The Coverage of International News in TV News Broadcasts: The Case of the Greek Public Television

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ABSTRACT

The "World Press Freedom Index" is published annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and aims to compare 180 countries and territories according to the level of freedom enjoyed by journalists and the media. For 2023, Greece is in position 107 on the list, occupying the last position among the countries of the European Union. As a result of the financial and political crisis, Greek journalists and media faced a deepening lack of trust in the country (Gioltzidou, 2018). In this context, the present study attempts an in-depth study of the potentially problematic aspects of the practice of journalism in Greece, starting from the level of coverage of international news on public television. The theoretical study is based on the research of Lent (1977), who concluded that national interests, censorship (internal or external), and an increasingly shrinking body of correspondents limit international news coverage in the media. In the empirical part, the research results obtained from the study of 66 news bulletins and 1447 separate news topics on the public television ERT3 during September 2021 were presented. The central research question of the study is "What is the role and the position of international news in news bulletins in Greece in cases of global crisis?".

Keywords: International news, journalism, public television, television broadcast.

I. INTRODUCTION

The way international news is covered by the national media offers limited evidence that the international scene works quite smoothly (Wanta & Hu, 1993). More often, the way of reporting international developments attempts to show the public that international problems are not really serious. The homogeneity with which disparate international news is presented also seems to be problematic. For example, international news can deal with a variety of topics: from foreign trade issues to terrorism. It is logical that different news topics require a different way of presentation. But this is not often observed, with the result that the public perceives a distorted and unrealistic agenda setting in relation to what is really important and what is not.

Most studies have not indicated uniform national media coverage. Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) pointed out the importance of narrative frames that journalists often use in order to organize their news stories. On the other hand, studies such as Williams et al. (1990) and Atwood (1987) have investigated the content of international news, while other studies as McNelly and Izcaray (1986), have demonstrated that unbalanced international news coverage affects the images individuals may have of other nations and states. McNelly and Izcaray (1986) identified that the degree of exposure and uptake of international news messages is significantly related to positive or negative feelings towards foreign countries and perceptions of successful or failed countries. Finally, in the study by Semetko et al. (1992), it is found that attention shown to international news is the best predictor of liking one country over another. The more visible a country is on television news, the stronger the public's interest in that country.

II. GLOBALIZED JOURNALISM

Technological developments in the information industry have shaped the conditions for the creation of a global public sphere (Castells, 2007), while globalization has also set new rules for the practice of journalism in terms of international news. However, it has been found that the international news presented by the national media does not include all the countries of the world but mainly the countries that gather global interest (Chang, 1998). At the same time, international news usually focuses on events related to disasters, wars, or other types of crises (Joye, 2010) and on hard news topics such as politics, economics.
and social or military issues (Straubhaar et al., 1992; Wu, 2000). Restraint of hard journalism is only noticed when it comes to events that gather global interest, such as major sporting events (e.g., the Olympic Games) or cultural and "lifestyle" events (e.g., the Oscars ceremony) (Altmeppen, 2010; Hamilton, 2010). Research shows that there is a gap between the news that is produced even by the European Union compared to what is broadcasted at a national level, but also that there is a great difference between how each country chooses to cover issues of European interest (Gioltzidou et al., 2023).

On the other hand, researchers, such as Biltereyst (2001), argue that there is a continuous expansion of local journalism, but also an attempt for the news to acquire elements of local identity, even if these are presented as "local," almost blackmailing.

In any case, a simple mention of what is happening outside the borders is not a complete journalistic article. Explaining, introducing comments, and mixing verbal and non-verbal cues in the background of a news story of international interest can attract the public's genuine interest, mobilize them, and lead them to seek more information in order to engage with the issue, as this was taking place next to them.

