

# The Absence of Western Media in the World: Examining News Coverage on the Wars in Afghanistan and in Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

The mainstream media in the U.S, regardless of the platform, have severely deviated from reporting international news, and have mainly focused on the political divide within America. The election of Donald Trump, and the rise of the alt-right have brought forth an age of media that has moved away from covering foreign affairs, somewhat isolating the immigrant population in America from their families and friends abroad. In this essay, I will address the implications of pushing aside foreign politics, by using the recent example of the turmoil in Ethiopia, and the War in Afghanistan. I will also address the importance of relating public policy to the extent of journalism. The use of framing is also essential in explaining the approaches in reporting significant events. Historical context will also be provided in order to explain to readers the significance of, by observing the conflicts within the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, I will demonstrate how the Western Media should attempt to broaden its coverage and cover more conflicts within the global community.

## **Introduction**

The presence of the American media in foreign countries has facilitated the exchange of culture, and globalization has increased the presence of American culture around the world. Although immigration has been present since the establishment of America, the 1990s to the present day has seen a massive influx of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in search for a better life and more opportunities. Manheim and Albritton (as cited by Hong, 2007), noted that efforts in public relations noticeably increased during the 1970s, and since then, sovereign states and international clients have tried to promote their image through PR firms. As a result of this promotion, national media outlets began to cover more foreign affairs. The media overtime became more sensationalized, and agendas and political alignments became clearer as domestic and foreign affairs were documented by the press. In this essay, I will specifically be looking at Ethiopia as well as Afghanistan and explain how the dwindling presence of national media in countries indicates a disconnect between native and immigrant populations.

## **The Relation between Economic and Foreign Policy**

In many countries around the world—especially in Africa and Middle Eastern countries, Western and international media has poorly covered significant conflicts and developments since the early days of revolution within Ethiopia and the struggle for independence in several African countries. Despite the massive growth of a diverse population within America, the U.S covers foreign affairs at a significantly lesser rate compared to domestic news. This might seem commonplace (as a country will most often prioritize its own affairs), but the U.S has developed a direct corre-

lation between the economic and military ties to countries, and the amount of new coverage in these countries. According to Sobel and Riffe (2), multiple predictors such as U.S aid given to a country, and strategic relationships between U.S and other sovereign states, determine the presence of the press around the world. A review of globalization by Matos stated, “The allegations made against the Western news agencies were that they did not cover enough the developing countries, the material covered was inadequate and the tendency was to reinforce a biased image”(3). In times of crisis, the media will extensively report and convey events from foreign countries, but now that the world has entered an age of globalism, the Western media hasn’t shown enough interest in reporting the factors and events that lead up to the conflicts that threaten these countries. It’s also important that the U.S populace is exposed to international developments, in order to understand the role of foreign countries, and subsequently the U.S and the global community.

## The Presence of the Media in the Ethiopian Political and Security Crisis

In the past ten months, the people of Ethiopia have been thrust into civil turmoil that threatens the stability of the Horn of Africa, and even the economic strength of Africa, The establishment of the new Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, drew criticism from regional governments, especially the TPLF(Tigray People’s Liberation Front), which spearheaded the insurgency against the oppressive communist DERG during the 1980s. Their isolation from federal decisions, and the rise in tensions between Abiy’s Prosperity Party and the government of Tigray, sparked a series of military campaigns led by the federal government, to uproot the TPLF and gain control of Tigray. As a result of this, the military along with some ethnic militias have perpetrated war crimes such as extrajudicial killings, rape, pillaging, and many other atrocities. The Ethiopian government has its own state media, so many facts and events were concealed from the public. These war crimes had to be reported through civilian social media accounts and independent journalists that gradually made their way to the mainstream media and accredited organizations. Although international agencies and media outlets began to pay attention to the suffering and tumult that was occurring in Ethiopia, many of them actually failed to address the past conflicts that plagued the country. Ethiopia, a country that is significantly strict with its use of censorship, seemed to be entering a new era of free speech and journalism. Despite this, the government under Abiy quickly began to revert to its old tactics once there were insurgencies and revolts against the regional government. Several organizations such as the Freedom House, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) have all recognized that the EPRDF and the Prosperity Party have both maintained an authoritarian rule over the people, and have subverted many democratic standards and civil liberties promised to the people. The OONI wrote an article (4) on internet shutdowns that occurred after a failed coup in the Amhara region. The figure below is a graph of Google data traffic recorded in late June of 2019.

