



Do the Contents of Foreign News on Television Match Viewers' Interests? A 12-Nation Study of Topics and Countries of Interest

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Abstract

This article draws upon content analytic and survey data from a 12-nation comparative study to examine the question of content-interest correspondence (CIC) regarding foreign news on television. That is, to what extent do the contents of foreign news aired on television match the interests that viewers have regarding foreign news? Treating CIC as a variable, the data show that, among the nations studied, CIC concerning *foreign countries covered in the news* is generally stronger than CIC regarding *news topics*. At the same time, the analysis examines whether the level of CIC relates to several national, media system, and viewer characteristics. The analysis shows that larger nations exhibit higher levels of CIC regarding topics and lower levels of CIC regarding countries. Also, CIC regarding news topics is lower in countries where the ownership and revenue structure of the television system leans toward commercialism and where television news focuses more heavily on soft news. Implications of the findings and directions for further research are discussed.

Keywords

foreign news, television, news audience, content-interest correspondence, comparative research

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Introduction

Decades of international communication research have generated much knowledge about the characteristics of foreign news in the media. Foreign news in many nations has been found to focus on a small number of countries. The few prominently reported nations are typically either the most powerful in the world or those with important historical, cultural, and/or political ties with the reporting country (Wu, 1998, 2000). Chang (1998) similarly found that countries at the center of the world system appear regularly in the news, whereas countries at the periphery are reported mainly when disasters, wars, or other types of crises occur (Joye, 2010). Meanwhile, researchers have found that foreign news tends to focus on hard news topics such as politics, economics, and social and military matters (Straubhaar et al., 1992; Wu, 1998), although others have noted the tendency of the “softening” of foreign news in the past decade as a result of the increasing influence of commercial and ratings considerations (Altmeyden, 2010; Hamilton, 2010).

There is also considerable research on audience interest in foreign news (e.g., Cohen, 1993; Hargrove & Stempel, 2002; F. L. F. Lee, Lin, Lee, He, & Yao, 2012; Sparkes & Winter, 1980; Straughan, 1989). Only a few studies, however, have examined content and audience interest simultaneously (e.g., Tai & Chang, 2002; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004) to address the question of content-interest correspondence (CIC), that is, the degree to which the types of content provided by the news media are also the kinds of content that the audience is interested in. This study examines CIC in the case of foreign news on television. More specifically, it examines, in a comparative perspective, whether the topics and countries covered prominently in foreign news on television are also the topics and countries that viewers are most interested in. Moreover, drawing upon content and survey data from 12 countries around the world, this study analyzes the extent to which the level of CIC varies across countries, and, if so, whether the country-level variations can be explained by characteristics of the reporting countries, their media systems, and their news audiences.

CIC is an important topic for analysis because it is closely tied to the questions of whether and how news content impacts viewers as well as whether and how television media organizations are responding to viewer interest. CIC can also be considered as a general indicator of media-audience relationships. Different levels of CIC can be taken as indicating the degree to which the news media are responsive to audience interest. Thus, analysis of CIC is also important in discussions of media performance, regardless of whether or not—based on one’s normative approach—responsiveness to audience interest is considered desirable.

Based on these premises, the current study makes two contributions. First, it develops an empirical approach to the measurement of CIC using a combination of content and audience data. Second and more substantively, by simultaneously analyzing CIC for news topics and countries reported on as well as the factors shaping levels of CIC, it expands theory development regarding the relationship between television news and its viewers.

News Content and Audience Interest

Since the seminal analysis of foreign news by Galtung and Ruge (1965), a distinctive line of research on international news as well as news in general has examined the structural factors and “news values” that determine which events would be reported or not (Eilders, 2006; Staab, 1990). Research has found that powerful nations, nations with closer economic ties with the reporting country, and nations that are culturally and geographically proximate to the reporting nation are more likely to be featured in the news (Wilke, Heimprecht, & Cohen, 2012; Wu, 2000). As such, foreign news is similar to domestic news in its emphasis on prominent people and institutions, violence, conflicts, and deviance (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Moreover, critical scholars who consider mainstream news media as deeply embedded in society’s dominant power structure emphasize that a country’s foreign policy and national interests also shape whether and how specific foreign news events are covered (e.g., C. C. Lee, Chan, Pan, & So, 2002; C. C. Lee & Yang, 1995; Zaller & Chiu, 1996).

Given the fact that foreign news content is shaped by numerous factors, is it reasonable to expect news content to match audience interest? Three sets of considerations are pertinent to answering this question: the possibility of media affecting audience interest, the possibility of audience interest driving media coverage, and the possibility that some of the determinants of news content are also determinants of audience interest, so that the media and their audience effectively share certain “common senses” about the importance of various foreign countries and events.

CIC Derived From Media Effects on Audiences

With respect to media effects, studies of public agenda setting provide the most germane arguments and empirical findings to the CIC question. Decades of research have provided ample evidence that media coverage of an issue constitutes salient cues leading the audience to regard the issue as important (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). Applied to research on international news, studies have shown that more frequently covered foreign countries tend to be perceived by the public as more important (Wanta et al., 2004; Zhang, 2012). Strictly speaking, agenda-setting research deals with perceived importance of—rather than interest in—issues, events, and/or countries. And yet, beyond agenda setting, one might also argue that frequent news coverage of a topic or country may lead to audience familiarity, which in turn may produce interest (McNelly, 1962).

