

# The political economy of attention: Global news agencies and the destruction of democracy

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## SUMMARY

*The digital information age brings an unlimited capacity for news and entertainment, as newspapers, television, satellite and cable networks are supplemented (or supplanted) by some 200 million websites. Ironically, in the midst of this burgeoning information circus, global news agencies, remain primary producers of news and information, even for entertainment. The largest news agency is Associated Press (AP), which has some 250 news bureaus in 120 countries, with a net income of almost \$200 million. Yet, despite its size and reach, AP may be the least investigated news media organization. Indeed, AP is seldom mentioned or else appears as a normative given in media studies of news framing, agenda setting, and political economies of the media industry. This critique of framing functions of AP offers some initial observations on global news agencies and their impact on democratic communication and citizenship. This work finds that as part of a transnational media regime constrained only by the limits of human attention, AP robustly competes for viewers by shortening messages, emphasizing news spectacle, and privileging elite sources over social movement advocates, while avoiding historical context and consequence. AP news wire releases rely on headlines, sound bites, and heavily dramatized events. The result has been more news clutter, more news stimulation, and more transnationally hegemonic news frames. As the primary news producer and distributor on four continents, AP thus contributes to reducing democratic public discourse.*

Key words: Associated Press, global news agencies, transnational, media framing

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## Introduction

The world is at war. The world is also verging on even more calamitous escalations. Yet, news media triggering of public attention seriously interferes with our ability to discern and resolve the actual causes and relations of power that underwrite chronic social and political conflicts. In fact, media frames obscure historical contexts, while blaming the victims or anyone who opposes austerity, dispossession, or military occupation. Unfortunately, access to information that might better serve a democratic citizenship is largely overwhelmed by the political economy of transnational media concentration.

The adverse conditions for news dissemination and public awareness are exacerbated globally through transnational mergers and partnerships. News media structures and practices have reduced the quantity, quality, and political diversity of global news within almost every nation. Except for a few elite exceptions, commercial print media in particular suffer from declining advertising revenue and circulation (Barthel, 2017). In the US, just 35 million read daily newspapers, the lowest since 1945, although daily papers have some 11 million more readers online. In Britain, print advertising revenues will fall by one third from 2014 to 2018. Given their primary purpose is to generate profits for owners and shareholders, print and broadcast media elsewhere have been cutting costs by severely reducing investigative reporting, international assignments, and radically cutting journalist positions across the board. As a consequence local media production of global news has dramatically declined in the last decades.

## The decline of international news reporting

Broadcast news media – even with shrinking budgets and reporters – remain the primary retail sources for news, even as social media (with 200 million websites) become major distributors of news. Billions may use digital media as their *means* for receiving communication (Facebook, Google, Baidu, etc.), but neither social nor digital media replace the commercial media production of news *content*. Most online news sites only aggregate or retransmit other published media: 98% of Yahoo's top stories are from AP or Reuters (Bui, 2011). Commercial news media remain paramount as sources of information (Nielsen, Cornia, & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). Moreover, in the current political economy of media relations, delivering news content to most commercial media internationally, global news agencies effectively set the public news agenda with the stories they choose to produce, distribute, and promote with graphics and video (MacGregor, 2013: 39). For international news in particular, global news agencies serve as the primary sources of news for publications that cannot afford foreign correspondents.

### **Emerging transnational media relations**

The Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Press dominate global news production and the content of news flow internationally. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had already agreed to zones of operation, with national agencies as part of their transnational operations, “forming intricate, collaborative relations of news production across borders and regions” (Bielsa, 2008: 357). Driven by transnational corporate needs for fast and accurate information for trade and investment in global markets, global news agencies developed new services for their expanding private client base.

The structure and practices of these global news agencies parallels and serves transnational capitalist collaboration and competition in commercial and consumerist terms, privileging markets and profits as well as parallel government economic and political policies (Artz, 2015). From a hegemonic leadership perspective, the transnational capitalist class cannot leave challenges to neoliberalism and austerity to an unfettered public discourse or the vagaries of social movements and protest. Transnational capitalists and their domestic partners depend on an accepting global public opinion. Not surprisingly, the emergence of global news agencies that lead the construction of acceptable debate and policy accords with the political and social needs of the transnational capitalist elite. Despite their cultural differences, commercial media in every nation share a business ethos and interest in commodified news produced by global news agencies.

The contemporary dominant trio of global news agencies arrives at their dominance through different historical trajectories and processes, have different ownership structures, and fulfill slightly different but complementary functions in their news reporting. The full stories of AP, Reuters, and AFP are beyond the scope of this essay, but can be cobbled together from a variety of narratives, including from their own websites, as well as both popular and scholarly work (e.g., Associated Press, 2007; Boyd-Barrett, 1998, 2000; Read, 1999).

The Associated Press is the largest news agency in the world and comprises the copy used for the analysis offered here. The AP was formed in 1846 as a collaborative effort of five New York newspapers. The AP is now a transnational non-profit organization serving 1700 newspapers and more than 5000 broadcasters around the world. With 243 branches in more than 100 countries, including Russia and China, AP leads a network that reaches over 1 billion people. The AP releases 2000 stories daily to thousands of commercial media around the world; half the world reads AP stories everyday. AP has licensing agreements with Google, Yahoo, and other websites and is the leading news source on Facebook. The AP obtains part of its credibility from its non-profit, cooperative model of ownership, which does not override its

primary function as a concierge news service on behalf of consolidated commercial media. The Associated Press only exists to serve the narrow interests of its owners and commercial clients. As news media consolidate, the interests of the concentrated entities become more pronounced in global news agency productions; diversity of political perspectives declines sharply. News is produced as commodity, as product for sale to clients, who pass along the news product to viewer-consumers as means of delivering audiences to advertisers. In the process, news content produced by concentrated news agencies and consolidated news media becomes even more assertively ideological. In the Associated Press copy at least, there is no alternative to neoliberalism, austerity, and military intervention.

