

# **The Imagined International Community: Dominant American Priorities and Agendas in Google News**

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## **Abstract**

A crucial aspect of communication rights is the ability to maintain a plurality of political views. This paper examines the biases of online news through the study of Google News, a multilingual interface that pulls articles from thousands of popular online news sources. The popularity of Google News and its global spread make it an influential channel, which can have important implications on the way people perceive the world. Subsequently, this paper analyzes the top news articles in Google News, looking at the most frequent issues, countries and links between countries. Findings indicate that the USA is a dominant actor in most popular news sources, and that both English and non-English online news display US-centric priorities and agendas. While reading popular online news, worldwide users were channeled to view the American military operation in Iraq or the concern of the nuclear potential of Iran and North Korea as the most important international political events. Consequently, it is suggested that Google News and similar services, which aggregate various news sources into one interface and become popular and “authoritative” news channels in themselves, intensify certain perceptions of the World based on the page-ranking mechanism and its popularization of content. A network analysis envisions the relative position and the news-links between states and organizations. It displays the centrality of the USA in English and non-English news. It also reveals the important role of the UN as a central hub that connects many African countries with the rest of the international network. This suggests that international organizations, and particularly the UN and the EU, play an increasingly crucial role in the international network as perceived by popular online news sources, due to their central position and political influence as mediators and connectors between countries.

**Keywords:** American Dominance; Google News; Information Inequalities; Network Theory; News-links; Search Engines.

## **Introduction**

Many have argued that mass media channels shape the way people envision and understand the World, as well as reinforce common habits and identities (Anderson, 1983; Foster, 1991; McLuhan, 1964; Robertson, 1992). More than ever before, the advent of the press enabled people to think about themselves and relate to others. Once news and knowledge of events were disseminated they became a common experience for specific communities and an integral part of their “national consciousness”. The increasing connectivity of online networks and their global diffusion, however, entails the possibility

of challenging this national imagining in the longer term. Since people from different countries can read the same popular news through common international multilingual interfaces such as Google News, BBC or CNN, contemporary mass media channels now have the ability to reinforce an imagined *international* community. This imagined international community may still be under the domination of specific powerful states. It has been argued, for example, that following the Gulf War, the US-based and owned CNN “dominated television screens around the World. One definition and one account of this momentous geopolitical event was given to global audiences” (Schiller, 1996: 113).

Thus, the problem of the asymmetrical global news flow is directly related to the broader discourse on the right to communicate (see also Thompson, 2000; McIver, Birdsall, & Rasmussen, 2003; Calabrese, 2006). According to the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (1981) one of the crucial principles of the right to communicate is that information should serve a social function, and thus be communicated equally among individuals rather than commodified and employed mainly by dominant companies or the state. While in principle the Internet provides more opportunities for individuals to express themselves and customize their content, it will be argued and indicated that the dominance of commercial considerations prevents from practicing equal production and consumption of information, and channels attention to certain views and agendas.

To that end, commercial search engines play an increasingly central role, as they often provide a starting point for users to reach other websites including news, and in some cases they also serve as news agencies themselves; organizing and disseminating (rather than producing) news based on specific considerations and priorities. A study by Pew Internet and American Life Project in December 2005 indicated that 35 percent of users in the US, or about 50 million people, check news online every day. Additionally, news portals such as Google News and Yahoo are among the most popular news services (Horrigan, 2006). This paper investigates Google News, a popular news channel that pulls together thousands of news websites and ranks them according to their popularity. Since it combines news sources from different countries, it should display different local points of view, irrespectively of the users’ origin. That is to say, users in Japan can read World news written by American sources, and vice versa. However, Google News may also reinforce certain views provided by particularly popular news websites. For example, Google’s Page-Rank mechanism may score the website of the Washington Post higher than many other news websites, and therefore the Washington Post would appear as a dominant and “authoritative” source in many of the World news links. In this case, it will be primarily American mainstream views that shape the notion of the World as perceived by a growing number of users.

### **American Dominance and Global Communication**

While studying the dominance of certain views in online news it is important to take into account global economic, political and cultural processes. Thompson (1995) suggests looking at the complex global interaction between human, material and symbolic flows. The concept of “power” is defined in this context as the “ability to act in pursuit of one’s aims and interests, the ability to intervene in the course of events and to affect their

outcome. In exercising power, individuals employ the resources available to them; resources are the means, which enable them to pursue their aims and interests effectively” (Ibid: 13). Subsequently, Thompson identifies four types of power: economic power, political power, military power and symbolic power. While the first three types may be self-explanatory, the symbolic power refers to the production, transmission and retrieval of information, symbols and cultures through media channels, and thus is directly related to the problem of information inequality and the increasing importance of search engines, as will be further elaborated. However, maybe the most important idea that Thompson puts forward, and is crucial to this study, is that symbolic power constantly corresponds with the other types of power.

While there is obvious significance to each of these forces, Mattelart and Mattelart (1998) suggest that the process of “globalization” initially grew out of the notion of “financial globalization” and the restructuring of the international financial sphere. Regulating and maintaining the economic order in a global scale have clear political and social implications (Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Similarly, Van der Pijl (1984) and Cox (1987) indicate the growing development of trans-national corporations (TNC) and international markets, and their economic and political significance. It has been estimated that multinational corporations account for 20 percent of world production and 70 percent of world trade (Perraton, Goldblatt, Held, & McGrew, 1997). The new global economy is characterized by its capacity to work as a unit in real time on a global scale (Castells, 2000). This is possible mainly due to the existence of a global network of communication that makes possible an immediate flow of information.

From the cultural point of view, globalization can be seen through the diffusion of a few dominant languages across the globe. In the 1990s, De Swaan indicated that ten to twelve languages account for the first language of over 60 percent of the world’s population (De Swaan, 1991). The dominance of English nowadays strongly indicates the symbolic power of two cultural hegemonies, the USA and the UK. The dominance of English is further intensified on the Internet, where 87 percent of the online documents are in English (Lazarus & Mora, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Language is therefore suggested as one of the major reasons for the digital divide within the online community, providing an absolute advantage to those who master English.

Apart from the dominance of English, the growing connectivity and flow of information, people and commodities on a global scale have led to the development of the concept of “cultural imperialism”:

The concept of cultural imperialism today [1976] best describes the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system. The public media are the foremost example of operating enterprises that are used in the penetrative process. For penetration on a significant scale the media themselves must be captured by the

dominating/penetrating power. This occurs largely through the commercialization of broadcasting. (Schiller, 1992: 9-10)

Schiller believes that cultural imperialism or what he also identifies as post-colonialism is characterized by the transition of most of the developing world from political subordination to political independence yet combined with economic dependence. This process is supported and intensified primarily due to the practices of global communication corporations. Unlike other industries, the communication industry has direct implications on human consciousness and therefore also on politics, society and culture. He thus concludes that the worldwide penetration of the Western (predominantly American) media industry leaves little room for the development of opposing or even alternative views and agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Examining the Internet in this context, Kroes (2003) agrees that it is predominantly American in nature as well, suggesting that “anyone who is surfing the net is drawn into a world of information, blending commercial and other messages, that in most cases is clearly of American origin, or is at least cast in an American mould.” (Ibid: 245). Yet, he also suggests that the interactivity of the Internet sometimes enables the “periphery” to “strike back at the empire” and promote local views. In any case, he believes that commercial and capitalist forces dominate the online network, making it an easier and more acceptable medium among Americans and online users from some Western countries.<sup>3,4</sup>

Thus, American dominance is seen primarily through the dominance of its symbolic power in global media channels, which is also supported by global economic structures and institutions. Much of this paper revolves around this view, as it examines the information produced in Google News, while bearing in mind the importance of economic power and commercial considerations that dominate the operation of search engines as well as the various interests of certain political actors.

During the 1970s UNESCO was the first international organization to study and address the asymmetry of communication flow between states and to outline its implications. Resolution 4.121, for example, outlines the main principles of the right to communicate, aiming to achieve greater plurality and more equal distribution of cultural expressions worldwide (UNESCO, 1974). As a result of the policies of the Reagan administration to adopt the theory of “free flow” as well as the overshadowing problems of the Cold War, the various initiatives of international organizations to balance and equalize the information flow eventually turned into a “dialogue of the deaf” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998). In the 1980s, the USA and the UK withdrew from UNESCO in protest, believing that it had become politically and socially hostile to their interests. The UK rejoined in 1997 following a change of government, and the USA rejoined in 2003, but only after UNESCO had implemented considerable organizational reforms (Ofori-Attah, 2007).

This suggests that despite the growing international concern over the American dominance, it seems that the ability to counterbalance this trend is still very limited. But first, we should perhaps ask ourselves whether this asymmetry of communication flow

indeed reinforces the dominance of American views worldwide, creating more homogeneous and global tastes. Some researchers will argue that it is no longer a question of “American” views, since the nation-state structure gradually becomes less influential as a result of global processes in economics, politics, society and culture (Hirst & Thompson, 1999; Lipschutz, 1998; Nash, 2001). The dominant power of states has been particularly challenged by the emergence of ICTs, with their trans-national properties (Falk, 1998). ICTs enable diversity of expressions and therefore Hirst and Thompson (1999) believe that they weaken the capacity of states to control and homogenize the information flow. People communicate across states based on common interests through global interfaces and with English as a universal rather than a national language.

In contrast, May (2002) believes that nation-states are still very much in control over politics, culture and even economics. There are significant barriers of language, culture, religion, national legal systems, and values such as trust, which prevent one homogeneous system to prevail through ICTs (Bennett, 2004). Krasner (1993) further argues that developments in ICTs may actually increase the capacity of states to regulate and control their citizens, and finance their activities from internal sources. To that end, ICTs reinforce and intensify the interaction between members of similar communities, who share a common culture and language (Smith, 2000). In addition, by making possible distant communication, ICTs generate an awareness for cultural differences that does not necessarily end with multicultural hybridity, but rather with further fragmentation and “tribalization” (Thompson, 1990; 1995).

