

The agenda-setting process in international news



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ABSTRACT: A framework for applying agenda-setting theory in an international news context is proposed. First-level agenda-setting would suggest that the more news coverage a nation receives, the more that nation will be viewed as being critically important to readers. Second-level agenda-setting meanwhile would suggest that the nature of the coverage, both attributes linked to a country and the tone of the coverage, would impact whether readers view the nation positively or negatively. The framework is employed through a content analysis of international news coverage in two Slovakian newspapers. The analysis shows the usefulness of the approach.

KEYWORDS: international news, agenda-setting, framing



INTRODUCTION

Agenda-setting research has undergone many refinements in the 40 years since McCombs and Shaw first examined the influence of the news media on the perceived importance of issues held by the public during the 1968 U.S. presidential election (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Perhaps the most significant advancement has been recent research that has examined agendas involving objects in the news other than issues. For example, Carroll and McCombs (2003) have proposed utilizing an agenda-setting framework to examine corporate reputation – businesses as the objects of the analysis. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004), meanwhile, explored whether countries receiving extensive news coverage were more likely to be viewed as “vitaly important” to the United States – nations as the objects of the analysis.

Thus, current research has begun examining other types of agendas. Indeed, there are many agendas in the news.

Beside objects, researchers have also recently investigated “attributes” in the news. This second-level of agenda-setting, closely related to news framing research, is concerned with how objects are portrayed in the news media and whether this coverage can influence public perceptions. In other words, researchers investigate

whether individuals link attributes to objects in the news based on coverage patterns in the news media.

In line with this new research, the current study explains the methodological process involved in examining the agenda-setting process in international news. It also will provide a case study that demonstrates the usefulness of this approach. The case study is a content analysis of international news coverage in the Slovak press.

The data utilized in the study involve news coverage in two newspapers in Slovakia. The amount of coverage devoted to foreign nations and the attributes linked to those nations were examined through 403 paragraphs from news stories during a constructed week in September 2007 in these two newspapers.

The agenda-setting impact of the news media has long been an important theoretical area for mass communication researchers, but this process is especially crucial in the area of international news. For many people, the mass media are their only source of information for learning about foreign lands. Thus, both the amount of coverage and the types of coverage foreign nations receive are extremely important for news consumers.

In addition, while agenda-setting has been widely investigated in the U.S. and a few other countries – notably, Germany (for example, Brosius & Keppinger, 1990), Japan (Takeshita & Mikami, 1995) and Spain (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000) – relatively few agenda-setting studies have been conducted in the former Communist countries in Europe. Thus, a study of Slovakia would be a key contribution to our knowledge base.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

First-level agenda-setting

McCombs and Shaw (1972) first tested the hypothesis that the news media have a significant influence on the perceived importance of issues held by the public. Combining a content analysis of the news media with survey responses from the public, McCombs and Shaw found support for the notion – proposed earlier by Cohen (1963) – that the news media may not be successful at influencing what the public thinks but are “stunningly successful” in influencing what the public thinks about.

Since the seminal study conducted during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, hundreds of subsequent studies have found broad support for agenda-setting. These studies generally found that individuals learn the relative importance of issues based on how much coverage these issues receive in the news media.

A similar relationship was found by Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) in their analysis of the coverage of foreign nations. Generally, the more news coverage a nation received, the more survey respondents felt the country was “of vital importance” to the United States. In other words, public perceptions of nations followed the inter-

national news agenda covered by the media. Thus, Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) found support for a first-level agenda-setting effect involving an agenda of nations rather than the traditional agenda of issues.

Broadly, first-level agenda-setting involves the transference of salience. Traditionally, this salience involved issues. Thus, news coverage of issues transmitted salience cue to the public. However, the findings of Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) showed that the transference of salience could be applied to foreign countries as well. Thus, news coverage transmitted salience cues about countries to news consumers. The salience of countries increased as media coverage of the countries increased.

Second-level agenda-setting

The vast majority of the agenda-setting studies traditionally have employed a similar methodological strategy – with the focus of the analysis centered on issues. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas (2000) examined a “second-level” of agenda-setting, one that focused on attributes. Their examination of second-level agenda-setting during the 1996 Spanish general election ushered in a new research framework.

Ghanem (1997), in her description of the theoretical underpinnings behind second-level agenda-setting, categorized several different types of attributes. Two types will be examined here: cognitive attributes, or sub-issues, and affective attributes, or the tone of the coverage.