Reuters and APTN (AP Television Network) are now also the premier world television producers and wholesalers of news video, producing more than 100,000 news videos per year. National news agencies that remain are essentially “component parts of a global news system” with interdependent sharing of sources, news exchanges, and alliances that sell services to media clients with or on behalf of the three global agencies (Boyd-Barrett, 2000: 6), which have multiple Internet partners across Europe, Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. While global news continue to misrepresent the developing world and the interests of the working majority (as charged by the UN’s MacBride Commission in the 1980s), they do so now as part of a shared neoliberal ethos and news paradigm for transnational market globalization – not as advocates for a particular nation-state or its domestic corporate interests.

### **From Western dominance to transnational capitalist relations**

Global news agencies are vital cogs in the transnational media regime because they construct and distribute news with apparent legitimacy for newsrooms around the world. “Clients who take [global news] agency products edit them and give a local national or cultural slant” but do not alter the fundamental content (MacGregor, 2013: 44). The sources, themes, and frames constructed by the global news agencies remain in localized re-presentations, with cultural hybridity and diversity apropos and necessary for attracting consuming audiences – obscuring the global capitalist function of this new transnational media. Pro-market, pro-interventionist, and pro-austerity and corporate dominance reports “float along on the neutral raft of accuracy, factual detail, and professional ethics” (Patterson, 2006).

Global news agencies gather stories everywhere and sell them everywhere to anyone: that is their business model. Yet, news as a saleable commodity is primarily purchased by commercial media clients, not the public, nor even public media. Thus, overall, global news agencies and their commercial clients “relay and reinforce existing global interests... they put corporate interests before public good, and

they marginalize progressive voices” (MacGregor, 2013: 47). The AP as a non-profit is but a most convenient means of cheaply producing media goods for profit-based media companies – few of which could individually produce news as efficiently or as well.

### **The status of world news reporting**

The stylistic attraction of immediate, breaking, 24-hour, live news – the CNN effect – relying on apparent factual information without journalistic interpretation has pushed each of the global news agencies to develop their own video-streaming and live feeds. Such news styles blur the distinction between national and international news by allowing and encouraging the creation of “mediatized political events presumed to be of global interest” (Bielsa, 2008: 362).

Global news agencies generate mediatized political events to meet the commercial goals of their transnational media clients. The production and distribution of news by these global agencies (and a few global private broadcasters) conform to the assumptions of transnational capitalism – focusing on spectacles and political crises with consumerist and market-related consequences.

Global news agencies function largely as news wholesalers, producing news stories as commodities sold to private media news retailers. Even with 24-hour live news and Internet news aggregators, the traditional function of news agencies that deliver instant, concise news briefs for sale as commodities to private news media remains remarkably stable.

### **Global agency news framing**

The political economy of global news all but assures that frames presented by the three global agencies predominate due to the concentration of news gathering, production, and distribution, the economic and political relations among the news agencies and their national and local clients, and the production of news as commodities with content further filtered by normalized “legitimate” news sources and transparent pro-market ideology that dismiss popular voices and sentiments challenging capitalism.

Using the news frames manifest in AP’s leading wire releases on several global crises as representative of global news agency reporting, the conclusions drawn here argue that the transnational operations of global news agencies compete for viewing audiences by shortening and replaying messages from “legitimate” sources, emphasizing news spectacle, and privileging “breaking” news over news context and consequence.

## **Identifying recurrent AP news frames: Crimea, Syria, and Venezuela**

The study here addresses the content of the AP lead stories (what the AP terms “Big Stories”) on three recent geopolitical crises: the 2014 Crimean referendum on secession from the Ukraine, the 2017 US missile attack on Syria, and the 2017 anti-government protests and Constituent Assembly elections in Venezuela. Many other global conflicts, such as the Saudi attacks on Yemen, the US/UK bombing of Libya, the Honduras coup, or the belligerence between the US and North Korea would allow similar investigations. The cases presented here are neither exclusive nor of paramount political import, but are nonetheless representative of AP wire service commodities that feature headlines, sound bites, and heavily dramatized events revealing ideological predispositions for neoliberal capitalism and the marginalization of democracy and social justice. The attempt to attract viewers with quick and flashy news bits has created information clutter and ephemeral stimulation that lay bare transnational capitalist interests and interfere with democratic public discourse. These three examples provide insight into the frames and themes manifest in reports by commercial media that attract the attention of millions – frames that are assembled and circulated by global news agencies.

### **Associated Press: Directing our attention**

The subject articles in this assessment are the two primary AP stories from each major crisis selected. For the Crimea instance, the two primary stories were by John-Thor Dahlburg (2014): his March 16 “Crimea referendum” story and his March 19 “Ukrainian officials denied” article, both of which were carried globally by hundreds of AP press and broadcast clients. For the Syrian case, the two AP-identified “Big Stories” by Zeina Karam and Sarah El Deeb (2017) provided the news copy. And, finally, for Venezuela, the AP-highlighted “Big Stories” included are Joshua Goodman’s (2017) April 9 report on Caracas and Michael Weissenstein’s (2017) article on the Constituent Assembly elections. The range of locations (Europe, Mid East, and Latin America) and the reporting by several different AP writers provides a useful, albeit limited, cross-cut of AP news reporting styles, news sources, word choices, and framing. These six articles on three disparate geopolitical crises that filled the global newscapes at the time of the events share several remarkably similar characteristics. The following observations are based on an initial content analysis of the six news stories that 1) identified quantity and attribution of news sources, 2) considered the articles’ syntax and word choice, especially evaluative adjective descriptors of events and news sources, and finally 3) ascertained the extent of political and historical context as manifest in the background information and descriptive word choices used.

### **Threats and justifications**

As revealed in the primary and leading stories for each conflict, AP discourse frames these geopolitical conflicts as threats and justified responses: threats to democracy and human rights and justified military responses motivated by humanitarian concerns and democratic impulses.