However, there are also studies that failed to confirm the expectations generated from agenda setting or the familiarity-breeds-interest thesis. Comparing 11 countries, Aalberg et al. (2013) found that the amount of foreign news on television is positively related to the population’s *knowledge* about foreign affairs, but not to audience *interest*. Focusing on perceived importance of specific news stories, Tai and Chang (2002) found no relationship between the amount of newspaper coverage of a list of 20 foreign news events and audience perceptions of their importance. The authors concluded that “. . . in the world of global news, audiences and journalists do not often see eye to eye as to what constitutes the most important stories of the year, particularly from a

long-term point of view” (p. 263). In other words, there has been mixed evidence about media effects on audience interest in the foreign news arena.

CIC Derived From Audience Effects on the Media

CIC can also arise when the media give the audience what it wants. On the one hand, media organizations have the incentive to provide the products that news consumers would be interested in. Scholars concerned with the phenomena of market-driven journalism (e.g., McManus, 1994) or consumer-driven journalism (Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991) have noted that news outlets more strongly driven by commercial considerations tend to provide more soft news and more sensationalized coverage of public affairs (e.g., Attaway-Fink, 2005; Beam, 2003; Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2006). On the other hand, market-driven journalism is considered as a problem precisely because many believe that there are and should be discrepancies between judgments of journalists and news consumers (Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2006). Professional journalists are expected to provide the public with what they need to know instead of what they want to know, and the news is expected to address the public interest rather than the public’s interest. A “choice gap” is therefore predictable. In a number of studies conducted in the United States, Europe, and Latin America, Boczkowski and his colleagues showed that journalists are more likely than news consumers to regard public affairs stories (as opposed to nonpublic affairs stories) as important (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Walter, 2011; Boczkowski & Peer, 2011).

Moreover, journalists do not frequently interact with the audience. News work is shaped more crucially by factors such as production routines, organizational culture, and interactions with sources (Allan, 1999; Cottle, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Tuchman, 1978). The audience is arguably even more distant from the journalists when foreign news is concerned. Meanwhile, the production and distribution of international news have a structure of their own—one that is dominated by powerful international news agencies and transnational broadcasters (e.g., Boyd-Barrett, 1980; McPhail, 2010). As producing international news can be very costly, many media outlets are heavily reliant on the international agencies and transnational broadcasters, including regional news exchange services such as the European Broadcasting Union (Cohen, Levy, Roeh, & Gurevitch, 1996). Their content is therefore shaped by the way the dominant players cast the “news net.” While home editors may domesticate materials, thereby making the news more relevant and appealing to the domestic audience (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013; Cohen et al., 1996; F. L. F. Lee, Chan, & Zhou, 2011), the preselection by international agencies and transnational broadcasters inevitably constrains the degree to which journalists and news outlets can be responsive to audience interest.

CIC Derived From Common Determinants of News Content and Audience Interests

Finally, CIC may also arise without the media and the audience influencing each other. Most media organizations around the world are either national or local, and the news

profession tends to define itself as providing a service to a public that is equally bounded geographically. Journalism tends to exhibit a significant degree of local orientation (Chan & Lee, 2011). Journalists and audiences may have similar judgments about news coverage simply because they are members of the same society and therefore share a set of commonsense judgments and values regarding what is important and interesting.

Put differently, some of the aforementioned determinants of foreign news content may also be determinants of audience interest. For example, the media often exhibit a high degree of regionalism in their foreign news, that is, the tendency to pay more attention to countries belonging to the same geographical region (Sreberny-Mohammadi, Nordenstreng, Stevenson, & Ugboajah, 1985; Wilke & Heimprecht, 2011; Wilke, Heimprecht, & Ito, 2013). The same tendency has also been identified in studies of audience interest in foreign news (Sparkes & Winter, 1980; Straughan, 1989). But in this case, the convergence of content and audience interest may not involve mutual influence. It is possible that journalists and citizens simply share the same tendency to regard things happening nearby as more important.¹ Similarly, while the media tend to pay more attention to foreign countries with stronger economic ties with their own nation (Wu, 2000), citizens may also be able to estimate the economic significance of various countries to one's own nation based on personal experience and observation, and may thus become interested in those economically significant foreign countries.

In sum, the above discussion points to a number of reasons for news content and audience interest to correspond to each other, as well as several reasons why they may not correspond. Certainly, CIC is after all a matter of degree and may be influenced by various factors. In their study of news choices of journalists and consumers, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2010) found that the size of the choice gap varies over time. While journalists pay more attention to public affairs compared with news consumers, the gap narrows in periods of heightened political activities. The current study also views level of CIC as a variable, but it focuses on the possibility that the degree of correspondence may vary cross-nationally and according to which aspects of the news one is examining.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study draws upon an analysis of television news and survey data from 12 countries. The initial research questions are the degree to which the topics and countries covered prominently in foreign news are also the topics and countries most salient among news viewers. Examining topics and countries simultaneously allows us to examine whether relative levels of CIC regarding topics and countries are similar or different. While Wanta et al. (2004) and Zhang (2012) found a correspondence between amount of media coverage of and viewer interest in foreign countries, Tai and Chang (2002) found little evidence for a correspondence on news events. It is believed that this contrast in findings is not accidental. As noted above, one main reason for discrepancies between news content and audience interest is journalists' professional norms

and judgments. Yet professional judgments and norms arguably have a stronger influence on decisions regarding topics than regarding countries. Professional considerations are likely to drive a journalist to prioritize political and economic issues, for example, over human interest stories, due to the presumably higher levels of societal impact and significance of the former topics (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011). On the other hand, the implications of professional judgments regarding countries covered are less clear-cut. Journalists may conceivably justify paying more attention to a particular country (e.g., the United States) due to its presumed importance to one's own nation and world affairs. But professional journalists may also value diversity and, hence, see the need to provide audiences with stories originating from a broader range of countries.

