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The coverage of China in Belgian television news: a case study on the impact of foreign correspondents on news content

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This study examines the difference that stationing a foreign correspondent can make for news coverage. We focus on the particular case of the news coverage of China on Belgian television. In Belgium, the public broadcaster decided to station a correspondent in China for an extended period of time, while the private commercial competitor did not do so. Drawing on a database of news coverage of China before and after the deployment of the correspondent in China (2005–2009), this study compares the news content for the quantity and issue diversity of the coverage of China, actors in the news, actor coverage, tone, nuance, and focus on everyday life. We conclude that, while foreign correspondents deliver the expected quality of news coverage on many fronts at the same time, generally they are not able to make a significant difference in the news to the overall picture of that faraway country.

Keywords: foreign news; China; Belgium; television news; foreign correspondent

As the world grows smaller and borders become increasingly porous, events occurring on one side of the globe can easily influence events on the other. Foreign news is vital because it offers the public a broader framework through which important contemporary developments can be interpreted. It is therefore considered as “an important mechanism for the extension of people’s horizon” (Tester, 2004). Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of foreign news on the knowledge of and attitudes towards foreign countries and their citizens (Beaudoin, 2004; Brewer, Graf, & Willnat, 2003; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Moring, 2007; Iyengar, Hahn, Bonfadelli, & Marr, 2009; McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Perry, 1990; Van Ginniken, 1998; Wu, 1998).

Despite the rapid dissemination of new communication technologies, television news still continues to be the most important source of foreign news for the public (Wu, 2003). Despite the fact that newspapers not only offer more detailed information but also greatly influence policy makers (Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Walgrave, Soroka & Nuytemans, 2008), in general, their influence on the public is much smaller than the power of television’s visual attributes (Graber, 1990). In addition, most foreign news items are not placed on the most prominent pages of newspapers. Hence readers can easily choose to avoid this news; whereas foreign items on television must be watched in the order they are presented and thus are less prone to a priori pre-selection by viewers. Consequently, it is more likely that the media user has actually watched foreign television news. Therefore, in this paper, we will look at foreign items

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in television news programs. More specifically, we will scrutinize the impact of the presence of a foreign television news correspondent in a foreign country for a long period of time, and answer the following question: Does sending a long-term correspondent to a foreign country change the amount of news coverage on that foreign country and/or the way it is covered?

We look into this question by studying the particular case of the coverage of China in Belgian television news broadcasts by using a longitudinal (2005–2009) quantitative content analysis of the attention to and portrayal of China. The television news market in Belgium¹ is a duopoly situation. Only two national channels compete for television news in prime time: the public channel (VRT) and the largest private channel (VTM). The Belgian news market is a textbook example of a duopoly situation leading to convergence. The news editors of both channels constantly keep an eye on each other and follow the same trends (De Swert, Walgrave, Hooghe, Uce, & Hardy, 2008; Hooghe, 2007; Uce, Schueremans & De Swert, 2006;). However, an important difference makes Belgium an interesting case for this study. In December 2007, the public channel VRT decided to station a permanent full-time correspondent in China. This move was a significant investment, which, in recent history, the public broadcaster had only applied to the US and Russia.² It was also a surprising decision in light of the international trend to reduce the number of foreign correspondents (Shanor, 2003). The private channel did not have the means to follow suit and continued to rely on traditional methods, which involved covering China based on the input from international news agencies and occasionally sending a short-term parachute journalist to China to cover a particular event.

Research on foreign correspondents

Traditionally, the presence of a foreign correspondent is seen as a prime measure of the quality of foreign news reporting (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004). Because foreign correspondents reside in the country they report on, they are said to have much better insight regarding the foreign society than desk journalists have (Kester, 2008). Foreign correspondents have on-the-ground knowledge; they can build up contacts with sources over time and maintain their own professional networks (Cottle, 2009). In short, foreign correspondents are specialists, and the expectation is that their presence is beneficial for the quality of their news coverage. However, few studies have actually tested whether foreign correspondents actually make a difference in the representation of a country. Most studies on foreign correspondents have not focused on the content these correspondents produce, but instead have examined the demographic characteristics of the overseas press corps, the evolution of its size over time, and its geographic distribution.

According to Shanor (2003), most overseas bureaus of the American television networks have simply been shut down. The shrinking of the foreign press corps is often seen as a core indicator for the deterioration of the quality of foreign news.

The main reason for the decline of foreign correspondents is that stationing a foreign correspondent is extremely expensive (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004). While technological evolution has obviously reduced the cost of production and distribution of news, it has also lowered the start-up costs of new media corporations, resulting in fiercer competition for the attention of the audience (Moisy, 1997). According to Shanor (2003), the response of news corporations to this situation has been two-sided.