The result of this study support this view, suggesting that together with more opportunities for local expressions, ICTs also serve the interests of powerful states (particularly the USA). Historically, Hills (2002) indicates the asymmetry of structural power and change, where the larger and wealthier states have lost less power to communication corporations than the smaller and poorer ones. She believes that it is impossible to separate between the interests of capitalist states and those of their companies. Although the Internet can be perceived as a “deliberating” platform to exercise freedom of information (production and consumption), it is also believed that certain actors (particularly US corporations and government) have greater abilities to promote their own priorities and agendas. Hence, the political, economic, technological and cultural dominance of the USA has often defined and shaped the online information flow and its order, constantly challenging the communication rights of certain states and actors in the global sphere.

### **Commercial Motives and Their Implications**

Together with the dominance of American priorities and agendas, information inequalities are also produced by the growing commercialization of media in general and the Internet in particular. This is also linked with the obsessive need of media companies to increase the size of their audience and to enhance their control over the production and dissemination of information. To that end, Bagdikian (2004) believes that narrow controlled information means also narrow controlled politics. He demonstrates the

growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few dominant corporations, and warns that while dominant media channels cannot tell the public what to think, they definitely tell their audience what to think about, and therefore further deny the communication rights of smaller companies and individuals.

In contrast, Compaine and Gomery (2000) challenge this view, indicating that when looking at the single industry level, there are trends toward both consolidation and greater competition. They believe that these trends became even more prominent after the emergence of the Internet, which lowered the entrance barriers for smaller media companies (see also Caves, 2000; Shapiro & Varian, 1999). In this sense, news channels, and particularly Google News, theoretically offer more opportunities for smaller news sources. However, studies also indicate constant competition for the limited attention of users, who often rely on the information presented in the homepage of popular portals, or the first page of search engine results (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Van Couvering, 2004; Jansen & Spink, 2003; Waxman, 2000). Thus, the commercialization of news means that, together with more opportunities, there is also an increasingly asymmetrical flow in favor of larger and richer websites.

The ongoing debate regarding media consolidation or diversification can be also seen in the light of the broader discussion of media homogeneity and heterogeneity. Both Bagdikian and Compaine realized the significance of the commercial motives behind the operation of media companies and information production; however, each emphasized a different aspect. This debate directly links to two significant commercial principles: *popularization* and *customization*, which oppose, but also complement each other, and are so essential in this study.

While search engines and portals channel users' attention to more popular websites and content, they are also required to provide advanced means of customization. Indeed, a study by Segev, Ahituv, and Barzilai-Nahon (2007) revealed that customization in popular portals and search engines often increases the heterogeneity and locality of information production in terms of content and form. However, in each of these specific channels the principle of popularization still operates in the background. For example, a search for the term "Iraq" in Google News will return specific news on Iraq, yet within this list of results the automatic ranking will still favor larger and more popular news sources. This tendency corresponds to marketing logic, i.e. providing specific advertisements to maximum users. It is often also a useful principle for many users, who usually search for the more popular news sources, and are less or hardly interested in smaller news sources. Hence, advanced customization of news creates more opportunities to obtain specific information, but this does not necessarily mean that smaller and less popular news sources can reach more audiences. Even when users search for more specific news, there is increasing competition over the position of results within the page, and it would be much more difficult for smaller sources to gain the attention of users who do not specifically search for them.

In the beginning of 2005 Google filed patents in the USA and around the World (WO 2005/029368), which revealed the ranking mechanism behind its news results. In order to

evaluate the “authority” and “quality” of a news source, Google monitors its popularity and worldwide traffic, the number of stories it provides, the average story length, the number of authors and staff employed, the number of bureaus cited and the duration it has been in business (Fox, 2005). Thus, the practice of Google News and its ranking mechanisms support the growth and strengthening of the larger and more popular news sources by definition.

Although Google News complies perfectly with the commercial principles of popularization and customization, its business model is much more complex and subtle. For example, up to now, Google has not included advertisements in its news channel.<sup>5</sup> However, there is no doubt that being a popular news aggregator,<sup>6</sup> Google gains various direct and indirect benefits from this service. Apart from its growing popularity, there are several other indications of the importance of this service to Google. One is the constant developments and introduction of new languages and features (such as archive search) in Google News. Another is the fact that Google actually pays for large news groups in the USA and Europe to formally license content for its news channel (Vass, 2008). Finally, the existence of specific search channels has a great importance for a search engine, as it increases the affiliation and dependency between the users and the company.

Obviously, the ability to obtain, organize, search and customize news from many online sources is very useful for users. It may be even more beneficial for search engines that can follow and store the information consumption habits of their users. In a way, Google News is also beneficial for news companies, as it channels more traffic to their websites. However, Google has been sued by several companies (and was ordered to pay) for copyright infringements, as it presents titles, some content and images of their news articles (Riley, 2007; Auchard, 2007). Thus, although there is a certain trade-off for Google and a vague business model, the growing popularity and constant development of its news channel indicate that so far it seems to conform to its commercial interests. As one of the dominant online advertising agents, it is reasonable to expect that in the long run, after settling copyright issues worldwide, Google will also apply its AdWords system in Google News.

The question is, what are the implications of news aggregators with popularization and customization mechanisms to the emergence of information inequalities? On one hand, they bring together various news sources and enable comparison and plurality of expressions. On the other, they exhibit another form of concentration, drawing the attention of international audiences to the more popular and “authoritative” news sources based on their page-ranking mechanism, and thus, marginalizing or even denying the communication rights of smaller and less “authoritative” news sources. The following analysis of online news examines this trend. Through the study of Google News, it attempts to identify the dominant political voices produced online and their biases.

Looking at the news industry worldwide, Thompson (2000) believes that there is an increasing globalization of international news agencies. Early technological developments, such as the telegraph, and later the radio, supported the emergence of international news agencies, and contributed to the formation of global communication

networks. The four major international news agencies that survived after the Second World War were Reuters from the UK, AFP (Agence France-Presse) from France and AP (Associated Press) and UPI (United Press International) from the USA. Today they are still the dominant international news sources, and efforts by international organizations (e.g. UNESCO) to create a more equal and democratic information and communication order have had a very limited effect (Thompson, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Tantanen, 1998; Wilkin, 2001; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998). Thus, it is expected that Google News, which aggregates popular news sources rather than producing original content, will reflect and further disseminate this trend globally.

## **Methodology**

This paper observes the top news articles in the World News section of Google News in different languages and follows two analytical approaches in order to study their biases. First it explores the frequency of appearance of different countries and issues in Google News. Second it looks at the relationships between countries (referred as “news-links”) and employs network analysis in order to portray the conceptual map of the World as represented by many popular news sources through Google News.

### ***Frequency of Appearance of Issues and States***

The study of frequency of appearance of certain issues is a common practice in media analysis. A similar approach was taken by Dearing and Rogers (1996), who measured the number of news stories as an indication of media attention and the popularity of certain issues (see also Kiouisis, 2004; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Pritchard, 1984; Benton & Frazier, 1976). Another way to assess popularity is by examining the position of news articles within the text (Kiouisis, 2004; Ghanem, 1997; Williams, 1985). Some scholars have further combined the principles of volume and position of news articles under the category of “visibility” (Manheim, 1986) in order to explore media attention, priorities and agendas.

Subsequently, the “visibility” of certain issues and countries in Google News was examined and assessed. On each day Google News displays the 20 most popular World news articles, integrating more than 4500 websites (Google, 2007). For each of the news articles, it also displays the number of online-related sources available, thus indicating the global coverage level of the issue. The top 20 news articles of Google World News were documented daily over a period of six months between August 2005 and January 2006. In total 2860 news articles in English were analyzed. The following aspects of each news article was documented: date, relative position (out of 20 news articles), the main countries to which it referred, the news source, the number of other sources dealing with the same issue or event and a précis of the article. These data were summarized in the result section to outline the dominant countries and issues in popular World news, and thus to picture the global political map as perceived by popular news websites.

Apart from news in English, Google News provided World news in 11 other languages during the period of observation. The popular World news in each language was slightly



different, since news sources were usually different (not all news sources have an English edition, and certainly not multilingual content). Since there are only a few dominant international news agencies, which provide World news to all other local news sources, it would be expected to find similar World news in different languages. Nonetheless, popular news in different languages can also promote local issues and agendas, which are crucial to the study of information inequalities and communication rights. Thus, each of the 11 non-English editions of Google World News was analyzed on a weekly basis for a period of three months between March and May 2006, looking at its top 20 news articles and comparing them with those of the English edition. In total 2880 news articles in different languages were examined. Ultimately, the paper summarizes and compares the frequency of appearance of countries in each of these editions.

### *Network Analysis of News-links Between Countries*

The second analytical approach was based on the network theory, which provides a useful framework for understanding and envisioning the relationships between countries as reflected through news. In many cases, news articles indicate formal or informal relationships between two or more countries. An international network emerges when countries are considered as nodes, and news articles provide a descriptive map of the links between them (hereafter: news-links). Hence, the analysis of the relations between countries as an international network may reveal which countries are more connected and serve as central and dominant hubs in the network, and which countries are less connected and play a more marginal role. It should be noted that the following analysis is not necessarily a presentation of the actual political relations between states, but rather a *representation* of the international network as perceived by popular news sources.

While the first analytical approach looks at the frequency of occurrence of countries in news, the network analysis focuses on the news-links, i.e. the relations between countries and their structures (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). It can indicate not only which countries appear more frequently in mainstream news, but also with which other countries they are frequently engaged, and what is their overall position in relation to other countries. Thus, the network analysis provides a much more detailed and visual conceptual map of the World's politics as represented by news sources worldwide.