At the same time, journalists and news consumers in the same country would be prone to share certain "common senses" regarding which foreign countries are both important and interesting. As mentioned earlier, regionalism is a tendency shared by both news content and audience interest (Straughan, 1989; Wilke & Heimprecht, 2011; Wilke et al., 2013). Similarly, journalists and audience members are likely to share the same interests in foreign countries with strong historical and social ties with their own nation. It follows then that, relatively speaking, CIC regarding countries should be stronger than CIC regarding topics.

Thus, the first research question and the first hypothesis are as follows:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the level of CIC regarding topics and regarding countries reported on in the 12 nations examined?

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The level of CIC regarding countries would be higher than the level of CIC regarding topics.

This study is also interested in whether several country-level factors may explain the degree of CIC regarding news topics and countries being reported. The underlying theoretical assumption is that the media-audience relationship is determined by the objective characteristics of the reporting countries, their media systems, and their audiences. The specific hypotheses explicated here are exploratory, however, due to the lack of existing research addressing this issue.

Regarding country characteristics, the analysis focuses on territorial and population size. The level of CIC is expected to be higher in smaller countries. Compared with large countries such as China and Brazil, audience interest in foreign news is likely to be less diverse and therefore more conspicuous and clearly identifiable in small nations such as Singapore. Part of the reason is that people in many small countries may be overwhelmingly concerned about their powerful "big neighbors," whereas people dispersed over a large country may be interested in different "small neighbors." For instance, people in both Venezuela and Uruguay are likely to be interested in Brazil while Brazilians' interest in Venezuela and Uruguay may heavily depend on whether they live in the north or the south. Generally speaking, news consumers in large countries are more likely to have relatively more heterogeneous living experiences, as

different geographical areas within a large country may differ from each other more sharply in their economic, social, cultural, and climatic conditions.

In other words, people in small countries are more likely to share a relatively more homogeneous living experience and “world view.” It thus follows that journalists in small countries would be better able to understand the interest of their compatriots. One may also argue that journalists and their fellow citizens in small countries are more likely to share certain common senses about the importance of specific foreign countries and news topics. Accordingly, the second hypothesis for the analysis is as follows:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The level of CIC relates negatively to territorial and population size.

For media system characteristics, CIC is expected to be stronger in countries with more commercialized media systems. This follows from the argument that CIC can result from the influence of audience interest on news decisions, and such influence would be stronger when the media are more market-driven (McManus, 1994; Shoemaker et al., 1991).

Degree of media commercialization is a multifaceted concept encompassing structural features of the media system, journalistic practices, and characteristics of news content. Based on data availability, this study treats the ownership and revenue structure of the television systems and the proportion of soft news in newscasts as two indicators of media commercialization. The former is a structural feature that shapes the degree to which a media system as a whole would cater to audience interest; the latter is a content feature signifying the extent to which media outlets actually provide the kind of news that is often assumed to be attractive to viewers (Underwood, 1995). Thus, the third and fourth hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The level of CIC is higher in television systems with a structure tending toward private ownership and relying on commercial revenue.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The level of CIC is positively related to the proportion of soft news in the newscasts.

Finally, the analysis examines whether CIC relates to two audience characteristics. First, it was expected that CIC would be stronger in countries in which the audience is generally more interested in foreign news. When people generally pay more attention to foreign news, the media can expect audience evaluation of their performance to be shaped relatively more by evaluations of the foreign news offered. Hence, the media have stronger incentives to provide their audiences with the type of foreign news they want. Besides, to the extent that the audience is interested in foreign news, the news media are more likely to receive audience feedback through various means and, hence, have a better understanding of audience interests. These factors should contribute to higher levels of CIC.

Second, we expect CIC to be stronger if audience interests in news topics and countries are more concentrated. Concentration refers to the extent to which audience interest is limited to only a small number of countries or a narrow range of topics. As for countries of interest, to the extent that the majority of the audience is interested in the same few countries, it would be easier for the media to identify them and provide news stories about them that would capture the audience's attention. In contrast, if audience interests are more diverse, it would be difficult for the media to judge whether or not stories about a specific country might capture audience attention. This means that high levels of concentration of audience interest would increase the chance of high CIC levels. The same logic applies to news topics.

Thus, the final two hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): CIC at the country level relates positively to audience interest in foreign news.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): CIC at the country level relates positively to the concentration of audience interest.

Data and Method

The data analyzed below were mainly derived from a cross-national study of foreign news conducted between 2008 and 2010, supplemented by pertinent archival data about country characteristics. The project included both content analyses of television newscasts and audience surveys. The need for competent and interested scholars with the required resources did not enable a random sample of countries. Instead, in order to provide diversity, the project coordinator purposively incorporated in the project countries from different continents, of different sizes, with different media and political systems. Twelve countries in which both a content analysis and survey were completed are included in the analysis: Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United States.

For the content analysis, four complete weeks of newscasts were analyzed. The sample spanned the period from January to March 2008.² In nine of the 12 countries, two channels were examined: the main newscasts of the public television channel and the most popular commercial channel based on ratings.³ In both Hong Kong and Singapore, due to the absence of public television channels, newscasts from two commercial channels were analyzed. On the other hand, absence of fully commercialized television outlets in China led to the decision to examine only the main national newscast of China Central Television (CCTV; *Xinwen Lianbo*).

A total of 11,984 news items in the 12 countries were analyzed. The location of the news event being reported was the key criterion used to distinguish between four types of foreign and domestic news. The items were distributed as follows: 22% ($n = 2,601$) were "purely foreign" items; 10% were "foreign with domestic involvement" (i.e., foreign news stories in which the reporting country was involved); 55% were domestic; and 13% were "domestic with foreign involvement" (i.e., domestic stories in

which at least one foreign country was involved).⁴ The analysis below focuses on foreign news, which encompasses stories that are either purely foreign or foreign with domestic involvement. Items dealing with international organizations such as the EU and NATO were considered foreign (usually with domestic involvement) for newscasts from member states.

