



Bad News: The Changing Coverage of National Leaders in Foreign Media of Western Democracies

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This is a study on international news flow based on a computerized analysis of foreign news coverage of national leaders in seven liberal democracies (Canada, Germany, France, Israel, Italy, the U.K., and the U.S.), encompassing a period of 30 years ($N = 266,177$). The results attest to a longitudinal trend in the coverage of foreign leaders in the political media of three countries—Canada, the U.S., and the U.K.: the tone is becoming increasingly negative. Two main factors account for these variations. The first is the level of political personalization in foreign coverage: Greater focus on foreign leaders is positively associated with increasing negativity toward these leaders. The second factor relates to proximity between countries: Negativity was found to be inversely and significantly associated with value and geographic proximity and to be inversely associated, with marginal significance, with political and economic proximity.

Political news coverage has undergone profound changes in the past decades. It has been argued that the media coverage of politics has been significantly affected by the professionalization of the political enterprise and journalistic practices (Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006) and by increasing market pressures (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002). One of the most prominent changes in this regard discussed in the literature is

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mediated political personalization, in the sense of a heightened focus on individual politicians and diminished attention to parties, organizations, and institutions (Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012).

Recent research has shown that mediated personalization has likewise encroached into global politics. Thus, over the past 30 years, the media coverage of foreign countries has focused increasingly on their leaders at the expense of other aspects of political life (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013). An argument has been put forth that a process of this kind may affect the public's interest in, and understanding of, foreign countries (Golan & Yang, 2013). In fact, recent studies have contended that a national leader serves as a principal agent, both figuratively and de facto, in directing his or her nation's reputation abroad (Snow, 2009). For example, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) found that U.S. leaders perceived as credible in the eyes of foreign publics (abroad) usually had a substantial positive impact on attitudes about the U.S. and vice versa (see also, Golan & Yang, 2013; Nye, 2004). Accordingly, in a situation where the media are the main source of information about foreign countries, foreign leaders who figure prominently in the mainstream media coverage are highly relevant in forming public opinion regarding their respective countries (Hayes & Guardino, 2011).

Most studies that deal with news coverage of foreign political figures, whether state leaders or other high-ranking officials, have focused on a specific personage, and for the most part in the context of a specific event. For example, Farnsworth, Lichter, and Schatz (2011) explored the coverage of U.S. president Barack Obama in the U.K., Germany, and the Middle East. Althaus (2003) analyzed the coverage of foreign officials in the U.S. news during the Gulf War (see also Entman, 2004), and Hayes and Guardino's (2011) research demonstrated empirically the effect exerted by the coverage of foreign elites, including leaders, on U.S. public opinion regarding the 2003 Iraq War. The present study is not confined to the coverage of a specific context, event, or public figure. Rather it offers a broad perspective on the flow of international news, focusing on foreign nations' leaders.

The goal of this study is twofold. First, it endeavors to assess the affective language used in news coverage of foreign leaders and, more specifically, to measure the shift in its tone over time—to a more positive or a more negative, as may be the case. The empirical analysis that has been carried out to this end utilizes a large database comprising the coverage of political leaders from seven liberal countries in foreign newspapers spanning a period of 30 years. Second, the study explains the variation that is expected to emerge in the affective tone vis-à-vis different leaders coming from different countries—which is due to various systemic cultural and political variables. These include two main factors. The first is the level of media personalization in the coverage of the foreign country. This observation constitutes an important contribution to the literature regarding mediated personalization trend. As elaborated next, a personalization

trend in the media of a number of democracies has been documented in an extensive body of literature, and studies have also suggested a general reason for this tendency. However, the present study is the first to present an argument in which the personalization trend accounts for other communication developments such as a shift in the tone of news coverage.

The second factor is anchored in proximity, in terms of relatedness and interaction, between the leader's country and the country in which the media are investigated. Whereas studies have explained why and how proximity affects the *amount* of media attention accorded by one country to another, this study goes one step further by explaining and demonstrating empirically the influence of proximity on the *affect* (i.e., tone) of the news coverage.

AFFECTIVE COVERAGE OF POLITICAL ACTORS

Political discourse in general, and especially as concerns political actors, cannot be reduced to facts alone, for the tone of a text may be as influential as its substantive content (Sheafer, 2007; Young & Soroka, 2012). For this reason, numerous studies have explored the tone or sentiment of the news content portraying or discussing a political figure (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2010).

As stated, the first goal of this study is to assess the affective language used in news coverage of foreign leaders abroad, and especially to measure the shift in its tone (positive vs. negative) over time. The extensive literature analyzing the latter issue has focused for the most part on the national (domestic) arena. It has been demonstrated that, with time, political news has become increasingly negative (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006; Vliegthart et al., 2011)—typically zooming in on negative events.

