

Giovanna DELL'ORTO

*American Journalism and International Relations: Foreign
Correspondence from the Early Republic to the Digital Era*

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Combining historical research with extensive discourse analysis, Dell'Orto sets out to track the evolution of print foreign correspondence in the United States. Analyzing U.S. news coverage of crucial events abroad from 1848 to 2008 and its effects on U.S. citizens and policymakers allows the author to conclude that the press is an irreplaceable mediator of meaning – and identities – in international affairs. While audiences nowadays might have a wealth of information at their disposal, if only they cared to look for it, Dell'Orto argues that knowledgeable, credible, and socially-responsible professional journalists are “best positioned to serve as mediators between an easily distracted public and a vast mass of realities out there in the world that it is imperative to make sense of” (p. 22). As such, the author argues, the current trend of declining foreign news coverage is an alarming one. It is bound to impede Americans' understanding of foreign nations and realities abroad and to have catastrophic consequences for foreign policy.

The book is well organized, with the first chapter laying out the theoretical underpinnings and the rationale for the study, the subsequent four chapters documenting foreign news reporting trends across four eras, the sixth chapter contemplating the future of foreign correspondence based on those patterns, and the conclusion chapter reaffirming the importance of a press not disengaged from world affairs.

A former Associated Press foreign correspondent herself, Dell'Orto weaves anecdotes from her professional experience, interviews with editors, and discourse analysis to tell the story of print foreign correspondence in the United States. Unlike many similar studies of foreign news reporting, Dell'Orto avoided correspondence about wars in which the United States was involved. In that case, she argues, war correspondence becomes essentially domestic news coverage. Instead, the researcher focused her analysis on twenty consequential global events that span four different eras: the nineteenth century, which saw the establishment of the first foreign bureaus in 1938; the World Wars era; the Cold War era; and the post-Cold War era.

Dell'Orto complements her discourse analysis with examinations of journalism's professional and institutional practices during the eras under scrutiny, with glimpses into news consumption and political engagement patterns among audiences over time, as well as with an overview of major developments in U.S. foreign policy. This constructivist approach allows the researcher to make causal inferences about the impact of the American press portrayals and translations of the world on certain political decisions and actions.

For instance, in her analysis of the foreign correspondence in the nineteenth century, Dell'Orto finds that foreign news reports were not truly foreign. As the United States was emerging as a global leader, correspondents were self-centered and exhibited a “cool assurance” (p. 65) when covering far and exotic nations. Their reportage focused more on self-definition and on American exceptionalism, which led to the country's isolationism at the time.

The professionalization of journalism, the development of radio and of the Associated Press, the strengthening of the marketplace of ideas, the increased public appetite for foreign news, and the United States' elevated status of global superpower led to the golden age of foreign correspondence in the first half of the twentieth century. Correspondents evolved from being partisans and advocates to being historians and reporters. While their coverage still reflected the nation's democratic and corporate ideals, it also reached a scale and depth not encountered before. Paralleling those patterns, American policy became more involved on the global stage – “imperial” even (p. 74), as the country became more comfortable in its role of leader of the free world.

While emerging as true watchdogs that assertively shone their light on every corner of the world, U.S. correspondents continued to construct the world through a distorted lens during the Cold War era. Dell'Orto argues correspondents focused heavily on the Soviet threat to the detriment of significant realities on the ground, such as the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East. Dell'Orto details several similar examples where the democracy versus communism frame crippled correspondents' perspectives on other parts of the world that did not fit that parameter. This led to a turbulent beginning of the twenty-first century, marked by the so-called war on terror and the social-media revolution. Drastic cuts in foreign bureaus, polarization of media, human-interest and episodic framing of atrocities committed around the globe, homogenization of foreign correspondence, and emphasis on speed at the expense of accuracy made credible constructions of an ever more complicated world difficult. At a time when the world was more interconnected than ever, public trust and news consumption of foreign news was at an all-time low. The impoverished correspondence led to self-doubting trends in foreign policy. So where does that take us?

To examine the future of foreign correspondence, the industry's vision for dealing with a world that seems entirely too complex to handle, and the concern about foreign correspondence being an endangered species, Dell'Orto turns to foreign and international editors at elite newspapers in the country. The conclusion stemming from their input and the author's historical research is that foreign correspondence still needs standards. It needs professionals with skills, time, and experience to make sense of the world and inform foreign policy.

Students of journalism and political science, historians, journalists, decision makers, and the general public alike will find this well-documented analysis and its normative prescriptions compelling.

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