III. ‘AGENDA SETTING’ OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS

The seminal study of Galtung and Ruge (1965) was the first to point out that international news reported by journalists is shaped by a mixture of internal and external constraints. This, as well as the studies that followed, basically argue that the preferences of local journalists regarding the processing and presentation of an international news story concerning a specific country are also related to the news coverage of the countries that border geographically, politically, or culturally (Chang & Lee, 1992; Sreberny & Stevenson, 1999; Wu, 2000). In this way, evidence of 'cultural' filtering is detected in the context of international news coverage (Stevenson & Cole, 1984).

As Paterson (1999) argued, studying the externalities in journalism, the dependence of local journalists on international broadcasters and major international news agencies greatly influences which news to broadcast. Moreover, the media's political positions influence the way it portrays national news (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2023), while the different journalists' cultures also influence the produced journalistic material (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2022). However, there is evidence of bias in the way international news is covered, which is based on, or influenced by, the foreign policy of the government of the journalists' home country and/or work. The effort of independence and neutrality in the coverage of international news by journalists is directly related to their special characteristics, such as their origin and their language, but also the attitude of the government of the country with which they are related.

IV. THE GEOGRAPHY OF TV NEWS

International news is influenced and determined by its 'geography' (Wilke et al., 2012). The term 'news geography' has been used to describe the extent to which the countries of the world are represented in television broadcasts (Wilke et al., 2012). Essentially it refers to countries' presence in other countries' television broadcasts.

Clearly, the mass media do not have the ability to widely cover the news that takes place in the rest of the world. It is the journalist’s responsibility to decide, for each individual news, which countries to cover and which to ignore. It seems, however, that, especially in television news, the selection of the broadcast news is usually based on criteria of temporal and spatial proximity. In this context, factors influencing the international news agenda are proximity in geographical terms, historical relevance, and broader cultural connection (Wilke et al., 2012). Of course, the performance of financial profit in the light of television viewing rates can also be a criterion; however, in the case of selection by the journalists themselves, it is considered that this parameter is not primary.

Stable factors influencing the choice of international news are the superpower concept and the perception of a country's sovereignty (Staubhaar et al., 1992). As a result, there are countries that are over-covered and others that are completely excluded from the journalistic approach to television broadcasts (Golan & Wanta, 2003). The study by Wilke et al. (2012) showed that the country that was covered more than any other in television news reports among 17 Western countries was the USA, while on the contrary, regarding developments in Asian countries, there was a disturbing "silence" (Wilke et al., 2012). The intense press coverage of the US confirms its establishment as the world's only remaining superpower since everything that happens in this country, whether it is about internal party elections, terrorist attacks, or sporting events, is reduced to the subject of prime interest in all its news media world (Staab, 1990). Except for the USA, the countries most commonly covered in the news are those that are territorially adjacent but mainly those that show economic relations or political interdependence with each other.

A country's national interests are another strong component that determines the degree of journalistic coverage in a news release. Apart from the similarities in the basic pattern of international news interest,
the choices of which countries are covered can also be explained by their political history and culture. For example, Poland’s TV news is undoubtedly dominated by Russia. Not only do the proximity and the common borders play a role, but probably also the fears caused by former dependence on the Soviet Union.

Clearly, sometimes the criteria for international news can be unspecified and depend on timeliness, especially in cases of events with certain characteristics (e.g., sporting events of global interest). In any case, many studies have shown that the criteria for televising countries, states, and nations are often subjective and not strictly journalistic (Golan, 2010).

V. THE SHRINKING OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS ON TV BROADCASTS

The shrinking of international news is particularly evident in the field of national media television journalism. Despite the spread of global information networks and telecommunication systems connecting countries around the world, foreign and international news from the mainstream media seems to cover a very small percentage of the news at the global level (Fragkonikolopoulos, 2012). Thus, instead of growing, "global journalism" is shrinking.

Mainly television international news tends to be replaced by other types of content, such as live sporting events, live ceremonies, and news that falls into the category of soft news and infotainment (Altmeppen, 2010). Ratings largely determine the product shown, with the result that news relating to crises, war, disasters, disease, crime, and corruption is mainly shown, crowding out any international news that could be shown with a different theme. Eventually, international events are compressed and end up covering a minimal part of a news bulletin, as if it were a forced, almost forced report (Altmeppen, 2010).