Why does media content today tend to be generally negative, and especially so when political figures are concerned? Two explanations are most prominent in the literature. One puts the blame on journalistic norms, which promote cynicism toward public officials. This, in turn, is attributed to a general decline of trust vis-à-vis public figures (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). Thus, scandals such as Watergate and the Vietnam War are said to have left an indelible mark on the journalistic culture (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). A second explanation suggests that it is the very process of making news that propels journalists toward both sensational and negative news frames (see especially Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). This argument emphasizes the need for media to present new and exciting items to their audience. For a story to make the cut, it must stand out somehow, and one way to achieve this is by presenting errors committed by political figures in the system (Soroka & McAdams, 2015).

As already stated, most such research has explored the media arena at the national level. Few studies have dealt with this issue in the international context, and then only in respect of a specific leader and with reference to a specific event. For example, Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, Van Aelst, and de Vreese (2010) analyzed the coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election in eight European countries. One of their analyses illustrates trends in candidate favorability in campaign coverage by showing that the media in Europe were very favorable toward Obama, whereas the coverage of McCain never reached an overall positive tone. Painter and colleagues' (2014) study of the coverage of the same election in six countries demonstrated the differences in the affective tone toward Obama. Farnsworth and colleagues (2011), mentioned earlier, likewise explored the treatment of the newly elected Barack Obama in news programs of the U.K., Germany, and the Middle East. Although highly important, this literature also lacks a longitudinal comparative analysis of the tone of foreign news coverage. In an attempt to fill this gap, the present study traces an overall pattern of change in the flow of international news; it is centered on nations' leaders, who are becoming the focal point of their respective countries' media coverage. In line with the preceding accounts elaborating the tendency of domestic news content to become consistently negative, it is assumed here that, in their foreign coverage, too, journalists follow the same norms promoting cynicism and distrust toward political leaders (e.g., de Vreese, 2004; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). Hence, the following is this study's first and basic hypothesis:

H1: Over the past three decades, the news coverage of foreign national leaders has become increasingly negative.

MEDIA PERSONALIZATION AND AFFECTIVE COVERAGE OF POLITICAL LEADERS

In recent research based on an extensive literature review, Van Aelst et al. (2012) distinguish between two forms of personalization in the news content. The first relates to a focus on individual politicians as central actors in the political arena, encompassing their ideas, capacities, and policies. This phenomenon points to a shift in media visibility from organizations (i.e., parties, the government) to individual politicians. The second form of personalization indicates a shift in the media construction of the politician: from a public functionary to a private individual, distinct from his or her public role. The common outcome of these two types of personalization is that the media privilege and highlight political leaders, effectively turning them into characters of stories that are broadcast in the news (Balmas et al., 2014; Mancini, 2011; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). It is argued here that, in such a media environment, the evaluation of political figures

is expected to be emotional—either positively or negatively so (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). This assumption is aligned with the fundamentals of social psychology: A group leader is generally viewed as the exemplar (Mullen, Pizzuto, & Foels, 2002; Schubert & Häfner, 2003), who consciously decides to behave either “well” or “badly” and who exercises full control over these choices (Sigelman, Sigelman, & Walkosz, 1992). Inasmuch as negative information attracts more attention than positive, it is not surprising that journalists tend to be more responsive to losses sustained by politicians in the playing field than to their gains (Soroka, 2006). Thus, with the rise in the media attention accorded to foreign leaders (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013), a disproportionately greater increase in negative coverage is to be expected. Building on the research just cited, the following is hypothesized:

H2: The negativity of news coverage of foreign leaders will increase with the increase in the personalization level of foreign media coverage.

A question probed by this research is, What harm, if any, is caused by the convergence between personalization and negativity, and to whom? One might plausibly argue that it doesn't really matter, as leaders are elected in their own countries and not abroad. We suggest, however, that it is not the leader who is at issue but rather his or her country and its citizens. According to social cognition theories, and especially the contact hypothesis, humans' view of out-groups (such as foreign nations) tends to be more simplistic than of the in-group (see, e.g., Maoz & Ellis, 2008; Mullen, Rozell, & Johnson, 2000). One consequence of such a simplified perspective regarding an out-group is the evolvment of a stereotype that makes “us” view its members as “all alike” (Boldry et al., 2007) and deduce therefrom that it can be adequately represented by a single member—the exemplar. The most prototypical exemplar of an out-group is usually taken to be its most prominent member (Bodenhausen et al., 1994). Indeed, based on models of social judgment, it was demonstrated that people's assessment of an out-group—such as a foreign nation—either as a whole or of some of its members, can be shaped by the attributes of a single exemplar—such as the nation's leader—construed as a prototype (Balmas, *in press*; Mullen et al., 2002; Schubert & Häfner, 2003). Accordingly, the convergence of the media personalization trend with the rise of negativity in leaders' foreign media coverage may affect foreign publics. Specifically, it may lead people in one country to base their evaluations of a foreign country and its citizens on the information they receive regarding that country's leader (Balmas, *in press*). If such information becomes more and more negative—as its main source today is the media—it may affect their evaluations of that leader's country and citizenry.