Some studies (Snyder & Kick, 1979; Nemeth & Smith, 1985) have realized the benefit of network analysis in understanding the World's political and economic systems, the position of countries and transnational interactions as indicators of economic growth. Recent studies have also employed network theory to examine the structure of international telecommunications (Barnett, 2001), indicating the dominance of North America and Western Europe in the production and dissemination of information. Similarly, Barnett and Kim (1996) utilized network analysis in order to examine the flow of international news, indicating a clear asymmetry where the Western industrialized countries dominated the production and dissemination of international news. Their study also suggested that the growing exchange of news among these countries further marginalized the position of other countries. Finally, they revealed that the structure of international news flow is influenced mainly by the economic development, and also by

the language, geographic location, political freedom, and population of each country. Thus, network analysis has increasingly become a useful method for studying the complexity of the global communication flow, and particularly the flow of news.

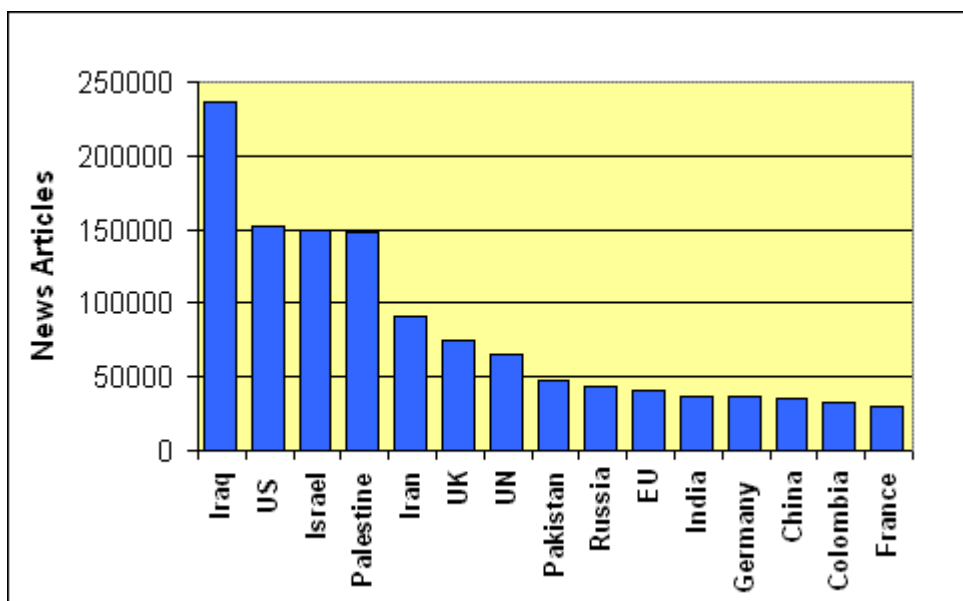
This paper applies network analysis in the study of Google News, not in terms of news flow, but rather in terms of content. It uses the same data that were sampled daily between August 2005 and January 2006, looking at the top 20 news articles of Google World News. For each one of the news articles it groups all countries that were mentioned together and had a certain formal or informal relationships. Then, it uses Borgatti's (2002) software, NetDraw Version 2, to produce visual networks of news-links between countries. Additionally, this software summarizes for each country its degree of connection (i.e. the numbers of news-links it has with other countries) as well as the strength of its ties (the number of news articles that mentioned each pair of countries). In this way, the network analysis not only graphically displays the centrality of certain countries, but also enables to look more specifically at the role and position of each country in relation to other countries, providing an important understanding of the biased representation of the World in Google News, and thus also in popular news sources in English.

## Results

### *Dominant Online States*

Figure 1 summarizes for each country and international organization (such as the UN and the EU) the number of news articles in English referring to it, and therefore indicates the countries and organizations which appeared most frequently in online news sources over the period of six months between August 2005 and January 2006.

**Figure 1 - Frequency of Occurrence of Countries in Google World News**



It shows that Iraq was the country that occurred most frequently in online World news in English. 235,928 news articles in Google World News mentioned Iraq over this period, on average more than 1,600 articles per day. In second place were the USA, Israel and Palestine, each being mentioned in about 150,000 news articles, on average more than 1,000 news articles per day. An analysis that also took the position of the news articles in the page into account yielded very similar results, where all four countries led in frequency.

Another way to determine the order of interest in countries in news sources is to conduct a search for each country in Google News. This makes it possible to determine the number of news articles mentioning each country in all news sources. Figure 2 displays the most frequently hit countries in Google News in general in a search conducted on 7 February 2006.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2 - Frequency of Occurrence of Countries in Google News**

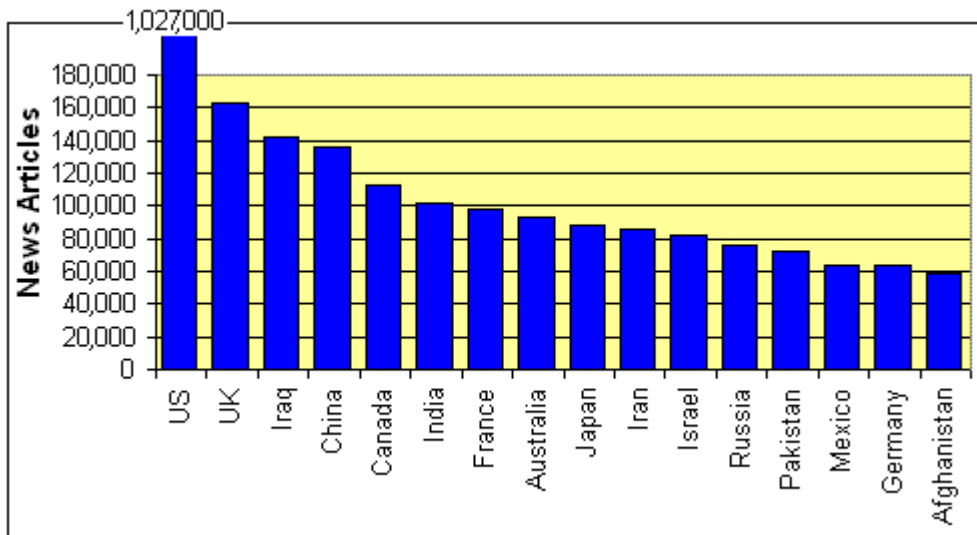


Figure 2 shows that the USA has by far the most news items, being mentioned in more than one million news articles per month.<sup>8</sup> The other most frequently occurring countries, such as the UK, Iraq, China and Canada, were mentioned in fewer than 180,000 news articles per month. The USA, and not Iraq, is the most frequently occurring country, since the analysis includes *all* news, while in Figure 1 it included only *World* news. This difference implies that most news in English is produced by American sources, mostly focusing on the USA, and views Iraq as the most widespread international concern, given the USA's involvement there. Other English-speaking countries, notably the UK, Canada and Australia, become more prominent because they also produce news in English. Findings provide strong evidence for the Western-centric point of view that dominates news in English. There is a very minor presence of South American countries among popular news sources, and hardly any presence of African countries.

This should not imply that there were fewer events to cover in these countries. IRIN news service, which is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, established to “bridge the information gap”, indicated civil wars in both Uganda and Somalia during the same period of observation.<sup>9</sup> Although IRIN reports revealed that the number of casualties of violence and displacements in these countries exceeded those in the Iraq War (IRIN, 2006a), they were marginalized from Google World News. Somalia, for example, was ranked in 116th place, with only 282 news articles over a six-month period (compared with 235,928 news articles mentioning Iraq). It is possible to obtain news on Somalia in Google News by making a specific search. However, many African countries rarely make headlines, and thus most users, who are not aware of significant World conflicts apart from the Iraq war, have very little opportunity to learn about them while reading the top stories in Google News.

A further analysis examines which countries dominate the *production* of news in English. Based on the news source of each observed news article, Figure 3 portrays the share of each country in producing Google World News over a period of six months.

**Figure 3 - Online News Sources by Countries**

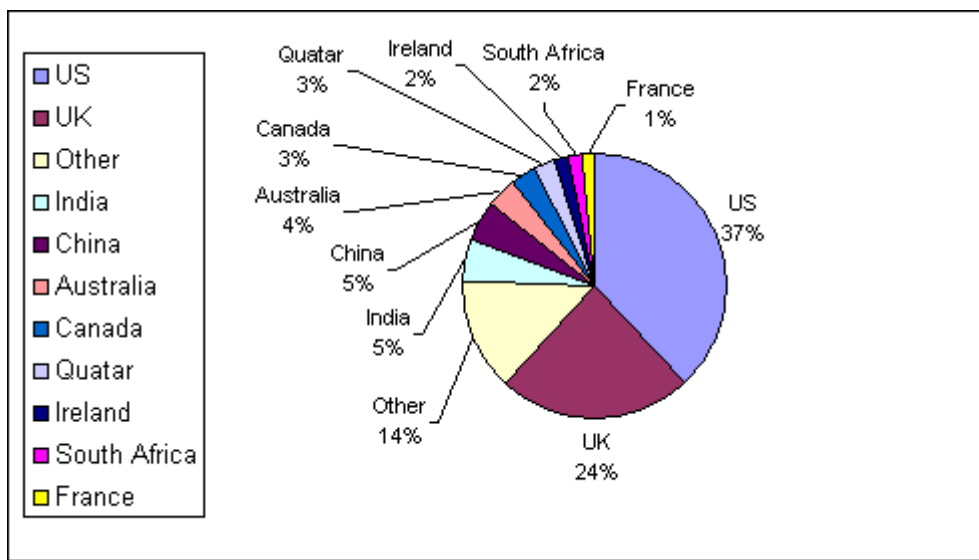


Figure 3 shows that American news sources are the most productive, generating 37 percent of the total English news articles. British news sources are in second place, producing 24 percent of the English news articles. Each of the other countries produces less than 5 percent of the English news articles in Google World News. Since Google News integrates thousands of news sources, it reflects a certain estimate of the market share, where the USA and the UK provide together around 60 percent of the popular World news in English. Other native English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada and Ireland, provide together around 20 percent of the popular World news in English. Only 20 percent of the popular World news in English is provided by non-English speaking countries, usually as the English version of their local news online.