Cognitive attributes involve factual pieces of information that are linked to an object in the news. For example, Golan and Wanta (2001) found several cognitive attributes that were linked to candidates in the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary. Survey respondents linked attributes such as “best chance to win” and “will cut taxes” to George Bush and John McCain in a similar proportion as media coverage of the same attributes. Their findings suggest a stronger agenda-setting effect for cognitive attributes than for affective attributes.

McCombs *et al.* (2000), in their initial study of second-level agenda-setting, referred to “substantive” attributes. They too found strong support for second-level agenda-setting in their analysis of election coverage in Spain.

Research investigating attribute agenda-setting does not need to be limited to political candidates, however. Clearly, the news media also link attributes to other objects in the news, including foreign nations.

Coverage of the United States in the Slovakian news media could provide an example of the importance of second-level agenda-setting in international news. Relatively few people in Slovakia have traveled to the United States, so they do not have first-hand knowledge of the country. For most Slovak citizens, their only knowledge of the United States is what they have seen in the media. The attributes linked to the U.S. in Slovak news coverage, therefore, could have a powerful impact

on how individuals in Slovakia view the U.S. If Slovak news consumers only see negative attributes linked to the U.S. through negative news coverage, they will mentally link negative attributes to the U.S. and subsequently view the U.S. in a negative light.

Indeed, research has found support for this type of mental processing. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004), for example, found strong support for both first-level and second-level agenda-setting in international news in the U.S. On the first-level, as mentioned above, the more coverage a nation received, the more likely survey respondents were to think the country was of vital importance to the U.S. On the second-level, the more negative coverage a nation received, the more likely survey respondents were to think negatively about the country. Therefore, affective – negative – attributes influenced individuals' perceptions about foreign nations.

While Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) were able to test second-level agenda-setting by examining affective attributes (positive, neutral, negative coverage impacting the public's positive, neutral, negative attitudes), their data set did not allow for an analysis of cognitive attributes. Thus, the present study will examine both cognitive and affective attributes linked to foreign nations in media coverage in two Slovak newspapers, an extension of this previous study.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Research examining the flow of international news has a long tradition in the field of mass communication. Larson and Hardy (1977), for example, found that more than 30 percent of network news content in the U.S. dealt with international news. However, not all countries are deemed newsworthy by a nation's press.

Chang (1998) noted that because of economic pressures, powerful industrialized nations form a core that receives significantly more news attention than countries in the periphery. Research has consistently supported this World Systems Theory approach. Findings from Larson (1982), for example, bear this out. In his study, 23.8 percent of international news in U.S. media came from Western Europe. The Middle East (at 22.7 percent) and Asia (21.8 percent) followed closely, with Latin America (8.6 percent) and Africa (5.6 percent) far behind.

World Systems Theory also was applied as the theoretical framework in a study examining news coverage of international elections in the U.S. media. Golan and Wanta (2004) found that of the 138 elections held worldwide between January 1, 1998, and May 1, 2000, only eight received coverage on all four newscasts that they examined. Their findings suggest that industrialized nations do form a core that generally receives extensive news coverage, but that the remaining countries form a two-tiered periphery: A semi-periphery that includes countries with close cultural ties to the U.S., and an outer periphery. Nations in the outer periphery receive

coverage only if there are certain circumstances that make the country newsworthy – oil production or nuclear arms capabilities, for example.

Based on World Systems Theory, a similar pattern could be expected in the Slovak news media. Economic pressures in this Central European country could mean that the news media will concentrate coverage on industrialized nations, especially those in the region, leaving other countries on the periphery and off the news agenda.

Researchers have found several other determinants of international news coverage, such as gross national product (Dupree, 1971), language (Kariel & Rosenvall, 1984), geographic proximity (Wu, 2000) and population (Kim & Barnett, 1996). Adding to the complexity of research in this area, however, is that variables affecting the status of one country do not uniformly impact coverage in other countries, as Wu (2000) discovered.

Bennett (1990) argues that international news coverage often is consistent with the foreign policy of a nation. Thus, U.S. media cover allies more positively than countries viewed as enemies. Again, these findings could be replicated in the Slovak press. Countries with close political ties to Slovakia could be covered more positively than countries with no political ties. Moreover, countries that have been political foes historically – Germany and Russia, for instance – could be covered more negatively than other countries.

