

Anglo-American media: why so interested in Latin America's human rights abuses?

[James Ron](#) [1] and [Emilie Hafner Burton](#) [2] 30 January 2013

In the 1980s and 1990s, elite Anglo-American media sources cared more about Latin American abuses than those occurring anywhere else in the world. Why?

When journalists report on human rights abuses, which region do they report on most? Africa, due to the Rwandan genocide, Sudan's Darfur, or Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army? The Middle East, as a result of Egypt, Syria and Gaza?

The correct answer – at least for *Newsweek*, the *Economist*, and the *New York Times*, ten years on either side of the Cold War's end - is Latin America.

From 1981 to 2000, controlling statistically for government repression, income, population, political regime, and other factors, violations taking place in Latin America received a whopping 42 - 82% i.e. *more* media attention than similar abuses elsewhere in the world.

This reporting pattern, moreover, contradicts [other studies](#) [10] demonstrating that when it comes to general foreign affairs, the international media is far *less* interested in Latin America than in other world regions.

We discovered this 'Latin Bias' while analyzing our data on all *Economist* and *Newsweek* stories with the keywords "human rights." As part of a [series of studies on the media, NGOs, and human rights](#) [11], we coded thousands of articles published from 1981 to 2000, ran dozens of statistical tests to verify our results, and cross-checked our findings on *New York Times* data gathered by others.

The results of our most recent labors appeared recently online in [International Studies Quarterly](#) [12], a scholarly journal, and the print version is due out in March 2013.

To be sure, there is no Latin Bias until we use statistical controls. Based simply on unadjusted flows of regional human rights reporting, Latin America does not stand out. Based on raw counts alone, the number of articles devoted to abuses in Asia outstripped those devoted to Africa or the Middle East, and were often much higher than Latin America.

When we control for other factors, however, including government repression, population size, per capita income, and more, Latin American abuses emerged as clear "winners" in the unspoken [struggle for international attention](#). [13]

To investigate further, we questioned over a dozen veteran foreign correspondents, editors and bureau chiefs at the *Economist*, *Newsweek*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Die Zeit*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and others. Collectively, these practitioners offered a range of possible explanations, which we then tested with new and existing statistical data.

We began by considering US strategic and economic interests, which always loom large in Latin America. "Human rights abuses are more frequently covered when their continuation appears to depend at least in part on US foreign policy," one journalist explained, and in the 1980s, "the wars in Central America created a direct link between human rights in the region and US policy." This prompted journalists to investigate whether "US foreign policy [was] aiding and abetting human rights abuse." As another put it, the "extent to which Washington opposed abuses - or became complicit in them - developed into a major part of the story."

To test this possibility, we introduced a battery of new variables into our statistical models, the goal of which was to measure the intensity of US policy interest. These included geographic distance between a nation's capital and Washington, D.C.; international trade flows; voting practices at the United Nations; and US aid. We discovered that geographic distance and UN

voting did matter, but that they did not eliminate the Bias. Even controlling for these factors, the *Economist* and *Newsweek* still reported 58-78% more on abuses occurring in Latin America.

Next, we explored the impact of political change. As one journalist noted, Latin America experienced democratization earlier than many other world regions, providing “a channel of protest that found a wider audience, one that was perhaps unavailable to Asians and Africans [at the time], where human rights abuses were surely just as serious, if not worse.” Democratization, moreover, is often a compelling media drama, as the Arab Spring demonstrated. The struggle for political freedom makes for great press copy, accompanied as it is by tales of heroism, villainy, and intrigue.

Although we had already controlled for political regime type, we went a step further, identifying periods of particularly dramatic political change, but found no statistically significant “democratization effect.” No matter which statistical method we tried, there was no evidence linking more intense political shifts with greater levels of human rights media reporting.

A third hypothesis related to the progressive currents within the Catholic Church, which some journalists thought might have boosted human rights coverage of Latin American events. As one noted, Latin liberation theologians had transformed parts of the Church in the 1970s and 1980s into “champion(s) of civilians and ... critic(s) of governments.” Or, as another said, “much of the human rights reporting and even more of the general consciousness raising [in Latin America] ... was done by the Catholic Church...[including] most famously, the [Jesuits](#) [14] and the [Maryknolls](#) [15].”

To investigate, we pulled a mountain of data from the [Vatican's statistical yearbooks](#), [16] including the number of baptized Catholics, pastoral centers, Metropolitan sees, and bishops; the size of the country's religious and lay Catholic workforce; the number of Catholic K-12 schools, as well as number of institutions of higher education; and the Vatican's tally of Catholic hospitals, old age homes, orphanages, and the like. This hitherto untapped data source, we hoped, would help us discover whether the Church's institutional strength, along with the intensity of its outreach to the poor, had any impact on the media's human rights reporting.