Thus news organizations have cut foreign correspondents and other fixed costs. In addition to these structural determinants, the general public is assumed not to have a great interest in foreign affairs (Thussu, 2004). As Hoge (1997) put it, “to the general public, much of foreign news seems confusing and without sufficient relevance to justify working it out” (p. 4).

News outlets therefore are becoming increasingly dependent on the content delivered by news agencies. It is indeed much easier and cheaper to use wire stories instead of employing journalists with the necessary background knowledge in overseas bureaus (Riffe, Aust, Jones, Shoemaker, & Sundar, 1994). International media agencies have a virtual monopoly on the distribution of international news, providing it with large agenda-setting power (Boyd-Barret, 2000). Recent studies claim that 50–80% of foreign news in any news outlet is derived from agencies (Hafez, 2007; Wolter, 2006). As the number of foreign correspondents decreases and the dependency on fewer agencies increases, fewer primary sources feed the global news flow. As the similarity among different news sources increases, there is a greater likelihood of the one-sided constructions of events (Joye, 2010; Kim, 2003).

Instead of stationing foreign correspondents, news corporations look for other, more cost-saving alternatives. One such alternative is the so called “parachute journalist”. These journalists need to apply a “hit and run” strategy as they are sent out to contemporary “hot spots” to cover breaking news. Communication scholars consider them poor substitutes for traditional foreign correspondents because of their lack of in-depth knowledge of the various countries and conflicts on which they are expected to report (Cottle, 2009). It is from that perspective that Hess (1996) stated that parachute journalists probably “know a great deal about covering crises but not necessarily about the crises they are covering” (p. 100).

The case of China coverage on Belgian television news

The specific case examined here allows us to account for the difference a foreign correspondent can make in the representation of a faraway country. Belgium is a small but densely populated country in Western Europe. It shares its capital of Brussels with the European Union, and the focus of foreign news is therefore largely European (Wouters, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2009). Very few Belgians have ever been to China, so the population at large is unlikely to get information about China in any direct manner. Therefore, the news media have a potentially high impact on the image and opinions people hold (Fahmy, 2010). The present study examines whether and how the coverage of China on Belgian television news has changed since the decision to assign a correspondent on a permanent basis in Beijing.

The main impetus for sending the correspondent to China (in December 2007) was the expected importance of social changes in that country, which had become more and more central in world affairs. The editor-in-chief of the public station (VRT) agreed with the necessity of stationing a full time foreign correspondent in China.³ In general, the notion is that foreign correspondents must be stationed in countries that are going through important transitions. More specifically, VRT had withdrawn its correspondent from the former Soviet Union since, according to the editor-in-chief, changes in that society were slowing down. Therefore, the focus changed to China because of its booming economy and important developments. Of course, it was known that the Olympics Games was scheduled to take place in Beijing,

but this was not a direct reason. The Olympic Games would be covered by other, temporarily stationed sports reporters, but the foreign correspondent was not called back to Belgium after the Olympics. In sum, the stationing of a foreign correspondent in China by the public broadcaster was clearly a strategic decision to give more attention to China. By stationing a correspondent to complement and deepen the steady stream of press agency coverage, the VRT decided to put China closer to center stage.

The main question here is the kind of differences in coverage that might be expected to have emerged as a consequence of this decision. Wim Willems,⁴ editor-in-chief of the public broadcasters, stated that “We believe that with a foreign correspondent, we can make a difference with respect to what the other media in our country are delivering. Despite the fact that on the spot reporting is expensive, and that we really have to ‘pick our battles,’ we believe that by investing in foreign newsgathering, we manage to offer a surplus value to our public.”

Four aspects of television news articulate the desired outcomes in this context: news flow and issue diversity; source and opinion diversity; color and nuance; and real life interest, i.e., attention to drawing a picture of how people live in foreign countries and the kinds of main problems they have. These four points are based on academic literature as well as interviews with key foreign news makers on their ideal of foreign news. It is important to note that the focus is on the image presented to the audience rather than on news values or the news selection perspective. Moreover, the focus is not on what should be in the news to get the right stories, but rather on what and how news should give relevant input for the image that people have of a foreign country.

With respect to the amount of coverage of country X by country Y, foreign news is relatively predictable. Based on quantitative material one can quite easily predict the amount of attention a certain country will get in the news media of another (Ahren, 1984; Wu, 2000). In studies on international news flow, two perspectives on the determinants of foreign news stand out. While the *gatekeeping* perspective focuses on the news selection process and considers the newsworthiness of events, the *logistics* perspective emphasizes the news production process as a starting point and argues that systemic factors (such as trade relations and the presence of press agencies) are key (Kim, 2003). It appears from the literature that newsmakers do not have much autonomy besides the events and the systemic determinants.