The components apparent in these three cases suggest patterns in the political economy of attention by highlighting how the structures and practices of news production create content favorable to transnational capitalist political agendas and seriously lacking in democratic sensibilities.

### **Sources privileged and absent**

The predominant news sources featured by AP reporters are always voices aligned with the manifest dominant neoliberal policies. In each case, the neoliberal preferences include: a) privatization of national resources, b) increased cooperation and alliance with transnational investors and their domestic allies or proponents, c) tolerance or preference for authoritarian measures on behalf of those policies and their proponents, and finally, d) the explicit privileging of increased or continued intervention by transnational players, whether through NATO or interventionist coalitions. Remarkably, each AP news story includes suggestions for direct military actions targeting enemies in the Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela – regardless of national sovereignty and international law.

**Crimea.** Associated Press news sources condemning the 2014 Crimea referendum outnumber voices in support almost three to one. Post-coup Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk is quoted several times, with additional attributions by the “new Ukrainian government.” The lead to the story, in semi-bold font cites the Ukrainian government calling the referendum a “circus directed at gunpoint by Moscow.” The Ukrainian military and its officers, German Prime Minister Angela Merkel, the European Union, and the White House round out the official spokespeople and institutional news sources all condemning the referendum. Supplementing this official narrative are AP chosen “vox populi” contributions from citizens who disliked the referendum. Several Tartars, a minority ethnic group in Crimea long at odds with Russian authority, were also quoted including one calling the vote “a clown show, a circus.” Given the AP’s tacit recognition that Crimeans overwhelmingly supported secession reveals that these references are not remotely representative of public opinion.

In contrast, there is one lone voice of Crimeans who overwhelmingly voted for leaving the Ukraine: Vladimir Lozovoy said, “I have finally returned to my mother-

land.” Although the AP headline announced that 95% supported secession from Ukraine and a return to Russia, Dahlburg apparently found very few supporters of the referendum or found their opinions not newsworthy. Instead, he relied on the Russian News Agency, the Russian Foreign Minister, a Crimean prosecutor who detained a Ukrainian naval officer, and the Prime Minister of Crimea who announced that Ukrainian officials were not welcome in Crimea. The remaining sources for AP are unattributed anecdotes expressed by the reporter himself.

In all, the balance of accurately quoted sources used in AP news “objectively” bolsters the lead claiming the referendum was Russian subterfuge.

**Syria.** AP sources for coverage of the US missile attack on Syria in April 2017 repeat a similar imbalance. Although the total number of sources favorable to the US attack compared to those opposed is not as dramatically skewed as in the Crimea coverage, 23 for to 11 opposed, a 2 to 1 ratio, the form is much the same.

Direct quotes from national and world leaders, Britain, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, and various government agencies of each, are supplemented with references to the World Health Organization and Doctors Without Borders, as well as local voices expressing appreciation for the attacks. AP quotes the Syrian Coalition which welcomed the attacks (without acknowledging that the Coalition is a US-concocted creation with little popular support) and a “US backed rebel commander” who told the AP that he hoped the strikes would be a “turning point” in the war.

AP reporters from Dubai, Moscow, Washington, and Geneva contributed to the news story written by Zeina Karam and Sarah El Deeb (2017), who were based in Beirut, Lebanon. Only correspondent-contributor Albert Aji was in Syria, but not in Khan Sheikhoun where eyewitnesses and confirmation of claims might have been possible. Still, in keeping with its use of citizen voices, AP closed one story with a quote from a survivor. Alaa Alyousef said the missile strike “alleviates a small part of our suffering.” The coda indicates that the “people” have spoken and they applaud the US missile attack that killed 15 civilians.

“Objective” news reporting by the AP seems to confirm its own headline that the missile strike is widely praised. Accurate quotes by selected officials and supporters of the US/UK/Turkey/Saudi intervention in Syria provide overwhelming evidence – at least 2 to 1 by AP arrangement.

**Venezuela.** The disparity between AP news sources that fervently oppose the socialist-leaning Bolivarian government compared to sources supporting the government is extreme. In the two AP “Big Stories” comprising the text for this investigation, oppositionist quotes outnumber quotes from supporters of the elected government almost three to one. In all, eight government spokespeople are cited and only one citizen supporter; twenty-one oppositionists are cited, including two “independent” analysts, a public opinion firm, Eurasia, and a New York investment bank, Torino

Capital – little-known, self-interested parties deemed worthy and legitimate commentators by the AP. As part of the AP template, several popular voices opposed to the government provided colorful condemnations.

The Venezuela stories have an additional component in their sourcing, not seen in the Crimea or Syrian instance. These two “Big Stories” on Venezuela feature an abundance of claims by AP reporters themselves. Observations and self-assessments were offered by Wiessenstein (2017), Goodman (2017), Fabiola Sanchez, and other unnamed AP writers. In fact, more than twenty “factual” statements in the two articles are written as given truths, asserted as such by the syntax of objectivity and common sense. For example, without attribution, Wiessenstein’s (2017) lead states that 8 million people voted to “create a Constituent Assembly endowing President Maduro with virtually unlimited powers.” This AP “fact” – which contradicts the actual functioning of the Assembly and distorts its actual power to overrule the President – is the lead that frames the rest of the article. The article itself is replete with additional “facts” elicited by AP testimonials based on its own reporters as sole news sources.

The tally sheet of news sources then looks like this: Opponents of the democratically-elected government 23, anti-government assertions by the Associated Press 22, spokespeople in support of the government and the electoral process, 10.

