

Shaping the Northern Media's Human Rights Coverage, 1986–2000*

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What influences the Northern media's coverage of events and abuses in explicit human rights terms? Do international NGOs have an impact, and, if so, when are they most effective? This article addresses these questions with regression analysis of human rights reporting by *The Economist* and *Newsweek* from 1986 to 2000, covering 145 countries. First, it finds that these two media sources cover abuses in human rights terms more frequently when they occur in countries with higher levels of state repression, economic development, population, and Amnesty International attention. There is also some evidence that political openness, number of battle-deaths, and civil societies affect coverage, although these effects were not robust. Second, it finds that Amnesty International's press releases appear to have less impact on media coverage when discussing abuses in countries that are central to the media's zone of concern. Indeed, Amnesty's press advocacy may be more effective when addressing violations in lesser-noticed countries. The article attributes this to the saturation of coverage of abuses in highly mediated countries. Cumulative attention by multiple journalists and others raises a country's media profile but also makes it more difficult for any one voice to be heard. The authors conclude that Amnesty's press advocacy may have greater media impact when focusing on abuses in countries located away from the media's core areas of concern. Overall, the authors are encouraged by the Northern media's sensitivity to actual patterns of repression and to Amnesty's lobbying, since both indicate that the media is potentially a useful ally in efforts to combat abuses worldwide. Yet, the discouraging effects of poverty on the media's human rights coverage are cause for concern.

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, international activists have successfully defined respect for civil and

political rights as an intrinsic moral good (Hopgood, 2006; Korey, 1998; Smith, 1995). Media coverage of abuses has played a key role in this effort, helping to generate a wave of

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three anonymous reviewers for their comments. The authors dedicate this article to the memory of their friend and research assistant, Heather Fisher, who died tragically before the project was completed. Please address all correspondence to James Ron at Jron@connect.carleton.ca. Replication data, syntax, and logs, including additional models, are available at <http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets>. Statistical analyses were carried out in Stata, Version 9.2.

international human rights activities and institution-building (Bob, 2005; International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Ron, Ramos & Rodgers, 2005). Yet media scholars warn that international news concentrates more heavily on some countries than others (Chang, Lau & Xiaoming, 2000; Kim & Barnett, 1996), and the deployment of explicit human rights concerns appears similarly imbalanced (Bob, 2005; Caliendo, Gibney & Payne, 1999; Fan & Ostini, 1999; Minear, Scott & Weiss, 1996; Ovsiovitich, 1993). Nonetheless, many human rights activists view media coverage as vital to their efforts and, consequently, enthusiastically pursue media-savvy strategies.

To investigate the media's record on reporting abuses, this article studies the factors shaping explicit human rights coverage by major Northern media sources. Do actual repressive conditions matter? If so, what other factors are relevant? The analysis then probes the ability of the world's largest international rights group, Amnesty International, to shape the media's agenda. When and where are Amnesty's press releases most effective? The study explores these questions with new data from Amnesty International and two prominent Northern weeklies, *The Economist* and *Newsweek*. The period of investigation is 1986 to 2000, the years for which the most complete data exist, and the statistical models are run on 145 countries.

The findings suggest both hopeful and more discouraging trends. On a positive note, media coverage is significantly associated with levels of government repression and Amnesty International press releases, suggesting that the Northern media can potentially play a useful role in global human rights protection efforts. On a more sombre note, poverty reduces media coverage, a finding of concern given the statistical association between low developmental levels and human rights violations. The analysis also suggests that Amnesty has less impact on

media coverage of high-profile countries. If Amnesty's goal is media impact, it should consider devoting more written advocacy to abuses in countries located away from the media's central zone of concern.