The dominance of the USA and the UK in popular news in English can explain why Iraq was the country that occurred most frequently in World news. Both countries were engaged in military operations in Iraq during the period of observation. Consequently, users from other countries who read World news in English were channeled to view the military operations in Iraq as the dominant international event. The bias of news thus supports the formation of a global image in which the USA, its allies and their foreign politics and priorities, are the main international concern.

***International Concern***

Apart from the frequency of appearance in Google World news, it is worth looking at the main issues with which each country is concerned. Based on the collected data, Figure 4 summarizes the number of news articles and the main political issues concerning Iraq over the period of six months between August 2005 and January 2006.

**Figure 4 - Online News Articles about Iraq**

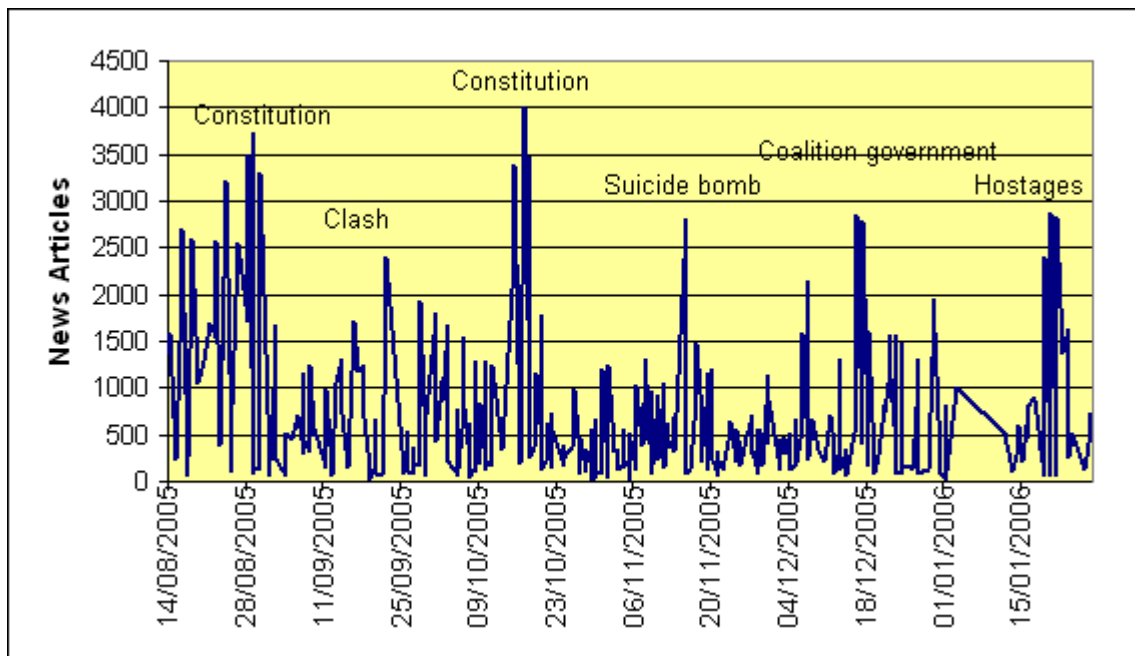


Figure 4 shows that the most frequently occurring issues related to Iraq were the process of establishing a democratic regime, and the constant insurgency and terror attacks, which interfered with and threatened this process. Figure 5 shows the main issues discussed in relation to the USA, the country which occurs second in frequency in World news in English.

**Figure 5 - Online News Articles about the USA**

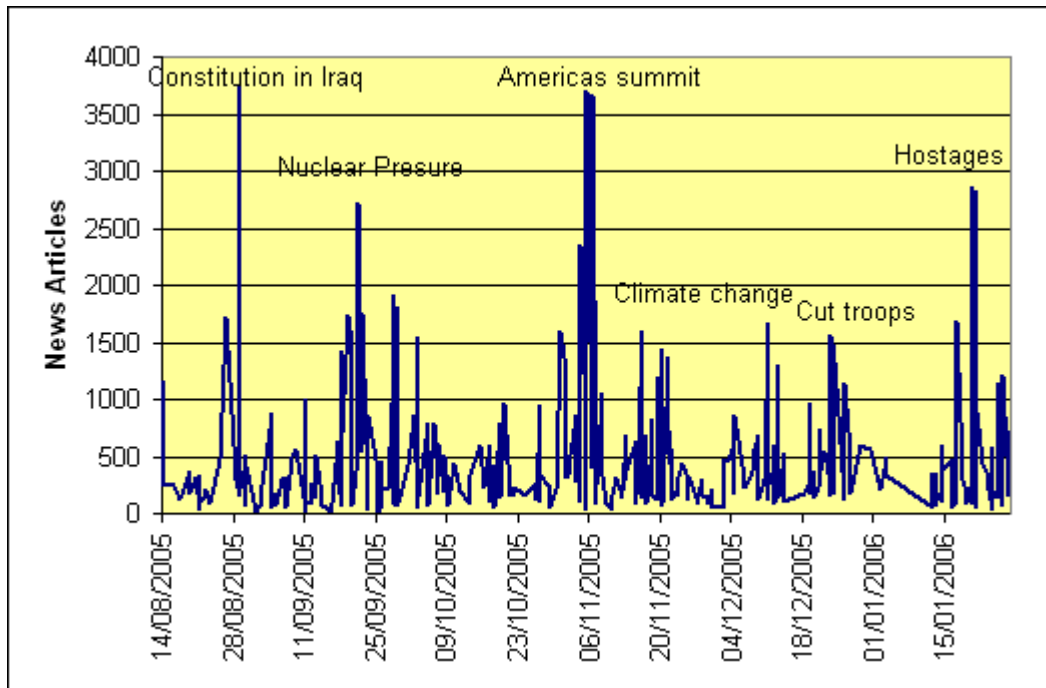
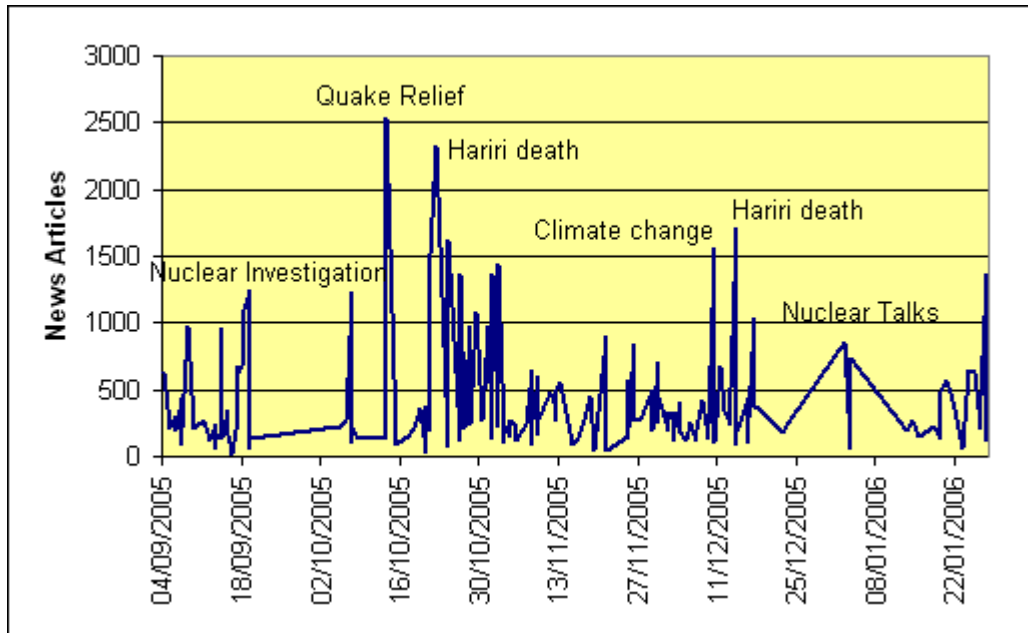


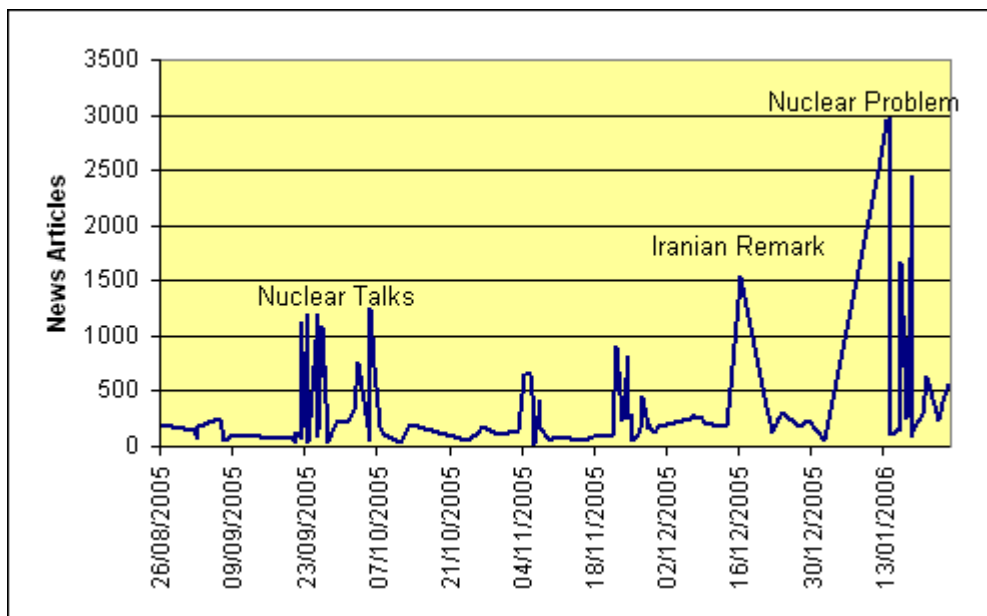
Figure 5 shows that the involvement of the USA in Iraq was one of the issues appearing most frequently in World news during the period of observation, from the political pressure to establish a democratic constitution, to the military operations and counter-attacks. Apart from its role in Iraq, the USA is also mentioned in the context of the Americas Summit, anti-nuclear pressure on Iran and North Korea, and climate change. In terms of numbers, although the population of Iraq and the USA together comprise only 4.8 percent of the entire World population, more than 21 percent of World news in the observation period is about these countries.