With the exception of Catholic K-12 schools, however, none of these factors were statistically significant, possibly because the Church was never uniformly critical of human rights abuses. In some Latin American countries, after all, senior bishops openly endorsed the government's anti-Communist agenda. These opposing vectors within the Church may have statistically canceled each other out.

We then tried a variety of other statistical controls, but couldn't make the Latin Bias disappear. This is hardly surprising, however, since many important phenomena resist the quantification necessary for statistical analysis. This is especially true when speaking of sentiments and ideologies, which are so difficult to measure.

Consider, for example, one explanation of the Latin Bias, advanced by an American correspondent with years of international reporting experience. In the 1980s, he argued, “radical” western leftists were rocked by a Conservative resurgence in the US and United Kingdom, as well as by a string of failed communist experiments. “Desperate for some new alternative... [to] provide a good basis for anti-American outrage,” the journalist said, these western radicals developed a romantic attachment to Latin America's Cold War-era insurgents, cheering leftist guerillas, demonizing local governments, and inserting this commentary into broader debates over political good and evil, many of which cast the US as the bogeyman.

As a result, conflicts in countries that were otherwise “inherently trivial” to US policy became central preoccupations, as did their human rights abuses. The western media followed suit, the journalist claimed, because it was an “unthinking and often unconscious follower” of left wing thought. Without this ideological backdrop, Latin American abuses would never have assumed such prominence.

Claims of this nature are hard to assess with statistical tools, but we could use new data to test the theory over time. If this journalist's “radical romance” story is correct, its effects should have waned over the last decade, as Latin America's wars ended or morphed into drug-fueled criminality. With new data, we'll be able to learn whether other world regions have moved to the center of the west's human rights interests. Is Africa finally on top, or is it now Asia, the Middle East, or the former (and current) Communist lands?

Regardless of what we find next, reflect on this statistically-proven fact: In the 1980s and 1990s, elite Anglo-American media sources cared more about Latin American abuses than those occurring anywhere else in the world.

A version of this article appeared originally in Spanish on the website of [Foreign Affairs-Latinoamerica](#), [17] and in English, on the website of the [Columbia Journalism Review](#), [18]



[23] *This article is published under a Creative Commons licence. If you have any queries about republishing please [contact us](#) [24]. Please check individual images for licensing details.*

Source URL: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/james-ron-emilie-hafner-burton/anglo-american-media-why-so-interested-in-latin-america%E2%80%99s-human-right>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/james-ron>
- [2] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/emilie-hafner-burton>
- [3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/international-politics>
- [4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/uk>
- [5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/united-states>
- [6] http://www.opendemocracy.net/editorial_tags/latin_america_caribbean
- [7] http://www.opendemocracy.net/editorial_tags/human_rights
- [8] [http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/70661&t=Anglo-American media: why so interested in Latin America's human rights abuses?](http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/70661&t=Anglo-American%20media%3A%20why%20so%20interested%20in%20Latin%20America%27s%20human%20rights%20abuses%3F)
- [9] [http://twitter.com/share?text=Anglo-American media: why so interested in Latin America's human rights abuses?](http://twitter.com/share?text=Anglo-American%20media%3A%20why%20so%20interested%20in%20Latin%20America%27s%20human%20rights%20abuses%3F)
- [10] <http://userpages.umbc.edu/~hasegawa/aejmc-icd/spring99/wsj.html>
- [11] <http://www.jamesron.com/Reporting.php>
- [12] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/isqu.12023/abstract>
- [13] <http://www.amazon.com/Marketing-Rebellion-Insurgents-International-Contentious/dp/0521607868>
- [14] <http://www.jesuit.org>
- [15] <http://www.maryknoll.org>
- [16] <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1203473.htm>
- [17] <http://www.revistafal.com/portada/1429-medios-de-comunicacion-y-violaciones-a-derechos-humanos-en-america-latina.html>
- [18] <http://www.cjr.org>
- [19] <http://opendemocracy.disqus.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.opendemocracy.net%2Fjames-ron-emilie-hafner-burton%2Fanglo-american-media-why-so-interested-in-latin-america%25E2%2580%2599s-human-right>
- [20] <http://irps.ucsd.edu/ehafner/am.php>
- [21] <http://ilar.ucsd.edu/>
- [22] <http://www.jamesron.com>
- [23] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>
- [24] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/contact>