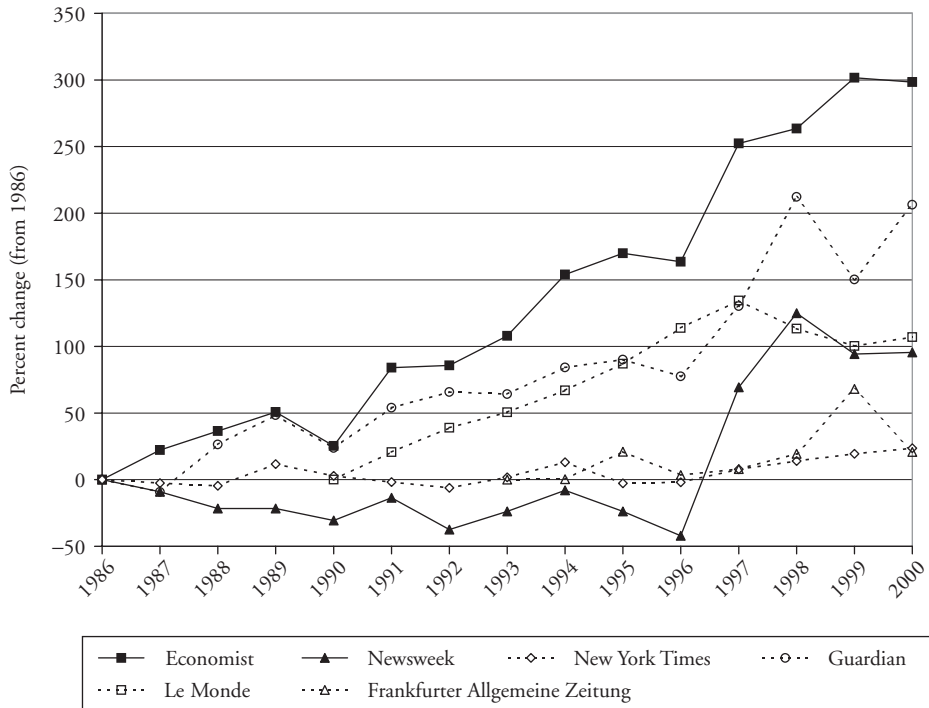
Human Rights in the Media

The term 'human rights' began appearing in media reports and policy statements decades ago, but its usage and visibility increased dramatically during the 1990s. 'Few political agendas', Cmiel (2004: 117) notes, 'have seen such a rapid and dramatic growth'. Chandler (2002) and Hopgood (2006) claim totemic status for human rights in the developed world, an argument bolstered by US surveys demonstrating substantial public support for a foreign policy oriented around vaguely defined human rights goals (Gallup, 2003). Individual rights have gained the status of a liberal-democratic civil religion, and membership in the modern family of nations is increasingly defined through shared human rights symbols, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and shared human rights rituals, such as war crimes tribunals (Bass, 2000; Cladis, 2001: xxviii). The number of self-described human rights organizations has also increased dramatically, creating a vibrant policy domain that both defines and sustains global activism (Smith, Pagnucco & Lopez, 1998; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004).

Figure 1 tracks the Northern media's growing use of the term 'human rights' from 1986 to 2000.¹ The graph shows percent change, from the year 1986, in stories mentioning human rights in two leading weeklies, *The Economist* and *Newsweek*, and in four American and European dailies – *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and

¹ Based on a count of articles appearing in Lexis-Nexis with the term 'human rights' (French: 'droite de l'homme' [singular] and 'droites de l'homme' [plural]); German: 'Menschenrecht' [singular] and 'Menschenrechte' [plural]).

Figure 1. Percent Change in 'Human Rights' Mentions by Northern News Media, 1986–2000



Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ).² By the year 2000, the growth rates ranged from a high of 298% in Britain's *The Economist*, to a low of 21% for the German FAZ. Although coverage in many publications varied and even decreased until the end of the Cold War, all experienced growth during the latter half of the 1990s. The term 'human rights', in other words, recently gained increased salience in the Global North's major media outlets.

This article's statistical models focus on two leading players in the Northern media, *The Economist* and *Newsweek*. As Figure 1 suggests, the two follow similar but elevated trends compared with other relevant Northern publications. The analysis is thus preliminary, and further examination using

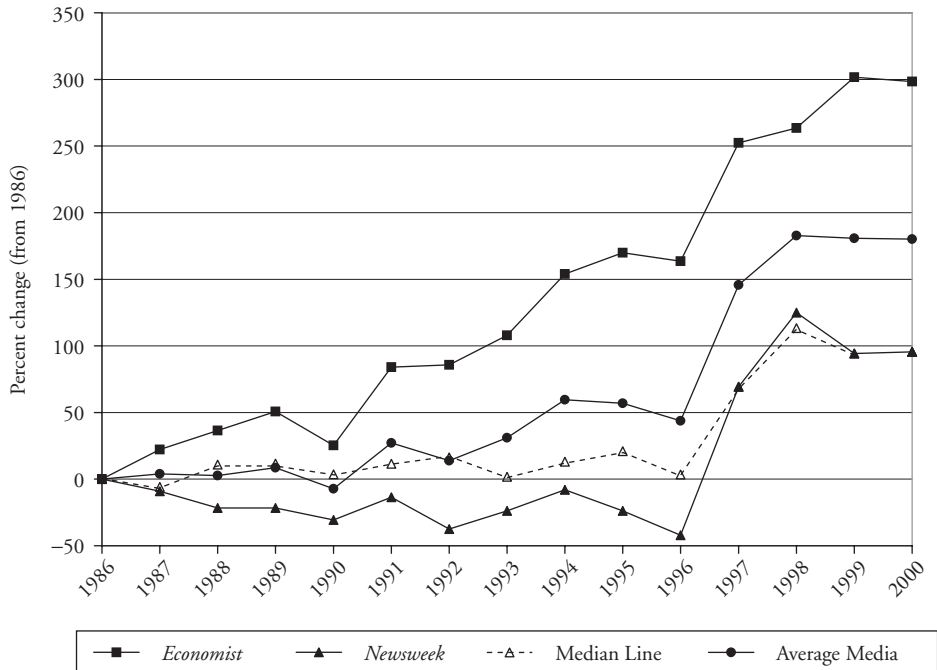
² The percentage measure is used to overcome scaling differences between weeklies and dailies, and calculates percentage change from 1986, or the first year of available data for *Le Monde* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Lexis-Nexis search conducted on 18 August 2004.

other sources may either narrow or broaden the findings' generalizability.

Many of the article's models use an average of both sources' country reporting to smooth intrasource variation and offer a more general measure of Northern interest. As Figure 2 illustrates, this is a reasonable approach. The graph examines change in our three response variables, *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, and average coverage between them, and compares it with a median line of change in coverage across all the media publications reported in Figure 1.

Generally, the three central measures follow a similar trend to the median change in coverage, suggesting they reflect broader trends. Yet, there are also slight differences: *The Economist* tends to have more stories mentioning the keywords 'human rights', *Newsweek* fewer, and the average between them more closely follows the median, although it is slightly elevated. No

Figure 2. Percent Change in 'Human Rights' Mentions by *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, Average Media Measure, and Median Line, 1986–2000



measure is perfect, but the three used here do a reasonably good job of capturing overall Northern media trends.

Yet, if these measures are in fact representative, Figure 3 provides cause for concern, since it shows that the wave of media 'rights talk' flows more towards some countries than others. The graph indicates the annual count of countries whose abuses were covered by *The Economist* and *Newsweek* in explicit human rights terms. At no point from 1986 to 2000 did either source report on violations in more than one-quarter of the world's nation-state population.

