represent an average across all nations in each category, they do not preclude exceptions to the pattern; however, the variance within these groups was fairly minimal. Because of sample size limitations, breaking these groups down by country would result in some samples too small to give stable figures. We attempt to maintain a broad scope while recognizing that more testing needs to be done on the news coverage of individual countries to corroborate our findings.

Further analysis on the question of how alignment affected the coverage of discrepant issues was conducted by calculating a "discrepancy value" for each story.¹² The mean discrepancy values for each set of countries are presented in Table 3. Again, these findings are consistent with the expectation that international alignments would affect the interpretation of an ambiguous situation. The values for the Soviet media and those of their allies were greater than those of the neutral country's media. The U.S. and U.S. aligned media had the smallest values.

To assess the significance of mean discrepancy value differences found between each set of countries, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. A highly significant F-value (148.91, 704 d.f.) was found.¹³ Differences between each of the five groups were then compared with T-tests (Table 4).

No significant differences in mean discrepancy values were found between the media content of the Soviet Union and that of their allies, between articles from the United States and those of their allies, nor between the U.S. articles and those from neutral countries. However, the remaining seven differences were all significant ($p < .01$). The results reflect existing patterns of national alliances. In essence, media coverage of the discrepant issues of the KAL 007 incident can be collapsed into three categories, the Soviet/Soviet aligned coverage and the United States/U.S. aligned coverage at the extremes with the coverage by the media of neutral nations in the middle.

Discussion:

Discrepant issues clearly emerged in the coverage of the KAL 007 incident. They became the central focus of an international power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Essentially, this struggle involved allocating the blame for the tragedy. The Soviets claimed that the U.S. was responsible for sending the KAL plane on a spy mission. The U.S. denied this charge and accused the Soviets of violating legal and moral conventions in shooting the plane down.

Our data show that political alignments correlated very strongly with the way these discrepancies were presented. National alliances apparently played a key role in how this ambiguous event was interpreted. All of the Soviet coverage and 95% of the coverage of nations aligned with the Soviets supported

the Soviet positions. U.S. claims were presented in Soviet aligned media, but when they were, they were usually challenged.

Coverage by the media of the United States and U.S.-aligned countries also reflected their common national interests. However, on the average, U.S.-aligned media were more supportive of pro-U.S. positions than the New York Times, 78% as compared to 58%. These countries' media coverage did not reflect the same degree of support for their national interests as did the media of Soviet-aligned nations. For instance, coders noted that the New York Times printed a full transcript of a major Tass news agency statement.

The strength of the media's alliances with national interests can be explained by several observations. First, adherence national interests seems to be related to the strength of the system's control over the mass media. For instance, in the Soviet Union, where the media are state-owned, control of content is more direct, producing coverage of the KAL incident which differed very little from the Soviet government's position. In the United States, coverage was predominantly supportive of the U.S. government, but the ideology of objectivity led to the presentation of Soviet viewpoints. In both cases, the theory of the press played an important role in orienting coverage.

A second factor affecting the strength of media alliance with national interests is the degree to which national interests are threatened. In the case of the KAL incident, the Soviets were obviously very sensitive to attacks on their legal and moral

standing in the world community. The strength of their media's support for the government indicates this concern. Likewise, the Korean national solidarity was aroused by the death of a large number of Koreans passengers. Korean media coverage was very anti-Soviet. This, in part, accounts for the high percentage of "pro-U.S." discrepancies for U.S. aligned countries.

A third factor is the extent to which the media are forced to rely on government sources for information. Immediately following the downing of the Korean jet, the governments involved were the only information sources. For the most part, deviation from national interest was based on a willingness to accept opposition governments as sources of information. As the story developed, other sources were cultivated. For instance, Soviet media quoted a French pilot's account of the CIA's practice of using Air France civilian airliners to carry out surveillance operations while deviating from their routes to Moscow.

Conclusion:

The Soviet downing of the KAL 007 was ambiguous. Considering the discrepancies in international coverage, it is clear that the news reflects more than information. Coverage reflects the influence of social forces, particularly national interests. Most news organizations settled on what they considered to be an acceptable version of reality, a version that was commensurate with national interests. However, when international accounts are compared, they are contradictory.

Constructing this story involved not only adjudicating between conflicting information, but also choosing what facts to present. The fact that relatively more Soviet-aligned media reported that the lights of the KAL plane were off at the time the plane was shot down is indicative of fact selectivity consistent with national interest. U.S.-aligned media generally ignored this issue. This demonstrates that news values lie outside the news itself and are imposed on it through hegemonic processes which tend to maintain the national interest.

These findings lend additional support to theoretical notions which assert that the media tend to reflect the institutions of power in a society. Political authority exerts a particularly powerful influence over the media in all social systems. Media messages tend to support the policies of internal authority, assisting in the management of social conflict and contributing to system maintenance. This is particularly evident when the conflict is external to the system. Information becomes part of process described by Coser, in which conflict with an external group increases the cohesion and solidarity of the internal group.¹⁴.