Only one conclusion can be drawn about AP’s preferred news sources based on these six news reports: AP privileges news sources that echo the policy preferences of the globally dominant governments and their institutions. NATO and EU want expansion into the Ukraine: democratic decisions by even a portion of the population is anathema to transnational plans. AP features voices in support of Ukrainian integration with the EU, at the expense of democratic discourse. The EU, Turkey, Saudi and most other Arab elites, and of course, the US, prefer a more amenable regime in Syria: national sovereignty, secular independence, multilateral cooperation with Iran, and any semblance of support for Palestinian rights conflict with the larger transnational plans for a privatized, commercialized, militarized, and sectarian Middle East. The AP thoroughly repeats all of the claims by the interventionists while marginalizing or omitting any independent voices in support of national sovereignty and democracy. The corporate interests in US, Spain, Canada, Brazil, and Colombia, among others need to dismantle and destroy any good example of participatory democracy. The Bolivarian revolution not only has threatened to redistribute wealth and protect working class, poor, and indigenous rights in Venezuela, its is being emulated in Bolivia and Ecuador and inspiring other democratic social movements. Accordingly, the AP prioritizes criticisms of the Venezuelan government, avoids mentioning social programs, omits the voices of citizens engaged in social change, all while presenting its own “factual” accounts that bolster the inter-

ventionist rationale. In each case, news reports produced and distributed by the AP direct public attention to arguments and appeals that obscure and deny the rights and rhetoric of citizens and their social movements.

### **Words hurt: Descriptions for justifications**

More distortions of representation occur in the descriptions and evaluations of sources, organizations, and events. The AP excels at providing extensive details of the most mundane components of significant events as a guise for objectivity and balance. At the same time, appositive phrases, dependent clauses, explanatory asides, and even evaluative adjectives effectively evaluate any particular person, group, or action – especially if the description is repeated. In the six AP stories here, standard AP practices indicate a consistency in disparaging and delegitimizing popular democratic movements or other targets of intervention. If a government is supportive of transnational plans for deregulation and gutting public resources, cutting back on worker’s rights, and dismantling social services in the interests of privatization and the accumulation by dispossession of working and middle classes, any opposition is deemed dangerous and unrepresentative of the nation. In contrast, if a government protects and expands civil rights, more democratic redistribution of wealth, and protects the public interest and national sovereignty, then the AP “objectively” discovers that the opposition is remarkably democratic, ethical, and admirable – no matter how narrow or unrepresentative; nor how dependent it might be on outside intervention. Evidence from AP coverage on Crimea, Syria, and Venezuela confirm this observation.

**Crimea.** Jon-Thor Dahlburg (2014) quickly establishes markers for determining legitimacy: Crimea is divided into “ethnic Russians” and “ethnic Ukrainians” – a pre-explanatory frame for why Crimea voted overwhelmingly for separation from Ukraine; they are Russian. The AP refers to the vote as “annexation.” Annexation raises visions of conquest, seizure, and occupation. The referendum, however – what citizens actually voted on – had two choices: reunification with Russia or remaining part of Ukraine. One does not vote for annexation, one votes for secession or reunification. Annexation is an ideologically and descriptively loaded term: that’s the word of choice by the AP. The description unequivocally discounts the democratic process and the vote as secondary to the AP assertion of Russian aggression.

The identifying adjectives for quoted sources serve as heuristic cues that legitimize or marginalize. A supporter of the referendum is a “retired Soviet naval officer,” while “ethnic Ukrainian” opponents gathered outside an Orthodox cathedral “scared of the potential for widespread harassment” and a Tartar (“whose families had been forcibly removed” during Soviet times) remained defiant in the face of “this trage-

dy.” EU and Ukrainian government officials have favorable identifiers in their condemnations of the referendum, effectively encouraging the view that “the ballot was illegal” (Dahlburg 2017). Dahlburg repeats these attributed claims with his own singular observation (without evidence) that opponents of the vote “appeared” to stay away. How do you measure what’s not there? Further, Dahlburg reports that opponent, “ethnic Ukrainians” were “denouncing” the vote as a Russian “power play and land grab.” Dahlburg terms the Ukrainian government “new” obscuring that its newness is the result of a coup against a democratically-elected government, a coup facilitated by the EU, the US, and fascist instigators (Sakwa 2016). Undeterred, Dahlburg adds that Russian troops were in Crimea after “seizing it two weeks ago” – repeating an inaccurate claim by the post-coup government.

Here are a few phrases Dahlburg succinctly applies for dismissing popular will and substituting a “blame it on Russia” frame: Russians seized, stormed, blockaded, and raised the Russian flag, while crowds of “ethnic Russians” celebrated the outcome. The Russian “threat [was] not far away,” while opponents stayed away because the vote was “an illegal charade stage-managed by Moscow.”

There we have it: a democratic referendum decided by an overwhelming popular vote must be questioned as a grand maneuver for Russian expansion – all constructed by the AP Style Manual for accuracy and objectivity.

**Syria.** In April 2017, the US launched 60 Tomahawk missiles against a country with which it was not at war in a direct violation of international law and UN Resolution 2118, but the “Big Story” for the AP was how many “widely praised” the assault. The AP provides cues for how to interpret the attacks: only Syria and Russia charge US with “aggression,” as if international law is simply a matter of opinion. Readers are quickly informed that the target Sharyat air base was attacked in retaliation (without quotes so it must be true) for a chemical attack that (unnamed) officials said used chlorine and “possibly sarin.” The reporters know the precise time of the launch (3:45 AM), the location (Idlib province 100 kilometers from Turkey), and the debate over how many US missiles reached the airbase (between 23 and 59) demonstrating their commitment to detailed objective accuracy. They have more trouble finding actual evidence for either the presence of nerve gas or Syrian responsibility. (In contrast, award-winning, veteran, and now independent journalist, Seymour Hersh (2017) discovered witnesses, interviewed sources, and found ample evidence to challenge the White House and global news agency narratives in a scathing indictment of the unverified claims and the illegal US attack, including evidence that the White House knew there was no evidence.)

