U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Human Rights in Latin America, 1975-1982: Exploring President Carter's Agenda-Building Influence

By Catherine Cassara

President Jimmy Carter's elevation of human rights to a major foreign policy concern had an impact on U.S. news coverage of Latin America. In the mid-1970s, U.S. coverage of Latin America was erratic at best. By the time Carter left office, the U.S. media had significantly increased both the resources and space devoted to covering the region.

In 1948, the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, was instrumental in the formulation and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But the implementation of the Universal Declaration was frozen in its tracks by the lowering of the Iron Curtain.[1] During the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy was fundamentally concerned with geopolitical negotiations. Policy makers were more interested in maintaining the balance of power than in exploring the implications of the Universal Declaration. Human rights played no significant role in U.S. formulation of foreign policy until Jimmy Carter took office in 1977.[2]

Carter's human rights policy linked U.S. foreign aid and assistance to a nation's observance of human rights.[3] During the campaign, his concern with human rights united a divided Democratic Party. His policy also resonated with the voting public and helped contribute to his electoral success.[4] Since Carter placed human rights on the nation's policy agenda for the first time, an examination of press coverage of human rights during this period offers a rare opportunity to assess the influence the Carter policy had on U.S. news coverage.

This research investigates how the Carter initiative affected U.S. prestige newspaper coverage of the region most affected by the U.S. policy change – the countries of Latin America. Foreign correspondents active during the period report that the Carter policy fundamentally altered how the U.S. press covered Latin America.[5] The study provides a systematic assessment of that supposition, and, in the process, explores the dynamics of how presidential foreign policy initiatives and U.S. international news coverage interact. As such, it explores the process of "agenda building," how sources influence media agenda. This is in contrast to agenda setting, which is concerned with how the media shape the issues the public thinks about.[6]

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Catherine Cassara is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Bowling Green State University.

Carter's Policy

President Carter did not introduce the topic of human rights to Washington. Religious groups, rights activists, and liberal legislators had long been concerned about U.S. assistance to countries that violated human rights. But, before Carter, these groups' efforts had been largely ineffectual.[7] The new administration brought civil rights experts into the State Department to spearhead human rights policy enforcement. It also elevated the standing of the bureau charged with monitoring human rights concerns, initiated State Department country reports on human rights, and placed human rights on the agenda of U.S. diplomats in embassies and consulates around the world.[8]

At first, the new human rights policy focused on relations with the Soviet Union. That focus was short-lived.[9] U.S. diplomats reserved human rights concerns for dealings with countries that had fewer strategic implications for U.S. interests. There were ramifications for U.S. relations with some African and Asian countries, but the result was particularly noticeable in dealings with Latin American countries.

The Carter administration's concern about rights violations in Latin America was not the result of a sudden or recent increase in atrocities in the region. For decades U.S. diplomats had been aware of widespread human rights violations by repressive Latin American governments. Policy makers, however, had always explained the violations as an endemic part of the Latin political culture – something that might be regretted but which could not be changed.[10]

Shifting political conditions in the region had fostered an upswing in violations during the 1960s and early 1970s.[11] Amnesty International had been issuing reports on human rights violations in Latin America since 1966, and journalists from the United States covering the region knew of widespread rights abuses.[12] Correspondents' efforts to document and report problems were stymied by victims who would not go on the record and U.S. embassy officials who were not interested in discussing rights violations. U.S. editors, meanwhile, were not interested if the diplomats were not.[13]

The Carter human rights initiative changed the lax attitudes towards human rights violations.[14] Suddenly there were embassy sources willing to talk and official U.S. government reports of rights abuses became available. U.S. diplomats were ready to provide official sources and facts, "giving reporters legitimate pegs to write at length on the subject."[15] As additional assistance to correspondents, the Carter administration's concern with human rights legitimized rights monitoring groups, such as Amnesty International and America's Watch, as news sources.[16] Editors decided not only that human rights might be news, but also that Latin America itself demanded more attention.[17]

When Carter took office, most U.S. news media covered all of Latin America from a lone bureau in Buenos Aires.[18] Latin America had traditionally received erratic coverage in the U.S. press.[19] Critics charged that important issues were neglected and misreported.[20] News outfits across the United States had cut their foreign news operations in general, and in Latin America in particular.[21] By the time Carter left office, U.S. news organizations had more than doubled the resources they devoted to coverage of the region. They had opened new bureaus, assigned more correspondents to the region, and were running more stories with Latin American datelines.[22]

Agenda Building

From Cohen to Neuman, researchers have found the press to be a participant in the process of foreign policy formulation and explication.[23] But researchers have not explained how the interaction works. While none has found the press to be an independent actor in the process, researchers are divided over how central a role the media play. As the conclusion of Chang's masterful review of the literature suggests, researchers must differentiate between the dynamics of the media's role in domestic policy formulation and foreign policy formulation. He proposes that the press may play a more independent agenda-setting function in domestic issues than in foreign policy.[24] In the same vein, other scholars suggest that when "real-time" television coverage transforms an international crisis into a domestic policy crisis, the dynamics of the relationship between the media and policy makers change.[25]

This paper falls under what McCombs and Shaw identify as agenda setting's fourth phase: research concerned with the sources of the media's agenda.[26] It is what Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman identify as "media agenda setting," as opposed to the more familiar idea that the media shape what people think about, identified as "public agenda setting."[27] Agenda building focuses on how news media interactions with sources influence the media agenda. These interactions are shaped by competition between news organizations, news handling practices and routines, and the influence of issue interest groups. Certainly, the research results outlined in this paper fit that description.