These disparities are an important source of global tension, with some governments claiming that their misdeeds are overreported, and some victims complaining that their plight is neglected (Bob, 2005; Brock, 1993/94; Gerstenfeld & Green, 2004; Joseph, 2000; Li & St. Cyr, 1998; Lieven,

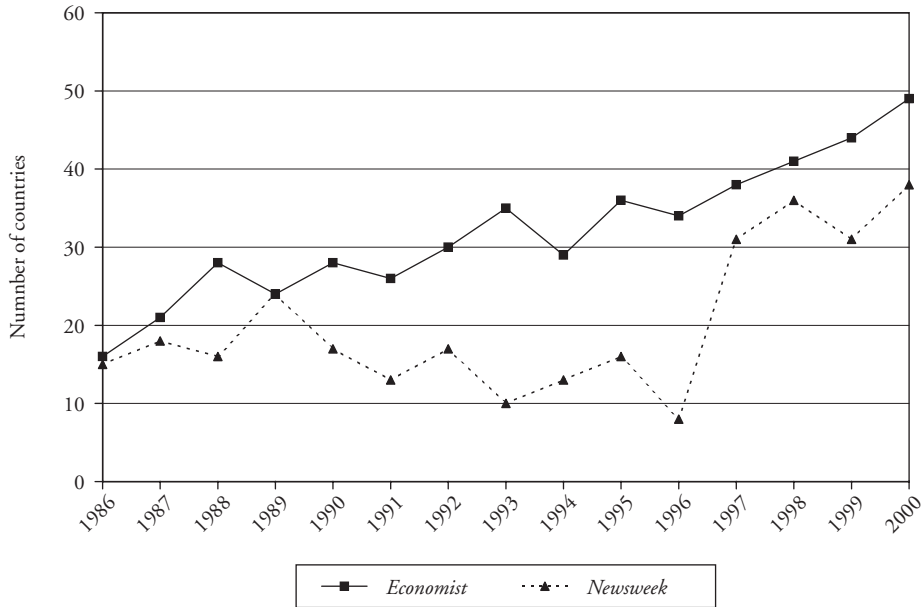
2000; Silverstein, 1994). They also motivate this article's examination of human rights media coverage and inform its hypotheses.

Hypotheses

Six hypotheses are advanced herein to explain variations in the Northern media's country-level reporting of abuses. The first is commonsensical, relying on media studies demonstrating an association between levels of media reporting and real world conditions (Tedesco, 2001; Bickland, 1998; Kim & Barnett, 1996; Wanta & Foote, 1994). Extending this logic, the media should publish more accounts of human rights abuse in countries with worse human rights records. Thus, Hypothesis 1:

H1: The more oppressive a country's actual human rights conditions, the more the media will cover its abuses in human rights terms.

Figure 3. Number of Countries Reported On by *The Economist* and *Newsweek* in 'Human Rights' Terms, 1986–2000



The second expectation flows from the scholarly observation that global human rights activism is more robust when interacting with a vibrant and well-organized civil society (Bob, 2005; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Khagram, 2004). Keck & Sikkink (1998) term this the 'boomerang effect', arguing that domestic activists trigger global media attention by lobbying international activists. Thus, Hypothesis 2:

H2: The larger a country's organized civil society, the more the media will cover its abuses in human rights terms.

News editors also cater to their readers' tastes (Neuman, 1990), and Northern media sources will cater to those of Northern publics. Some argue that Northern media focus on countries sharing 'cultural proximity' with the developed world (Johnson, 1997; Galtung & Ruge, 1965: 67; Østgaard, 1965: 46), while others find that Northern ties boost human rights coverage by the Northern media (Fan &

Ostini, 1999; Ovsiovitch, 1993). This trend tracks the broader tendency of international media flows to follow the contours of global economic relations, dependency, and foreign aid (Chang, 1998; Meyer, 1989; Zuckerman, 2004: 53). Thus, Hypothesis 3 expects media reporting to be greater for countries receiving foreign aid:

H3: The more a country receives Northern aid, the more the media will cover its abuses in human rights terms.³

The analysis also models the effect of national poverty, which should decrease levels of media reporting. The global communications literature finds that journalists write

³ In addition, the Northern media may focus more heavily on countries with higher levels of US aid because abuses in those countries may be higher; previous scholarship has suggested an association between US aid and repression (Schultz, 1981; Stohl, Carleton & Johnson, 1984; Carleton & Stohl, 1985; Regan, 1995). Note that this expectation counters Herman (1993) and Chomsky & Herman (1979), among others, who believe the Northern media systematically under-report abuses by US allies.

more about events in rich countries shaping international affairs (Chang, Lau & Xiaoming, 2000; Chang, 1998; Kim & Barnett, 1996; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Østgaard, 1965). Poor countries, moreover, have less of the technological and physical infrastructure that enables international reporting, including roads, telecommunications, human capital, and international news bureaus (Zuckerman, 2004). As one survey of human rights reporting explains, 'it is easier for an NGO campaigning for abolition of the death penalty to research conditions under which it is applied in the US than in North Korea or China' (International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002: 112). Thus, Hypothesis 4:

H4: The lower a country's level of economic development, the less the media will cover human rights abuses within its borders.

This expectation is noteworthy, given the scholarly finding of an association between poverty and civil war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), personal integrity violations (Poe, Tate & Keith, 1999), and abuse of social and economic rights (Farmer, 2003; Pogge, 2002; Sen, 2000). Indeed, the logic of Hypothesis 1 would suggest that poverty should be associated with *greater* reporting, not less. Yet, higher levels of development will create more access to information, and this should significantly shape the media's human rights output. As a result, the authors anticipate that greater per capita wealth will boost media country coverage.

There is also reason to suspect that military and population size will be associated with greater coverage. Military agents are often key human rights violators, and larger security forces should, logically, commit more abuses. Militarily powerful countries also carry more weight in the international system and should thus attract more media attention. Population size should act similarly; larger populations provide more opportunity for government abuse and have also been associated statistically

with higher levels of government repression (Henderson, 1991; McCormick & Mitchell, 1997). Following the logic of Hypothesis 4, communications scholars find that larger populations also generate more international communications flows (Kim & Barnett, 1996). Thus, Hypothesis 5:

H5: The larger a country's military and population, the more the media will cover its abuses in human rights terms.