The AP, in meeting its pressing news deadline demands of 6000 global media clients, largely accepted and then constructed a convincing narrative – undeterred by a lack of evidence – relying at most on “suggestions” that civilians were exposed to

“chemical substances” (Karem & El Deed, 2017a). Unsurprisingly, the word choices and descriptions paramount in the AP stories accord with the assertions and justifications by the US, its EU and Middle Eastern allies, and its surrogate armed groups in Syria. Rather than investigating either the chemical explosion or the legitimacy of US violence, the bulk of the AP “US strike” story consists of glossy graphics detailing the Tomahawk launch, a map of the missile strikes, and a short video on chemical weapons. Such graphics normalize the action, accept the attack as a given, and turn the public’s attention and orchestrated dismay to technical aspects of a geopolitical event.

The AP stories go on to explain through assertion that the US interest has been in stopping Syrian aggression, while Russia has been defending Assad: legitimate, humanitarian motives versus self-interested defense of an autocrat. Russian and Syrian claims are dismissed as so much propaganda. Thus, the AP needs offer no reference to applicable international law, unlike Sweden, China, and dozens of other countries, but instead provides detailed accounts of the attack and accurate quotes by a myriad of supporters, including Saudi Arabia which lauded the “courageous decision” by US President Trump. In the same paragraph, we find the AP practice of accepting or disparaging perspectives through appositive phrase descriptors. Although the feudal kingdom that has armed ISIS and beheads its citizens was not so described by AP, in the next sentence, we are alerted that Hezbollah is “an Iran-backed Lebanese group that has sent thousands of fighters to Syria to bolster Assad,” which makes it quite easy to dismiss claims that the strike was “foolish.” A few sentences below, AP quotes (without any explanatory descriptors) that the opposition Syrian [National] Coalition hailed the US attack as an end to the “age of impunity.” Readers apparently can be spared any explanation that the Syrian Coalition is largely a collection of Syrians living abroad and a handful of US armed militias in tolerant alliance with Al-Nusra and other reactionary Islamist groups, diplomatically and financially supported by US (Alakhbar, 2015). Similarly, Jamil al-Saleh is introduced as a US-backed rebel commander, with no organizational description – perhaps in AP deference to the embarrassment that the Pentagon and CIA have faced with the failure of attempts to create a Free Syrian Army or other armed groups where little popular support exists (Bulos, Hennigan & Bennett, 2016). Identifying descriptions or the lack of descriptions accent and evaluate by either increasing or reducing the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the interests being contested linguistically, politically, and militarily. The AP does a disservice to the global public even as it serves the interests of its commercial clients and the ideological needs of the transnational capitalist order that depends on public inattention to the political conditions, trajectories, and interests in conflict in Syria and across the Middle East.

**Venezuela.** The AP coverage of Venezuela is extreme in its disparities and prejudices. The AP may not read directly from the interventionist playbook, but it accepts those premises and determinations in practice, as evidenced with descriptions and vocabularies employed in the representative two “Big Stories” on Venezuela. Just listing words associated with the Venezuelan government and President Nicolas Maduro confirms a consistency in relentlessly criticizing the Bolivarian revolution. The Venezuelan government: decreed, barred, banned, jailed, cracked down, squashed, roughed up, and fired on protestors. Maduro threatened, has “virtually unlimited powers,” wants to govern without limitation, and escalates conflict. In contrast the favored opposition “poured” into the streets, in a “sea’ of peaceful protest, and despite the understandable “frustration with 17 years of socialist rule,” the “world is beginning to see there are injustices in Venezuela.”

Comparing the attributes of oppositions in Crimea, Syria, and Venezuela readily indicates that descriptions and interpretations depend on whether the opposition or the government favors neoliberal policies. A repressive, abusive, coup-based government in the Ukraine is coded with neutral or favorable descriptions. Despite ample evidence, Yatsenyuk never quashes, bars, or cracks down on citizens. However, the successive Chavez and Maduro presidencies (elected by popular vote) and a participatory political and social system that has brought widespread progress to the population, especially the poor, are coded as authoritarian and undemocratic. Lewis Carroll could have been an AP star reporter in Alice’s Wonderland.

AP descriptions and framing of two Venezuelan electoral events in 2017 indicate as much. In July, 5500 candidates stood for election to 545 seats in a Constituent Assembly (in accord with the Venezuelan Constitution). More than 8 million voted. But Weissenstein (2017) reports that the election and its outcome were “widely mocked” and appeared “certain to escalate the polarization.” Weissenstein relies on one exit poll of only 110 voting centers (out of thousands) conducted by a New York investment bank, substantiated by his reference to nine governments dismissive of the elections and popular democracy (including UK, Spain, Colombia, Argentina, Panama, Paraguay). In contrast, Weissenstein disparages Maduro’s reference to the 57 nations extending congratulations to Venezuela on the peaceful and successful outcome, and by only noting support from Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. Additionally, and perhaps to supplement the questionable use of an investment bank as a valid assessment of elections, AP’s own eyewitness reports that “dozens of polling places were virtually empty” – although readers don’t know where or when or what virtually empty might mean. The right wing opposition had called for a boycott of the election, recognizing their disadvantage in a constituent based process, so finding polling places in Chacao, or other wealthy sections of Caracas, to be sparse would not be a surprise, nor representative of participation rates. Relating opposition

claims that the election was “rigged” and the “apparent low turnout” bolstered by AP’s own selective survey permits Weissenstein to assert that 8 million voting for the Constituent Assembly turned out to be a “resounding victory” for those opposed. In Venezuela direct violent actions and blatantly explicit intent by the opposition are woven into their privileged and racist preferences about returning to a system of unquestioned elite control, with the rest of the “pardo” staying in their neighborhoods. For the rest of the world, AP directs global public attention to carefully crafted descriptions and images of “democratic” opposition figures valiantly fighting against an authoritarian and corrupt government that has been hiding behind faux elections (winning 20 of 22 elections since 1998) and alleged populist hand-outs. With a modicum of effort, readers and viewers of AP stories may recognize the distortions resulting from identifying word choices and ideologically selected descriptions of persons and events.