Early agenda-setting research focused on the press role in "setting" audience agendas.[28] In recent years, researchers have begun to look at how media agendas are set, studying the power of sources to shape what becomes news.[29] A number of studies have examined the relationship between presidential speeches and media coverage of domestic matters.[30] Research has also focused on the rise and fall of individual policy issues, focusing on issues of domestic concern.[31] Both lines of research suggest that the president can be an important actor in the process. They also suggest that the relationship is not always clear-cut. Later research, which looked at presidential agenda-setting power over a two-year period, found that on some issues the president set the agenda for the media while on others the media set the agenda for the president.[32] While that study included international issues, it did not focus on individual international issues. Given Chang's attention to the differences in the dynamics between the president-press relationship in domestic and in foreign affairs, studies that examine a single foreign policy initiative and its impact are needed.

Students of U.S. foreign policy disagree over the appropriate role for human rights in U.S. policy formulation. They nonetheless agree on the originality and impact of Carter's approach to foreign policy.[33] Researchers examining media treatment of Latin America have found that coverage of the region blossomed during the late 1970s.[34] As the literature review suggests, journalists, policy analysts, and media scholars alike hold a number of assumptions about the relationships between the U.S. press and foreign policy formulation. This research seeks to empirically verify the dynamics of that relationship and some of its subtleties. This research set out to answer two questions:

(1) Did the Carter human rights initiative affect U.S. news coverage of Latin America?

(2) If the Carter policy affected the coverage, what was the nature of the effect?

Method

This study examined news coverage of Latin America in four prestigious U.S. newspapers known for their commitment to international news: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Los Angeles Times*.[35] Of central interest, stories were coded according to whether they referred to human rights, defined as stories that mentioned human rights per se or massacres, torture, political prisoners, the "disappeared," or death squads.

The period examined was 1975 to 1982, which included the Carter presidency and the period immediately before and after Carter's term. A two-week, constructed random sample for each paper for each of the eight years generated 614 stories.[36] The newspaper, date, page, square inches, section, country, and staff/stringer/wire/or other were recorded. The Budd index was used to assess the prominence of coverage. Possible Budd scores range from 0 for a brief without art run on the lower half of an inside page to 5 for long story with art above the fold on Page One.[37]

A single researcher working with a pretested coding instrument coded all the content. Recoding was done periodically to ensure intracoder reliability. Intracoder agreement for all categories was 98.6%. A second coder helped pretest the instrument and then coded a random sample of 30 stories. Intercoder pretesting of the coding instrument produced agreement averaging 96% for all categories. Differences between coders were settled by discussion.

Throughout the period under study, the *New York Times* gave more coverage to Latin America than did the other papers. But while there were differences in volume and staffing, no other significant differences were found. Hence study results will be reported in aggregate.

Results

Did the Carter human rights initiative affect U.S. news coverage of Latin America? The research results indicate that coverage of Latin America changed as the result of the Carter human rights initiative. Table 1 indicates that from 1975 through the 1976 presidential campaign and into the first years of the Carter presidency, the number of stories the newspapers devoted to Latin America increased significantly; so too did the coverage given to human rights. While coverage dipped in 1977 and leveled off in 1978, it rose again in 1979 and reached 40% in 1980.

If the Carter policy affected the coverage, what was the nature of the effect? The results suggest that there were very real changes in the coverage of Latin America that can be linked to human rights coverage. As Table 2 indicates, the human rights stories tended to be supplied more often in-house by staff and stringers than by wire stories. In addition, the mean length of human rights stories was longer (24.9 square inches, SD= 22.7, n= 192) than other stories (18.5 square inches, SD= 19.0, n= 449; t-value = 3.45, d.f. = 311.1, $p < .001$).

The Budd prominence index helps differentiate how the newspapers used the human rights coverage and suggests that human rights stories got better play that other coverage. In all, 48% of the stories that earned a rating of 4 or 5 dealt with human rights, while only 18% of the stories with 0

TABLE 1
Human Rights Coverage by Year and Presidency

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
Human Rights	19%	26%	42%	15%	23%	40%	30%	35%
Other Stories	81%	74%	59%	85%	77%	60%	70%	65%
Total	48	77	65	65	79	87	84	136

$N = 641$
Chi square = 19.6 $p < .001$ d.f. = 4
Cramer's V = .17 $p < .001$

ratings did (N=641, Chi square=12.7, $p < .001$, d.f.=2, Cramer's V=.14, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study's results support the premise that the Carter policy initiative on human rights brought more news coverage to the region and cleared the way for more coverage of human rights. This resulted in measurable changes in the caliber of the reporting from the region.