Finally, scholars find that international activists are powerful players in the global marketplace of ideas (Bob, 2005; Florini, 2000; Mathews, 1997; Simmons, 1998; Price, 2003). Transnational NGOs resemble domestic social movements, relying on media coverage for validation, recruitment, fund raising, and impact (Ryan, Carragee & Meinhof, 2001; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). The link between NGOs and media exposure prompts Hypothesis 6:

H6: Greater international NGO advocacy will be associated with greater Northern media coverage.

Methods and Data

The number of stories in *The Economist* and *Newsweek* were regressed on indicators of civil and political rights, civil society, Northern aid, economic development, size of military, size of population, and NGO advocacy. Although the authors' original data cover over 190 countries, missing data for control variables cut the country sample to 145. The data are structured in country-year format. Ordinary least square (OLS) models showed signs of heteroskedasticity and first-order autocorrelation, prompting the authors to transform some variables to their natural logs and include a first-order lag term.

The analysis relies on population average models with Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) negative binomial regression, an independent correlation structure, and semi-robust

standard errors. Population average models 'account for correlation between lower level units within higher level units (or clusters) by modeling the correlations or covariances themselves rather than by allowing for random effects or random coefficients' (Diez Roux, 2002: 592). Standard errors were adjusted for clustering on countries repeatedly observed in a country-year data matrix. This method was chosen because GEE was specifically developed for highly correlated panel data (Hardin & Hilbe, 2003; Zorn, 2001). Since the dependent variable consists of yearly counts that violate OLS assumptions, the analysis employs negative binomial regression, a technique scholars recommend over other count models (such as Poisson) when the variance does not equal the mean (Cameron & Trivedi, 1986). In such cases, 'over-dispersed' data may inflate parameter estimates and lower standard errors (King, 1989; Long, 1997).

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable consists of new data collected by coding reports of specific human rights abuses in *The Economist* and *Newsweek* during the years 1986–2000. Scholars recommend using multiple sources (Mueller, 1997; Swank, 2000), a task rendered feasible by tracking coverage in news weeklies rather than dailies. Both magazines are major Northern media sources, but they differ in important ways. *The Economist's* readers are comparatively wealthy, educated, influential, and internationally orientated.⁴ In 2002, *The Economist's* circulation was 880,000, half of which lived in North America; 20% in continental Europe; 15% in the UK; and 10% in Asia (*The Economist*, 2004). The authors regard *The Economist* as a reasonable indicator of the type of news read by elite Northerners interested in international affairs. *Newsweek's*

⁴ In 2004, readers of *The Economist* had a median personal income of \$154,000; 95% were college educated; 44% were company directors; 62% took three or more international trips per year; and 70% had lived abroad at least once (*The Economist*, 2004).

19.5 million North American readers are far more numerous, but their income and educational levels are substantially lower (*Newsweek*, 2004).⁵ Taken together, the two sources are a useful measure of Northern media coverage.

The Lexis-Nexis search engine was used to locate all articles in *The Economist* and *Newsweek* with the keywords 'human rights', 1986–2000. These were then coded for articles specifically mentioning an abuse in a given country-year to generate a subset that became the dependent variables. Although this underestimates the total number of articles on abuse by omitting accounts of repression without the keywords 'human rights', it provides a consistent estimate of the media's deployment of the rights discourse. Five coders were employed and intercoder reliability was promoted through regular meetings and repeated Cronbach's Alpha tests, which consistently scored 0.80 and higher. Disputes were resolved through consensus during face-to-face meetings. When an article discussed more than one country or abuse, only the first mention of each was coded; although this limited the sample, it boosted intercoder reliability. The final data include 1,027 and 810 articles from *The Economist* and *Newsweek*, respectively.

The authors begin their analysis with the dependent variable *average media coverage*, a measure of the average country-year coverage of both sources. To examine the robustness of findings, additional models are run on each individual publication's coverage.

Explanatory Variables

H1 expected abuses of civil and political rights to be associated with greater media coverage. Following scholarly convention (Poe, Tate & Keith, 1999; Poe, Carey & Vazquez, 2001; Davenport, 2004), the authors use the *political terror scale (PTS)* to estimate a state's

⁵ In 2003, North American *Newsweek* readers had a median personal income of \$41,662; 44% were college graduates; and 6% were 'top management' (*Newsweek*, 2004).

propensity to violate its citizens' personal integrity rights, including freedom from torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial execution. Scholars create these by scoring countries' human rights records as portrayed in annual reports by Amnesty International and the US State Department. This article's base models make use of both scores, ranging from 1 (least repressive) to 5 (most repressive).⁶ Yet, since the Amnesty and State Department measures are highly correlated (0.87), and scholars demonstrate score convergence over time (Poe, Carey & Vazquez, 2001), most models are run with the Amnesty-based scale alone. The second measure of civil and political rights is political authoritarianism, which can exacerbate repression (Goodwin, 2001; Lichbach, 1987; Rummel, 1994; Scott, 1998).⁷ This is estimated with the revised *Polity IV* score, whose rating of democracy and autocracy ranges from -10 (least politically open) to 10 (most politically open) (Marshall et al., 2002; Marshall & Jaggers, 2002). Scholars often associate armed conflict with government repression (Poe, Tate & Keith, 1999). The authors model this with a third measure, the *number of battle-deaths* in a given country-year, taken from Lacina & Gleditsch (2005), Version 1.0. However, these figures do not include indirect war casualties; unfortunately, systematic country-year data for these do not exist (Ghobarah, Huth & Russett, 2003; Leitenberg, 2006). Since H1 expects oppressive human rights conditions to increase media country coverage of abuses, the authors anticipate that higher political terror scale scores, lower Polity IV scores, and higher battle-death numbers will be associated with greater average media coverage.