Several researchers have studied the implications of the disparate news coverage patterns on public attitudes. Salwen and Matera (1992), for instance, found an agenda-setting impact of international news. Wanta and Hu (1993) examined different news frames and agenda-setting. Their findings suggest stories had a stronger agenda-setting effect if they involved international conflicts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the previous research outlined above, three research questions are posed:

1. Which countries receive the most coverage in the Slovak news media? Based on World Systems Theory, the Slovak news media may devote the most coverage to industrialized nations, especially those in Europe.

2. Which cognitive attributes do the Slovak news media link to foreign nations in the news? Again based on World Systems Theory, in which economic ties are central determinants of news coverage, the Slovak news media may mainly link economic attributes to other countries.

3. Which affective attributes do the Slovak news media link to foreign nations in the news? Because Slovakia has had an extensive history of conflict with neighboring countries such as Germany and Russia, the Slovak news media may mainly link negative attributes to these countries.

BACKGROUND

Slovakia is an ideal country to examine for several reasons. It has a long history of being ruled by neighboring countries, and thus has had unusual relationships with many nations in the region. It also currently has emphasized press freedom. In 2007, it ranked 33rd in press freedom by Freedom House (2007), one ranking below the United Kingdom. This is in contrast to such countries as the United States (ranked 16th), Australia (39th), Greece (54th) and South Korea (66th). North Korea (195th) ranked last. Table 1 lists the 50 countries with the greatest press freedom according to Freedom House (2007).

Table 1. Top 50 countries in Press Freedom, as ranked by Freedom House (2007)

Rank	Country
1	Finland, Iceland
3	Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden
7	Luxembourg, Switzerland
9	Andorra, Netherlands, New Zealand
12	Liechtenstein, Palau, Portugal
15	Jamaica
16	Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Monaco, Saint Lucia, United States
22	Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Marshall Islands, Malta, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, San Marino
29	Czech Republic, Lithuania
31	Latvia, United Kingdom
33	Costa Rica, Dominica, Micronesia, Saint Kitts & Nevis, Slovakia , Taiwan
39	Australia, Austria, Belize, France, Hungary, Japan, Slovenia
46	Cyprus, Poland, Spain, Suriname
50	Grenada

Source: authors' elaboration.

Slovakia has a population of 5,398,629 as of September 2007. This ranks 109th out of the 222 countries that report population figures (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2008).

SLOVAK HISTORY

After the Slavs were invaded by the Magyars, approximately 1000 years ago, Slovakia strove to be recognized as a sovereign state. There were Magyars, who occupied Slovak territory for more than a millennium, Nazi Germany during World War II and the Soviet Union as well.

The relationship between Slovakia and Hungary was especially cold for many decades, and there are still some open questions connected with the past. During the Hungarian occupation, Slovaks had to adopt the Hungarian culture and language. Many Slovak children were taken from their families and brought up as Hungarians. Because of Magyarization in the 19th century, thousands of Slovaks left their homes with a hope to build a new life in America. It took a great deal of effort from many intellectuals who fought for retention of the Slovak language and sovereignty to bring this to successful end. A similar situation occurred in the Czech Republic, which was under Austrian rule.

At the same time as this Slovak revolution, World War I started. During this period of time, Slovaks cooperated with Czechs and announced an independent state in 1918. The first Czechoslovakian state was recognized by the U.S., the U.K. and France. Even then, however, there were many voices calling for Slovak autonomy. They argued that it was a very unequal partnership. Slovakia was less developed than the Czech region and did not have an equal representation in the government, and the Slovak people were less educated. These disparities did not matter, however. Britain and France signed the Munich Agreement, which handed over the north-western area to Nazi Germany. Slovakia was forced to yield 10,420 square kilometers of its land, 779 villages and 859,000 inhabitants (including 276,280 ethnic Slovaks) to Hungary. Czechoslovakia lost approximately one third of its territory. Slovak governor Jozef Tiso got an ultimatum from Adolf Hitler to form an independent Slovak State. In March 1944 the Nazi Puppet State – Slovakia – made an agreement with the Soviet Union to help fight against Germany.