Surveys were conducted in the same 12 countries using a standardized questionnaire. Except for the United States, where the survey was conducted via the web, all other surveys were telephone-based. Overall, there were 9,587 respondents, with the size of the country samples ranging from 395 in Canada to 1,220 in Chile. All surveys used a probability sampling procedure, although the details of the procedures varied depending on local considerations.⁵

Due to each national team's funding situation, complete synchronization of the timing for the survey fieldwork was impossible. All 12 surveys, however, were conducted within 11 months (from September to October 2009 in Chile to June to July 2010 in the United States). This means that there was a time lag between the identical sample period of the content analysis (early 2008) and the surveys. This time lag, however, should not constitute a substantial problem. While viewer interest in the various countries may fluctuate due to extraordinary news events in different countries, the findings discussed below indicate that the levels of interest in specific countries largely reflect long-term patterns. The same applies to findings of the most frequently covered countries in the content analysis. In other words, while the timings of the survey and the content analysis would inevitably generate some random noise in the data, the noise does not appear to be overwhelmingly strong, hence, no systematic bias seems to exist in the data that threatens the validity of the significant findings.

The data from the content analyses and surveys were used to construct measures of CIC regarding topics in the news and countries being reported on. The surveys also provide data on the respondents' general interest in foreign news and levels of concentration of interest in foreign news topics and foreign countries (for H5 and H6). The content data provide a measure of the proportion of soft news, which is operationally defined as news stories about accidents, crime, and sports (for H4). Data on the respective countries' population and territorial size in 2009 (for H1 and H2) were mainly derived from the country profiles available in the website of the United Nations. In the cases of Hong Kong and Taiwan,⁶ relevant information was obtained from the respective government publications.

An index of the ownership and revenue structure of the television system—ranging from 0 to 4—was constructed based on official information or estimates provided by members of the project team. A score of 0 indicates a system without privately owned, commercial broadcasters (only in the case of China in the current study⁷) and a score of 4 refers to completely commercial-based systems (Singapore and Hong Kong). The other nine countries that have both public and commercial broadcasters were assigned scores ranging from 1 to 3 based on the extent to which their public broadcasters receive advertising revenue (1 = advertising revenue accounts for either none or up to 25% of the public broadcaster's revenue; 2 = advertising revenue accounts for more

than 25% but less than 75% of the public broadcaster's revenue; 3 = advertising revenue accounts for 75% or more of the public broadcaster's revenue). It should be reiterated that this variable refers to a structural feature of the media systems rather than the broader notion of commercialization per se. Moreover, the operationalization is consistent with the design of the content analysis, which involves, as noted, both a public broadcaster and a commercial broadcaster in nine of the 12 countries.

Findings and Analysis

Calculating CIC

In the content analysis, each news item was coded as belonging to one of 25 major news topic categories, including social issues, internal politics, internal order, economy, international politics, sports, and so on. The analysis thus provides information about the relative prominence of the 25 topics in foreign news on television.⁸

In the surveys, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest—using 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = *very uninterested* and 5 = *very interested*)—in foreign news in general as well as in seven specific topics: domestic politics; relations between or with foreign countries; social issues; economics, business, and commerce; crime and violence; sports; and accidents and natural disasters. It should be noted that only seven topics were included in the survey due to constraints on the length of the questionnaire as well as the need to include topic categories that make intuitive sense to respondents. Therefore, in order to compare the survey and content data, the 25 news topics in the content analyses were recoded into seven topics that best match the categorization of the survey questionnaire.

Two rankings were produced for each country—one based on frequencies of coverage and one on levels of viewer interest (see the appendix for the three highest ranking topics in the news and of the respondents' interests). The degree to which the two rankings correspond with each other across the seven categories was indicated by Spearman rank correlation coefficients. Taking Brazil as an example, foreign relations (52.5%) constitutes the most frequently covered news topic in foreign news on Brazilian television, followed by economic issues (24.8%), social issues (15.2%), internal politics (8.0%), sports (7.3%), crime and violence (6.0%), and accidents and disasters (2.1%). In terms of audience interest, Brazilians were most interested in social issues ($M = 3.8$), followed by economics ($M = 3.6$), foreign relations ($M = 3.3$), accidents and disasters ($M = 3.2$), sports ($M = 3.0$), crime and violence ($M = 2.63$), and internal politics ($M = 2.61$). The Spearman rank correlation between the content and survey rankings is $\rho = .54$. The figure is not statistically significant. For the present purpose, however, the significance level of each of the correlation coefficients is not a major concern; the coefficients simply indicate the levels of CIC regarding topics for the different countries.

Table 1 presents the levels of CIC regarding topics and countries. The first column relates to topics and clearly indicates substantial variations among the 12 countries. In

Table 1. Spearman Rank Correlations for Levels of Content-Interest Correspondence (CIC) Regarding Topics and Countries by Nations of the Study.

	Topics	Countries
Brazil	.54	-.04
Canada	-.07	.49**
Chile	-.36	.47*
China	.36	.38*
Germany	-.04	.52**
Hong Kong	-.21	.39*
Poland	.09	.61***
Portugal	-.32	.11
Singapore	-.50	.69***
Switzerland	.04	.67***
Taiwan	-.25	.69***
United States	.35	.02

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

fact, Brazil registers the highest level of CIC for topics, and levels of CIC are relatively high in China and the United States ($\rho = .36$ and $.35$, respectively) as well. Interestingly, the United States, China, and Brazil are the three largest countries in the study. In contrast, small territories such as Singapore and Hong Kong had very low levels of CIC for topics—in fact, the correlations are even negative ($\rho = -.50$ and $-.21$, respectively). These findings suggest that larger countries have higher levels of CIC for news topics.