The peaks, dips, and plateaus that chart the relationship between the study's variables underscore the complex relationships between news coverage and foreign policy that lend credence to the study results. Carter administration officials ran into problems as they tried to implement their policies, and reporters covering human rights also ran into trouble. In both cases, the forces behind the problems were the countries subjected to the spotlight of media attention. Human rights remained a policy priority, but after the first flush of aid cutbacks, the United States encountered problems in promoting its stance. Some Latin American governments chose to withdraw their aid requests rather than have them rejected. And, once aid had been cut, the administration lost influence with the offender nations and gradually shifted its policy from intervention to dissociation.

Faced with reporters covering the nations' human rights abuses, the governments of the affected Latin American countries fought back. Through a variety of means, they tried to hinder reporters from learning about human rights abuses and interviewing survivors of human rights abuses.[38] They also mounted publicity campaigns aimed at discrediting the reporters and their reports. In some cases they even threatened the correspondents. Both the U.S. government and the U.S. press adapted and found new ways to address their concerns, but the result was fluctuations in policy implementation and coverage.[39]

Events in Latin America during the period clearly played a role in coverage fluctuations. It is nonetheless important to remember that human rights violations and political unrest were a constant in the region before, during, and after the Carter presidency. The increases in coverage of human rights, however, came only after the administration focused media attention in that direction. Coverage increases in 1981 and 1982 are also explained in terms of policy climate changes in Washington. When Carter left office, the

TABLE 2
Human Rights Coverage by Story Byline

	Staff	Stringer	News Service (with id.)	Not Identified
Human Rights	34%	45%	21%	29%
Other Stories	66%	55%	79%	71%
Total	267	51	203	120
$N = 641$				
Chi square = 12.7	$p < .001$	d.f. = 2		
Cramer's V = .14	$p < .001$			

Reagan administration made no secret that it would not place human rights before other foreign policy concerns.[40]

Instead, Reagan announced he would draw the line on communism, particularly in Central America. But by this time the human rights news agenda had a life of its own. Coverage of El Salvador and Guatemala increased, and human rights coverage continued. This indicates how prominent issues in the news, once on the agenda, tend to remain. Human rights persisted after Carter left office. First, as the result of the dynamics of news and news coverage during the Carter administration, human rights issues gained legitimacy as news and the sources of information on human rights, such as Amnesty International and Americas Watch, had become legitimate sources. Second, because of Reagan's strategic interests in containing communism in the region, the administration was willing to throw U.S. might behind the armed forces tackling insurgents. As a result, U.S. support for efforts to stamp out political and military opposition actually created conditions in which human rights abuses thrived.[41]

Thus, particularly in Central America, the incidence of human rights violations increased, and there were experienced reporters on hand to tell the story. Long-term, the Reagan administration did its best to discourage human rights coverage. An extreme example of this policy was the controversy over the reporting of the El Mozote massacre. Government officials and the *Wall Street Journal* accused Raymond Bonner of fabricating the gruesome details in his *New York Times* story in 1981. His veracity was questioned, and his career as a foreign correspondent all but destroyed. Rosenblum suggests that other correspondents and editors took notice, and human rights coverage was chilled.[42] In 1992 a team of forensic archaeologists confirmed the facts of the El Mozote massacre, as Bonner had reported them.

Conclusions

Exploring the connection between the Carter human rights policy and changes in newspaper coverage of Latin America, this research paints a picture of the power of presidential policy initiatives to influence media agendas and shape U.S. press coverage of foreign news. Thus, the findings not only support the idea that the Carter policy influenced newspaper

coverage of the region, they also suggest dynamics and interactions in the relationship that might be considered in future agenda-building studies. Both the anecdotal accounts of the correspondents and the results of the quantitative study reinforce the interdependence of the foreign correspondents and government officials involved in the development of the policy and its ramifications.

Reporters had been trying to cover human rights violations in Latin America, but before Carter their success was limited. After Carter took office, U.S. diplomats were concerned about human rights and the government offices charged with oversight had been given a new lease on life. Bureaucrats were available and interested in talking about rights concerns; government officials went on the record. Nongovernmental groups concerned with human rights took on new importance. Reporters had sources for their stories, editors believed those stories were newsworthy, and human rights sources in and out of government became routinized.[43]

The study underscores the importance of several of the categories of influence on media content outlined by Shoemaker and Reese, particularly the influence of media routines and organizational concerns.[44] Once there were more correspondents covering the area, there were more opportunities to do in-depth reporting of the kind involved in human rights issues. Increased resources meant increased coverage of all kinds.

Further research might explore whether the Reagan policies eventually chilled human rights reporting, and thus would provide an opportunity to pursue Wanta et al.'s suggestion that the nature of the relationship between the press and the president may shape the dynamics of the agenda-setting process. It should be noted that in this case, as in other foreign policy issues, there are also relationships between the reporters and other governments that must also be taken into account.[45] The research suggests that as presidential policy initiatives are implemented they may generate changes in the bureaucratic structure and, thus, generate valuable sources for correspondents covering otherwise elusive stories – sources that will persist even after the policy in question has been revoked.

NOTES

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