PROXIMITY BETWEEN COUNTRIES AND AFFECTIVE NEWS COVERAGE OF FOREIGN LEADERS

Although expecting to find an overall increase in negativity in the coverage of foreign leaders, especially in a personalized media environment, it is still necessary to consider other fundamental factors that may have an impact on the tone of such coverage. The basic premise of comparative analysis is that various systemic cultural and political variables should result in different political communication processes (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Therefore, the tone of the reciprocal media coverage of different leaders is expected to vary with the level of relatedness and interaction (in other words, proximity) between their countries.

Proximity between two countries is considered by many researchers as predominant among the news values that affect the international news flow (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker, Lee, Han, & Cohen, 2007). Thus, Galtung and Ruge (1965) found a negative correlation between the cultural distance between countries and negativity in their mutual news coverage (related to a specific event)—a conclusion that is in keeping with basic principles of social psychology. Indeed, according to the contact hypothesis (e.g., Allport, 1954), people's view of distant groups tends to be more negative than of proximate groups (see, e.g., Mullen et al., 2000). The present study expects this principle to hold true of nations as well. In line with the research just presented, the overarching proximity hypothesis is as follows:

- H3: The negativity of a foreign leader's news coverage decreases with the increase of proximity between that leader's country and the country for which media are investigated.

Among the kinds of proximity that significantly affect international news flow researchers have cited cultural proximity (Golan, 2007), value proximity, political proximity (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Sheafer, Ben-Nun Bloom, Shenhav, & Segev, 2013; Sheafer & Shenhav, 2013; Sheafer, Shenhav, Takens, & van Atteveldt, 2014), mutual trade (Rosengren, 1977; Wu, 2000), and geographic proximity (Shoemaker et al., 2007; Wu, 2000).

Value Proximity

In this study, value proximity designates the similarity of democratic and political values in two countries (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Sheafer & Shenhav, 2013). At both the individual and collective levels (Schwartz, 1990), *values* have been defined as “deeply rooted motivations or orientations guiding or explaining certain

attitudes, norms, and opinions which, in turn, direct human action” (Halman, 2009, p. 309; see also Balmas & Sheafer, 2013).

It has been suggested that a nation’s evaluation of foreign leaders is to a large extent a function of its cultural values (Dickson, Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003). Yet this conjecture has not been supported by sufficient evidence, and a counterclaim has been put forth (e.g., Shaw, 1990) that such foreign leader evaluations are subject to cross-cultural parameters. A prominent cross-national study of individuals’ values is the World Values Survey project, which analyzes the development of postmaterialist values in various countries. This and other international surveys served as a basis for Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005, 2010) factor of values embraced by people. Its constitutive components are survival values and self-expression values. According to these authors, this factor is especially useful in tapping democratic values, and therefore the present study uses it to operationalize democratic values embraced by the public in the countries investigated. In line with the basic proximity assumption, the hypothesis regarding values is as follows:

H3a: The negativity of foreign leaders’ news coverage decreases with the increase in value proximity between countries.

Political Proximity

As opposed to interstate cultural proximity, which represents shared values, political proximity is related to shared interests (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013). Political proximity is a pivotal notion in the international relations realist school, which posits that states ally on the basis of congruence of their strategic interests (Maoz, Kuperman, Terris, & Talmud, 2006). Political proximity between countries is operationalized and assessed in this study based on policy-related actions, in line with Sheafer and Shenhav (2010), and Balmas and Sheafer (2013)—specifically, the level of political congruence between policy-related actions taken by any dyad of countries. The hypothesis in this regard is as follows:

H3b: The negativity of foreign reciprocal news coverage of national leaders will decrease with the increase in the political proximity between their countries.

Economic Relatedness and Geographic Proximity

As previously noted, both economic relatedness, represented by bilateral trade, and geographic proximity, measured by the distance between capital cities, have been identified as fundamental news values (Shoemaker et al., 2007; Wu, 2000). For example, Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) theory posits that a nation’s economic and geographic characteristics determine not only the amount but also the nature

of the coverage received by a country in the news media of another (see also Sheaffer et al., 2013). This can be explained by familiarity considerations. For example, one of the main criteria for choosing a tourist destination is geographic proximity (Nicolau & Mas, 2006). Tourism is considered the main indicator for familiarity with a foreign nation. In fact, research has demonstrated that the higher the familiarity with a destination (a foreign country), the more positive the general perceptions regarding it (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Another indicator for familiarity with a foreign nation is the goods imported from it. Indeed, it was demonstrated that frequent exposure to products coming from a foreign country contributes to familiarity perceptions (Heslop, Papadopoulos, Dowdles, Wall, & Compeau, 2004). In summarizing the findings of earlier studies, Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden (2003) noted that familiarity influences affect (e.g., prestige) dimensions, enhancing positive affect. Based on the literature presented here, and in view of media's tendency to focus on foreign leaders at the expense of other national aspects, the following is hypothesized here:

H3c and H3d: The negativity of the news coverage of national leaders will decrease with an increase in bilateral trade (H3c) and geographic proximity (H3d).

METHOD

This study is based on a large-scale, long-term computerized content analysis of political coverage in newspapers of three countries regarding the leaders of seven countries.