The next section formally examines whether country, media system, and audience characteristics can explain the cross-national variations in levels of CIC on news topics. For here, suffice it to say that the correlations for topics are also negative for other countries (Chile, Portugal, and Taiwan). A negative correlation suggests that what ranks relatively high in terms of frequency of media coverage ranks relatively low in terms of viewer interest. The average of the 12 topic coefficients is $\rho = -.03$ (i.e., virtually 0). In other words, across the 12 countries, topics in the news and viewer interest in topics typically do not correspond with each other.

Spearman rank correlations for CIC were also calculated for each of the countries in the study regarding the countries on which news was reported and were of interest to the viewers. In the content analysis, coders registered all countries mentioned in each foreign news item. This information enabled the creation of a list of the most frequently covered countries in each of the 12 nations. For the analysis, the list of each country in the study consisted of the 15 most frequently covered countries in the news. In the surveys, the respondents were asked the following open-ended question: “In the news concerning other countries, which countries, other than [the respondents’ own country] are you most interested in?” Respondents were then prompted to indicate up

to five countries. Based on the responses, a list was created for each country in the study of the 15 most frequently cited countries. Spearman rank correlations were then calculated between the content and survey lists.

For a concrete example, the 15 most frequently covered countries in television foreign news in Canada were (from highest to lowest): the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Israel, Afghanistan, Palestine, France, Australia, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Germany, Kenya, India, and Nepal. The 15 countries of interest most frequently cited by Canadians in the survey were the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Australia, India, France, Israel, Mexico, Greece, Japan, and Germany. Notably, the two lists are quite similar: both begin with the United States, the United Kingdom, and China. Afghanistan ranks fifth and Australia ranks eighth on both lists. The Spearman rank correlation is $\rho = .49$, which is statistically significant (with $n = 15$) at $p < .05$.⁹

Notably, the similarity between the two lists also suggests that, despite the time lag between the survey fieldwork and the content analysis, the findings regarding the most frequently covered countries and the countries that people from the nation are most interested in arguably reflect more long-term and stable tendencies. Admittedly, the fact that Haiti ranked fourth on the viewer interest list was due to the Haitian earthquake in early 2010. But on the whole, the impact of extraordinary news events on the survey and content analysis findings is reasonably small. The same applies to the findings from the other 11 countries (see the appendix).

The second column of Table 1 summarizes the levels of CIC regarding countries reported in the news. With the exception of Brazil, the other 11 coefficients were positive, nine of which were substantial and reached statistical significance (set at $p < .10$, two-tailed). The average of the 12 correlation coefficients was $\rho = .42$. In other words, where countries reported in the news are concerned, among the 12 nations in the study, foreign news content typically does correspond with viewer interest.

Nevertheless, there are still substantial variations among the 12 nations in levels of CIC regarding countries. Besides Brazil, CIC levels are also low in the United States ($\rho = .02$) and Portugal ($\rho = .11$). At the other end of the spectrum, CIC levels are high in Poland, Singapore, Switzerland, and Taiwan (ρ ranging from .61 to .69).

Interestingly, the findings for topics and countries in the two columns in Table 1 actually tend to be negatively correlated with each other, although not statistically significantly ($\rho = -.48$, $p = .11$). One can see from Table 1 that some of the countries that register relatively high levels of CIC regarding countries, such as Singapore, Taiwan, and Germany, had negative scores on CIC regarding topics. Brazil, which has the most positive score on CIC for topics, is the only country registering a negative score on CIC for countries. This intriguing finding is elaborated upon in the discussion section below.

More important, the findings in Table 1 confirm H1, which posits that the level of CIC for countries would be higher than the level of CIC for news topics. The mean correlations of the two columns ($\rho = -.03$ and $\rho = .42$, respectively) differ

Table 2. Spearman Rank Correlations Between Content-Interest Correspondence (CIC) and Country-Level Factors ($n = 12$).

	Topics	Countries
Country size		
Population	.79***	-.51*
Territorial	.57*	-.60**
Media commercialization		
Ownership/revenue structure	-.61**	.32
Percent soft news	-.57*	.20
Audience characteristics		
Interest in foreign news	-.12	.33
Concentration of interest	-.21	.40

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

significantly from each other using a paired-samples t -test ($t = 3.04$, $df = 11$, $p < .02$).¹⁰

Correlations Between CIC Correspondence and Country-Level Factors

H2 through H6 are concerned with the relationships between CIC and the country-level factors: geographical size and population size, proportion of soft news, the ownership and revenue structure of the television system, the population’s interest in foreign news, and concentration of interest among the population. Measuring the population’s interest in foreign news was based on the general interest question in the survey, that is, the mean scores of general interest in foreign news were calculated for each of the 12 countries to represent country-level viewer interest in foreign news.

Concentration of viewer interest on topics at the country level was calculated based on the responses to the survey questions concerning interest in each of the seven news topics. Each country’s score on this variable represents the variance among the overall mean scores of the seven items across all respondents. A high score on the variable indicates that audience interest in the seven topics varies substantially.

Concentration of interest in countries was calculated based on the responses about the countries in which the respondents said they were interested. The score for each country on this variable is the percentage of responses referring to the four countries mentioned most often by the respondents in the respective country.¹¹ For instance, in Hong Kong, the four most frequently mentioned countries in the survey were the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia. These four countries together accounted for 70.9% of all country mentions. Hence, Hong Kong’s score on the variable is 0.709. Higher scores on the variable indicate higher levels of interest concentration.¹²

Table 2 presents the Spearman correlations between the CIC variables and the country-level factors. It should be noted that Spearman rho coefficients are reported

because Pearson coefficients can be very substantially affected by a single outlier when the sample size is very small. Rank-order correlations, in contrast, would not be affected by outliers.