The frequency analysis indicated also the relatively high popularity of international organizations such as the UN and the EU, which were ranked within the top ten popular political entities in World news. Interestingly, the EU was mentioned more than most European countries. Figures 6 and 7 reveal the main issues discussed in relation with these two international organizations.

**Figure 6 - Online News Articles about the UN**



**Figure 7 - Online News Articles about the EU**



These figures suggest that both the UN and the EU play crucial roles in maintaining international security and the balance of power. While the EU was mentioned more in the context of the Iranian nuclear plan, which is of primary concern to the US, the UN was also mentioned in the context of the Asian earthquake relief, the intrigues surrounding Hariri's death in the Middle East and environmental issues.

## *International Network*

Figure 8 delineates the center of the news-link network. The size of a node indicates its degree, i.e. the number of news-links that each country has with other countries. The width of the links indicates the strength of the tie, i.e. the number of news articles mentioning each pair of countries.

**Figure 8 - International Network Center**

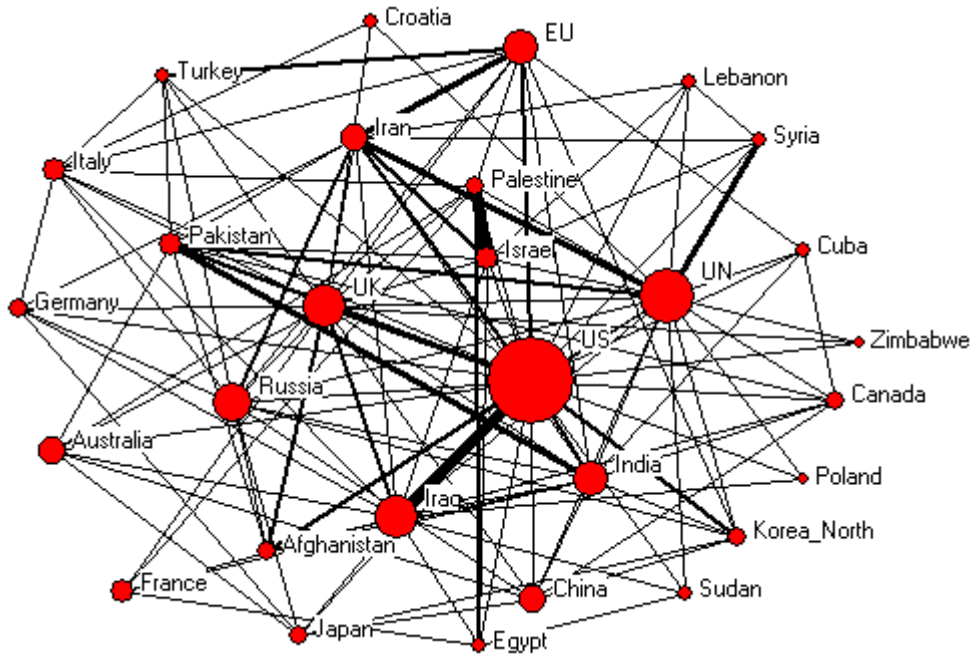


Figure 8 shows that the USA is at the center of the network, with ties to 54 other countries, i.e. it is the main and largest hub of the international network, linked to more than 45 percent of countries. Interestingly, the UN is the second most linked node, with links to 32 countries. The UK has 25 links, Iraq 24 links, Russia 21 links and the EU and India 20 news-links to other countries.

The strength of ties indicates the number of news articles mentioning each pair of countries. It may therefore signify which countries are reported to be more frequently engaged with each other. Figure 8 reveals that the USA and Iraq are highly engaged with one another, as are Israel and Palestine. Further, there are frequent engagements between the UN and both Iran and Syria. The EU has frequent engagements with Iran, Pakistan with India, and the UK with the USA. As the previous discussion on international concerns revealed, these strong ties often indicate tensions between the two states/organizations, and less often cooperation (which can be explained in that tensions and conflicts tend to be better reported by the mass media than cooperation and peace).

Apart from international organizations, the center of the international network also includes most English-speaking countries (the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia) and some European and Middle Eastern countries. Asian and South American countries are



located in the middle. African countries tend to be located in the margin of the international network as perceived by English news sources. As such, this network is obviously biased and represents a very partial picture of the World. Between August 2005 and January 2006, civil wars, health problems, food shortages and massive displacements of communities were taking place in the Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Liberia, Burundi, Senegal, Nepal and Yemen (IRIN, 2006a; UN News, 2006). Most of these events were marginalized in news. Similarly, in the same period, IRIN news services reported on the growing tensions between Chad and Sudan and between Gambia and Senegal. News in English did not mention Gambia and Senegal at all, while Sudan was mentioned only in relation to the USA and the UN. Thus, news-links between African countries did not get much representation in the international network of Google News. African international relations seemed to matter only when their relations mattered to countries and organizations outside Africa, and particularly the main hubs (i.e. the USA, the UN and the UK).

Furthermore, it is possible to separate each country and analyze its international environment (i.e. ego-centered network) as represented by popular news sources in English. The ego-centered network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) allows focusing on one specific actor, in this case a country, and its relations or news-links with other countries. The UN is the second most important hub, and it is also the hub that connects most African countries to the international network. It could be argued that it is primarily because of UN concern that African countries get some news coverage.

**Figure 9 - The International Network of the UN**

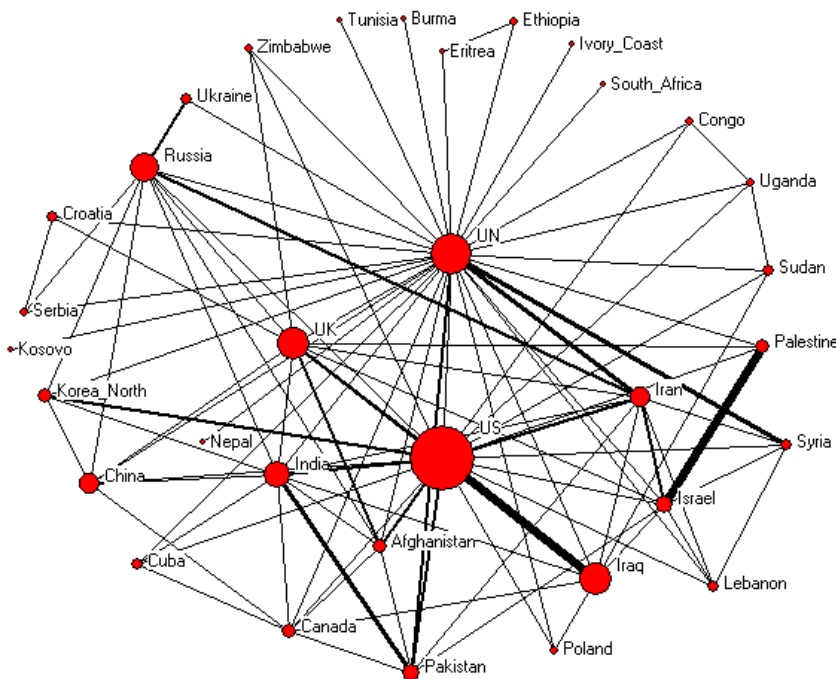


Figure 9 shows that, together with links with many African countries, the UN has strong ties with Iran, Syria and Pakistan. With Iran there is the issue of the nuclear problem,

with Syria the investigation of Hariri's death, and with Pakistan the earthquake relief. Popular news articles do not mention the UN so much in relation to Asian, South American and European countries, but there are certainly news-links with the main hubs, the USA, the UK, Russia and China. Here the international network of the UN can provide a visual illustration of its main activities and concerns as perceived by popular news sources.

