

# **UNDERSTANDING** Foreign Correspondence

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A Euro-American Perspective of Concepts,  
Methodologies, and Theories



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# Preface

Foreign correspondents “swoop into our imaginations with flash and gravitas,” writes John Maxwell Hamilton in the introduction to his superb 2009 history of America’s globetrotting reporters; “Here, in white tie, they dine with European royalty, trading *bon mots* and information. There, with sinister native guides, they slip through battle lines to find and interview rebel leaders.” Fifty years hence, the next historians of the craft will no doubt have a less romantic and James Bond-like description of the new generations of foreign correspondents, no doubt be adorned with diminished sartorial splendor, and be the products of the rapid changes in the concept of foreign correspondence, technologies that feed into it, audiences and their needs, and societal and professional cultures. The gravitas, however, should not be lost given the centrality of foreign correspondence to the global economy, politics, and the general and specific relations among nations and peoples. The future of the traditional foreign correspondent is often described as glum but as *métier* it is not facing extinction. New varieties of foreign correspondents are already making their presence felt: The foreign correspondent, the local reporter sent abroad or using the Internet to collect foreign information of local interest, and the do-it-yourself correspondent making use of the Web disseminate information and views to anyone interested in accessing them. They are only some of the new reporters who are altering the traditional elite practice of foreign reporting. Who accesses the information disseminated by these new types of foreign correspondents, what the quality of their reports may be, what their effects might be, and how the reporters’ information sources are adjusting to the faster, more complex and demanding pace of foreign correspondence is something that remains to be studied.

This collection of chapters should serve as the jump-off point for these studies, particularly those concerned with European media coverage of the United States, because they provide the historical contexts for anyone interested in knowing more about the topic of foreign correspondence and correspondents, both in the more traditional mode. It focuses on varied academic sources dealing with the nature of the work these reporters carry out, their effects and importance, and the theories that have arisen pertaining to their work. Foreign correspondence is a calling with a long recorded history, analyzed from different perspectives and considered by media scholars, political

scientists and other in their respective works, many of them outlined in this book. Modern-era European media coverage of the United States, and vice versa, has the longest and most extensive history when compared to coverage of other continents by either European or American foreign correspondents.

In the last quarter of a century, changes in technology, media economics, geopolitics and rapid globalization have altered the working conditions and institutional frameworks of the foreign correspondence, and the exigencies of their profession. It was not long ago that reporting from areas out of direct reach of the Western world depended entirely on the postal service or access to a telephone landline. Clipped sentences based on sketchy notes were dictated to an editorial secretariat, and still photography and video images on tapes were faxed and mailed to their desired destinations.

Today, technology provides instant, live, multimedia access from anywhere in the world and the individual in Germany and the United States, no more so than the one in Ghana or Colombia, has come to expect a real-time front-seat view to worldwide events and information, just as if they were sitting in a lawn chair following the happenings in the backyard of their next-door neighbor. The interested public is also turning to new sources of international information, in many cases relying on photos, video materials and reports by amateurs, military personnel right out of action, and others present (or not) at an event, and the thousands of blogs and websites that allow for the disseminate of such often unedited fare. The cell phone has added yet another dimension to such reports, with its ability to have an individual send mini-notes describing observations, feelings, and fates witnessed, as well as photographs shot at the scene of events and incidents. Foreign correspondence can no longer ignore this new universe of international information that provides unprecedented and ill-understood competition. Any new analyses of the work of the foreign correspondents, begins with an understanding of their past work so that we may understand where there is continuity or discontinuity, and how and what a comparison of past, present and future may explain the success or failure of the functions that foreign correspondence has in the world.

The seed of our project was planted at a conference on European correspondents covering the United States that was held at the University of Oklahoma in Norman (followed by another conference that focused on Middle Eastern correspondents covering the United States). In subsequent years, the discussions about available sources, theories and methodologies related to foreign correspondence and its practitioners continued, culminating as it

were in the decision to document these to provide some cohesive guidance to present and future scholars engaged in the subject. The invitees to the University of Oklahoma conference included European correspondents and scholars of the subject from Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Turkey. We regret the absence of Eastern European correspondents and scholars, because the intellectual origins of the project are tied to the end of the Cold War when many of the institutionalized aspects of national politics, geopolitics, economics, cultures, and information gathering and dissemination were altered. Journalism in and from the countries liberated from the yoke of Communism had to be transformed in view of the need to understand new forms of democratic rule and the new nature of the European political, economic and cultural landscape. It was a new challenge for foreign correspondents reporting on the “new” and “old” Europe and, in fact, it was so for all foreign correspondents covering the almost 200 nations states in the world now freed of the bipolar U.S.-Soviet worlds.