All the correlation coefficients concerning countries reported (the right-hand column of Table 2) are in the predicted direction. The levels of CIC for countries are higher in smaller countries (H2), where the ownership and revenue structure leans toward commercialism (H3), where television provides a heavier dose of soft news (H4), where the respondents exhibit higher levels of general interest in foreign news (H5), and where the respondents' interests in foreign countries are more concentrated (H6). Admittedly, only the correlations for the two country size variables—population and territory—are significant at $p < .10$ (two-tailed). Hence, strictly speaking, only H2 is supported. Nonetheless, because the small sample has made it difficult for individual coefficients to attain statistical significance, the findings are highly suggestive given the overall consistency of the pattern.

In contrast, while some of the correlations dealing with the news topics (left-hand column of Table 2) are highly significant, they are all in the opposite direction to those in the second column, indicating that they are all contrary to the hypotheses. The levels of CIC regarding topics are significantly higher in larger countries and significantly lower in countries where the ownership and revenue structure leans toward commercialism and where television news provides a heavier dose of soft news. This latter finding is counterintuitive, as it means that the discrepancies between news content and viewer interest regarding news topics are actually larger in the more commercialized media systems.

Before discussing the findings about the relationship between CIC and media commercialization, post-hoc analyses were conducted using Spearman rank correlations in an attempt to better understand the other unexpected finding that levels of CIC regarding topics are significantly higher in larger countries. A plausible reason for the positive relationship is that the large global or regional powers in the sample—the United States, China, and Brazil—play greater roles in international politics; hence, their media may cover international relations more prominently. At the same time, people living in larger countries may also become more interested in international relations because they understand their countries' role in international affairs. This could contribute to CIC regarding topics.

The results of the post-hoc analysis show that there are indeed highly positive and significant relationships between percentages of foreign news stories addressing foreign relations and the measures of population and territorial sizes ($\rho = .74$ and $\rho = .73$ for population and territorial sizes, respectively; $p < .01$ in both cases). At the same time, the level of CIC is also higher when a country's television system covers foreign relations more prominently ($\rho = .69$; $p < .05$). These findings support the argument that CIC regarding topics being reported is partly driven by simultaneous interests from the media in the large countries and their viewers concerning foreign relations.

Discussion

This study examined the extent to which television foreign news content in 12 countries matches the interest of viewers in those countries. While previous research addressing the similarities or dissimilarities between journalists' and viewers' choices focused either on news topics or on countries being covered, this study examined topics and countries simultaneously. One major finding is that the level of CIC regarding countries is substantially higher than the level of CIC regarding topics.

We contend that CIC regarding countries is more prominent because, when compared with the question of which topics to cover, the question of which country to cover is relatively less constrained by professional norms and values. Moreover, journalists and viewers, both being members of the same society, are likely to share the same commonsense judgments regarding which countries deserve attention. In fact, while foreign news content has long been shown to exhibit the tendencies to focus on the most powerful countries, neighboring countries, countries with strong economic ties with one's own, and countries with strong historical and social connections with it, ordinary citizens are also likely to have picked up the same long-term tendencies because the relevance of such foreign countries can often be felt by the citizens themselves in their own everyday lives.

More generally, this study thus suggests that news content may match viewer interest in certain aspects while at the same time differ in others. Of course, there are other possible aspects or dimensions of foreign news content beyond topical categories and countries being covered: the format and reporting style, the degree of domestication, the balance between good news and bad news, and so on. All these may differentially correspond with viewer preferences. Studies about the relationship between news content and viewer preferences should pay closer attention to the differences between various aspects of the news. Theoretically, this means that media responsiveness to viewer interest should be treated as a multifaceted or multidimensional construct. The news media may find it relatively easy and unproblematic to be responsive to viewer interest on certain aspects of news content when doing so does not compel them to betray their professional judgments or when the news media and journalists also share the same "natural" tendencies to provide certain types of content.

The present study also shows that variations in CIC at the country level can be accounted for by several factors, most notably country size, although it does not completely relate to CIC in ways that we originally expected. Larger nations exhibit lower levels of CIC regarding countries reported on. Our contention is that viewer interest in and journalists' judgment of the importance of foreign countries are more likely to converge in a small country since they are often strongly oriented toward a few specific powerful countries with strong geographical, economic, and historical ties. In contrast, the "hierarchy of importance of foreign countries" can often be less clear-cut in large and powerful countries that are themselves the center of regional or global

attention. In other words, journalists and their viewers are more likely to share “commonsense” judgments regarding which countries deserve attention.

However, we also found that larger countries exhibit higher levels of CIC regarding topics. Our post-hoc analysis suggests that this finding can be attributed to the simultaneous interest of both media organizations and viewers in the topic of foreign relations in larger countries, which are typically also regional or global players in the international system.

One broad general theoretical implication of the findings about the relationship between country size and CIC regards how we should understand the relationship between media and their audiences. Theorization of media-audience relationships often focuses primarily on the characteristics of the national social and political systems. But the arguments articulated in the above paragraphs suggest that the relationship between media and their audience, at least with regard to the reporting and consumption of foreign news, should also take into account the positions and roles of the nations in the international political economic system. This is an area that comparative studies should continue to explore.

The present study did not find evidence for the presumably higher levels of CIC in more commercialized media systems; instead, the analysis found a negative relationship between CIC for topics and two indicators pertinent to commercialization—ownership and revenue structure of the television system and proportion of soft news. One possible reason for this finding is that, as noted in the conceptual discussion, the production of foreign news can be very costly. When other factors are kept constant, more commercialized media systems and organizations may actually be less likely to invest in foreign news production. As a result, their foreign news content may become more constrained by what the international news agencies and transnational broadcasters provide, and they are therefore less capable of being responsive to viewer interest.