**Figure 10 - The International Network of the EU**

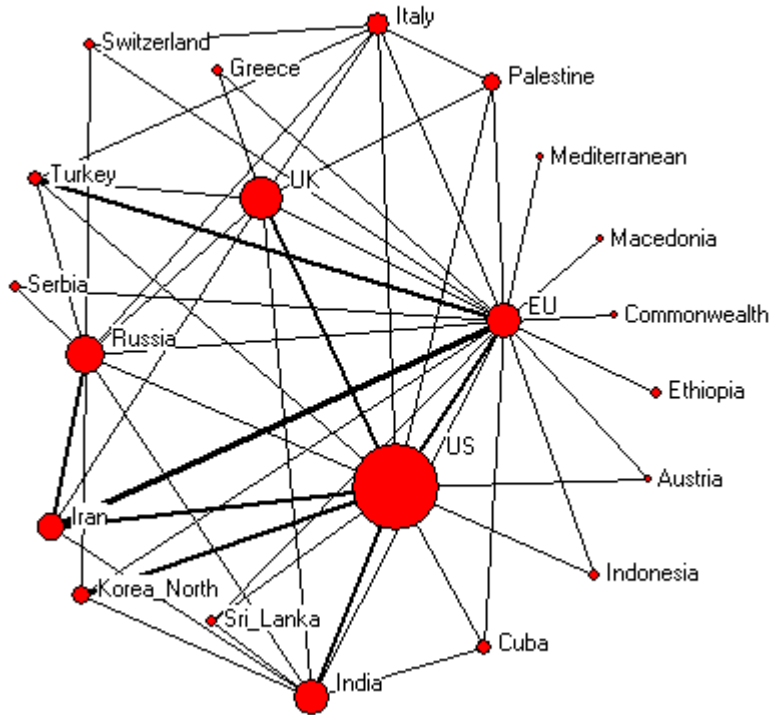
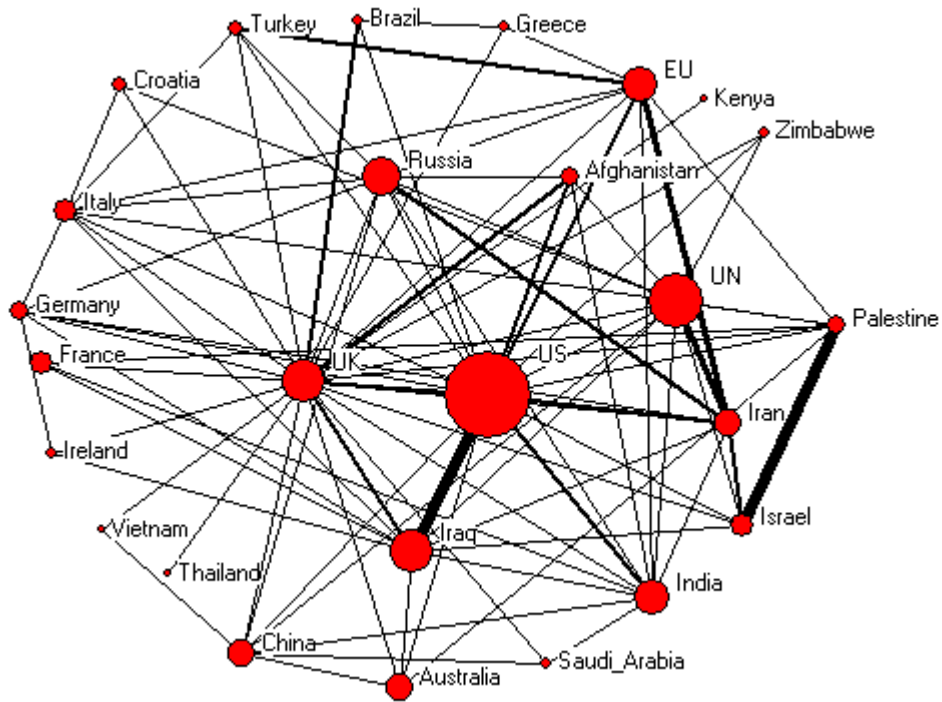


Figure 10 illustrates the international network of the EU. As a regional organization it has obviously more links to European countries, but it also acts as a hub linking to many other countries, such as Iran and North Korea, as well as to other hubs such as the USA, the UK, Russia and India. Through this particular structural framework, the EU is viewed as an international hub, in a way a smaller version of the UN. It has fewer links and its ties are weaker than those of the UN. The heterogeneity of links to a few African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries may imply that its international function and concern are still not entirely shaped (or recognized by popular news sources).

Similarly, the international network of the UK is relatively large and scattered. It has links to some other European countries and to main hubs, such as the USA, the UN, the EU, Russia and China. Additionally, it has relatively strong ties with Iraq and Afghanistan, where it is engaged in military operations, and with Brazil, with which it had diplomatic tensions due to the London shooting of an innocent Brazilian man in July 2005. Finally, there are some weak links to Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries.

**Figure 11 - The International Network of the UK**



The international network of Iraq reveals a very different picture. Here there is almost full representation of many English-speaking as well as European countries and some Middle Eastern Countries. Apart from Japan there are no Asian countries linked to Iraq.

**Figure 12 - The International Network of Iraq**

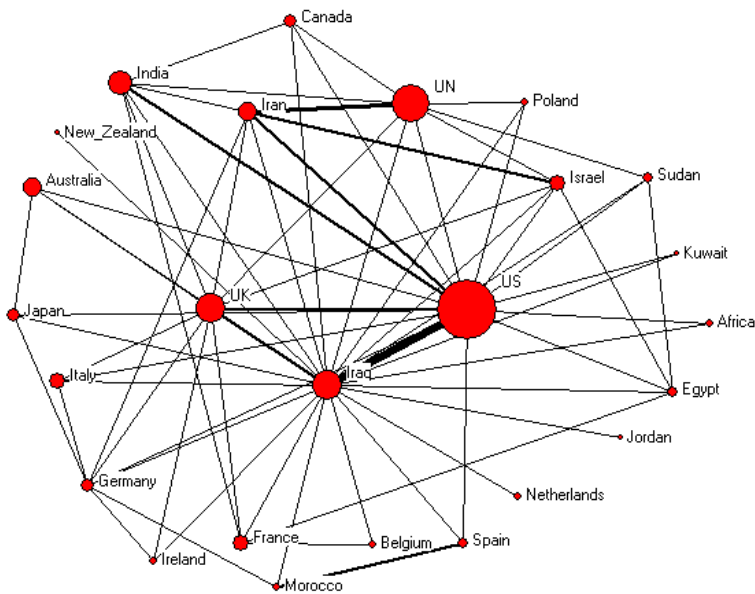
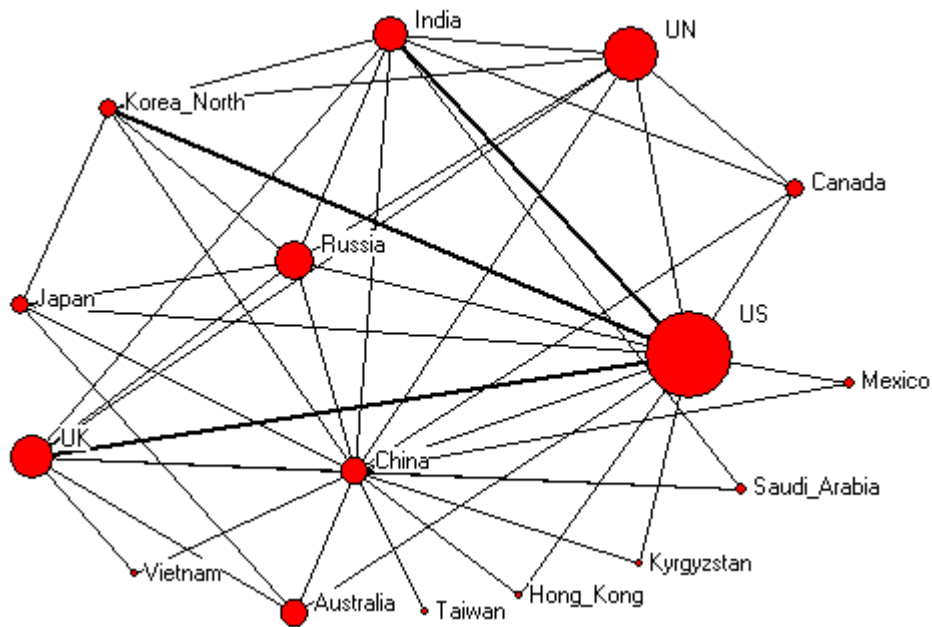


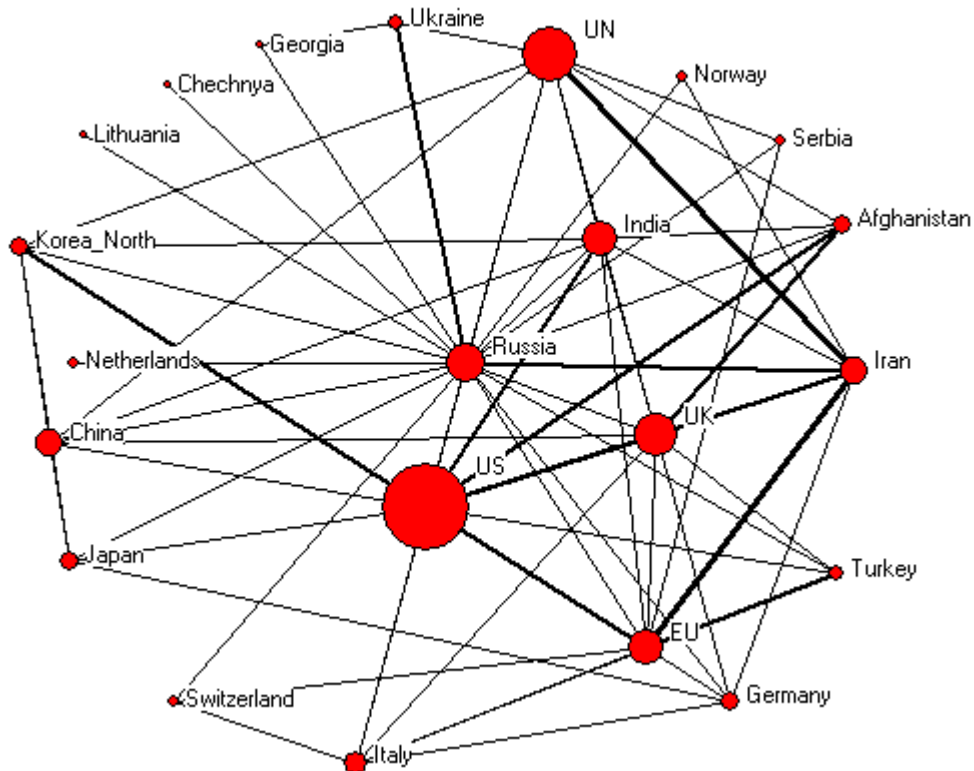
Figure 12 shows that the strongest ties of Iraq are with the USA and then with the UK. As Iraq is mentioned mainly in the context of the USA's military operation and its "nation-building" efforts, the international network represented by news sources is highly biased toward Western interests. In this case, Figure 12 particularly shows which countries were the key players involved in these operations. Interestingly, there were no news-links between Iraq and Syria, Lebanon or Turkey. This is despite the major effects of the Iraq War on these countries. For example, in December 2005 IRIN News (2006b) reported on almost one million Iraqi refugees who fled to Syria to escape US-led offensives, and their plight, and also their role in the Iraqi elections.