### **News without context: The commodification of news bites**

Lack of context is a primary ingredient for the political economy of public attention constructed by the largest global news agencies. Driven by commercial media interest in short spectacles, the AP, Reuters, and AFP produce sound bites and news bits in easily consumable and adaptable commodities – not news per se, but nuggets of news. The 24-hour news cycle and the news scroll on network cable news becomes the standard for news production and increasingly for public taste. The political economy of attention parallels the increased intervention of technology into our daily lives. AP may not be solely responsible for infotainment and the consumability of news, but it certainly has willingly contributed to the process of shortening public attention. In this mix, there is no time, nor profit, in providing context to news stories, no matter how consequential.

Moreover, the last thing transnational capitalism needs is thoughtful, reflective consumers, let alone informed and engaged citizens.

Spectacles featuring understandable (and ideologically preferable) cues for viewers and readers to make quick judgments and move on are predominant, fitting the PR and propaganda needs of transnational corporations and their respective national governments. AP, Reuters, and AFP have emerged victorious in the battle for profits by delivering infotainment, spectacle, and news unencumbered by context or historical meaning. The paragraphs below are abbreviated to highlight only some of the more obvious lack of context in AP stories.

**Crimea.** AP coverage shielded Americans “from evidence that the 2014 ouster of the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich was a US-supported coup d’etat” (Parry, 2017). Instead, the AP reported the conflict as the result of Russian aggression.

Knowing that the Crimea, with a population of 2.2 million, has historically been part of Russia since 1784, an autonomous republic during the Soviet years until 1954 when Khrushchev unilaterally assigned it to the Ukraine helps explain why “ethnic Russians” are in Crimea, speak Russian, and identify with their heritage. Likewise, the crisis is rendered more understandable with even a slight discussion of recent Ukrainian history: independence after the collapse of the Soviet system, the subsequent vying for power among oligarchs, the corruption of the political system, initial attempts at democratic reforms, and the violent hijacking of civic movements by modern neo-Nazis. To the outrage of the EU, the US, and Ukrainian industrialists, democratically-elected President Viktor Yanukovich opted for Russian trade relations rather than succumbing to EU demands for austerity as a precondition to joining an expanding NATO. Instigations and interference by EU and US, combined with unleashed fascist groups ended in a coup against Yanukovich (Sakwa, 2016). Some acknowledgement of US intervention to orchestrate unrest, disruption, and advocate for its chosen government (which almost immediately assaulted autonomous rights as well as labor, cultural, and civil rights) would also shed some light on the lead up to the Crimean referendum.

One could argue that the above paragraph carries more relevant information than all the extensive details provided by John-Thor Dalburg about stand-offs and flag waving in post-referendum Crimea. At any rate, the total absence of any grounding information to make sense of Crimean citizen desire to break from a fascist-inspired, coup-based Ukrainian rule facilitates the narrative of Russian aggression and undoubtedly spurs public attention and concern for that artificial explanation advancing a very real EU/US transnational policy in Eastern Europe.

**Syria.** The “Big Stories” on Syria in 2017 lack historical background and even passing reference to contemporary political conflicts. Instead, AP reports conveniently and spectacularly reiterated versions of the terrorist narrative – which has been cultivated by governments and media to direct public attention in recent decades. Granted, a chronological account of the shifting alliances and name-changing among reactionary Islamists evades the understanding of even the most attentive experts. At the same time, omitting the role of Saudi, Turkish, British, American and other interventionists, including their documented support for a variety of “terrorist” groups seems relevant, especially considering the devolution of the democratic opposition to Assad as part of the Arab Spring. US hubris in attempts at directing anti-Assad forces and circumventing the leadership and interests of the population ended with disastrous consequences for millions, as US-backed armed groups turned to ISIS, Al Nusra, and other fanatical factions in their feeble but violent attempts to topple a politically and militarily secure Assad regime.

The global reach of the AP spreads the humanitarian mantra for intervention, again made possible by limited contextualization. The Syrian Observatory on Human

Rights, known popularly as the White Helmets, appear in AP news articles as a human rights monitoring group, identified only as a Britain-based group (like Oxfam or some other humanitarian NGO). Unreported is the Observatory's function as a project of Britain's Foreign Office, funded by the UK and EU. Further, the two "Big Story" articles presented details, graphics, and even a video as essential for reporting the attack, but had no space for mentioning the concerted interventions over the last six years through US, UK-financed and trained militia and mercenaries, which occasionally appear in other media (e.g., Bulos, Hennigan & Bennett, 2016).

Perhaps the most egregious oversight is the AP's total failure to check Swedish claims that the US missile attack violated international law – which any cub reporter would discover with a cursory check of United Nations resolutions. Somehow, in the midst of a conflict with charges of human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, and foreign intervention, the AP skipped the actual global discourse that undercuts much of the interventionist persuasive appeal. Instead, the AP left out historical, political, and legal contexts for reporting on the US missile attack deferring to unverified charges made by US, UK-sponsored proxies desperate for assistance. Following the AP framing, which provided no other compelling context, global public attention was directed at Syria's presumed heinous attacks on civilians.

**Venezuela.** Anyone who has followed the remarkable changes in health, education, housing, nutrition, and education in Venezuelan since 1998 has learned that commercial media are no fans of participatory democracy and the redistribution of wealth. The two AP reports on the 2017 protests and elections in Venezuela are no exception and reprise the ongoing framing of Venezuela in AP reports for the last 20 years, although one would strain to find anymore context in that entire body of work than appears in the two articles presented for this assessment. The only context offered by Joshua Goodman (2017) and Michael Weissenstein (2017) are superficial claims about a "devastating crisis" brought on by socialist misrule. No mention of the economic boycott, black market speculation, sabotage, violent protests, machinations by several nations in the OAS, and ongoing US financing and intervention in the domestic political process, or even the Obama/Trump initiated sanctions against the declared Venezuelan "threat."

