

# NEWS MEDIA

and its Influence on the American Debate Over War and Peace

-By Viola Gienger



A generally well-informed retired diplomat, relieved at the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, expressed surprise months later to learn in casual conversation that no U.S. service members had died in combat there in the last year and a half of the war, until the chaotic and explosive end.<sup>[1]</sup>

A Vietnam War veteran, lamenting the years of U.S. military presence in Iraq, paused after hearing stories about Iraqi civil society leaders working to defuse their own communities' conflicts before they turned violent. "I've never heard anything about that before," he says.<sup>[2]</sup>

And as Russian President Vladimir Putin amassed forces in 2021 near the border with Ukraine, in advance of his February 2022 full-scale assault, longtime watchers had to remind journalists repeatedly that Ukrainians had been fighting a war with Russia since 2014, when he captured Crimea and launched the offensive to control eastern Ukraine that had already claimed 14,000 lives.

In different ways, each of these incidents reflects how the U.S. news media increasingly struggles to play its essential role in the American debate over war and peace. Even the most diligent news consumers, flooded with information, disinformation, and infotainment, miss key elements of the biggest stories. Journalists, pressed by deadlines and ever-shrinking resources — due to staff cuts and the elimination of foreign bureaus and even copy desks, for example — leave crucial gaps in coverage. The result is a dearth of the kinds of in-depth, well-rounded news and accountability journalism that the American public and their leaders depend on for decision-making in a democracy.

The al-Qaeda terror attacks of September 11, 2001 that precipitated the war in Afghanistan and also led — via deception — to the war in Iraq, occurred amid a financial collapse in American newspapers that continues even today (though with a few shining exceptions).<sup>[3]</sup> American broadcast news divisions closed one foreign bureau after another.<sup>[4]</sup> In recent years, attention to the consequences of the precipitous decline in the U.S. news industry has focused primarily on gaps in local news. But one of the segments of the news industry that has long been hard hit is foreign coverage, impacting the related public discussions of U.S. foreign and defense policy that are crucial to any democracy. Questions of whether and how the United States should prosecute war or how it should deal with growing instances and risks of violent conflict abroad get short shrift. A disaster like Afghanistan's collapse and its humanitarian catastrophe quickly become blips on the screen, both on the news industry's radar and on the little screens of smartphones. Russia's full-scale escalation of the war on Ukraine in February 2022 received impressive attention — and resources — from major media outlets, but within just a few months, the volume and priority it received in news output fell sharply, even as the conflict entered a pivotal stage.

The results have outsized ramifications for those working in the fields of foreign policy and national and international security. How can diplomats, defense officials, political leaders, and other decision makers ensure they are getting and conveying accurate information and making honest choices based on facts (to the extent they have an interest in doing so, but that's another story)? How can their publics hold them to account?



Public Domain: Walter Cronkite in Vietnam with CBS News/February 1968 (NARA)

## BARRIERS OLD AND NEW

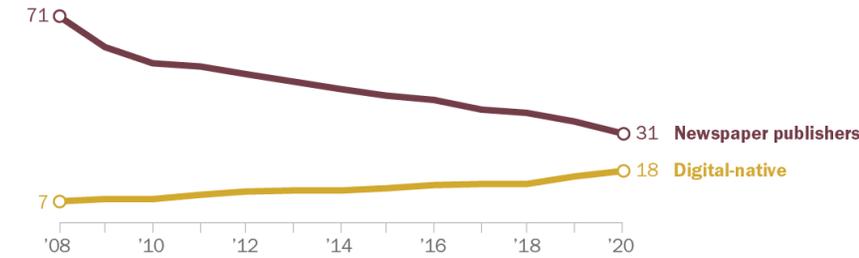
American journalism has historically been far from perfect in serving the ideal of the Fourth Estate. One need only look at the era of "yellow journalism" at the turn of the twentieth century or the often-racist coverage of the civil rights movement. Even in the heyday of network television news and major newspapers, when each had multiple bureaus on most continents and were driven by that competition, foreign news was colored by the perspectives, traditions, and biases of the privileged — mostly white — men (and occasionally a few women) who won those coveted jobs. Local journalists who assisted them were relegated to uncredited "fixer" status, even when they contributed significantly to the news gathering with their deep knowledge and remarkable courage. As George Washington University Associate Professor Sean Aday wrote, "coverage of foreign policy outside of war tends to be scarce, elite-driven, ethnocentric, and uncritical," and "war coverage is all of those things, only more so."<sup>[5]</sup>