The international networks of Russia and China reveal that they have relatively more news-links to Asian countries in their region. Similarly to the role of the UN as an international hub to African countries, the network analysis indicates that both Russia and China serve as crucial hubs to some Asian countries.

**Figure 13 - The International Network of China**



**Figure 14 - The International Network of Russia**



Both China and Russia have news-links to the main hubs (i.e. the USA, the UK and the UN) and to some countries in their region. However, they have almost no news-links with Middle Eastern, African or South American countries. Interestingly, there were no news-links between Russia and many of its central Asian neighbours, such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In November 2005, for example, IRIN News (2006c) reported on a treaty signed by Russia and Uzbekistan, offering mutual assistance and providing each with the right to use military facilities in either country. This event, however, did not make headlines in Google News. Similarly, the strategic ties between China and West African countries, as well as China's economic investments, in January 2006 (IRIN, 2006d) were not mentioned in popular news in English.

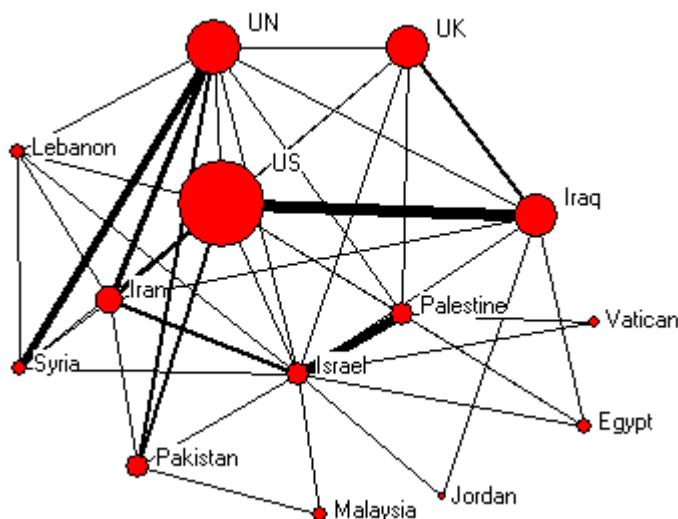
Again, the news-link networks indicate that Russia and China are mentioned mostly when the issues are also related to the USA. The content of news-links provides clear support to this claim. To begin with, Russia and China are both mentioned in the context of military cooperation. Further, China has news-links with the UK, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and North Korea, all of which deal with enhancing political and economic ties with these countries. In contrast, the news-links of China with the USA are mostly about growing tensions: American and UN criticism of human rights abuse in China, American concern about the militarization of China and American pressure on Chinese political reforms. Similarly, in relation to Hong Kong and Taiwan, China is mentioned as a regime that exercises tight control and limits democracy and freedom initiatives. Obviously, China is pictured by popular news in English as a growing

international actor that may threaten American security. Moreover, China is often mentioned in the context of human rights abuses, such as the killing of protesters over property rights or the journalists’ protest against censorship in December 2005. All examples suggest that in popular news in English, China is viewed as a problem or an increasing economic and political challenge for the West.

Similarly to China, the representation of Russia in news in English is mostly one-sided. Russia has news-links with North Korea and Iran dealing with its support of their nuclear plans and its involvement in international arm deals. Further, Russia has news-links with India, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey, all of which deal with enhancing political and economic ties with these countries. In contrast, within Asia, among its neighbors, Chechnya, Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine, news-links deal with political and economic tensions. The USA is only mentioned as expressing criticism and concern over Russian support of Iranian nuclear plans. Additionally, Russia is mentioned in the context of Khodorovsky’s hunger strike and the governmental control of NGOs. Hence, the content of popular news-links in English clearly underlies a dominant American concern over the “unresolved” international identity of Russia. Has Perestroika really changed the face of Russia from an “enemy” to a “friend”? Will it succeed in fighting internal corruption (Khodorovsky) and governmental control (NGOs) on its way to become a more “democratic” and “free” state?

Finally, the international network of Israel indicates its importance as a regional hub in the Middle East, although many other countries have news-links with each other and with the USA. The Middle Eastern network is therefore a particularly tied cluster, in which each country has either positive or negative relations with other countries in the region.

**Figure 15 - The International Network of Israel**



The analysis of international networks as represented by English news sources could not reveal a regional hub in South America. To that end, the USA serves not only as a global hub, but also as a regional hub for the American continent, probably since most international news in English provides a biased and narrow view of the region through an American lens. Of course, an analysis of international news in Spanish and Portuguese might reveal different networks with different hubs, though see below for some general trends.

### *The Language Dimension*

Together with the growing number of newsreaders around the World, there is an increase in the number of non-English news sources. Hence, an interesting question is whether popular news sources in different languages have different biases, reinforcing different imaginary communities. In the period of three months between March and May 2006, Google News provided popular World news in 12 languages. Table 1 displays the 20 countries most frequently mentioned in news sources in different languages. In order to emphasize the differences between English and non-English sources, countries that appeared less in English news, but more in non-English news, are shown bold. In contrast, countries frequently appearing in both English and non-English news are shown in light grey.

**Table 1 - Frequency of Occurrence of Countries in Google World News by Language**

Rank	English	Spanish	Dutch	French	Portuguese	German	Italian	Chinese (Mandarin)	Chinese (Cantonese)	Japanese	Korean	Hebrew
1	USA	USA	USA	Italy	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	Iran
2	Iraq	France	Iran	Iran	France	Iraq	Palestine	Iran	<b>China</b>	<b>China</b>	Canada	USA
3	Iran	Iran	<b>Belgium</b>	USA	Italy	UK	Iran	<b>Japan</b>	<b>Japan</b>	Iraq	<b>S. Korea</b>	Italy
4	Russia	Italy	<b>Netherlands</b>	Russia	Iraq	Italy	Iraq	<b>China</b>	Iran	<b>Japan</b>	<b>China</b>	France
5	Palestine	<b>Peru</b>	Iraq	France	Iran	UN	Israel	Iraq	Iraq	Iran	<b>Japan</b>	<b>Germany</b>
6	Italy	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Poland</b>	Israel	Israel	Afghanistan	France	<b>S. Korea</b>	Russia	<b>S. Korea</b>	<b>N. Korea</b>	Israel
7	Israel	Iraq	EU	Iraq	Russia	Iran	Italy	<b>Serbia</b>	<b>S. Korea</b>	EU	UN	Russia
8	Afghanistan	UN	Italy	Palestine	Palestine	Russia	Russia	Russia	<b>Taiwan</b>	Palestine	<b>Vietnam</b>	EU
9	Australia	<b>Spain</b>	Russia	EU	<b>Yugoslavia</b>	Palestine	India	Italy	<b>Yugoslavia</b>	UN	Australia	Iraq
10	Nepal	<b>Yugoslavia</b>	UK	<b>Yugoslavia</b>	<b>Peru</b>	<b>Switzerland</b>	UK	<b>Thailand</b>	UN	Russia	UK	UK
11	France	<b>Vatican</b>	Israel	<b>Egypt</b>	UK	<b>Bolivia</b>	<b>China</b>	Ukraine	Palestine	<b>N. Korea</b>	EU	<b>Jordan</b>
12	UK	<b>Colombia</b>	Palestine	<b>Serbia</b>	<b>Chile</b>	France	<b>Peru</b>	Palestine	<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>	<b>Africa</b>	Palestine
13	Sudan	<b>Cuba</b>	Afghanistan	<b>Spain</b>	EU	<b>S. Leone</b>	Afghanistan	Pakistan	Ukraine	UK	Iraq	<b>Syria</b>
14	EU	Israel	<b>Serbia</b>	Ukraine	<b>Liberia</b>	<b>World</b>	Canada	India	France	India	<b>Nigeria</b>	Australia
15	India	EU	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Belarus</b>	Nepal	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Germany</b>	UN	<b>Thailand</b>	<b>Syria</b>	France	Sudan
16	Sri Lanka	<b>Brazil</b>	India	<b>Ivory Coast</b>	<b>Egypt</b>	Ukraine	EU	France	India	<b>World</b>	Iran	<b>Egypt</b>
17	Canada	<b>Uruguay</b>	<b>Vatican</b>	<b>Chad</b>	<b>Venezuela</b>	Israel	<b>Brazil</b>	UK	UK	Sudan	<b>Syria</b>	Pakistan
18	UN	Russia	<b>Spain</b>	<b>China</b>	India	<b>Austria</b>	Israel	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>	India	<b>Lebanon</b>
19	Ukraine	<b>Serbia</b>	France	<b>Switzerland</b>	Ukraine	<b>Armenia</b>	<b>Somalia</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Somalia</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>	<b>Yugoslavia</b>
20	Pakistan	Nepal	UN	Canada	<b>China</b>	Australia	<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Belarus</b>	<b>N. Korea</b>	<b>Cameron</b>	Israel	Ireland

The dominance of light grey countries in Table 1 indicates that there is not a great difference in the focus of World news in different languages. In all sources, English and

non-English, the USA is one of the countries which is mentioned most frequently in World news. Interestingly, Italy is mentioned more than the USA in French news, and Iran more than the USA in Hebrew news. However, in both French and Hebrew news the USA was ranked second or third. Generally, news in European languages (including Spanish and Portuguese, which are also popular in Latin America) has a very similar focus to that of English news. World News in Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, German and Italian focuses mainly on the USA, Iraq, Iran, Russia and the Middle East, all of which also occur frequently in English news. African and Asian countries have very little presence in World news in most European languages. Obviously, in World news in Asian languages, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, there is a dominant presence of Asian countries, besides the high presence of the USA and the Middle East.

Apart from the USA's dominance in non-English news, there are also some significant regional trends. News in Spanish and Portuguese often mentions countries in Latin America, such as Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and Venezuela, which occur far less frequently in English news. Similarly, news in Hebrew often mentions countries in the Middle East, such as Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon, which occur far less frequently in English news.