H2 anticipates that media coverage will increase with larger civil societies, measured here by *number of NGOs* registered to the

Union of International Associations (UIA) in a given country-year.⁸ Many scholars rely on published UIA yearbooks for data on 'ties' to international governmental or nongovernmental organizations (Beckfield, 2003; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004), typically measuring these by international NGOs' reports of members located in individual countries. In this study, by contrast, the authors use yearly figures provided by the UIA; these examine the number of NGO 'main secretariats' registered in a given country, rather than self-reported ties (Union of International Associations, 2004). Unfortunately, this measure combines international and domestic NGOs. Still, it provides a reasonable estimate of a country's formally organized civil society.⁹

H3 expects Northern assistance to be associated with more media coverage. Following Knack (2004) and Neumayer (2003), the authors rely on a broad measure of Northern assistance, *Official Development Assistance (ODA)*,¹⁰ obtained from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators* (World Bank, 2002), as well as a US-specific measure, *US military assistance*, obtained from the US Overseas Loans and Grants database (USAID, 2004).

H4 anticipates that economic development will increase media coverage. This is captured with *Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP per capita)*, obtained from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*.

H5 expects larger militaries and populations to be associated with greater coverage, and *size of military* is estimated from the Correlates of War II Project, *National*

⁶ Data obtained via e-mail from Steven Poe (steven_c_poe@unt.edu) on 14 January 2004.

⁷ The relationship between authoritarianism and repression is likely to be non-linear (Cingranelli & Richards, 1999; Davenport & Armstrong, 2004).

⁸ This measure includes all UIA-registered NGOs, except those categorized as types H, J, and U (Union of International Associations, 2005). Because of the terms of data release, replication data on the *JPR* website do not include the UIA figures. See online appendix for alternate models.

⁹ See Edwards (2004) for a critical discussion of civil society. This measure does not capture traditional civil society groups such as informal clubs and kinship associations.

¹⁰ ODA includes most forms of Northern bilateral and multilateral economic aid, including most US economic assistance.

Military Capabilities 3.0, and *size of population* from US Census International Data Base (IDB) mid-year estimates (US Census Bureau, 2002).

H6 anticipates that NGO advocacy increases media country coverage. To investigate, research assistants coded press releases by Amnesty International, a respected international group (Buchanan, 2002; Cmiel, 1999; Edelman, 2003; Hopgood, 2006; Korey, 1998). Data on Amnesty's advocacy efforts were obtained from the Amnesty *International Cumulative Guide 1962–2000* CD-ROM (Amnesty International, 2001), which lists the titles of annual reports, newsletters, background papers, and press releases. This includes 3,208 Amnesty press releases from 1986 to 2000, or 17% of the organization's overall catalogued output during this time. Press releases are an excellent measure of Amnesty's written advocacy, as they are explicitly aimed at journalists, news editors, and policymakers. They differ from background papers directed at NGOs and specialists, and from newsletters sent to Amnesty members. Each press release was coded by the country it was catalogued under. The number of *Amnesty press releases* is expected to be positively associated with *average media coverage*.

Table I summarizes the variables and their operationalization. Table II offers a summary of descriptive statistics.

Empirical Findings: What Shapes the Media's Human Rights Coverage?

Table III presents an analysis of factors shaping the media's global human rights coverage.¹¹ Model 1 uses the *PTS* based on Amnesty's annual reports, while Model 2 uses the US State Department-based measure. The results are broadly similar, reinforcing assertions of score convergence (Poe, Carey &

Vazquez, 2001).¹² As a robustness check, Models 3 and 4 disaggregate the dependent variable *average media coverage* into its individual *Economist* and *Newsweek* components.

Across models, violations of civil and political rights are significantly and positively associated with media coverage of abuses, providing support for H1. As expected, greater state repression of personal integrity rights (higher *PTS* scores) is associated with increases in media country coverage, and Models 1 through 3 demonstrate that greater levels of democracy (higher Polity IV scores) are associated with less media coverage. Polity IV's effects lose significance in Model 4, however, which uses *Newsweek* reporting as the dependent variable. Unexpectedly, the battle-deaths variable has a negative effect and is not statistically significant in Model 4. This requires further investigation; it may stem from the data's non-inclusion of indirect war casualties. Or, possibly, state repression may increase after war's end, or may even be used in lieu of actual hostilities (Lacina & Gleditsch, 2005). Yet, on the whole, the results clearly suggest that the Northern media's country coverage of abuses in human rights terms is associated with actual violations of civil and political rights.

H2 anticipated a positive and significant relationship between the size of a country's civil society and media human rights reporting. Theoretically, greater numbers of organized citizen groups should provide journalists with more access and information, and their activism should focus greater attention on their country's abuses. The analysis reveals only qualified empirical support for this claim. Size of civil society does achieve statistical significance in Models 1 and 2, whose dependent variable is the average number of human rights articles in *The Economist* and *Newsweek*, and in

¹² Political terror scales are not an Amnesty International product and are only weakly correlated with the Amnesty press release variable (0.30 for Amnesty-based scores, 0.27 for US State Departments scores).

¹¹ See online appendix for alternate specifications.