Among the factors undermining the mission of informing the national debate over U.S. national security today are eviscerated news operations, the competing noise of the Internet, and outdated views of what constitutes news.

With a few exceptions, the financial capacity of news media that serve American audiences has shrunk dramatically over the past two to three decades, and the decline has only accelerated, from major broadcast networks to large U.S. and European newspapers and magazines, to the once cutting-edge digital outlets that have faced recent cutbacks. This is true also of the few European outlets that serve parts of the U.S. public,

## Newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers dropped by 57% between 2008 and 2020 while employment at digital publishers more than doubled

Number of U.S. newsroom employees by news industry, in thousands



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data.

Pew Research Center

foreign reporting. Additionally, new ventures were trying to support international journalism,<sup>[11]</sup> either by funding journalism (as in the case of the then-new and recently shuttered International Reporting Project and the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, which remains vibrant today) or by setting up new digital outlets like *Global Post*, which was acquired in 2015 by public radio station *WGBH* in Boston and its Public Radio International.<sup>[12]</sup> Today, some major news organizations, such as the *Washington Post*, are even re-establishing permanent foreign presences.<sup>[13]</sup>

such as *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, *Reuters*, and *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*.

Pew Research Center estimated in 2021 that total U.S. newsroom employment, including newspapers, broadcast outlets, and online sites, dropped by a quarter overall in a little over a decade ending in 2020.<sup>[6]</sup> While employment at digital outlets grew 144 percent over that time, it was starting from a small number (7,400) and was far outpaced by the 57 percent plunge in employment at newspapers, which lost about 40,000 jobs. Newsroom employment in broadcast television and cable news remained steady over that time, but radio dropped 26 percent. Exacerbated by the pandemic, “in 2020 alone, a third of large newspapers in the United States experienced layoffs,” Pew also reported. In 2018, the research group found that, although newsroom employees were more likely than the American workforce overall to have college degrees, those who do have degrees make less than other college-educated workers.<sup>[7]</sup>

By 2008, international news was “rapidly losing ground” in terms of devoted space and resources, Pew found. Two-thirds of newspaper executives reported giving less space to foreign coverage, almost half said they cut resources for it, and only ten percent “considered foreign coverage ‘very essential.’” “This decline in foreign news occurs as U.S. armed forces confront stubborn insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Biden administration talks of a global war on terrorism and international trade increasingly impacts the everyday lives of Americans,” the researchers wrote.<sup>[8]</sup> Between 1998 and 2010, 18 newspapers and two newspaper chains closed all of their foreign bureaus.<sup>[9]</sup> In 2015, McClatchy, a major newspaper chain that operated 30 papers — including the likes of the *Miami Herald* and the *Kansas City Star* — closed its remaining four bureaus in Beijing, Mexico City, Istanbul, and Berlin in favor of domestic regional and political news.<sup>[10]</sup>

There are exceptions. Even during the biggest period of retrenchment, major news outlets like the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* continued doing extensive

## COMPETING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Notably, resources remain scarce, and professional journalists and major news media now compete for the time and attention of their audiences with the cacophony that is the Internet, especially social media. Serious journalists — national security reporters, policy analysts and commentators, and remaining foreign correspondents — find it increasingly difficult to



Photo by Rahul Chakraborty / Unsplash

transcend the noise of today's information space with facts and fact-based analysis. Journalism Professor Tom Lansner once started a workshop by asking his audience of journalists which headlines they thought would catch the most attention: "Myanmar Army Attacks Rohingya," "Kim Kardashian Kidnapped," or "Capitals Win Stanley Cup."<sup>[14]</sup> They knew the answer.