Simple details, the kind that appear exhaustively in AP accounts of missile attacks and Russian incursions, are missing from AP accounts of the opposition forces in Venezuela. Contextualizing the social divide and concentration of wealth in Chacao and other "eastern" neighborhoods would quickly highlight the narrow social base and decidedly self-interested motivation for the confrontational opposition. Before Chavez and a tepid 21<sup>st</sup> Century socialism raised the rent tax on international oil companies and used the revenue to fund schools, nutrition, housing, health care, and community media, the proceeds of the oil industry only trickled down to ancillary industries, retail giants, and their privileged technocrats and managers. The pain of

democracy agitated the elite, such that Leopoldo Lopez, described by AP only as “another major opposition figure,” and Julio Borges, president of the National Assembly, were both key leaders in the 2002 US-backed coup against the democratically-elected President Hugo Chavez. The irony might be too confusing for AP readers to know that former putschists were freely campaigning candidates and elected senators in what they claimed was an “undemocratic” government. Instead, the AP created its own artificial context, suitable for study as “fake” news. Either through willful deceit or ignorance of the Constitution and the obligations of the Constituent Assembly, including the necessity for a national referendum on any Assembly proposals, Weissenstein’s lead falsely asserted as fact that the Assembly was “created” to expand government authority and control. Again, simple fact-checking would give some corrective context to an otherwise confusing account.

AP’s dedication to commodifying news events as “spectacles” that direct public attention away from social relations of power indicates its service to transnational strategies at odds with democracy and public welfare. Moreover, the Associated Press fails in even providing elementary facts. In more than 30 paragraphs, readers will learn nothing of Venezuela’s juridical structures, the protagonists’ political affiliations and actions, any mention of improvements in the quality of everyday life in the last 15 years, or any mention of the verifiable interference and machinations by the US, Spain, Colombia, and OAS interventionists that undermine and disrupt the democratic process.

In communication, context is everything. In these six AP reports, context is almost nothing. Thus, the communication from AP may attract public attention, but never risks challenging the neoliberal assertions about the dangers posed by unreasonable social movements and uncooperative governments.

### **Public attention and the ideological function of global news agencies**

The prolific production of global news undercuts political diversity through its sheer size and mass distribution. News media rely more than ever on agency news products, especially international news, which, based on the three cases here, means standardized, decontextualized, and ideologically pro-capitalist news briefs. With no doubt, readers and viewers around the world primarily witness the media frames of one or another of the three global agencies, which effectively set the global news agenda, influencing public awareness and homogenizing public opinion, preparing the cultural ground for government PR and propaganda.

The AP commodifies crises and conflicts as news stories. Top news, presented as “Big Stories,” are reduced to dramatic spectacles that threaten markets and consum-

ers. The chronic contradictions of inequality, austerity, and social disruption appear as news only when citizen responses violate the norms of civility and diffusion allowed within diverse nation-states. When the ruling order is challenged, then, global news agencies rush to mold selected facts into a sometimes effectively persuasive narrative that obscures both the socio-political and economic causes of the crises and marginalizes or avoids any presentation of possible participatory democratic solutions – as evident in the Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela and many other places. Instead of admitting that NATO's expansion and EU/US intervention may have spurred the Crimean secession, or questioning that unverified reports from partisan witnesses may have distorted the claims of chemical weapons justifying an illegal and immoral US missile attack on Syria, or reporting on the economic sabotage and US intervention in Venezuela while the democratic elections for a constituent assembly are legal and constitutional, the AP chose to unquestionably accept the “official” preferred sources (or voices expressing similar claims) while framing events according to the geopolitical interests of the primary capitalist and transnational interests involved, including EU partners and favored allied local Ukrainian, Saudi, Israeli, and Venezuela politicians and private businesses.

Most political, economic, and military decisions and actions take place without public attention or awareness. However, whenever the scope of corporate or government actions threaten international social stability, when public support for extensive coercion is required, publicists and propagandists turn to news media for assistance. Then, the agenda setting function of the media and media framing within acceptable ideological parameters become essential for directing and organizing the necessary discourse for public opinion amenable to the preferred government and corporate actions. Global news agencies function as primary gatekeepers for determining the appropriate news frames for each geopolitical crisis.

The transnational capitalist project of wealth accumulation through dispossession of public resources are bound to spur outrage, reaction, and political resistance. Public opinion must be molded as much as possible.

Public opinion, the precursor to public support or at least acceptance, results from the construction of meaning within national cultures, informed by international contexts understood from global news agency framings. Thus, US-initiated sanctions against Venezuela were constructed by important geopolitical allies, in Spain by *El Pais*, in Britain by ITV, Sky, and the *Sun*, and in Colombia by *El Tiempo*, RCN, and Caracol. In each case, the AP and Reuters provided the foundational “objective” reporting necessary for undergirding news reports around the world. Likewise, the tepid acceptance of the US-backed, al-Nusra-friendly, Free Syrian Army, was orchestrated by the *New York Times* and American network television, UK's *Telegraph*, *Daily Mirror*, and ITV, and across the Mideast by the Rotana network, owned by a Saudi

Prince and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox. Importantly for this essay, the Associated Press was instrumental in the gathering of much of the site-specific information and presentation of the partisan ideology for intervention. Perhaps equally egregious are the distorted frames of “news” about the Sisi coup and its aftermath in Egypt, the US-backed Saudi war on Yemen, and the US-supported presidential coup in Honduras.

The consistency of ideological perspective and media framing by both national media and global news agencies is a testament to the internalized media hegemony of transnational capitalism. These recurring biased reports, demonstrated in part by the three case studies presented here, indicate that journalists and editors of commercial media consistently exhibit adherence to neoliberalism and consumerism in news presentation. Transnational media, sharing stories and formats, attempt to head off independent or critical public opinion that might transcend national borders and gain international momentum. Transnational media corporations massage the public on behalf of transnational capitalism. They may not get all the kinks out, but global news agencies set the standard and provide the copy that fills columns of newspapers and the scant minutes of nightly television news – all of which are aggregated and massively shared through social media retransmissions.