The Sample of National Leaders

The sample includes all the leaders who served during the last 26 years in seven democracies: Canada, Germany, France, Israel, Italy, the U.K., and the U.S.. The choice of a sample comprising exclusively Western democracies was driven by two considerations. The first is technical, related to the availability of data—not only news content but other materials as well, such as the World Values Survey. Second, the goal was to study countries expected to attract large media attention. All the countries examined (except Israel) are members of the G7 and are thus considered world's major advanced economies. Foreign media coverage of these countries tends to be higher than of those with lower economic indices (Sheaffer et al., *in press*). Moreover, according to Wu's (2000) research analyzing the news coverage of 38 countries, the most covered countries in Europe are France, Germany, Italy and the U.K.; in the Middle East, it is Israel; in the American continent (and worldwide) it is the U.S. (Canada was not included in Wu's research)—hence, the choice of the sample.

The Media Sample and Method of Selecting News Articles

Twelve national newspapers in three countries (Canada, the U.K., and the U.S.) were analyzed. The countries were selected for two main reasons. First, at present, such computerized sentiment-based content analysis can be conducted only in English. Second, the main goal of this research is to investigate a longitudinal political-communication process; hence, only those countries that have leading newspapers with a record on LexisNexis from at least the early 1980s and through 2010 were selected. In view of the availability of the data on LexisNexis, the earliest year that could be chosen was 1984. The following list details the newspapers singled out for analysis: Canada: the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Sun*, and *National Post*; U.K.: the *Mirror* (the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Mirror*), the *Sun*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, and *Mail on Sunday*; U.S.: the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*.

Using LexisNexis, all articles were analyzed in the aforementioned newspapers, which mention the names of a leader from any of the other five countries—the one in office at the time the article appeared. For example, every news article in the *New York Times* from 1984 until the end of 2010 was singled out if it mentions the name of the French president in office at the time of its publication. The full database contains all news items from Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. that mention one or more of the leaders of the six countries other than itself ($N = 266,177$). The data were collected by three trained research assistants.

The Tone of the News Coverage (Positive/Negative)

The very large number of articles included in the content analysis performed for the purposes of this study ($N = 266,177$) necessitated the use of computerized tools to capture the polarity of the dominant sentiment in each of the articles selected. The computerized content analysis tools employed were the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (LSD) and the Amsterdam Content Analysis Tool (AmCAT), a web-based database and coding program.

The LSD, created by Young and Soroka (2012), is a comprehensive dictionary coded for valence. It is designed to target primarily the content of political news items but can also be used for other texts. Young and Soroka's dictionary merges and standardizes three widely used and publicly available affective lexical resources from political science, linguistics, and psychology. The result is a broad lexicon scored for positive and negative tone, capturing the positive–negative sentiment valence in text. The LSD includes, for example, positive categories such as “benevolence,” “vindication,” “respect,” “cheerfulness,” and “intelligence,” as well as negative categories such as “insolence,” “malevolence,” “painfulness,” “disappointment” and “neglect.” Young and Soroka showed that the LSD produces assessments that are consistent with human coding. Based on

the LSD coding, it is reasonable to expect that if a news article displays a higher frequency of negative as opposed to positive words, its general tone or context will be negative.

One of the goals of this research is to capture the polarity of the tone a news article projects in covering the leader of a particular foreign country. To this end, the study employed, *inter alia*, AmCAT (Schultz et al., 2012; van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, & Ruigrok, 2008), instructing it to search for words coded as either negative or positive by the LSD and occurring at a maximum distance of 10 words from the name of the leader. However, to conclude that a given negative or positive word refers to the leader rather than to a different entity, the results of AmCat must be compared with some other, independently validated, assessment—case in point, human coding. Such a reliability analysis was performed by two trained human coders and included 1,200 articles: 100 from each of the 12 national newspapers just listed, of which one third were published in 1980–1989, one third in 1990–1999, and one third in 2000–2010.

Coders were instructed to read each article; identify the leader covered in it by the name; then, for each leader in each article, designate the tone of coverage as positive, negative, or neutral (examples of the instructions are found in the appendix). This validation required two reliability tests: One is between the coders, and the other is the coders versus AmCat. The first test resulted in a Krippendorff's alpha of .84 and the second was .71. According to Hayes and Krippendorff (2007), with $\alpha = .70$, the risk of accepting the data as reliable when they are not is quite low ($q = 0.0125$). This shows that, in most cases, when a negative or positive word appears at a short distance from another lexical item (signifying the leader), its tone will be associated with the entity signified. A staple concern in content analysis, whether human or automated, is producing reliable measures, relatively unaffected by random coding errors. One of the ways for a study to deal with this issue is through volume. Aggregation works because errors are essentially random, thus cancelling one another out as more and more data are added. Some texts may be coded a little too far in one or the other direction; by putting them all together, the correct signal is obtained. Dealing with large data sets requires automated content analysis, which in turn is usually performed on larger data sets (for further discussion, as well as for information about the capacity of dictionary-based systems to capture tones in content, see Soroka, Young, & Balmas, 2015; Young & Soroka, 2012).