Certainly, one may also question whether the surveys have registered actual viewer interest in news topics or only socially desirable responses. Nevertheless, the findings regarding CIC for news topics do not seem to be entirely due to social desirability. For example, Singapore had the lowest level of CIC for news topics (the correlation coefficient is strongly negative), but as the appendix shows, the most frequently covered topics in foreign news in Singapore are internal politics, the economy, and social issues. Notably, it would not be socially “undesirable” for viewers to claim that they are interested in such topics. In other words, the low level of CIC for topics in Singapore cannot be merely due to the respondents giving socially desirable answers to the survey questions.

Admittedly, commercialization is a complex notion, and the ownership and revenue structure variable employed in this study may not be a very robust indicator. As already noted, the variable also adopts the working assumption that ownership structure has a more fundamental influence on media behavior when compared with revenue structure. Hence, China gets a score of zero despite the fact that CCTV itself is quite heavily reliant on commercial revenue. Future studies may attempt to

construct better measures of degree of commercialization at the system level. However, given the fact that the proportion of soft news also relates negatively to CIC for topics, the study does strongly suggest that media commercialization does not necessarily shape the media-viewer relationship in a straightforward manner. The implications of media commercialization need to be further examined in the future.

Two other limitations of the present study should be noted. First, the analysis of the country-level correlates of CIC is exploratory and includes only a limited range of factors. Yet the findings establish that country-level variations in CIC can provide a meaningful analytical focus. Future studies can examine additional factors that may relate to CIC, such as cultural diversity of the population (which may also make viewer interest in foreign news more diverse) and degree of professionalization of the journalistic occupation (which may imply a stronger tendency of journalists to disregard viewer interest when the latter clashes with professional norms).

Second, the study encompasses only 12 nations, and the sample was not derived from a probability sampling procedure. On the one hand, these issues are inevitable given the challenges involved in conducting large-scale cross-national comparative studies. But, on the other hand, the small sample size does constitute a technical limitation when statistical analysis is concerned.

Despite the somewhat tentative nature of the findings, the study does warrant two additional broader implications. First, the study points to another way of understanding the matching or discrepancies between news content and audience interest. Some previous research cited earlier has examined agenda-setting effects of the media in the arena of international news and found that countries covered more prominently in the news are also regarded as more important by the public (Wanta et al., 2004; Zhang, 2012). While the findings in the current study can be regarded as replications of earlier studies, we suggest that correspondence between countries covered in the news and countries considered as important may not necessarily reflect an agenda-setting effect by the media; it may reflect instead the common judgments held by journalists and citizens as members of the same society, and the extent to which journalists and citizens would hold such common judgment may depend on country characteristics. This is not to deny the possibility of agenda-setting effects, but our analysis points to new ways of understanding CIC.

Finally, this study points to additional structural factors that may constrain the capability of media systems to be responsive to audience interest. Discussion on media responsiveness to audience interest typically focuses on characteristics of media systems. And yet, our study suggests that research attention could be extended to country characteristics and audience characteristics as factors having implications for media responsiveness. Cross-national comparative analysis in media research could benefit from a tripartite conceptualization encompassing country characteristics, media system characteristics, and audience characteristics.

Appendix

Descriptive Findings From the Content Analysis and the Audience Survey

	Top three topics			Top three countries		
	Content	Audience	Content	Content	Audience	Audience
Brazil	1. Foreign relations 2. Economy 3. Social issues	1. Social issues 2. Economy 3. Foreign relations	1. United States 2. Colombia 3. Venezuela	1. United States 2. Japan 3. France	1. United States 2. Japan 3. France	1. United States 2. Japan 3. France
Canada	1. Internal politics 2. Crime 3. Foreign relations	1. Accidents 2. Foreign relations 3. Social issues	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. China	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. China	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. China	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. China
Chile	1. Sports 2. Foreign relations 3. Economy	1. Accidents 2. Social issues 3. Economy	1. Argentina 2. United States 3. Spain	1. Argentina 2. United States 3. Spain	1. United States 2. Argentina 3. Spain	1. United States 2. Argentina 3. Spain
China	1. Foreign relations 2. Economy 3. Social issues	1. Economy 2. Accidents 3. Foreign relations	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom
Germany	1. Foreign relations 2. Social issues 3. Crime	1. Accidents 2. Social issues 3. Foreign relations	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. France	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. France	1. United States 2. France 3. Russia	1. United States 2. France 3. Russia
Hong Kong	1. Internal politics 2. Crime 3. Foreign relations	1. Accidents 2. Economy 3. Foreign relations	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom	1. United States 2. Japan 3. United Kingdom	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. Japan	1. United States 2. United Kingdom 3. Japan
Poland	1. Internal politics 2. Social issues 3. Foreign relations	1. Foreign relations 2. Social issues 3. Accidents	1. United States 2. Russia 3. Ukraine	1. United States 2. Russia 3. Ukraine	1. Germany 2. Russia 3. United States	1. Germany 2. Russia 3. United States