A potentially important factor that newsmakers do control, however, is the use of a foreign correspondent. When the decision is made to station a foreign correspondent in a foreign country, thereby no longer relying fully on international press agencies and/or sending parachute reporters when certain events occur, newsmakers have far more control and can provide greater depth of coverage. Most of the cost of maintaining the foreign correspondent is fixed and predictable. Editors desire as much profit as possible from this investment, which is a combination of quantity and quality of coverage, in this case the coverage of China. The profit motive will lead to at least a minimum amount of coverage of China, since the correspondent is there, they need to use him/her. When a foreign reporter is stationed somewhere, a relatively steady stream of reportages from that country may be expected to enter the news. In addition to this minimum expectancy, extra stories are far less expensive than if a parachute reporter was required. This way, the hurdles are lowered and additional news stories on China move through the news selection process more easily.

Increased issue diversity is more a matter of news quality than of news quantity. In every country, there is information on basically every possible topic: the economy, crime, the environment, natural disasters, celebrities, and so forth. Normally, in addition to events that are spectacular or dramatic enough to be of interest to a worldwide audience, only issues that are of great relevance for the foreign country in particular would get coverage as foreign news. This process is partly similar to domestic news selection, but for foreign news it is even more unclear from which pool of information the selection must be made. Stories with higher news value because of, for example, the drama factor or a connection to the home country would be far more likely to appear in the news than other hard news stories that might be evidently more important and relevant for the foreign country itself. It is worth contemplating the extent to which the selection process leaves the viewer with an incomplete or distorted picture of a foreign country.

Incompleteness is unavoidable, but distortion (i.e., a clear overrepresentation of certain issues) is more problematic and exactly what the news editors want to prevent. Stef Wauters,⁵ editor-in-chief of the Belgian private station, even counts bringing these “off-the-beaten-track” stories as a central task for foreign correspondents:

Of course foreign correspondents need to cover the big moments and events from the first row. That is their core task. But they also have to make stories that tell us something about the society they live in. Obviously, this is also to keep the presence of the correspondent cost-effective. But it enables us to tell stories that most press agencies would not tell, because these stories are not “news” in a strict sense (2009).

Thus we expect the news to be less event-driven when a foreign correspondent is present. When no events take place, the correspondent will be called upon on a regular basis anyway to deliver a piece about China. If China would only receive news coverage when natural disasters or other negative, sensational events occur, people abroad might see China as a dangerous country in which to travel or invest. Covering a foreign country on a more diverse range of issues helps to avoid these possible distortions and could for that reason be preferred over a monotonous or mono-issue coverage.

A foreign correspondent stationed in a foreign country for a longer time period could help by getting a better grasp of really important developments in that country, even before they have impact on the home country. Furthermore, foreign correspondents have access to local media and a local network (Cottle, 2009). They find themselves in a better position to oversee which stories are available and their local salience, which is also what the key foreign newsmakers thought. Inge Vrancken,⁶ head of the foreign news desk of the public broadcaster, argues that “Foreign correspondents are important because they really can keep a finger on the pulse. They immerse themselves in another society, and know far better than the people here in Brussels sitting at a desk what exactly is going on in a society and what the consequences are for everyday lives.” These notions led to two hypotheses that were examined in the current study:

H1a: With a foreign correspondent in China, there would be more continuous and less event-driven coverage of China.

H1b: With a foreign correspondent in China, there would be an increase in the diversity of the issues and topics covered about China.

Another problem that has been addressed in the literature on foreign news coverage is the sources of news. Most television news broadcasters depend greatly on international news agencies for foreign news. Because of economic constraints and pressures, these agencies mostly rely on official information provided by governments (Hafez, 2007; Wolter, 2006). There is often no time for in-depth research or alternative sources. The information they transfer is highly “indexed” to the elite opinions (Livingston & Bennett, 2003). The literature suggests that foreign correspondents differ from so-called parachute journalists, and particularly from journalists working from the home country news desk, because they can rely on the local network they have built up (Hess, 1996; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Wu & Hamilton, 2004). This method reduces the cost of using non-governmental sources (i.e., searching, checking, and trusting), which will result in a more source-diversified coverage, that is, coverage with fewer elite-dominated sources. The costs involved are not only money and time but also the risk of using a “wrong” (unreliable, inappropriate, etc.) source (Niven, 2005). The foreign correspondent also has the resources and network to reduce this cost. Thus one could expect news items produced by a foreign correspondent to contain more news sources and to be more balanced and less elite-dominated in the selection of voices in the foreign society. Two hypotheses were tested in this context:

- H2a: With a foreign correspondent in China, there would be an increase in the number of speaking sources in the Belgian television news about China.
- H2b: With a foreign correspondent in China, the use of speaking news sources would be less elite-dominated.