The time after World War II can be characterized as a strict Communist control, which was interrupted only for a short period in the so-called Prague Spring of 1968. Slovak politician Alexander Dubček became Secretary of the Communist Party and asked for political, economic and social reform. Socialism with a human face ended because of the occupation of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, by Soviet troops. During the following year, political and economic life stagnated. All other political parties were prohibited, holy institutes were closed and many priests, nuns or even regular citizens accused of collaborating with western countries were arrested or sent to labor camps. The Soviet Union took over control of the factories and private businesses.

Finally in 1989, massive protests known as the Velvet Revolution led to the downfall of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was renamed to the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in 1990. Former dissident Václav Havel became president of Czechoslovakia. But history repeated itself, and Slovaks felt that their position was playing second fiddle to the Czechs. There were big differences between both economies. Finally, the Czechoslovak Federation split peacefully between the two countries in 1992, even though polls taken at that time showed that majority of people were against the break up. Both countries attained recognition from the United States and European neighbors straight away. After numerous political and economic

reforms, Slovakia entered the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

In addition to Hungary, Germany, Russia and the Czech Republic, there have been many complications with Poland as well, even though both countries cooperate very well nowadays. In 1918 Poland tried to occupy the northern part of Slovakia and did for a certain period of time. Reciprocal relationships became better after reinstating the former Slovak–Polish border.

METHOD

To demonstrate the methodological approach of agenda-setting in international news, this study examined news coverage of foreign nations in two Slovak newspapers. All international news stories printed in a constructed week in September 2007 were included in the analysis. The specific dates of the constructed week were randomly determined. The papers included in the analysis are:

Pravda, Slovak for “truth.” It is historically one of the most widely read and highly respected daily newspapers in Slovakia. It was established in 1945 and is considered neutral politically. It had a circulation of 70,519 as of September 2007.

SME, roughly translated as “we are.” It is also generally regarded as one of the most influential papers in Slovakia. Its circulation was 69,870 in September 2007.

Coding

Three variables were the main focus of coders. The variables involved the countries mentioned in the news stories and the cognitive and affective attributes linked to the countries.

First, each country mentioned in a paragraph was coded. For the purpose of this study, we also included al-Qaida as a “country.” Though we understand the political controversies surrounding this group, we felt that al-Qaida was important enough to warrant examination as a separate entity. A total of 77 countries received at least one mention in the time period of the study.

Next, the cognitive attributes in the news stories were coded. The cognitive attributes here were coded as issues linked to the countries. For example, a paragraph reporting on a trade agreement between Slovakia and Poland was coded as having an economic attribute. A paragraph reporting about a terrorist bombing in Somalia was coded as having an international conflict attribute. Cognitive attributes were grouped into five categories: social issues, economic issues, international issues, political issues and miscellaneous.

Finally, the affective attributes linked to the countries were coded. The affective attributes were coded as being positive, neutral or negative. For example, a paragraph discussing a new trade agreement with Poland was coded as positive, because Poland would be viewed in a positive light by readers. A paragraph mentioning an

attack in Somalia was coded as negative, because in this case Somalia would be viewed in a negative light by readers. A paragraph mentioning an election in France was coded as neutral, because France would not be viewed negatively or positively by readers in this case.

The data were then aggregated so that the coverage across individual countries could be compared. Thus, the analysis examined the amount, type and tone of coverage for foreign nations in the Slovak newspapers.

RESULTS

A total of 403 paragraphs involving 77 countries were coded in the two Slovak newspapers.

Table 2 lists the overall frequencies of coverage. Sixteen countries received at least six mentions in the two Slovak newspapers, led by the United States, which was men-

Table 2. Amount of coverage of foreign nations in the Slovak press

Rank	Country	Number of paragraphs
1	United States	63
2	Russia	37
3	European Union	24
4	Poland	20
5	Czech Republic	19
6	Germany	17
7	France	15
8	Hungary	14
9	Austria	12
	United Kingdom	12
11	Iran	11
12	Al-Qaida	10
13	China	7
	Israel	7
	Pakistan	7
16	Iraq	6

Source: authors' elaboration.