Table I. Variables and Operationalization

	Operationalization	Source	Hypothesized relation
<i>Dependent variable</i>			
Average media coverage	<i>Economist</i> and <i>Newsweek</i> stories covering human rights abuses, added together and divided by two, by country and year	<i>The Economist</i> and <i>Newsweek</i>	Dependent variable
<i>Economist</i> coverage	<i>Economist</i> stories covering human rights abuses by country and year	<i>The Economist</i>	Dependent variable
<i>Newsweek</i> coverage	<i>Newsweek</i> stories covering human rights abuses by country and year	<i>Newsweek</i>	Dependent variable
<i>Explanatory variables</i>			
Amnesty political terror scale	1–5 scale. 1 least oppressive, 5 most.	Poe's Political Terror Scale	+
US State Department political terror scale	1–5 scale. 1 least oppressive, 5 most.	Poe's Political Terror Scale	+
Polity IV	–10–10 scale. –10 least open and most repressive	Polity IV project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2002	–
Number of battle-deaths	The number of deaths resulting directly from violence inflicted through the use of armed force by a party to an armed conflict during contested combat	Lacina & Gleditsch, Battle Deaths Dataset, Version 1.0	+
UJA number of NGOs	Number of nongovernmental organizations (main secretariats) registered with the Union of International Associations	Union of International Associations	+
ODA	Official Development Assistance, \$US millions logged	World Bank, World Development Indicators	+
US military aid	Total US military assistance including grants and loans, \$US millions logged	USAID, US Overseas Loans and Grants (Online US Greenbook)	+

(continued)

Table I. (continued)

	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Hypothesized relation</i>
GDP per capita	Gross Domestic Product per capita, \$US logged	World Bank, World Development Indicators	+
Size of national military	Military personnel by country, thousands logged	Correlates of War, National Military Capabilities 3.0	+
Population	National population for a given year, total mid-year estimates, millions, logged	US Census, International Database	+
Amnesty press releases	Amnesty International 'press releases' documented for a given country and year, coded by country catalogued under	Amnesty International, <i>Cumulative Guide 1962-2000</i>	+

Table II. Summary Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Average media coverage	0.34	1.19
<i>Economist</i> coverage	0.38	1.12
<i>Newsweek</i> coverage	0.30	1.60
Amnesty political terror scale	2.46	1.21
US State department political terror scale	2.41	1.23
Polity IV	1.39	7.28
Number of battle-deaths	591.35	3,435.02
UIA number of NGOs	123.36	520.09
ODA, \$US millions (log)	3.99	2.27
US military aid, \$US millions (log)	0.47	1.21
GDP per capita, \$US (log)	7.45	1.54
Size of national military, thousands (log)	3.39	1.89
Population, millions (log)	2.07	1.46
Amnesty press releases	1.19	3.22

Model 4, which focuses on articles drawn from only *Newsweek*. It is not significant in Model 3, however, which focuses only on articles drawn from *The Economist*. When this civil society measure is replaced with a measure of international NGO (INGO) ties, the variable is significant only in Model 4 (see online appendix). Civil society is thus important, but its effects are not consistent across models or measures. More research on this count is warranted.

There is no empirical support for H3, which expected foreign assistance to be significantly associated with greater media coverage; neither ODA nor US military assistance was statistically significant. Possibly, the indicators used here do not capture the full extent of Northern ties to recipient nations. Covert US assistance, for example, is rarely included in official statistics but may nonetheless be revealed and made politically significant through investigative reporting.

Economic development is statistically significant and has positive effects across all models, supporting H4. Regardless of specification, lower levels of logged per capita GDP have coverage-reducing effects, despite the variable's positive statistical association (in other studies) with higher risks of civil war, state repression, and violations of social and

economic rights.¹³ This finding has several plausible explanations. First, poorer countries lack information-producing infrastructures such as telecommunications, road systems, and educated populations. All of these generate more knowledge of abuses, and these may stimulate more Northern media attention. Second, the media tend to focus more on events in rich countries, because of their greater international political, economic, and cultural influence (Chang, Lau & Xiaoming, 2000; Chang, 1998; Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Wealth's visibility-boosting effects suggest that better-off countries gain more attention to their abuses, all things being equal.

H5 enjoys partial support; larger populations are associated with more coverage, but not larger militaries.¹⁴ This is likely due to their greater international visibility, power, and prestige, as well as their greater potential for human rights abuse.

Finally, H6 also enjoys empirical support. The association between Amnesty's press advocacy and media coverage was positive and significant across models, supporting general

¹³ This remains true when the USA and the UK were removed from the dataset.

¹⁴ This remains true when models were run with military personnel per capita.

Table III. Factors Influencing the Northern Media's Explicit Human Rights Coverage, 1986–2000: Negative Binomial Population Average Models

	Model 1 <i>Avg. media</i>		Model 2 <i>Avg. media</i>		Model 3 <i>Economist</i>		Model 4 <i>Newsweek</i>	
	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.
Lag term	0.216***	0.050	0.216***	0.048	0.248***	0.038	0.128***	0.040
Amnesty political terror scale	0.405***	0.077	0.486***	0.062	0.407***	0.080	0.386***	0.120
US State Department political terror scale								
Polity IV	-0.021**	0.011	-0.020*	0.011	-0.021*	0.012	-0.022	0.015
Number of battle deaths	-1.470E-05*	8.950E-06	-2.060E-05**	1.040E-05	-2.920E-05**	1.350E-05	-7.290E-07	1.050E-05
UIA number of NGOs	1.269E-04**	5.380E-05	1.326E-04***	4.960E-05	1.002E-04	7.600E-05	1.840E-04*	1.063E-04
ODA, \$US millions (log)	0.052	0.050	0.063	0.050	0.042	0.053	0.098	0.080
US military aid, \$US millions (log)	0.007	0.043	0.022	0.043	0.025	0.045	-0.054	0.071
GDP per capita, \$US (log)	0.275***	0.081	0.354***	0.080	0.252***	0.073	0.317***	0.127
Size of national military, thousands (log)	0.010	0.125	-0.004	0.125	0.041	0.098	-0.030	0.234
Population, millions (log)	0.368***	0.135	0.365***	0.129	0.329***	0.119	0.442**	0.202
Amnesty press releases	0.092***	0.010	0.093***	0.009	0.083***	0.010	0.107***	0.014
Constant	-6.251***	0.755	-7.045***	0.706	-5.802***	0.723	-7.153***	1.119
Prob > χ^2	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
Wald χ^2	886.92		948.66		648.45		1,004.47	

* significant at the 0.10 level; ** at the 0.05 level; *** at the 0.01 level.

arguments about the discursive influence of global activists (Florini, 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Mathews, 1997; Simmons, 1998; Wapner, 1996) and bolstering specific claims about NGOs' media impact (Dale, 1996; Huckins, 1999).