Although, in recent years, interest in international news related to global climate conditions and global trade has been rising, there is a tendency for journalists to transform news from international to local to keep the interest of local viewers alive.

Thus, while on the one hand, the news is increasingly perceived as international, it tends to acquire, either naturally or acquired, local elements which may weaken these news stories and deprive them of their relevance as those that concern people around the world. While journalism should encourage the public to cultivate a dialogical and intertextual understanding and knowledge of the global, it tends more to encourage the reading of international developments through a narrow, national lens (Ward, 2008).

Secondly, there is a tendency to shape international news from a mixture of internal or national views and characteristics, which essentially "false" the news, as it is increasingly transformed into a "national" interest. Thus, international and, even more often, geopolitical news tends to be filtered through a cultural field that may be emotionally or nationally charged (Paterson, 1999). The result is that international news is presented biasedly and in the light of the common national line, even in cases where efforts are made for independence and freedom in the way of presentation.

VI. CRISIS

Although the meaning of crisis is difficult to be clarified, we keep the definition of Coombs (2015), which describes crises as unpredictable events that have the potential to create undesirable results for those in power. The researcher clarifies that crisis refers to conditions or situations that occur in complex systems, such as the economy, society, moral values, or the political or educational system. Times of crisis can create challenges for journalists who are called upon to cover them. Well-studied periods of crisis are, for example, the cases of wars and conflicts (Gioltzidou, 2018; Panagiotou, 2013). Crises, however, may also refer to health abnormalities. Referring to the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece but also throughout the world, it is important that this crisis can be considered a big one, as according to Negreponti-Delivanis (2010), the big crisis is characterized by severity with which all developments and individual events are carried out, which bring about upheavals even in fundamental social structures. The period of Covid-19 can be characterized as a crisis for Greece as well since the result of the pandemic led to dramatic effects on life and health, as well as on the social and political life of citizens.

VII. METHODOLOGY

The main research question of the present study is: What is the role and position of international news in news broadcasts in Greece in cases of global crisis?

The geographical area of the research is Greece, and the 3rd channel of the public Hellenic Radio Television (ERT3) was chosen as the TV channel. Regarding the sampling period, this concerns the month of September 2021. Based on the ERT3 schedule during this period, three news broadcasts were broadcast daily at 2:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 10:00 p.m. The choice of study period was made because the specific period in Greece is the end of the vacation period, and schools are open. At the same time, the pandemic in...
Greece, based on the data of the National Public Health Organization (EODY) on the epidemiological situation of the country, showed an increase in all dangerous hard health indicators. This confirmed the maintenance of the concept of crisis.

The present research focus on the thematic analysis of the news broadcasts, i.e., mainly on "what" is said, less on "how" it is said, and not at all on "to whom" and "for what purpose" it is said. Thus, content analysis was chosen as the research method to draw valuable conclusions about how or even why journalists cover or exclude certain information while also explaining how the media can become a primary determinant of political issues (Bennett et al., 2006).

The basic prerequisite for content analysis to be representative is a large sample. A total of 66 television broadcasts were studied, which included 1447 separate news topics. All the news material was categorized according to its subject.

VIII. RESULTS

A. Content of the News

Initially, we examined the content of the 1447 news reports that were presented in a total of 66 news broadcasts in September 2021. As Fig. 1 shows, 61% of the reports referred to social, 21% to political, and 8% to international news. Almost 8% of the reports were about other news, such as cultural and sports, or special news, such as world days, conferences, and tributes. It is worth emphasizing the fact that only 1% of all topics were related to financial news, while only 1% was about geopolitical news.

Fig. 1. The content of the news.

The results are important if we consider that the research period is a special period of crisis in which the pandemic caused thousands of deaths in the whole world, and publicized figures for each country were easily accessible and understandable.