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

	Top three topics			Top three countries		
	Content	Audience	Content	Content	Audience	Audience
Portugal	1. Crime 2. Foreign relations 3. Internal politics	1. Social issues 2. Accidents 3. Foreign relations	1. United States 2. Spain 3. East Timor	1. France 2. Spain 3. United States	1. France 2. Spain 3. United States	
Singapore	1. Internal politics 2. Economy 3. Social issues	1. Accidents 2. Social issues 3. Foreign relations	1. China 2. United States 3. Malaysia	1. United States 2. China 3. Malaysia	1. United States 2. China 3. Malaysia	
Switzerland	1. Internal politics 2. Social issues 3. Crime	1. Social issues 2. Foreign relations 3. Accidents	1. United States 2. France 3. China	1. Germany 2. United States 3. France	1. Germany 2. United States 3. France	
Taiwan	1. Social issues 2. Internal politics 3. Crime	1. Accidents 2. Economy 3. Social issues	1. United States 2. China 3. Hong Kong	1. United States 2. Japan 3. China	1. United States 2. Japan 3. China	
United States	1. Foreign relations 2. Crime 3. Social issues	1. Accidents 2. Foreign relations 3. Social issues	1. Iraq 2. Israel 3. Palestine	1. Iraq 2. Israel 3. Palestine	1. Afghanistan 2. United Kingdom 3. Iraq	

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Notes

1. This argument points to an alternative explanation for the “agenda-setting effects” found in Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) and Zhang (2012). Ascertaining the presence or direction of causal influence between content and audience interests is not the concern of the present study, however.
2. Complete rather than composite weeks were used in order to enable continuity in the coverage of ongoing events over consecutive days. Spreading the four-week sample over three months allowed for a broader repertoire of events.
3. This design means that an analysis of the differences between public and commercial television is possible. However, this article adopts country as a unit of analysis instead of media organization. Therefore, the differences between public and commercial television are not

addressed. Findings about the public-commercial differential from the cross-national project are available in Chan and Lee (2013).

4. Krippendorff alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for the content coding in all countries with the exception of Canada (only one coder did all the analysis) and Singapore (where only general percentages of agreement were calculated yielding a mean of 84%). For the other countries, Krippendorff alpha values for countries reported in the news ranged from .77 (Chile, United States) to 1.00 (China, Hong Kong, Portugal). For news topics, the mean alpha values ranged from .72 (Switzerland) to 1.00 (Brazil), with an overall mean across countries of .82. Two limitations should be noted. First, due to the skewed and dichotomous nature of these topic variables, some of them do not separately meet the Krippendorff's alpha reliability threshold (but do have a high percentage of agreement). Second, we did not obtain additional "international" intercoder reliability scores. This is an obvious and notable limitation, but it is also inevitable: It was virtually impossible to obtain such scores on a random sample of all newscasts to be coded in a decentralized project such as this, given the wide range of languages involved.
5. The Hong Kong survey registered response rates of 60% following AAPOR RR6 (the maximum response rate), 39% following RR3, and 16% following RR1 (the minimum response rate). These response rates are typical of surveys conducted there. The response rates of the surveys in other countries were calculated using different formulas. Taiwan, the United States, Switzerland, and Canada reported the minimum response rates (RR1), and the figures were 24%, 18%, 30%, and 5%, respectively. China reported a RR3 of 39%, whereas both Portugal and Germany reported maximum response rates of 60%. For Brazil, Chile, and Poland, we do not have the precise response rates. Instead, we were provided a typical or the average response rates following the RR1 formula for similar surveys conducted by the firms that conducted the interviews. The typical or average response rate was reported as 17% in Brazil and Chile, and 20% in Poland. On the whole, using Hong Kong as the baseline (because the available information allowed the calculation of response rates based on different formulas), the response rates of the surveys from the various countries are highly comparable, with Canada's low rate as an exception. Response rate from Singapore was unavailable.
6. The UN website does not contain information about Hong Kong (which is not a sovereign country) and Taiwan (which is not a member of the international organization).
7. While some may argue that the television system in China has also been commercialized despite state ownership, this variable is aimed at capturing the *structural* features of a society's media system. Hence, China's zero score is based on ownership consideration. Notably, by setting China's score at zero, the variable treats ownership structure as more fundamental than revenue structure (i.e., China scored zero because there is a lack of totally privately owned TV stations, even though China Central Television [CCTV] and other TV stations in China are quite heavily reliant on advertising). While this assumption may be debatable, this study adopted this working assumption because there is no alternative and justified way to put different media systems onto the same scale by simultaneously taking into account ownership and revenue structure.
8. Each item could be coded as pertinent to as many as three different topics. Thus, multiple coding was used in the analysis and the total percentage can exceed 100%.
9. It should be noted that, as the 15 top countries on the two lists are not completely identical, the calculation of the correlations is actually based on extended lists that included all the countries mentioned. Thus, for example, in the case of Canada, four countries

(Haiti, Mexico, Greece, and Japan) appeared only on the survey list, while four countries (Palestine, Pakistan, Kenya, and Nepal) appeared only on the content list. The extended list for Canada, therefore, included 19 rather than 15 countries—the 11 countries that appeared on both the content list and the audience list, plus the 4 countries that appeared only on the content list, and the 4 countries that appeared only on the audience list. Accordingly, the n value (number of countries) for each correlation was greater than 15 (but not necessarily the same for each country in the study).

10. It should be noted that, when conducting the paired-samples t -test, the 12 countries were treated as a sample of countries around the world. Although, as noted, the countries were not randomly selected based on probability sampling, statistical tests (in this and in the following section) were nonetheless treated as an illustrative sample of countries around the world.
11. The decision to use four countries was arbitrary (it could have been fewer or more) but it proved to be a robust indicator of the variability of the responses.
12. Concentration of interests in topics and countries were calculated differently because the original interest in topics and interest in countries items in the survey are different. Interest in topics was registered by questions about levels of interest in seven predefined topics, whereas interest in countries was registered by an open-ended question asking people to name up to five countries. In any case, the fact that the two are calculated somewhat differently should not be a problem because we are not comparing level of concentration of interest in topics directly with level of concentration of interest in countries. They are only two variables used to correlate with the content-interest correspondence (CIC) indices separately.

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