The post-Communist world was more than just a new challenge for foreign correspondence and its practitioners, it was also the source of a new kind of foreign correspondence in the much revered and venerable prototype developed by Ryszard Kapuscinski, for example, created during the years of severe media censorship under Communist rule. His reports from Africa and South America described daily political and social life with a fresh and detailed acuteness that had no equal in the journalism from that continent practiced by Western foreign correspondents. It was a special approach to observing and, therefore, to describing seemingly “exotic” environments, one that was built on trust and empathy and created a different world of understanding by comparison to the event-driven classic foreign correspondence that most of us have grown up with in the Western world. This may indeed be the prescription for 21<sup>st</sup>-century foreign correspondence in a co-dependent world.

It also bears reminding the readers that technological innovations in the wake of the Cold War, even from very small countries like Estonia, changed the swiftness of international communication immensely. Thanks to Skype, for instance, the contemporary foreign correspondents can expect a direct call from his or her readers and viewers, because global calls cost next to nothing. Distances and even technological impediments have evaporated.

Our strong interest in the two formative elements of understanding foreign correspondence, i.e., the production of news and information, and the

theoretical aspects of understanding foreign environments and their cultures that constitutes the core of this book, has evolved out of the overall evaluation of transatlantic research carried out to date on this topic. There is a clear and most often direct relationship between the praxis and theory of foreign correspondence, as the coverage of the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine demonstrates. After the attention-getting events at Kiev's Majdan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), a number of Western correspondents came together to reflect on the reporting during those tumultuous days and concluded that the impression their reports had created were responsible for the conviction in the West that the Ukrainians were almost completely united behind the "orange" leader of the opposition. Not having observed events throughout the rest of the country and, perhaps, not distancing themselves emotionally from the enthusiasm of the crowds in Independence Square, they under-reported the massive support for the incumbent and failed to report on the larger state of Ukraine's political culture. Knowing more beforehand about basic emotional aspects of foreign reporting, i.e., theoretical insight might have saved practice from pitfalls of this kind.

Another aspect of foreign correspondence that shows the merging of theoretical insight and the production practices in which foreign correspondents engage is again demonstrated in the work of Kapuscinski. In his last years, he was often referred to as "the world reporter." At a conference in Scandinavia, Kapuscinski's insights on the new dimensions of a now multipolar world, on the increased self-confidence among people in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the fact that Europe and the United States are no longer the only points of reference, were officially cited on high-ranking diplomatic level as proof for the necessity of a multilateral change of perspectives in world diplomacy.

The marriage of theory and practice in academic research on foreign correspondents has become a necessity. It is in this spirit and with this objective that our volume is offered to readers. We believe that in this shrinking world of ours, there is no more important topic in journalism and intercultural communication that should hold the attention of scholars than foreign correspondence and the people who practice it.

We ordered the chapters of this book to provide what we considered to be a logical continuum for both the novice and experienced researcher seeking to understand foreign correspondence and their practitioners in the largest possible context. Thus, Chapter 1 endeavors to provide an inventory of the available sources on the subject and categorizes them. Chapter 2 is an

overview of the theoretical perspectives employed in the study of foreign correspondence and the research methodologies employed. The political economy of foreign correspondence is considered in Chapter 3 and the research practices, methods and text in the ethnography of foreign correspondents is analyzed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 takes a concerted look at gate keeping, agenda setting, and framing in international news and mythmaking in foreign correspondence is considered in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 explores how and when foreign correspondents are mediators and translators between cultures. The professional values, ethics and norms held (and put into practice) by foreign correspondents are examined in Chapter 8. Finally, with Chapter 9, this collection ends with a topic that does not yet offer a rich collection of data upon which to base conclusions, but is most certainly intrinsic to the present and future of foreign correspondence: the impact of the Internet on the work routines of foreign correspondents.

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