Although each of the 266,177 news articles was analyzed individually and coded as positive, negative, or neutral (the latter, for cases in which the tone could not be identified), the unit of analysis employed in this study is not a single news article but rather an aggregated score for 1 *year* of coverage. The reason for the use of such a yearly measure is that other (independent) variables, that is, value proximity, political proximity, and the foreign country's power, could be gauged only on a yearly basis.

The next stage, therefore, was to produce two measures that predict the probability of finding either positive (*positive measure*) or negative (*negative measure*) coverage of a certain country's leader in an article randomly chosen out of a corpus of articles in which this leader is mentioned, selected in a single country in a single year. The negative measure was calculated by dividing the number of articles published over 1 year in a single country that cover a given leader in a negative context by the number of all articles that mention that leader's name. The positive measure has the same denominator, but the numerator is the number of articles published over 1 year in a single country that cover a given leader in a positive context. All the news articles that were not identified as either positive or negative were categorized as neutral. These measures are asymmetric; they are adopted from previous research that used computerized content analysis (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Ruigrok & van Atteveldt, 2007).

Nevertheless, the preceding measures for positivity and negativity are not separated but are combined into a single item. The annual aggregated measures employed are suitable for statistical analysis using the Janis–Fadner coefficient of imbalance (Janis & Fadner, 1965). This indicator, which gauges the relative proportion of favorable (positive) to unfavorable (negative) articles while controlling for the overall volume of articles (Brown & Deegan, 1998; Deephouse, 2000), is formalized as follows:

$$\text{Coefficient of media favorableness} = \begin{cases} (f^2 - fu)/(r)^2 & \text{iff } < u; \\ 0 & \text{iff } = u; \\ (fu - u^2)/(r)^2 & \text{ifu } > f \end{cases}$$

where f = probability to find favorable (positive) articles regarding a specific leader in a given year, u = probability to find unfavorable (negative) regarding that leader in that year, and r = the probability to find both positive *and* negative articles for the leader in that year. The range of this variable goes from -1 to 1 , where 1 indicates all positive coverage, -1 indicates all negative coverage, and 0 indicates a balance between the two over the year.

Mediated Political Personalization

Based on Balmas and Sheafer (2013), this variable is defined as the relative media attention accorded per year to a foreign country versus its leader. Using AmCAT, this measure was calculated by dividing the number of articles published over 1 year that mention the leader's name by the number of articles that mention that leader's country's name. The association between the leader and his or her country is defined as the chance of reading about a certain country in a randomly chosen article that discusses its leader (Ruigrok & van Atteveldt, 2007).

Proximity Between Countries

Value Proximity. As part of the World Values Survey project, Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 2010) deduced a factor of values embraced by people comprising survival values, on one hand, and self-expression values, on the other. This study applied the factor of values produced by these scholars to each of the six countries investigated and then calculated the distance between every two countries in the sample by subtracting the score of one from the score of the other (in absolute values). By multiplying these distance values by -1 , we obtained the proximity measure for each dyad, where the larger the value, the more similar the dyad (e.g., Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Sheafer et al., 2013; Sheafer et al., 2014). For example, the 2006 score for survival–self-expression values in the U.S. was 1.76, in Canada 1.91, in France .13, in Germany .42, in Israel .36, in Italy 1.16 and in the U.K. 1.68. By subtracting each one of the six countries' score from that of the U.S., we find that, in terms of these values, the U.S. is the most similar to the U.K., followed by Canada, Italy, Germany, Israel, and France, in that order. It should be noted that the World Values Survey is not conducted every year, as people do not change their values and deep perception frequently (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Based on previous studies that used the World Values Survey, the missing years were not defined as missing values. Rather, the same value was stipulated for several consecutive years (e.g., Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Sheafer et al., 2013; Sheafer et al., 2014).

Political Proximity. This variable, which is operationalized as the voting similarity between a pair of states in the United Nations General Assembly, is a good indicator of shared political interests and therefore also of political proximity, as it reflects each country's position on a broad range of political issues (Kim & Russett, 1996; Voeten, 2000). The expectation is that the more interests are shared by two states, the greater will be the political proximity between them (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Sheafer et al., 2014). First, each state's vote on each General Assembly resolution (United Nations Biographic Information System¹) was coded between 1984 and 2010 (-1 = no, 0 = abstain, 1 = yes). Next, rank-order correlations (Spearman's rho) were produced between the votes of each of the countries and the vote cast by the other countries in each United Nations General Assembly session over a single year.

Economic Relatedness. Data for this economic interaction variable is taken from the Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook of the International

¹ <http://unbisnet.un.org:8080/ipac20/ipac.jsp?profile=votingandmenu=searchandsubmenu=power#focus>

Monetary Fund.² Bilateral trade represents the sum of imports and exports (in millions of dollars) between the state that has its media investigated (the host state) and the other states in the sample divided by the total trade traffic of the host state with all other countries. This index is measured per year from 1984 until 2010. Such method of calculation facilitates assessment of the economic significance of the foreign state for the host state, and thus helps to avoid the fallacy of symmetry—where, for example, the relative level of trade from the U. S. to the U.K. is mistakenly assessed as identical to that of the U.K. to the U.S. (see, e.g., Shenkar, 2001).

