Attention Maps of 10 Major Newspapers

Attention mapping displays substantial differences in components and scale of localization in papers.

The difference between the world as presented in the news and the world as it really exists is a fundamental problem for responsible journalism. But, even without differences in active bias, the world as presented by one newspaper is different from the world as presented by another. A newspaper has a specific location and assumes a specific constituency, and this social-geographical vantage point is an important determinant of its attention to the almost infinite amount of unedited information available to it.

The Attention Map project is a quantitative attempt to describe the world as perceived by the newspaper. The amount of news play given a certain event is the product not only of the information available, but also of the newspaper's interest in the information. "Attention maps" can be constructed which compare coverage patterns of newspapers and display the effect of localized interests on news coverage.

The philosophical position underlying this research is that knowledge and interest are inextricably intertwined. News coverage is the combined product of knowledge and interest, and, thus, the study of the world as perceived by newspapers can supply insights not only about the world, but about the interests of newspapers and their constituencies. The study does not contrast the world "as it really is" with the

By Brantly Womack

control of the media. Localization as a type of news distortion has a far smaller potential for invidiousness, since it is the geographic origin rather than the specific content of the news which is studied, and percentages of total attention rather than quantity of news. But interest, rather than news itself, is the most important determinant of localization, and this study accepts the co-determination of news by interest as its starting point. Specific interests produce selective attention to available information, and over time they influence the production of available information. The interplay of knowledge and interest cannot be untangled, but the relative displacement of attention can be studied through a comparison of attention patterns.

A reasonably precise indication of the attention map of a newspaper does not justify that pattern of attention. It might be the case of reflection as to whether that pattern of attention is adequate for the interest of the newspaper or for its assumed constituency, but such a question is beyond the scope of the present work. Some might think with Schudson that international news coverage contributes to the malaise of "informed futility" by providing information about events not under the reader's control, while others might protest the imposition of narrow horizons upon a newspaper's readership.

The Project

The Attention Map project involved measuring the amount of general news devoted to geographical areas for the week of July 23-July 29, 1979. Newspaper, rather than television coverage, was analyzed because the attention pattern of newspapers is less dependent on extraneous factors such as the availability of video footage. The newspapers were the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Miami Herald, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, the Houston Chronicle, the London Daily Telegraph, Le Soir (Belgium), France Soir, and Frankfurter Allgemeine.

The geographical categories of analysis were: local, city, local state, nations (including two transnationals—UN and PLO), international regions, world. News was classified into the most specific category, for instance Lebanon rather than Middle East. Multinational news among separable parties was divided among the parties, but a regional event, such as a meeting of the Organization of African Unity, would be counted under "Africa." Front page news was listed separately. Total space in square centimeters, including headlines but excluding pictures, was the raw data unit.

Since the study compares news attention patterns rather than quantities of coverage, each category of raw data was converted into percentage of coverage per newspaper-day, and all comparisons were in terms of percentages. Front page coverage was weighted twice that of normal coverage. However, all statistics were also calculated with unweighted data, and the results were quite close. Five or six days of coverage were available for all newspapers except the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and Le Soir. The representation of these two papers was judged adequate for analysis in Table 1 but inadequate for detailed analysis of international coverage.

The small scale of the project allowed a realistic development of decision rules for data gathering, and in any case the gathering of geographical data is simpler and faster than projects which require more complex analysis of article content. The data are very amenable to statistical analysis as well as to graphic display.

The attention mapping technique of Table 1 was specially developed for this project to display localized attention. Its scope of the research. The two-dimensional technique allows the more localized categories to be nested inside of the less localized categories, creating the accurate visual effect of widening horizons of interest. There is no spatial distortion in an attention map.
FIGURE 1: Attention Maps of 10 Major Dailies


Boston Globe  Miami Herald  France Soir  Frankfurter Allgemeine

Fort Worth Star-Telegram  Houston Chronicle  Reference Grid

Legend:
- Local City
- Local State (only for U.S.)
- National
- European (only for European)
- International
because it is composed of equal spatial subunits.

**Analysis**

It should first be emphasized that this analysis does not involve any assessment of the quality of news content; only the amount of space devoted to each place was measured. Moreover, the tables portray coverage as a percentage of the newspaper's total coverage, not absolute coverage. Since American newspapers usually have a larger news hole than their European counterparts, a slightly smaller percentage coverage does not necessarily mean less article space.

Figure 1 provides a graphic display of the ratio of localized news to international news in the newspapers under study. The attention maps are constructed of 1000-square grids, each square representing 1% of news coverage. Uneven lines occur when the cumulative percentage of attention is not the square root of an integer (the square root of 1000 is 31.6, hence the uneven horizontal line of the grid).