Others:

4 paragraphs: Ukraine, Algeria, the Netherlands;

3 paragraphs: Spain, Greece, Palestine, Serbia, Portugal, South Korea, Syria, Japan;

2 paragraphs: Denmark, India, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Sweden, Libya, Chad, Europe, Estonia, North Korea, Morocco, Afghanistan, Philippines, Cuba, Africa, Canada, Zimbabwe, Miramar, Chile, Peru;

1 paragraph: Belarus, Antarctica, Sudan, Italy, Nicaragua, Malaysia, St. Lucia, Kosovo, Panama, Vietnam, Romania, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, Finland, Senegal, Ghana, Mauritania, Belgium, Mali, Lebanon, Latvia, Vatican, Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia.

tioned in 63 paragraphs. Russia with 37 was the only other country to receive more than 24 mentions. The European Union in general appeared in 24 paragraphs to rank third, while Poland was fourth with 20. European countries followed: the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Austria and the United Kingdom. Thus, geographic proximity played a major role in the amount of coverage countries received.

Cognitive attributes for the countries receiving the most coverage are shown in Table 3. Overall, two broad issue categories were most prevalent: political issue attributes with 114 mentions and international issue attributes with 103 mentions. Very few social issue attributes were linked to countries in the news – just 28.

Table 3. Cognitive attributes linked to foreign nations in the Slovak press

Country	Social issues	Economic issues	International issues	Political issues	Misc.
United States	1	15	19	15	12
Russia	4	7	6	15	5
European Union	0	9	3	12	0
Poland	1	4	2	10	3
Czech Republic	1	4	2	9	3
Germany	1	6	5	3	2
France	0	4	6	3	2
Hungary	0	4	6	3	2
Austria	0	2	1	1	8
United Kingdom	2	3	3	0	4
Iran	1	1	2	6	1
Al-Qaida	0	0	10	0	0
China	0	1	4	2	0
Israel	3	0	2	1	1
Pakistan	0	0	6	1	0
Iraq	2	0	0	3	1
Others	12	16	26	30	14
Total	28	77	103	114	63

Source: authors' elaboration.

Cognitive attributes for the United States were evenly split among four of the five categories, with 19 international issue attributes, 15 economic attributes, 15 political attributes and 12 misc. attributes. Only one social issue attribute was linked to the U.S. This is in stark contrast to the cognitive attributes linked to Russia. Here,

15 political attributes were linked, followed by attributes dealing with economic (7), international (6), misc. (5) and social issues (4). Clearly, the U.S. and Russia were covered very differently in the Slovak newspapers.

Political attributes also were most common in the coverage of the European Union, Poland and the Czech Republic. Economic attributes were linked to Germany, while international attributes were linked to France, Hungary and al-Qaida. Austria had a high percentage of misc. attributes.

Table 4. Affective attributes linked to foreign nations in the Slovak press

Country	Negative paragraphs	Neutral paragraphs	Positive paragraphs
United States	15	47	1
Russia	15	21	1
European Union	4	16	4
Poland	4	15	1
Czech Republic	2	14	3
Germany	1	14	2
France	2	11	2
Hungary	7	7	0
Austria	0	11	1
United Kingdom	3	7	2
Iran	6	5	0
Al-Qaida	10	0	0
China	5	2	0
Israel	4	1	2
Pakistan	5	1	1
Iraq	2	2	2
Others	29	82	8
Total	114	246	30

Source: authors' elaboration.

As shown in Table 4, the Slovak newspapers linked more negative attributes (114) to countries than positive attributes (30), though most coverage was neutral (246 attributes). Only three countries received more positive attributes than negative attributes: the Czech Republic (3 positive to 2 negative), Germany (2 positive to 1 negative) and Austria (1 positive to 0 negative). All 10 of the affective attributes linked to al-Qaida were negative. Other negatively covered countries were China (5 negative, 2 neutral, 0 positive) and Hungary (7 negative, 7 neutral, 0 positive). Both the United State and Russia had 15 negative attributes and one positive, though the U.S. received significantly more neutral attributes (47) than did Russia (21).

DISCUSSION

The present study utilized an agenda-setting framework in a case study that examined the amount, type and tone of coverage that individual nations received in two Slovakian newspapers. From the content analysis, several results are worth noting.

First, the nations receiving the most coverage in the Slovak newspapers were industrialized nations. This supports the ideas behind World Systems Theory. As in the previous research, industrialized nations formed a core that received extensive media coverage. Non-industrialized nations formed the periphery, which received much less media coverage.

Not surprisingly, nine of the 10 countries receiving the most media coverage were from industrialized nations in Europe. Not only do these countries have economic clout, the basis for World Systems Theory, but they also have the advantage of geographic proximity to Slovakia. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that the United States received such extensive coverage, nearly twice as much coverage as the second, most covered country, Russia. Thus, the Slovak newspapers were sending salience cues to the public that the most vitally important country to Slovakia is the United States.