Conversely, how many Americans know, for example, that more than 80 million people have been forced from their homes worldwide by violent conflict, and that this figure predates the war in Ukraine, which has displaced millions within the country and forced millions more to cross borders for safety?<sup>[15]</sup> Further, how many Americans understand what such upheavals ultimately mean to the United States in refugee and other humanitarian crises, including what other conflict dominoes might fall as a result? How many Americans have the information they need to consider the trade-offs between foreign involvement and staying out of it, even though the impact of either decision shows up in their communities each day, in one form or another? How many Americans understand the acute dangers that climate change presents, not only in extreme weather events, but also in the political tensions over the fact that prosperous industrialized countries like the United States are responsible for most warming globally and have consistently failed to live up to their agreements to fund the needed measures for adaptation and mitigation?

"For a variety of reasons, studies consistently show that the American public knows even less about foreign affairs generally and foreign policy specifically than it does about domestic issues," wrote Aday, though he noted, "there is debate about whether citizens still make basically rational if not fully informed decisions about foreign policy."<sup>[16]</sup> More recently, Pew Research has found a distinction between Americans who mainly get their news from social media and those who rely more on other sources ranging from news websites to broadcast and print. "Those who rely on social media for news are less likely to get the facts right about the coronavirus and politics and more likely to hear some unproven claims," Pew reported.<sup>[17]</sup>

While Donald Trump's campaign and presidency were a bonanza for major news media in terms of audience growth, little of that attention turned to international news. Glendora Meikle, who worked for the International Reporting Project (IRP) before it closed, wrote for the *Columbia Journalism*

*Review*, "I lost count of the number of IRP fellows who dejectedly relayed that an editor had told them they had no space for a piece that didn't include a 'Trump angle.'"<sup>[18]</sup> And as the Trump presidency wound down, news website *Axios* declared that statistics show "Americans now want to read about sports, not politics."<sup>[19]</sup>

International news resounding immediately to U.S. national security garnered a brief spotlight in 2021 during the Afghanistan withdrawal, but at least some of that attention was from right-wing outlets fanning the flames against President Joe Biden.<sup>[20]</sup> And statistics for online interest in select news events during Biden's first 100 days showed that the only foreign story that grabbed Americans' attention was about the British royals. Not even the news of the cargo ship stuck in the Suez Canal broke through to the top ranks.<sup>[21]</sup>

## COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE

At the same time, the persistent complexities and nuances of foreign and international affairs create additional burdens for journalists trying to tell these stories and for the audiences trying to comprehend them, never mind the policymakers trying to navigate them.

Perhaps one of the most neglected stories in major American news media in recent years has been the Colombia peace accords and their aftermath. Colombia's drug wars captured legions of U.S. press attention at their height in the 1980s and 1990s, in part due to America's own problems with drug abuse and trafficking. But Colombia's narco-trafficking was part of a half-century of broader and more complex violent conflict that the hard-



Heads of State participate in the Peace Signing ceremony between the Government of Colombia and the FARC E.P. Photo // Gobierno de Chile // CC 2.0.

fought peace agreement in 2016 between the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army) rebels intended to end.

The difficult negotiations in Havana, Cuba, barely received mention in major U.S. news media, and after a brief spate of coverage on the agreement itself, the story again receded, despite the wrenching drama that has ensued as a new Colombian president sought to undo the accord and both sides struggled to meet its terms. Today, the agreement is unraveling but receives only sporadic attention in the American news media.<sup>[22]</sup>

"We need journalists to be holding both the government and the FARC accountable to their peace deal commitments, to help ensure they follow through on them," said Nadja Drost, a special correspondent for *PBS NewsHour* and Pulitzer Center grantee. "In order to do that kind of reporting, we need to do it from the ground."<sup>[23]</sup>

U.S. media coverage of the political, economic, and social dynamics in Central America are merely episodic, even though they are at the root of the migration and border crises that otherwise consume so much of the American political dialogue. The root causes drew some attention in 2021 but only through the lens of new Vice President Kamala Harris's attempts at finding solutions on the ground.