In a case like the KAL incident where Soviet and American interests were in direct conflict, their historical antipathies toward each other and the conventions for their media's treatment of the other come into play. Both countries tend to characterize the other as the enemy with conflicting interests.¹⁵.

In this way, the struggle between the capitalist economic interests represented by the United States and socialist interests of the Soviets are lost in the ambiguity of a struggle between "good" and "evil." Hartley refers to this as the "us/them" opposition.¹⁶ Thus, when a tragedy like KAL 007 occurs, the coverage is pre-disposed toward representing events as conflicts. Before the KAL incident even occurred, the roles of the actors--the governments, the press systems, and the various publics--were already defined through conventional practices. These practices can produce distorted information. For instance, in early Korean coverage of the incident it was reported that the airliner was shot down while on its "regular course."

Chomsky sees a common theme in messages produced under external conflict situations--the justification of policy based on an outside threat.¹⁷ The KAL 007 case is a prime example. Herman charged the Reagan Administration with taking advantage of the situation by disseminating misleading information about the events in order to achieve policy goals such as generating Congressional support for the MX missile.¹⁸

Chomsky points out that the media play an integral role in the "manufacture of consent."¹⁹ The media shape messages which encourage the acceptance of the very same types of action that other countries are condemned for. In essence, the media can "block understanding" of these events.

In this study, we demonstrated that news coverage of an

ambiguous event reflects international political alignments. Coverage fell into three patterns which are consistent with national political alignments: pro-Soviet, neutral and pro-U.S. Media coverage, in the absence of incontrovertible evidence about the incident, was oriented by organizational, political, economic and ideological forces. By broadly surveying world press coverage of the KAL incident, this study lends further evidence to attest to the power of social controls in the production of news.

TABLE ONE

Number of stories containing pro-Soviet, pro-U.S., and neutral presentations of each discrepancy (N=705)

<u>DISCREPANCIES*</u>	<u>NOT FOUND</u>	<u>PRO-SOVIET</u>	<u>NEUTRAL</u>	<u>PRO-USA</u>
Plane purposely flew over U.S.S.R.	445	<u>(YES)</u> 157	32	<u>(NO)</u> 72
Plane's lights were off	657	38	6	4
Third party blamed for not warning 007	629	69	3	5
Soviets didn't know it was commercial airliner	626	47	11	22
Soviets confused by other spy plane	629	65	4	8
Soviet action was acceptable	348	59	16	283
Soviets attempted to guide plane down	646	46	4	9
Soviets attempted to warn the plane	592	92	13	9

*The discrepancies are phrased in a form which resembles the pro-Soviet position.

TABLE TWO

Percentages of pro-Soviet, pro-U.S., and neutral presentations
of discrepant issues by nation-type

<u>ALIGNMENT</u> (cases)	<u>U.S.S.R.</u> (45)	<u>SOVIET-ALIGNED</u> (139)	<u>NEUTRAL</u> (114)	<u>U.S. ALIGNED</u> (354)	<u>U.S.</u> (53)
PRO-SOVIET	100%	95.15%	32.45%	11.55%	23.58%
NEUTRAL	0%	1.08%	20.53%	10.14%	18.95%
PRO-U.S.	0%	3.77%	47.02%	78.31%	57.89%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	n=106	n=371	n=151	n=355	n=95

TABLE THREE

Average mean discrepancy value for each group of countries

<u>Alignment</u>	<u>Average Discrepancy Value</u>	<u>N</u>
Soviet Union	0.82	45
Soviet Aligned	0.73	139
Neutral	-0.24	114
U.S. Aligned	-0.50	354
United States	-0.43	53
Total	-0.13	705

TABLE FOUR

T-tests between groups of countries on mean discrepancy values

<u>NATIONS</u>	<u>1.</u>	<u>2.</u>	<u>3.</u>	<u>4.</u>	<u>5.</u>
1. U.S.S.R. x=.82 n=45	--	--	--	--	--
2. SOVIET-ALIGNED x=.72 n=139	.10	--	--	--	--
3. NEUTRAL x=-.24 n=114	1.06**	.96**	--	--	--
4. U.S.-ALIGNED x=-.50 n=354	1.32**	1.22**	.26**	--	--
5. U.S. x=-.43 n=53	1.25**	1.15**	.19	.07	--

* p < .05
** p < .01

FOOTNOTES

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12. The discrepancy value has a range of 1 (pro-Soviet) to -1 (pro-U.S.). All articles containing at least one discrepancy can have a value of 1 or -1. The discrepancy value is calculated by adding the pro-Soviet presentations to one-half the neutral presentations. This number is divided by the total number of discrepancies mentioned in the article. This yields a measure of the overall tone of the article. In order to present this figure on a scale of 1 to -1, .5 is subtracted and the remainder is multiplied by 2. If no discrepancies were mentioned, the a discrepancy value of 0 was assigned to the case. The discrepancy value reflects the tone of an individual article regardless of the number of discrepancies.

13. When the articles which contained no information about the discrepancies were removed, the F-value remained significant.

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