Figure 16 portrays the international network as reflected by World news in different languages. Each of the 12 languages was linked with the 20 countries most frequently mentioned in it. The large blue nodes represent languages and the small red nodes represent the most frequently mentioned countries. The size of a node indicates its degree of connection, i.e. in how many languages the country was mentioned. The width of the links indicates the strength of the tie, i.e. the number of news articles that mentioned each country.



**Figure 16 - The International Network by Language**

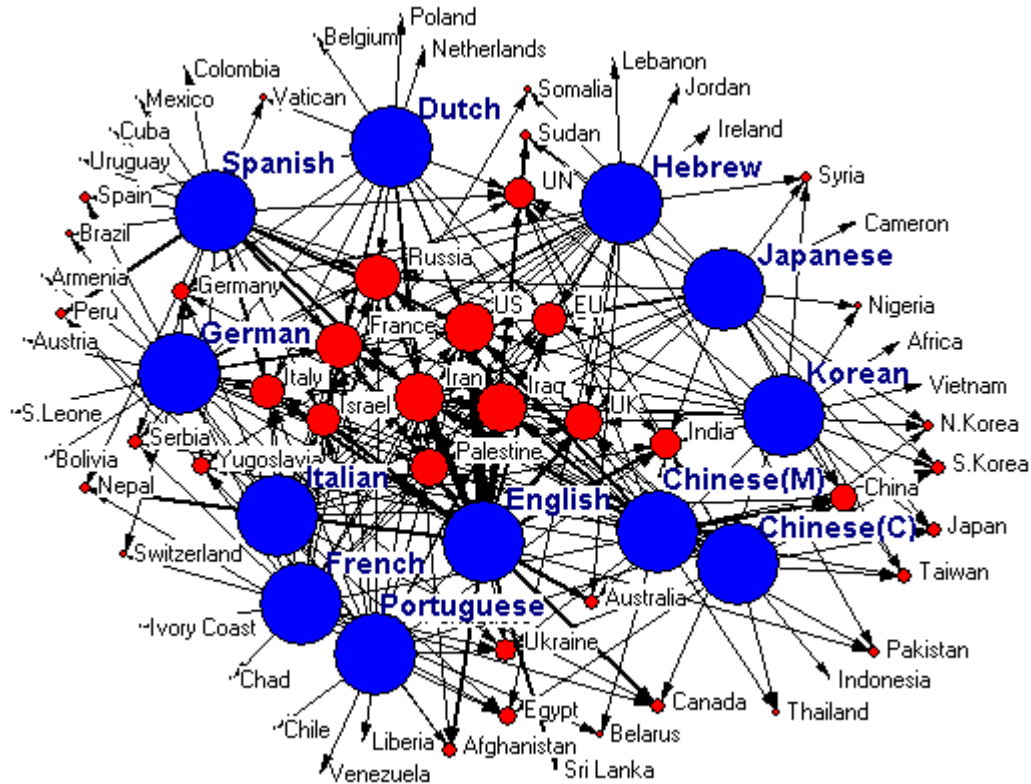


Figure 16 indicates that the USA, Iraq and Iran are the most frequently mentioned countries in World news in all languages. Immediately following; France, Russia, the UK, the UN, the EU, Palestine, Israel, Italy and India, play a central role in World news in different languages. Finally, similarly to previous indications, Asian and Latin American countries occur frequently only in news in Asian and Latin American languages respectively. Most African countries occur far less frequently in news sources in different languages, and therefore constitute only a minor part of the imaginary international community as perceived by users worldwide.

Figure 16 clearly demonstrates regional trends, where South American countries dominate Spanish and Portuguese news; Asian countries dominate Japanese, Chinese and Korean news; and Middle Eastern countries dominate Hebrew news. Apart from regional trends, there are also very obvious global trends. The center of the international network reflected by non-English news is very similar to the center of the international network reflected by English news. Considering the recent involvement of the USA in military operations in Iraq, and its growing concern over the Iranian nuclear plan, these global trends suggest that, similarly to English news, non-English news in Google News is also biased toward US-centric priorities and agendas.

## Summary and Conclusion

The study of Google News suggests that, together with informing the public, it has also shaped a certain global image, in which the USA, its allies and their foreign politics were the main international concern in the second half of 2005. One of the reasons for this partial representation of the World is that the USA and the UK provide together around 60 percent of popular World news in English.<sup>10</sup> Other native English-speaking countries, such as Australia, Canada and Ireland, provide together around 20 percent of popular World news in English. Only 20 percent of the popular World news in English is provided by non-English speaking countries, usually as the English version of their local news websites. Thus, a US-centric view is reinforced, mainly since American news sources also dominate the English media. Google News, that gathers and organizes thousands of these news sources, reflects this trend.

A network analysis also revealed the relations between countries, and mapped their relative positions in the news-link network as perceived through Google News and popular news sources. It indicated that, in addition to the USA, the center of the international network also includes the UN, the UK, Iraq, Russia, the EU and India as main hubs that link to many other countries. Asian and South American countries are located in the middle and have more regional links. African countries tend to be located at the margin of the international network as perceived by news in English. Thus, the network analysis indicated that many countries appear in news only because of their relations with the main hubs. In this context, the UN plays a crucial role as a central hub that connects many African countries with the rest of the international network, bringing them into public consciousness. This shows the importance and potential of certain international organizations in the global political map, or at least in the imaginary world as represented by popular news channels.

Strikingly, the center of the international network reflected by non-English news was very similar to the center of the international network reflected by English news. This suggests that popular news in different languages is still very biased toward US-centric priorities and agenda. This is probably because there are only a few dominant international news agencies, which originate in English-speaking countries and provide World news to all other local news sources. Thus, most international news is translated from English sources and distributed through local media channels.

The study of Google News indicates that news aggregation tools do not necessarily increase the plurality of views, and in fact, may rather reinforce the dominance of American views and challenge the right to communicate. This bias is not an intentional agenda of commercial search engines, but rather an inevitable result of their popularization and customization mechanisms. In many cases, popularity of websites is an indication of their relevancy. While Google News pushes by definition<sup>11</sup> more popular news sources to its front pages, it also appeals to larger audiences and generates more traffic. This is true, not only for its news channel, but also for its e-commerce channel (i.e. product search), its academic channel (i.e. Google Scholar), and so on. The idea is that if most users find an information source relevant and appealing, there is more chance

that a random user will also find it appealing. From this perspective, prioritizing more popular and authority sites clearly benefits Google's popularity. Moreover, it was earlier suggested that after settling copyright problems worldwide, Google may also apply its AdWords program in Google News, since news companies increasingly depend on the traffic it generates. As has happened with other media, it is expected that a growing dependence on advertisements will only further strengthen the dominance of mainstream news channels and contribute to the commodification of news with all the previously discussed political implications.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, advanced customization, which is another important commercial motive, often works in the opposite direction, and when it comes to news it increases the possibilities and variety of means for skilled users to find smaller and less-popular news sources. However, users who search for these sources usually also know what they are looking for, and are able to search skillfully for more specific information. The Internet and the increasing customization power of search engines may certainly provide easier and quicker access to that information, but people who search for alternative views, and knowing unique ways to get alternative information, were around well before the advent of the Internet. Many users, however, are not aware of specific non-mainstream news sources, and do not search for them frequently. They are part of a vicious circle, defining the popular and retrieving it in return. The page-ranking mechanism in Google News is not and cannot be the cause, it is merely an essential agent that contributes to this process.

The current analysis of main issues and states in Google News in its English and non-English versions raises concerns about the right to communicate, especially when it comes to smaller or non-Western actors. It suggests that, together with local and regional trends (based on the different news languages), there are also very significant global trends of US-centric views. These trends portray another aspect of information inequality, and in a way correspond to observations of other scholars regarding the dominant role of American views in online media and international news production (Kroes, 2003; Thompson, 2000; Barnett & Kim, 1996). The World as reflected by Google News, and therefore also by popular news sources, is one in which American international relations with Iraq or Iran are, or should be, everyone's business. It is a world in which Asian and South American countries have limited importance primarily within their own region and vernacular news. Finally, it is a world in which African countries that produce a very small fraction of news sources online are completely marginalized and neglected by the international community.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> More conservative estimations suggest that only 68 percent of the webpages are in English (Pastore, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The term "alternative views" is used hereafter to refer to non-mainstream views. In the context of the American dominance discourse alternative views often take the form of views that oppose US priorities and agendas.

- <sup>3</sup> The term “Western countries” is used hereafter to refer to Western European countries, as well as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- <sup>4</sup> Following the studies above, the concept of dominant “American” or “Western” views is used to refer to the asymmetrical flow of information and particularly online information from the USA and other Western countries respectively, as well as to the dominance of their priorities and agendas in popular online channels such as Google News.
- <sup>5</sup> Up to the period of writing these lines in June 2008, Google has not revealed any intention to attach advertisements to its news channel.
- <sup>6</sup> In July 2007 Google News attracted 9.6 million visitors (Liedtke, 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> The analysis is sensitive to the various names and spellings that certain countries may have (e.g. “United Kingdom”, “the UK”, “England” or “Britain”).
- <sup>8</sup> During the observation period Google News displayed news articles for the recent month only. A search for a country in Google News would have therefore returned all the news articles mentioning this country over the last 30 days.
- <sup>9</sup> See also McLeary (2006).
- <sup>10</sup> As was measured in Google News during the sampling period, but since Google gathers thousands of news sources these figures can provide a good estimation of the more general trend.
- <sup>11</sup> See the previous section on the commercial motives regarding the patent filing of Google News ranking algorithm.
- <sup>12</sup> Similar trends were found also in other media forms. Bennet (1990), who examined the press-state relation in the USA, introduced the concept of media “indexing”. He suggested that as a result of increasing commercial motives mainstream media in the USA tend to limit their coverage of events and issues to elite views, often marginalizing alternative and critical views (see also Entman, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

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