The continuing and, in some cases, decreasing professional capacity of journalists to cover foreign and global issues is due not only to declining resources, but also a reliance on traditional ways of viewing foreign affairs. Journalists commonly look for the scandal or political games and maneuvering; highlight incremental breaking news or superficial "tension," to the neglect of underlying issues; and obsess over political "leaders," no matter how credible. Citizens become players most often as either victims or heroes in a feel-good story, rather than as persistent, strong community leaders in conflict zones around the world.

Structurally, foreign policy and national security coverage is delineated in most news operations based on "beats" covering the State Department and the Pentagon. The National Security Council is treated as an appendage of the White House beat, and the U.S. Agency for International Development is mostly ignored, except for rare occasions when a big name like Samantha Power takes the helm. Even these stories are most often a personality profile rather than a deep dive

into policies and programs that (1) cost taxpayer money and (2) have significant — and not always positive — impact on the ground in areas affected by conflict. Notably, human rights coverage most often focuses on individuals rather than patterns, except on opinion pages. And the burgeoning field of peacebuilding is neglected entirely as too soft and too complicated.

## INFORMED FOREIGN POLICY IN A DEMOCRACY

There are exceptions to this pattern, and they may point the way forward. Often, coverage that breaks the mold is funded today not by core newsroom budgets but by foundations such as the Pulitzer Center. When the previously mentioned Nadja Drost addressed the misperceptions about the "peace" in Colombia, she was speaking at a 2018 conference organized by the Pulitzer Center to explore different ways of covering conflict and peace. Started in 2006 with funding from Emily Rauh Pulitzer, the widow of newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer Jr., (the Center isn't connected with the famed Pulitzer Prizes), the Center now bills itself as the "largest single source of money for global enterprise reporting."<sup>[24]</sup> It supports 200 reporting projects per year published in 150 news organizations, including some that once funded their foreign reporting entirely by

themselves — the *Associated Press*, *The New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *BuzzFeed News*, *PBS NewsHour*, and the *BBC*.

In addition to covering high-profile conflicts, such as Ethiopia and Afghanistan (including the current humanitarian crisis since the U.S. withdrawal), Pulitzer Center-funded journalists also venture to more obscure locales, such as Mozambique and Guyana, providing stories that would otherwise be neglected.

"One of the things I like to think that we're all trying to do is complicate the moral imagination that our readers have about what's going on in these places — expand the

imaginative proximity and make something that sounds so far away so much closer," remarked Jina Moore, a Pulitzer Center grantee and then-East Africa bureau chief at *The New York Times*, at the same conference.

Many similar nonprofit efforts to fund foreign reporting have ultimately collapsed, such as the previously mentioned International Reporting Project. The Seattle-



## Pulitzer Center ON CRISIS REPORTING

based Common Language Project, which sought to highlight “personal” international stories.<sup>[25]</sup> went through various iterations over 15 years, including a name change to The Seattle Globalist, before finally shuttering in 2020 amid a “financial crisis.”<sup>[26]</sup> Competition for non-profit funding is no less intense than the brutal race for advertising dollars and audience subscriptions in the for-profit world.

In the realm of international news, nonprofit organizations still thriving include the International Women’s Media Foundation, which awards fellowships for women journalists with a hefty roster of donors,<sup>[27]</sup> and the award-winning International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which conducts joint reporting with 280 journalists and more than 100 media outlets around the world.<sup>[28]</sup> ICIJ produced the famous 2016 Panama Papers investigation based on leaked documents, as well as the recent Pandora Papers series that exposed South Dakota and Wyoming as

the past two decades. Foundations and media innovators have put money and energy into science and health news, too, especially in the COVID-19 era.