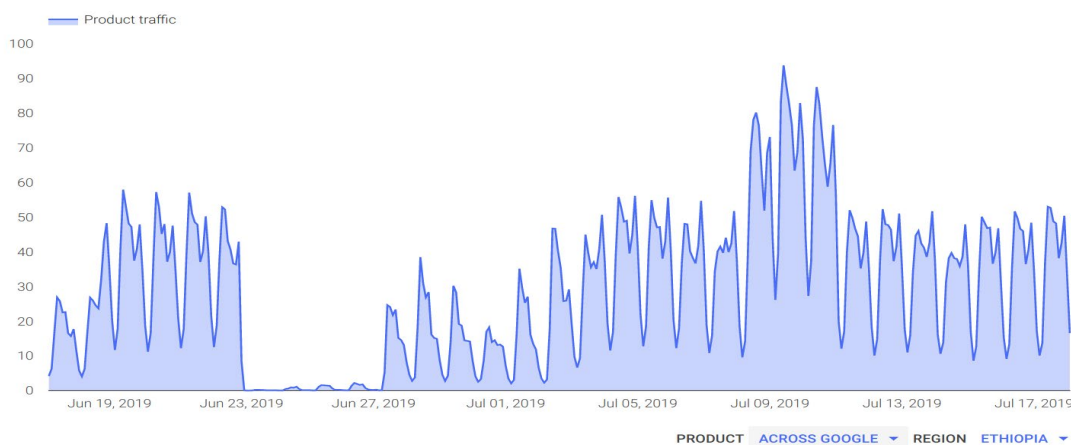


Figure 1: Google Traffic Data in Ethiopia from June 19th to July 17th

The abuse of censorship under the Ethiopian government has plagued the country since the 90s, thus the people were forced to resort to reporting events on their own, and the international Ethiopian community relied on communication apps like WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram to communicate with their families and friends. Although it is not the responsibility of Western media to take upon the mantle of free press in Ethiopia, their coverage of daily events is vital to understanding the relationship between countries, and should not be influenced by foreign policy. The country stands as a major force in the Horn of Africa against terrorist forces, and may serve as an economic engine for Africa in the future. The conflict in Ethiopia is heavily ingrained in the centuries old conflicts between ethnicities, and has been renewed in monarchies, communist governments, and the current democracy. America is a country built on immigration, and if U.S news agencies do not recognize the plights of the global community, they end up harming the position of America as a world leader. Thus, the international community, including industrialized countries, should develop better standards for covering events in foreign regions, especially if they have economic and strategic relationships with the Western World.

## **The Crisis in Afghanistan**

In the past few weeks, the world has turned its attention to the conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban, a radical Islamic terrorist organization, managed to drive off the Afghan government and army, and established a new Afghan government under their authority. Among the industrialized nations that dread the future of Afghanistan, the U.S is at the center of this, as the war in Afghanistan was the accumulation of decisions made by multiple administrations since the 1980s. With President Biden defending his decision to pull all remaining U.S troops from Afghan territory, the Democratic and Republican parties have been quick to blame each other, while mainstream media and social media platforms host mixed opinions about the current administration's decisions. Thus, the public's opinion has drastically varied, many of them unaware of the history of U.S involvement with both the Afghan people and the Taliban. The Afghani people have resisted the Soviet Unions for decades, ever since the Soviet Union established a pro Soviet puppet government in the 1980s. In response to the oppression of the new government, several militias began to arise that were known as the mujahideen, who proclaimed themselves as holy warriors who waged jihad(mission) against the Soviet forces. In America, the Red Scare was still prevalent even while preconceptions of the USSR were being disproved. Many Americans thus saw the mujahideen fighters as those who want to fight for democracy and supported their cause for independence. The Carter administration along with the CIA had already been supporting the Afghan resistance armies, shipping weapons and resources worth billions for dollars, and continued to do so when the fighters fled to Pakistan for refuge. President Reagan even invited the fighters to the White House, and the leader of the mujahideen Yunus Khalis visited the Oval Office in 1987.