Geographic Proximity. This variable represents the distance (in thousands of kilometers) between the capitals of states.³

Covariates

Foreign Country's Power. Many studies that tested the influence of national traits on the international news flow drew on Galtung and Ruges's (1965) structural theory of foreign news. Several variables associated with news coverage were identified in this regard, such as gross national product per capita, population, location, and geographic size (Wanta & Golan, 2010; Wu, 2000). Previous studies have shown that powerful countries and their leaders are considered as more newsworthy than less powerful countries and their leaders (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Chang, 1998; Wanta & Golan, 2010; Wu, 2000). Therefore, a country's power is expected to account for some of the variation in the tone of its coverage in foreign media, yet its effect is impossible to predict.

The measurement of power is based on the Composite Index of National Capability, taken from the Correlates of War Project⁴ (Singer, 1988; Singer, Bremer, & Stuckey, 1972). This index, measured per year from 1984 until 2009, represents a country's national capability by integrating six variables: energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditure, military personnel, total population, and urban population.

Involvement in Armed Conflict. This variable controls for the possibility that the tone of the foreign coverage of a leader was impacted by his or her country's involvement in a political conflict. Admittedly, in an armed conflict, with people getting hurt, be it citizens or soldiers, the leader is likely to be the one held accountable, evoking criticism and hence a more negative news coverage. The relevant data were obtained from the Center of the Study of

² <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=20721.0>

³ Retrieved from <http://www.cepii.fr/anglaisgraph/bdd/distances.htm>

⁴ *National Material Capabilities* (v3.02). Retrieved from <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>

Civil War,⁵ which displays information, for a large number of countries, regarding their involvement in domestic and international military conflicts. This variable—measured yearly—can have one of the following three values: not involved at all (coded 1), providing military support to another country in conflict (coded 2), leading the conflict (coded 3).

Statistical Analysis

As the present study operates with a database comprising groups with two members, the statistical analysis here is based on dyadic data analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This entails that each line in the database represents the relationship between two countries: one country's (e.g., U.S.) media coverage of the other's leader (e.g., Tony Blair) over 1 year. Unlike usual multilevel analyses, dyadic analysis constrains the model to include only fixed effects of the independent variables. The reason, according to Kenny et al. (2006), is that

dyads don't have enough lower-level units (i.e., dyad members) to allow the slopes to vary from dyad to dyad. However, the intercepts for the dyads can vary, and it is through the variation of intercepts that the nonindependence in the members' scores within dyads is modeled. (p. 89)

As stated, the total number of dyads in the current study is 18, with three countries covering six other countries' leaders (44 leaders). Therefore, the total sample size is 18 times the years of analysis (starting in 1984) for each dyad ($N = 553$).

RESULTS

Nations' Leaders in Foreign News—The Tone of Coverage

According to the first hypothesis, with the years, the amount of negative coverage devoted to foreign leaders is expected to increase. This assumption was confirmed in most of the cases examined, as is evident in Figure 1. By and large, the context of the news coverage in Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. regarding the leaders of Canada, Germany, France, Israel, Italy, the U.K., and the U.S. (excluding domestic coverage) is becoming increasingly negative. In fact, the three figures that represent the positivity level in the coverage of foreign leaders clearly show that (a) each line in each of the three figures ends at a lower point than it started and (b) the decrease begins at some point in the mid/late

⁵ *Data on Armed Conflict*. Retrieved from <http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/Armed-Conflict/>