All the while, U.S. foreign coverage still takes a back seat. “International journalists have benefited in recent years from the volume and variety of opportunities,” Meikle, the former IRP deputy director, wrote. “But as the number of fellowship programs has increased, the number of funders has not.”<sup>[31]</sup>

The for-profit sector spawns the occasional major start-up. When *Politico* expanded to Europe, it arguably became a leading provider of analysis of foreign news, though through a predominantly political lens more than an examination of government policy and practice. Ben Smith, the prominent founding editor of *BuzzFeed News* who went on to serve for a brief time as media columnist at *The New York Times*, announced in January 2022 that he was leaving that perch to launch a new global general-interest news venture by the end of 2022 with Justin Smith,

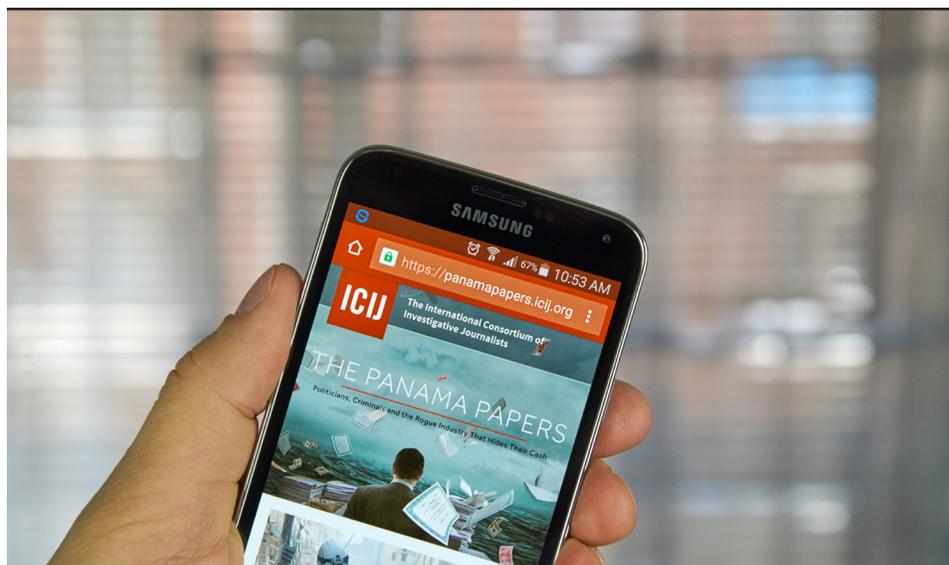
who left his position as chief executive of *Bloomberg Media*.

“Especially in the last decade,” Justin Smith wrote in a memo about the project posted by *Axios*, “I realized that a new cohort of global, digitally-native, educated news consumers had emerged that were poorly served by legacy news media — an insight that has inspired me to launch this new venture.” He estimates the potential global audience of “English-speaking, college-educated, professional class” at more than 200 million, “the most worldly audience in human history.”<sup>[32]</sup>

If successful, such a venture might help fill the gaps in public understanding of global affairs in the United States and abroad. But to do so, it will need to do more than rely on

the same thinking and structures of news gathering that presently undermine the quality of information Americans receive. The world is full of smart, connected, courageous journalists who aren’t from or don’t live in “the West,” and while some serve on staffs of U.S. news organizations, the vast majority work as freelancers. Pulitzer Center founder and Chief Executive Jon Sawyer has noted “the growing dependence on freelancers for frontline reporting in conflict zones.”<sup>[33]</sup> A new global news organization would do well to scoop up such talent — and more importantly, listen to them.