Here, however, a note of caution is in order: statistical association does not prove causality. Although Amnesty's press advocacy may be shaping media coverage, the reverse is also possible, as is a reciprocal relationship. Indeed, the latter makes the most theoretical sense, since, as Hilgartner & Bosk (1988) argue, 'claims-makers' often cluster around high-profile issues, borrowing each other's ideas and information and driving increased rates of public attention through multiple feedback loops (Dalton et al., 1998; Ungar, 1998; Wood & Peake, 1998). Human rights violations will receive more attention when Northern activists and journalists reinforce each other's interests and reporting.

To test the direction of the NGO–media relationship, the authors first regressed average human rights reporting in *The Economist* and *Newsweek* on all explanatory variables, lagged by one year, as well as on the previous year's lagged media reporting. The lagged Amnesty variable remained a significant predictor of media reporting, suggesting that the group's press releases do in fact boost media coverage.

Next, the authors tested for reverse causality by regressing Amnesty press releases on media coverage and all the other lagged independent variables. Surprisingly, lagged media coverage was not statistically significant (unless the lagged Amnesty variable was dropped from the equation). Amnesty press releases were thus reliable predictors of media reporting, but the reverse relationship is not robust. More research on this count is warranted.¹⁵

¹⁵ This finding is somewhat at odds with Ron, Ramos & Rodgers (2005), which examined reciprocal monthly (rather than annual) coverage and did not include other controls. The monthly dataset covered 193 countries, but the annual dataset includes only 145 countries owing to control-related missing data.

Overall, the analysis reveals that the Northern media's human rights coverage during the 1986–2000 period was positively associated with greater repression of personal integrity rights, higher levels of economic development, larger populations, and more Amnesty press releases. In some models, moreover, political openness, battle-deaths, and size of civil society were significant predictors. The effects of foreign aid and size of military, however, consistently failed to achieve statistical significance.

Testing Amnesty's Media Strategy: What Works Best?

Following conventional wisdom, many social movement scholars believe that the most influential activists are those capable of packaging their concerns in ways that appeal to the media (Andsager, 2000; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Ryan, Carragee & Meinhofer, 2001). For these researchers, the most successful activists are savvy communicators who benefit from media attention and credibility by inserting their messages into dominant 'master frames' (Benford & Snow, 2000). The regression findings presented in Table III can be interpreted as the Northern media's human rights 'master frame', prioritizing coverage of countries with higher levels of repression, economic development, and population size.

Many NGOs are media-savvy (Dale, 1996; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Bob, 2005), and Amnesty is no exception (Hopgood, 2006). As the organization's 2004 strategic plan argues, 'communicating our message effectively' is an 'overarching priority', and Amnesty staffers are urged to make vigorous use of 'television, the Internet and other media' (Amnesty International, 2004: 16). In this section of the article, the authors ask the following questions: When Amnesty focuses more press releases on countries located within the human rights media frame, do they have greater impact? Does their media-savvy strategy pay off?

To investigate, the authors created interaction terms between Amnesty press releases and three other variables of interest: PTS, logged GDP per capita, and logged population; each was statistically significant across previous models. The five-point PTS measure was disaggregated into five separate dummy variables, and each was interacted with Amnesty press releases. Two simple cross-product interactions were created between press releases and logged GDP per capita as well as logged population. The results are surprising: when Amnesty focuses on countries located within the media's master frame, they do *not* have a greater impact on the media's coverage.

Model 1 of Table IV investigates what happens when Amnesty focuses on the world's most repressive countries, including four interaction terms between Amnesty press releases and dummies for countries with PTS scores of 2, 3, 4, and 5 (countries that scored 1 are the reference category). For the most part, Model 1's findings are similar to those discussed above in Table III. On their own, all PTS dummies are significant, as are Amnesty press releases, political openness, size of civil society, wealth, and population. The only significant PTS–Amnesty interactions, however, are for countries with PTS scores of 2 and 3, that is, those at the intermediate-to-low end of the repression scale. Interactions with the most repressive countries (PTS scores of 4 and 5) are not significant. The interaction with countries ranked 4, moreover, has less media impact than the interaction with countries ranked 1. In other words, there is no statistically discernable evidence that Amnesty's press releases have greater media impact when focusing on countries with the worst human rights records.

Model 2 examines the interaction between Amnesty's press advocacy and logged GDP per capita. Again, the lower-order variables are similar to the findings originally reported in Table III. Yet, the interaction term is also not statistically significant; Amnesty gains no

statistically apparent payoff from focusing on abuses in wealthier countries.

Model 3 examines the interaction between Amnesty press releases and logged population size, and here the results are particularly noteworthy. The lower-order variables perform the same as in Table III, but the interaction term is significant and negative. When Amnesty focuses on abuses in countries with larger populations, it is *less* able to shape the media's agenda. Table IV's results thus suggest that a media-savvy strategy does not pay off, confounding the expectations of many scholars (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Ryan, Carragee & Meinhofer, 2001), as well as Amnesty's own communications strategists.