The transnational capitalist class has constructed a political economy of public attention, producing enticing media spectacles sold as news commodities by collaborative, transnational media companies that benefit from national deregulation and commercialization of media in every nation. The consolidation of global news media, especially the concentration into three dominant global news agencies, does not serve democracy or public deliberation by informed citizens.

Commercial media’s cultural diversity helps disguise the homogeneous economic practices and political rationale for a globalized capitalism. The absence of an interactive global public sphere is the result of transnational planning with global media participation, but the crushing of democratic public discourse and participatory democratic access to media production has been universally championed by governments around the world – not by an imposition or seduction by Western powers – but by collaborative, transnational partnerships of capitalist classes everywhere (Artz 2015). The idealized public sphere – the imagined civil society within nations anticipated by Eastern European politicians and Latin American developmentalists – now confronts a very real transnational class operation, including the UN, EU, NATO, IMF, World Bank and a plethora of bilateral agreements between nations. In other words, with the participation of national governments in the neoliberal transformation of public resources and political policies into a global capitalist regime of production and distribution (Robinson, 2004), “fewer and fewer political topics can be dealt with in the absence of influential information and arguments originating from outside the national realm” (Hyarvard, 2001) – Greek austerity, Honduran

elections, and Yemen's destroyed social order are but a few more dramatic examples. All local problems now are interrelated with global relations and interactions: climate, food and nutrition, employment, education, technology, trade, health, entertainment, security, the list goes on.

The political economy of public attention includes global media, entertainment, news, and quite importantly the global news agencies, none of which are closely connected or determined by national political institutions. Global news agencies are vertically integrated (moving from wholesale news producers to retail online news providers); horizontally integrated (with production agreements with other transnational media corporations); commercialized (seeking profits for their shareholders or providing marketable news commodities for private media); diversified (expanding from news text to produce photos, video, live streaming in news and new markets for entertainment and sports); and localized (regionalizing news products for local clients). In all, global news agencies structurally and functionally serve the economic, political, and ideological needs of transnational and national capitalist clients' intent on global socio-economic relations of production and distribution.

Reliance on global news agency information homogenizes forms and frames for reporting, with occasional local variation. As news agency stories fill available time and space in transnationally consolidated local news media, the normative practices of news presentation, organization, syntax, and sourcing travel along, too. Media frames and ideological content become homogenized as a consequence of transnational media consolidation and increased global news agency distribution: the news made available to the public is inherently biased towards neoliberal values and practices, including military interventions. Because news media are increasingly accessible to everyone, regardless of geography and format, the global public shares similar information that cultivates similar (but not predetermined) responses – repeatedly contradicted by the direct political experience of millions.

Democracy is undermined by the very spread of news and information, because global news agencies select events, frame explanations, and distribute news commodities that are driven by corporate interests not human, democratic impulses or concerns. Media agenda setting prepares publics for more organized government propaganda and PR based on selective news reporting and framing.

Transnational media dominance determines global news flow, delivers copy and film to local news media worldwide, influencing public agendas and public awareness, to the detriment of our knowledge and our interests. Other information from more democratically partisan media exists on the margins, especially through the Internet. Independent, democratic, participatory news media, including TeleSur, exist in Latin America exist (Artz 2006, 2017), but more are needed to counter the daily construction of biased news in distorted media frames that marginalize or omit

the world's working majority. Global communication of citizens across borders (without global news agency and transnational media filters) is needed for democratic dialogue and the development of solutions that put people before profits, humanity before markets.

Importantly, the direct experience of thousands will continue to create opportunities for considerations of social justice and social change. Popular democratic upsurges may be dismissed, but cannot be curbed, by global news agency reports. As citizens, we should always recognize that reports of unrest and social and political turmoil reveal the stirrings of humanity and call for our solidarity. Global news agency stories and frames should never be used as a guide for understanding or action, but can spur more serious inquiry leading to coordinated social movement action for more information, transparency, and solidarity with others who have unsettled the transnational capitalist order with their insistence on equality, social justice, and more inclusive democratic world.

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# Politička ekonomija pozornosti: Globalne agencije za novinare i uništavanje demokracije

Lee Artz

## SAŽETAK

*Digitalno informacijsko doba daje neograničeni kapacitet za vijesti i zabavu jer oko 200 milijuna web stranica nadopunjuje (ili zamjenjuje) novine, televizije, satelitske i kabelske mreže. Ironično, usred tog rastućeg informacijskog cirkusa, svjetske novinske agencije i dalje ostaju glavni proizvođači vijesti i informacija, čak i za sektor zabave. Najveća novinska agencija je Associated Press (AP), koja ima oko 250 ureda u 120 zemalja, s neto dohotkom od skoro 200 milijuna dolara. No, unatoč svojoj veličini i dosegu, AP je možda najmanje istraživana novinarska organizacija. Zapravo, AP se rijetko spominje ili pojavljuje kao normativna u medijskim studijama o medijskom uokvirivanju, postavljanju agende i političkoj ekonomiji medijske industrije. Ova kritika medijskog uokvirivanja AP-a daje neka početna zapažanja o svjetskim novinskim agencijama i njihovom utjecaju na demokratsku komunikaciju i građane. Ovim radom utvrđeno je da se AP, kao dio transnacionalnog medijskog režima kojeg ograničavaju samo granice ljudske pozornosti, energično natječe za gledatelje skraćivanjem poruka, naglašavanjem novinskih spektakala i privilegiranjem elitnih izvora nad zagovarateljima društvenih promjena, dok izbjegavaju povijesni kontekst događaja i njihove posljedice. AP-ova mreža oslanja se na naslove, zvučne isječke i silno dramatične događaje. Rezultat toga je sve veći nered u vijestima, veća stimulacija vijestima i transnacionalno hegemonijsko medijsko uokvirivanje. Kao glavni proizvođač i distributer vijesti na četiri kontinenta, AP time pridonosi smanjenju demokratskog javnog diskursa.*

Ključne riječi: Associated Press, svjetske novinske agencije, transnacionalni, medijsko uokvirivanje