Public opinion of the Afghani fighters was mostly positive during the 80s because of their opposition to the Soviet Union. When the Afghan Soviet government was finally toppled, the mujahideen no longer required as much U.S presence in the country. The U.S still kept their troops in Afghan territory however and kept sending weapons to the mujahideen. This was arguably a foreign policy disaster for the Reagan and Carter administrations, as many of the fighters began to develop anti-imperialist perspectives and began to see the U.S as a threat to the culture and religious traditions of Afghanistan. During the 1990s, many of the mujahideen that fought the Soviet armies went on to establish the Taliban, rising from the ashes of post-Soviet Afghanistan. These fighters would recruit more Afghani people, and eventually be known as the Taliban, a radical Islamist organization. Public opinion at the time was mixed, as the mainstream media rarely reported ground coverage of Afghanistan. But during the turn of the millennium, the Taliban had taken control of Kabul, and began to enforce their fundamentalist ideologies onto the people. The mass media heavily criticized the bombings of large Buddha statues in the Bamyan valley of central Afghanistan, as well as their oppressive treatment of women. There was a massive shift however in the coverage of Afghanistan after 9/11, as Osama bin Laden and other members of Al-Qaeda, were under Afghan refuge after the perpetrated the attacks.

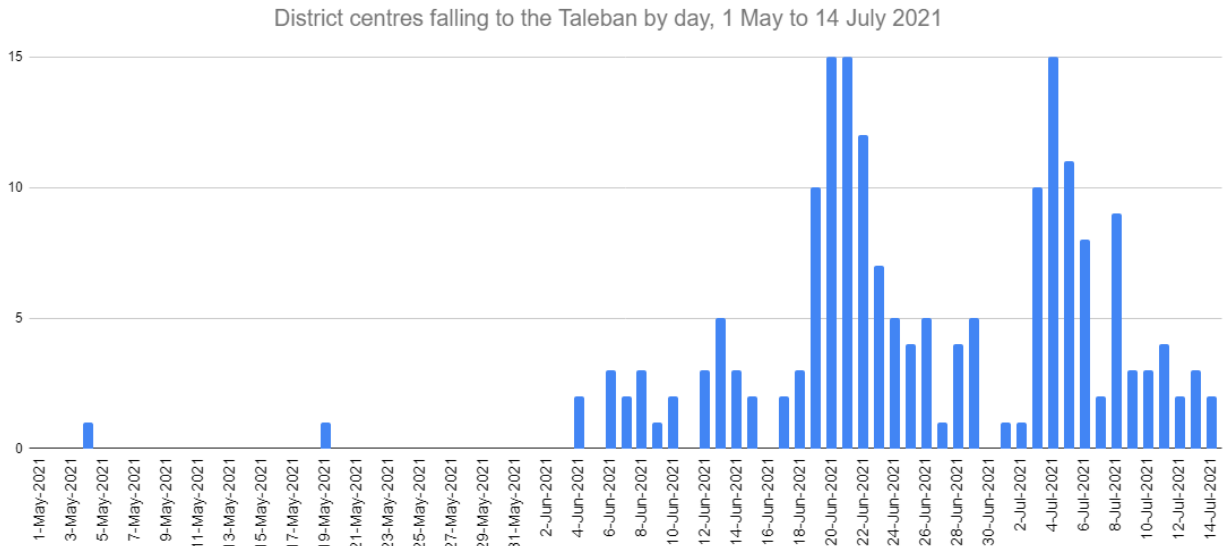


Figure 2: District Centers falling to the Taliban by day, from May 1st to July 14th 2021 (Source: The Afghan Analyst Network)