Furthermore, this coverage was spread broadly across four categories of news. Not only did the U.S. receive coverage dealing with the Iraq war – which most often fit into the international issues category here – but it also was linked often to economic and political issues. Thus, the attributes linked to the United States in the Slovak press came from a wide variety of issues.

While the United States was linked to a variety of attributes, the tone of the attributes was consistently negative. Fifteen of the affective attributes linked to the United States were negative to just one positive attribute. The messages transmitted through the Slovak press, then, portray the United States negatively across various issues.

Of course, the United States was not alone in receiving negative news coverage. Russia received the same 15 negative to 1 positive ratio of attributes in the Slovak press. The main difference in the coverage of the two countries lies in the finding that most coverage of Russia involved political issues. The cognitive attributes linked to Russia, therefore, were much more limited than those linked to the U.S. This finding could be due to the fact that Russian parliamentary elections were scheduled for December 2007, three months after the content analysis time period. There were also reports speculating about the Russian presidential election, held in March 2008. Nonetheless, the contrast between the sub-issues linked to the United States and Russia was stark, and certainly deserves further research attention.

The findings here also demonstrate the concentration of negative news in the Slovak press. This has been a consistent finding in international communication research. The news media consistently concentrate on conflicts in their coverage of

international news. While the majority of coverage in the Slovak press was neutral in tone, negative attributes outnumbered positive attributes 114 to 30. Only three countries received more positive coverage than negative: the Czech Republic, Germany and Austria. The Czech Republic shares a long history with Slovakia, including many years when the two countries were merged into one nation – Czechoslovakia. The two countries split during their “Velvet Divorce” but maintain close and positive ties.

The reason why Germany received positive coverage is less clear. On the one hand, hard feelings still exist throughout Europe over the Nazi occupation of countries several decades ago. On the other hand, Germany has regained significant economic power in the region. The results here suggest that Germany was often linked to economic issues, and oftentimes these links were portrayed positively in the Slovak press.

While Germany and the Czech Republic benefited from positive coverage, another country in the region received extensive negative coverage. Hungary, which shares a lengthy border with Slovakia, was linked to negative attributes seven times – the fourth highest number of negative attributes in our study, after the United States, Russia and al-Qaida. Here, historical events intervened. Several events during the time period of our study strained relations between Hungary and Slovakia, including an investigation of an ethnic Hungarian student who allegedly was the target of a hate crime incident; a protest by Hungarian Garda, a right-wing extremist group; and debate over the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam, a project on the Danube agreed upon in 1977 that has never been completed. Certainly, of all of the countries in the region, the relationship with Hungary is the most complicated for Slovakia. This is apparent from the results here.

While the result for the countries that received extensive coverage was logical, it was surprising that some countries received little or no coverage. The Ukraine, a country that borders Slovakia to the East, was mentioned just four times in the Slovak newspapers. The nearby countries of Romania, Slovenia and Croatia were mentioned just once. Other European countries, such as Bulgaria, were not mentioned at all. So while geographic proximity was important to an extent, it certainly was not the only factor in determining a country’s newsworthiness.

Finally, it should be noted that a total of 77 countries received at least some mention in the news during the time frame of our study. It appears, then, that the two newspapers in our study covered a wide-range of countries.

As with any research project, the present study has some shortcomings. The content analysis involved only two newspapers from one country. Future research should continue to examine first-level and second-level agenda-setting in other countries and in other contexts. The current study also involved only the media agenda. While many previous studies have found support for an agenda-setting effect of media coverage, further research should continue to examine this process by including a public agenda as well.

CONCLUSION

The current study demonstrates the usefulness of applying an agenda-setting framework in international news coverage, even when the source of the content involves news media in a relatively small country such as Slovakia. The content analysis identified both the amount and the type of coverage countries received. The content analysis demonstrates the portrait of individual countries that the news media painted. This media agenda in turn painted “pictures in the heads” of readers in Slovakia.

Agenda-setting research has a long tradition of research in many regions of the world. This study shows how the media depicted the world within a former Communist country. Future research is necessary to examine news media in other countries to get a fuller picture of how the media agenda-setting process functions around the world.

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