Brazilian journalist Natalia Viana wrote eloquently on the bias reflected in news media both in the United States and throughout the Global North against local experts and journalists in the Global South. “As news organizations in the North increase their focus on the climate crisis, it’s time for community leaders in the South — and the journalism that already regards these leaders as experts in nature conservancy and healing the earth — to be seen as valuable sources of stories, commentary, and solutions,” she said.<sup>[34]</sup>



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international offshore financial havens. Global Press, an umbrella organization founded in 2006 by Cristi Heganres, is pursuing a different but equally ambitious mission: cultivating an all-woman cadre of journalists with “physical and cognitive diversity” in communities around the world “to counter the disaster-driven narrative that the 24-hour news cycle prioritizes and legacy media perpetuates.”<sup>[29]</sup>

But the most extensive emphasis for investment in U.S. news today is on saving, resurrecting, or, more often, reinventing local news. Northwestern University’s Medill Center has its Local News Initiative. The Knight Foundation is investing USD 300 million to support local news and information endeavors and lists 12 organizational partners working with it to bolster local news, including a pioneer in that area, Report for America.<sup>[30]</sup> Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy has made local news a priority for its research agenda. All are crucial, especially considering the gutting of local news organizations over



FILE - Hundreds of people run alongside a U.S. Air Force C-17 transport plane as it moves down a runway of the international airport, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug.16. 2021 // Screen Capture from Al Jazeera Video // Open Source.

The recipients of foreign news and information — i.e., the public and the policymakers — bear responsibility, too. Specifically, the American public all too often succumbs to the temptations of infotainment and the easy lure of cat videos, and for failing to support reliable news outlets (though the latter is a chicken-and-egg question, as media outlets too often fail to adjust to the changes in the information and advertising ecosystem that ate their lunch and therefore contributed to their own demise).

Policymakers are getting better about listening to non-traditional voices. This has become especially poignant after the frustrations of the “endless wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror, along with the eye-openers of the “Me Too” movement and Black Lives Matter protests, not to mention the pandemic. Even the field of peacebuilding got a shot in the arm with the 2019 Global Fragility Act, though that has yet to deliver in concrete terms.<sup>[35]</sup>

Policymakers and political leaders still have work to do. They must not only open their minds to new perspectives and innovative solutions, but also learn how to communicate complexity more effectively and clearly to their constituents. Regardless of what one thought was the right approach to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, for example, the mantra of “endless war” and “forever wars” became so overwhelming that it entirely snuffed out reasoned debate about how to responsibly end the United States’s role.

In a panel discussion as the Biden administration was planning its withdrawal, a longtime proponent of such a move was asked what to do about all the Afghans who had helped the United States or had supported pro-democracy and human rights initiatives, trying to support their country’s transition, and who were at risk of becoming targets of the Taliban. The expert’s only solution: hand out American visas to any Afghan who wanted to get out. The simplistic response fell far short of a serious answer to a life-and-death issue for millions of people. Yet when Kabul fell to the Taliban, Americans were shocked not only by the collapse but by the absence of a U.S. contingency plan.

Certainly, part of the responsibility for that lies at the feet of U.S. news media. Despite some laudable efforts at non-traditional reporting — notably by the *Washington Post*’s Pamela Constable, for example — most often, coverage of the war in Afghanistan was purely defined as a political or military battlefield.<sup>[36]</sup> The thousands of Afghans trying to make the transition work in their communities and make their voices heard beyond got little more than a nod or a quote. On the rare occasions that such efforts received more media attention, it was either because of a financial scandal or came in the form of a fluffy feel-good story, rather than serious investigation into how and whether these ubiquitous projects were working.

News outlets and journalists must identify novel, more influential ways of conveying the facts and realities of the world. Americans and their leaders are dependent on this information to understand and to cope with the complexity of the global landscape. Swanee Hunt, a former U.S. ambassador to Austria who went on to become a leading advocate of female leaders in communities worldwide, exhorted journalists at the 2018 Pulitzer Center conference to understand their power and use it for good:

“If what you’re doing is talking about the male political leaders who are working with the male warriors, that becomes the primary source. That’s history,” she noted. “And if you’re ignoring the fact that in Nigeria and Liberia, women organize Christian-Muslim marches with thousands and thousands of women who are calling for calm . . . , are those stories front and center? Put them front and center, because what you’re writing becomes the history.”<sup>[37]</sup>



Major General Chris Donahue, commander of the U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division, XVIII Airborne Corps, boards a C-17 cargo plane at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Alex Burnett)

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