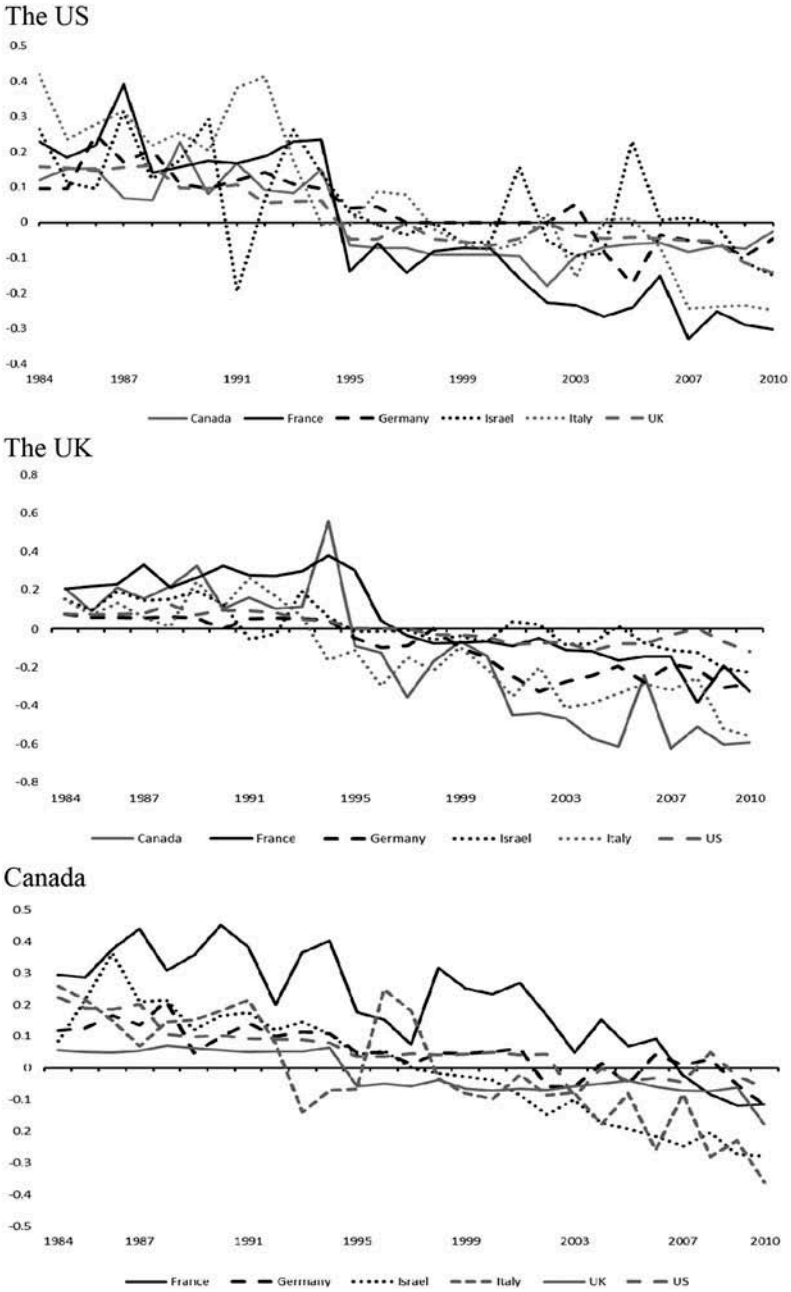


FIGURE 1 Media valence in the coverage of foreign leaders.
 Note. The Y-axis represents the level of positivity in news articles about each

of the 44 leaders who have served during the last 30 years in Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the U.K., and the U.S. (during his or her time in office). This measure is based on the Janis–Fadner coefficient of imbalance; the range of this variable goes from -1 to 1, where 1 indicates all-positive coverage, -1 indicates all-negative coverage, and 0 indicates a balance.

1990s. Further evidence for these trends emerges from the dyadic analysis presented in Table 1, where the dependent variable is the total yearly balance of positive and negative media items covering foreign leaders (based on the Janis–Fadner coefficient, as discussed in the Method section). The coefficient of the variable “year” (running 1984–2010) is negative and significant. Thus, the media context centered on foreign leaders has become increasingly negative with time. That said, the different slopes of the lines in Figure 1 attest to a considerable variance between the countries in the coverage of a given foreign leader. This is attributable to two main factors: the level of personalization in the coverage of foreign countries and the proximity of the leader’s country to the country for which media are investigated.

According to H2, negativity in the news coverage of foreign leaders is expected to increase with the level of media personalization. The results displayed in Table 1 support this hypothesis: Greater focus on foreign leaders is positively associated with increasing negativity toward these leaders.

The third hypothesis in this study predicts a negative relationship between proximity in values (H3a), political interests (H3b), economic relations (H3c),

TABLE 1
Media Valence in the Coverage of Foreign Leaders

<i>Fixed Effects</i>	<i>Foreign Media Valence B (SE)</i>
Main predictors	
Level of personalization	-.15*** (.03)
Year	-.15*** (.00)
Relatedness and interaction	
Value proximity	.02** (.01)
Political proximity	.05* (.03)
Economic relatedness	.06* (.03)
Geographic proximity	.01*** (.00)
Controls	
Foreign country’s power	.014 (.19)
Armed conflict	.02** (.00)
Intercept	.25*** (.03)
<i>N</i>	553

p* < .08. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.



and location (H3d), and the extent of the negative foreign news coverage of a leader: The more proximate one country is to another, the less negative the coverage of its leader will be by the media of the latter, and vice versa. The analysis summarized in [Table 1](#) partially supports the four proximity hypotheses: Coefficients for value proximity and geographic proximity are positive and significant; coefficients for political proximity and economic relations are marginally significant ($p < .08$). This entails that the greater the proximity between two countries, the less the reciprocal coverage of their foreign leaders will be framed in a negative context. Next are examples for different kinds of proximity. The value proximity between the U.S. and Canada is greater than between the U.S. and Italy, and the U.S. press coverage of the Italian leader is more negative than its coverage of the Canadian leader. Political proximity between the U.K. and France is greater than between the U.K. and Germany, and the U.K. press coverage of German leader is more negative than of the French leader. Geographic proximity between Canada and the U.S. is smaller than between Canada and the other countries in the sample, and the Canadian press coverage of the U.S. president is less negative than of the Italian, U.K., and French leaders.