A study done in 2018 by Slavin, attempted to analyze how *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, two prominent newspapers covered the events in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, and in 2018, more than a decade after the war began. He used categorical framing; a method of organizing stories based on selective aspects of events and addressing it with greater detail within a specific text. By observing the thematic frames (i.e Policies, Battles, and Terrorism) in articles about Afghanistan, and the episodic frames that cover specific events in Afghan territory, Slavin sought to understand how journals covered the Afghan war and appealed to specific audiences. The results of his research determined that both of the journals actually utilized thematic framing in their coverage, such as the origins of the Taliban, or Afghan involvement with Al-Qaeda; however, as time passed, both of these journals began to cover more daily events and breaking news. While the *Journal* seemed to stop covering articles that focused on themes, *The New York Times* integrated thematic framing into their coverage of breaking news, by displaying the recent events, placing it within a broader context, and giving background to these events. Despite this, the lack of episodic coverage of events in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, as well as the less detailed coverage of events by the *Journal* in 2018, were the causes behind the decrease in public interest on the Afghanistan war. Now that Afghanistan has fallen a second time to the Taliban, there has been a resurgence in articles about Afghanistan, and the mainstream media has been consistently giving live coverage on the evacuation of those who feel threatened by the Taliban. As a result of the poor coverage of the war in Afghanistan, the public are now beginning to pick pieces of information and using articles from prominent platforms to formulate their own opinion. President Biden's decision to withdraw troops has drawn ire from some Democrats and Republicans, who believe that U.S troops left Afghanistan, without any additional countermeasures to prevent the Taliban from seizing control of Kabul. The rapid seizure of Kabul and the uprooting of the Afghan government has shocked many around the world. In an interview with the CPJ, a reporter by the name of Jane Ferguson had this to say about her reporting in Afghanistan: "I don't think we've ever seen a war just flip on its head like that, where suddenly, those in charge are the Taliban, the insurgents. Trying to navigate the parameters has been incredibly difficult, trying to figure out what is safe and what isn't, where you could go" (5). The tumult that has occurred in social media, and the divide between political parties gave political analysts and journalists to capitalize on the situation and draw in an audience by portraying the decisions of the government as major mistakes and have begun to criticize the current administration's efforts to end U.S presence in Afghanistan.

As noted in the previous section, Western media has often reported in areas based on the foreign policy of the government, and thus shifted away from reporting factors that lead up to factors that led to significant events. However, when these events are actually reported, the mainstream media will often narrow the situation, and will

often ignore different perspectives. Although there are a number of articles that have attempted to document the views of the Afghani people, they have been limited to recent events such as the takeover of Kabul, or the evacuation of refugees. As a result, the whole story is not properly conveyed, and those who genuinely wish to understand the war in Afghanistan must dive into the academia that covers such topics.

## Conclusion

“Freedom of the press” is a civil liberty that ought to be granted to all citizens of any sovereign state, and in order to uphold that right, the media must be unbiased in its reporting and seek to cover all aspects of events, in order to properly convey information to the public. This is not realistic however, as many facets of journalism have developed some agenda, or have become involved in certain political circles that may influence their reporting. As a result, situations like the war in Afghanistan have been reduced to episodic coverage, and criticism of the current government. Although reporters and news anchors may recognize and announce that the war in Afghanistan was a series of failures made by multiple administrations, their emphasis on breaking news and recent events narrows down the conflict, and limits the audience to a specific narrative. As for the war in Ethiopia, the lack of coverage by American media is due to its relative position as an American strategic and economic partner. Although the government has made several statements on the conflict in the Horn of Africa, articles and news reports fail to provide ample context or at least relate the audience to the situation within Ethiopia. In areas where the media is either maintained by the state or is heavily censored, the American media should be compelled to alert the public about the ongoing events within the global community.

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