However, ERT3 devotes only 8% of its television news time to covering international news, including news related to the pandemic. The invisibility of the rest of the countries in how they were affected and how they were dealing with the pandemic is remarkable.

B. International News and Pandemic vs. National News and Pandemic

Although the time period under consideration finds the pandemic at a global level, and the World Health Organization removed the scenario of the exit from the crisis, Fig. 2 shows that the overwhelming percentage of 96% of the reports concern the developments of the pandemic in Greece. Only 4% of the news is about the pandemic in other countries.

Considering that the pandemic is evolving rapidly, that it is not limited to geographical borders, and that due to travel and open borders, data from any neighboring or remote country can directly affect the epidemiological situation in Greece, it raises questions as to why international coverage, an international problem such as the Covid-19 pandemic is not adequately covered by public television news reports. The unilateral coverage of the developments on the pandemic could lead to dangerous introversion, both in managing the problem and in assuming collective responsibility (Altmeppen, 2010).
C. The Most Prominent Countries in the News

Our attempt to identify which countries are most mentioned in the news demonstrates the role of the geography of international news, as it has been extensively analyzed in the first part of the theoretical approach. More specifically, as can be seen in Fig. 3, the international news presented in the ERT3 newscasts covers 54% of the countries of the European Union, 18% of countries that are not members of the European Union but geographically belong to Europe, 9% Asian countries, 8% America, 7% Australia, while only 2% countries belonging to the African Continent.

The evidence confirms the already existing scientific studies on the power of the "geography" of news. The research results are in agreement with Wilke et al. (2012), who argued that the choice of countries to be covered journalistically is related to geographical proximity, their politics, history, and culture, as well as their commercial and economic relationships. This explains why European Union countries are largely covered (54%), while other neighboring countries, which belong to Europe and have geographical proximity, but no political and economic relationship with Greece, are covered at only 18%.

The results confirm the position of Nossek (2004) that the location of an event is not particularly relevant to the definition of the event as news and that proximity is not the main criterion for journalistic coverage of an issue - although it is an important place in the general criteria.

However, the results of this research do not confirm the positions of Staubhaar et al. (1992), who have argued that the journalistic coverage of a country depends on whether it is considered a superpower. In the present survey, only 8% of the reports cover America, and an even smaller percentage covers the US specifically. This suggests that Greek journalists do not highlight as major the issues taking place in the
world’s biggest superpower, the USA, although the Greek element of expatriation is strong in the country.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

In the present research, we attempted to outline the role and position of international news in broadcasts in the case of the public television medium ERT3. From the literature review of the first part of the research, it is easy to draw the conclusion that globalization directly and drastically affects the field of news, especially the field of television broadcasts. However, despite the ever-increasing intensity of international developments, there is a shrinking of international news presented on national network broadcasts and its replacement by news that mainly concerns domestic and national interests (Altmmeppen, 2010).

The present research demonstrated that the coverage of international news in a television newscast, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is influenced by "news geography," which is used to describe the extent to which the countries of the world are represented in television news broadcasts (Wilke et al., 2012). Political international news seems to have a special place in Greek television broadcasts, especially when the countries of origin are interconnected with the country of consumption. The public television of ERT3, however, does not particularly cover superpower countries, such as the USA, although similar studies have proven that countries that gather disproportionate power with the rest are often covered more intensively in the press.

The coverage of international news in the news broadcasts of ERT3 television is not important since there is a disproportionate emphasis on national perspectives, crises, and activities in relation to the rest of the countries. The geographical proximity, the intense crisis of neighboring states, and the policies, economic and historical relations with them did not significantly affect the order of the news. The television time dedicated to covering international news, at a time when all the countries of the planet were facing an unprecedented health, economic, and also political crisis, was very limited.

The phenomenon of "internationalization" (Clausen, 2004), i.e., the adaptation of international news to national narratives, was overwhelmingly confirmed.

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