A major flood occurred in Houston during the period under study, producing an unusual amount of localized coverage for the Houston Chronicle and of state coverage for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

The category of Western Europe was differentiated for the European newspapers on Table 1 because it is a geographical unit roughly comparable to the United States in economic importance and population. Obviously, one problem in comparing domestic news coverage in Belgium and the U.S. is the tremendous disparity in size and autonomy. It turns out that Western Europe is a very significant additional unit of localization for the London Daily Telegraph and France Soir, adding another 3% in each case, but it is very important for Le Soir (19.6%) and Frankfurter Allgemeine (36.6%).

Disparities within the international news coverage of the various papers studied cannot be presented in the format of Figure 1. Places in the news were ranked for each newspaper according to percentage of coverage, with those receiving more than 10% of total coverage classified as first tier, those with more than 1% as second tier, and those with more than 1% as third tier. The analysis of international attention not only confirms the importance of localization, especially for the regional papers, but also provides evidence of selective patterns of attention within international news. Some of these variations can be plausibly explained as symptoms of localized interest, while others appear to reflect the latitude of editorial judgment.

The number of different places receiving significant attention may well be an indicator of a newspaper's cosmopolitanism, although the number of third tier places is undoubtedly influenced by layout and total volume of news. The number and variety of second tier countries may be a better indicator of international attention because the higher level implies sustained news coverage or special reports. The time period of this study is too short for clearly separating random variations from bias, but the data do suggest some observations which could be confirmed by a more extensive analysis.

Since the New York Times and the Washington Post show significant variation in both second and third tier coverage, it is evident that editorial discretion plays a large part in the pattern of international news. The distinguishing characteristic of the regional newspapers is that there is little difference in the second tier, but massive differences in the third tier. For instance, 66% of the Houston Chronicle's Herald's list, and 59% of the places found significant by the Herald were ignored by the Chronicle.

A clear picture of a collective national interest determining international attention does not emerge from the American papers, although coverage of Israel is significantly greater than in the European papers while that of Eastern Europe is much less. By contrast, a striking element in the coverage of the London Daily Telegraph is that former English colonies and spheres of influence are preferred. Similarly, France Soir finds Belgium and Luxemburg unusually newsworthy in addition to its vast domestic coverage. Over two-thirds of Frankfurter Allgemeine's non-dominion European coverage is devoted to United Kingdom, but even the remaining 6.7% of non-German, non-U.K. European coverage exceeds the total non-domestic European coverage of France Soir and the Daily Telegraph.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of the Attention Map study was to develop a methodology and data which describe accurately the geographical attention patterns of newspapers. The general result was that while all newspapers have a located point of view in their news coverage, attention mapping displays significant differences in the components and scale of localization. Further analysis of international coverage shows that localization affects international content as well.

The patterns of attention analyzed here are the product of available information and each newspaper's interest in reporting that information. By analyzing different newspapers for the same period of coverage we focus on the various interests of each newspaper to explain differences among attention maps. It is evident that the available information was selected according to the location of the newspaper and the scope of its interests. Furthermore, the predominantly regional interests of the Globe, Herald and Chronicle produced a standardization of major international coverage and an erratic pattern of minor coverage. Evidently, attention patterns are fairly accidental at the third tier fringe of attention, and the displacement of attention toward local concerns among the regional newspapers places local international events at the fringe—or beyond.

Without considering the question of active bias in the content of reporting, this project has demonstrated that the selective attention of various newspapers supplied quite different world views to their readerships. Although the idea of different simultaneous worlds is somewhat disquieting, the fact that what is news in Houston is not necessarily news in Frankfurt is quite natural. Newspapers may be more or less cosmopolitan depending on how they view the scale of interests of their constituency, but they are never perspectiveless, distortion-free records of the world. The world as perceived in the news is a record not only of the world but, also, of a located community of interests.

*"If the Post Had Tried to Save the Boy..."

The First Amendment will work only as long as the people want it to work. I am concerned about the current level of distrust and even hostility toward the press. It didn't help when the roof fell in on the Washington Post the other day over its fake prize-winning story of an 8-year-old heroin addict who didn't exist. Yet some good can come of that scandal if it stimulates every journalist to pause, take stock and ask some questions.

Post editors simply failed to do their job. They trusted a gifted liar, a kid from Ohio who had even faked her background to get her job only nine months before. Everyone in our profession was injured some because it gave ammunition to critics who want the press somehow controlled.

The Post... wore its hair shirt all last week for the nation's editors meeting in Washington. To its credit, the Post printed the facts that led to the shameful fraud—including charges and doubts which it had earlier stonewalled instead of investigating. Ironically, if the Post had tried to save the boy, it would have saved itself.—LEE HILLS at annual meeting of Knight-Ridder Newspapers, April 28, 1981.