Covariates

An important covariate in the statistical model controls for the possibility that the tone of the foreign coverage of a leader is a function of his or her country's involvement in armed conflict. The results presented in [Table 1](#) show a positive and significant relationship between the level of involvement in conflict (a higher level pointing to greater involvement) and the level of positivity. This result may strike one as counterintuitive. Yet it is possible that, because all the countries in the sample are allies, they will be supportive of one another in time of conflict, and this will find expression in their mutual media coverage.

Another covariate was the country's power. [Table 1](#) shows no significant relationship between the country's power and the tone of its leader's foreign news coverage.

As the statistical model presented here (i.e., the dyadic data analysis) does not produce the coefficient of determination, denoted as R^2 , a traditional regression analysis was conducted as well. The regression model, which was produced with exactly the same variables as in the dyadic data analysis model, explains 52% of the variance in the tone of the news coverage of foreign leaders.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the first part of this study was to introduce a broader perspective on the media portrayal of foreign national leaders than the one offered by the previous literature. The contribution of such an approach to the study of

journalism is a new and deeper understanding of the dramatic change that has recently occurred in the journalistic language: a linear increase in the use of negative terms in describing world leaders.

The second part suggests an explanation pivoting around the relationship between the tone of a leader's foreign coverage and the level of personalization in media. As part of the latter phenomenon, politicians are becoming the main anchor of interpretations and evaluations in the political processes reported in the news. The argument developed here is that such a personalized media environment fosters a more critical and judgmental coverage. The results of this study demonstrate the validity of this argument empirically: The level of media personalization has emerged as one of the strongest predictors for the tone of news coverage. More specifically, the level of negativity has been shown to increase with the increase of the media personalization level.

The convergence found between the personalization trend and the increasingly negative coverage of foreign leaders constitutes an important contribution of the present research. An impressive body of empirical research to date attests to the presence of a personalization trend in the media of a number of democracies. Several studies have also suggested a general reason for this tendency. However, the study presented here is the first to construct an argument in which the personalization trend is used to account for other communication developments such as the increasing negativity in news coverage.

The second explanation for the increasing negativity in the coverage of foreign leaders is based on proximity considerations. It was hypothesized that the leader of a nation that is more proximate in values, politics, economy, and geography will elicit less of negative coverage. The analysis, generally, supports this hypothesis: The hypotheses regarding value proximity and geographic proximity were fully confirmed, whereas the hypotheses regarding political proximity and economic relations were marginally confirmed ($p < .08$). Although other studies have shown that proximity affects the *amount* of media attention accorded by one country to another, this study takes this conclusion one step further by demonstrating that it also influences the *tone* of the news coverage.

It is important to point out the limitations of this study. The first has to do with the size of the sample, which includes leaders from only seven countries. One could argue that such a selection might be biased, but this criticism is applicable to all small sample size comparative work (see Ebbinghaus, 2005). The second limitation is the homogeneity of the countries sample: As noted previously, all the nations investigated are Western democracies that are active players in the global political arena and members of the Group of Seven. Future research would do well to focus on more countries including, for example, those from the G20 such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. Moreover, our understanding of the quality of international news flow may significantly benefit from a comparison between Western-liberal and non-Western and less liberal

countries. Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. have the same media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). It is possible that, in a liberal journalistic culture, where the media system is commercialized, news reporters tend to assess world events based on the actions of individual leaders (Soroka & McAdams, 2015), and their perception is influenced by rating considerations (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Therefore, expanding the countries sample can contribute to higher variance of proximity variables. It will shed more light on pairs of countries that are more distant from each other, especially culturally and politically (e.g., the U.S. and Indonesia or Saudi Arabia).

Limitations aside, the findings and insights obtained here as concerns the emotive language pervading the foreign coverage of national leaders, as well as explanations of variations in the tone of international news, are revealing, regardless of the profile of the sample. The exploration of this subject opens up new avenues for future research, which will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the effects of affective news coverage in the international arena.

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APPENDIX

Coding Scheme

Coding messages regarding national leaders

Please read each one of the articles you got, identify the leader covered in it by the name, and then, for each leader in each article, designate the tone of coverage as positive, negative, or neutral.

The following are examples. *Note that this is not an exhaustive list. It serves as a list of examples in order to make you familiar with the kind of messages we are looking for. Additional types of negative and positive messages are always possible.*

Negative messages regarding a leader

- The leader made a mistake
- The leader did not do enough
- The leader reacted too slowly
- The leader neglected her/his duty (wholly or partly)
- The leader acted too aggressively
- The leader took risks that he/she should not have
- The leader is poorly managed
- The leader cannot be trusted
- The leader wasted resources
- Generally—the message seems critical of the leader

Positive messages regarding a leader

- The leader is intelligent/professional/expert
- The leader acted responsibly
- The leader prevented harm/a disaster
- The leader acted carefully/sensitively
- The leader can be trusted
- The leader acted according to moral standards
- The leader is charismatic
- The leader took a calculated risk and succeeded
- The leader has broad support in domestic/international arena
- Generally—the message seems to praise the leader

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