Problems of saturation and 'bandwagoning' may explain this finding. Reporters, government officials, NGOs, and other claim-makers cluster around events in newsworthy countries, transforming public and media interest into a scarce but valuable commodity (Wood & Peake, 1998). The potential gain from publishing a newsworthy press release is huge, but competition for exposure is also heavy. As one group of experts noted, 'it is far more difficult for human rights organizations to find a distinctive media voice – and still harder to win coverage in an increasingly competitive market' (International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002: 45). Groups such as Amnesty are drawn to high-profile countries, but so are many others. Cumulatively, this reinforces a country's centrality, but it also undermines the ability of individual voices to be heard. As one Amnesty activist commented, the famous Amnesty candle symbol 'doesn't show up where the spotlight already is' (cited in Hopgood, 2006: 76). Away from the media's central zone of interest, however, Amnesty's contribution may have more impact. With fewer reputable figures available for comment, journalists may be more likely to seek out, and be influenced by, Amnesty's human rights country experts (Zuckerman, 2004).

Table IV. Amnesty's Interaction with the Northern Media's Human Rights Frame, 1986–2000: Negative Binomial Population Average Models

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.	Coefficient	Semi-robust S.E.
Lag term	0.207***	0.049	0.212***	0.050	0.243***	0.042
Amnesty political terror scale			0.393***	0.077	0.334***	0.075
Polity IV	-0.023**	0.010	-0.021**	0.011	-0.024***	0.010
Number of battle deaths	-1.020E-05	9.430E-06	-1.480E-05*	8.610E-06	-7.990E-06	8.560E-06
UIA number of NGOs	1.943E-04***	4.400E-05	1.436E-04**	6.000E-05	1.301E-04***	4.650E-05
ODA, \$US millions (log)	0.072	0.048	0.059	0.050	0.064	0.045
US military aid, \$US millions (log)	0.016	0.043	0.014	0.046	-0.014	0.040
GDP per capita, \$US (log)	0.324***	0.075	0.305***	0.077	0.281***	0.071
Size of national military, thousands (log)	-0.029	0.121	0.011	0.122	0.002	0.105
Population, millions (log)	0.400***	0.129	0.367***	0.135	0.501***	0.123
Amnesty press releases	0.066***	0.015	0.158***	0.043	0.225***	0.030
Reference category AI PTS 1						
AI PTS 2	0.578**	0.237				
AI PTS 3	0.929***	0.299				
AI PTS 4	1.577***	0.324				
AI PTS 5	1.908***	0.308				
Reference category AI PTS 1						
Interaction AI PTS 2 * AIPR	0.124***	0.031				
Interaction AI PTS 3 * AIPR	0.118***	0.034				
Interaction AI PTS 4 * AIPR	-0.009	0.018				
Interaction AI PTS 5 * AIPR	0.021	0.020				
Interaction GDP per capita * AIPR			-0.008	0.005		
Interaction Population * AIPR			-6.493***	0.726	-0.034***	0.006
Constant						
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000				
Wald χ^2	1,460.59	877.88				0.000
						1,169.34

* significant at the 0.10 level; ** at the 0.05 level; *** at the 0.01 level.

Cases at the extreme margins of the human rights master frame, however, may also be challenging, and advocacy on highly 'peripheral' countries is likely to fail. As one senior Amnesty manager argued, 'You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn't give a rat's ass.'¹⁶ Yet many countries lie between these extremes of media interest, and it is here that Amnesty's impact may be most keenly felt.

Conclusion

This article analyzes Northern news media coverage of human rights abuses in 145 countries from 1986 to 2000. Country reporting was shaped by violations of personal integrity rights, levels of economic development, population size, and Amnesty International press releases. Some statistical models also found that political openness, number of battle-deaths, and size of civil society were also significant factors. And while Amnesty's press releases do help drive the media agenda, they do not gain greater impact when dealing with abuses in countries of central media concern.

The article's findings are thus mixed. The real world of abuse matters, as does the work of international human rights activists, suggesting that the Northern media could, potentially, be a useful ally in international human rights promotion. Yet other factors also matter, reinforcing claims of a divide between real-world conditions and claims-making about those conditions (Best, 2002, 1993; Blumer, 1971; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Schneider, 1985; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977).

The negative impact of poverty is particularly troubling. Although it is hard to know with certainty, it is likely that other poverty-related factors, including geopolitical insignificance, poor communications facilities, and degraded transportation networks, conspire to keep poor country violations off the Northern media's agenda. This may be compounded by the effects

of civil society size; socially disorganized countries may share poor countries' marginalization from international communications flows. Moreover, the Northern human rights agenda focuses more heavily on civil and political rights than abuses of social and economic rights (Pogge, 2002; Sen, 2000). This is especially true for the Northern media, who often conflate the term 'human rights' with wars, violence, and repression (International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002).

The marginalization of poor victims is hardly news. As Farmer (2003: 25) notes, 'You don't have to be a doctor to know that the degree of injury, of suffering, is unrelated to the volume of complaint.' Economists, sociologists, and political scientists repeatedly find that poor countries are less able to benefit from global public goods. Despite its emancipatory potential, the global human rights discourse appears to be similarly challenged.

However, the analysis presented in this article also highlights possible remedies. Most notably, the press work of Amnesty International makes a difference, suggesting that global advocacy NGOs can shape the agenda. And since Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations have recently developed a greater interest in economic and social rights (Robinson, 2003), they may soon shift media interest towards poverty-related abuses. Yet, the findings also warn that NGOs should think carefully about flocking to media hotspots, since their voice appears to get lost in the multitude. Instead, their influence may be greatest on countries at intermediate levels of media concern. NGOs should not abandon their work on high-profile countries, however, since public engagement with the pressing issues of the day advances their credibility and visibility (Rodgers, 2006). If NGOs were to focus solely on the most obscure countries, journalists, government elites, and grass-roots supporters might lose interest. Instead, NGOs might do best to consciously split their advocacy between central and more peripheral countries.

¹⁶ Discussion with senior Amnesty manager, London, 2 July 2004.

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