More diverse sources, however, do not necessarily guarantee a more critical coverage of China. In the current study, critical coverage implies more color and tone than a purely neutral report. This can entail the presence of either negative or positive statements about China, or both. According to Neveu (2002), the emergence of television and the tendencies towards professionalization in communication of politics (e.g., spin doctors) has made journalism evolve towards a generation of journalism led by the principle of critical expertise. However, not all journalists can or do live up to this standard. According to Ugland and Henderson (2007), there are three levels of journalists: public communicators (who are not really professional journalists); second level journalists; and top level journalists. This last category of reporters functions according to the highest ethical standards, including the use of different sources and proper verification of them. Often these top-level journalists also try to present the story as their own, thereby separating themselves from the pack of reporters. Moreover, their prominence in the news – often by appearing on camera – provides a semblance of quality and accuracy of their product that is linked directly to their personal status as journalists. This type of journalism requires much more time and effort than second level journalists, who (often simultaneously) work on many more, shorter, more brief, and generally more sensational news stories. When a broadcaster decides to station a foreign correspondent in a foreign country, this person is likely to be a top-level journalist, while the foreign news desk in the newsroom at home is more likely to be at least partly run by second-level journalists who merely collect stories from the assembly line and pass them along. This distinction leads to another hypothesis.

- H3: With a foreign correspondent in China, stories about China would have more color and tone.

Finally, knowledge of the local habits and culture would enable foreign correspondents to be confident enough to report on the daily life of a foreign society or culture. If this expertise obtains a more truthful image of a foreign nation and its people, it can only be encouraged, even if such news items might not comply with all the standards of hard news (Meijer, 2003). This coverage could consist of brief soft news stories on correspondents themselves, illustrating what it is really like in a particular country. However, for scholars, it is even more interesting to observe cases in which hard news issues are covered with the support of concrete, daily life footage or references to it. This can be related to public journalism and to the recent trend that Neveu (2002) refers to as “fourth generation” (political) journalists, a type of bottom-up journalist that tries to connect to the needs and problems of the citizens, rather than relying on the manufactured news that comes to him/her via official channels. In this kind of journalism, contact with the local society and citizens is indispensable, which is exactly what the foreign correspondent is capable of doing as opposed to his/her colleagues that work from their news desk in the home country. This leads to the final hypothesis of the study:

- H4: With a foreign correspondent in China, more attention would be devoted to the daily life of the Chinese people, both in words and in images (pictures).

Methods

The hypotheses were tested by means of data derived from a quantitative content analysis. All 924 television news items in which China was mentioned or involved from 1 October 2005 to 30 June 2009 were identified. The news items were retrieved from the Electronic News Archive (ENA) (www.nieuwsarchief.be). This archive holds copies of every daily flagship newscast of both the nationwide television broadcasters (public channel [VRT] and private channel [VTM]) and encodes them into various content categories. Using the search term “China” (including Hong Kong) in the field of “countries involved/mentioned in the news item” only relevant news items were selected and subjected to a secondary coding, which was done by the authors. During pilot coding, inter-coder reliability was done using Cohen’s Kappa. The required minimum coefficient of .80 was obtained on all the variables before the actual coding could begin. In addition, the ENA guarantees inter coder reliability for their basic coding (De Swert, Walgrave, Hooghe, Uce, & Hardy, 2008). During the secondary coding process, doubtful cases were decided upon jointly by both authors.

The original coding from the ENA archive included date, item length, topic codes (up to three topics per news item), and actor coding (people speaking at least one sentence in the news item). The secondary coding added the following variables for all the items: (a) name of reporter; (b) present/not present in China; (c) China mentioned by journalist and/or by sources; (d) tone of mentions⁷ (positive, neutral, negative) as well as a reference to the working that led the coder to these decisions; (e) an overall score for the news item as positive, neutral or negative; (f) reference to the daily life of people in China; (g) images of daily activities in China (e.g., how Chinese people eat, live, work as well as recreation and mobility).

The analysis focuses on a comparison of four subsets of the news items: the period between 2005–2007 for both channels – public and private – when neither had a foreign correspondent stationed in China; and the period between 2008–2009 for both channels when the public channel had a correspondent in China while the private station did not. This design enabled using the private channel as a “control” for the presence of the public channel’s correspondent in China. However, it must be remembered that given the fact that the study is concerned with news, one would expect the findings to be highly dependent upon actual events in China, particularly during a period when a major earthquake shook a part of China and the Olympic Games in Beijing.

Findings

Of course, a foreign correspondent in China cannot be responsible for all coverage involving China. At best, he/she can take care of reports of events happening in China and within reach of his/her location. In other words, many news items that involve China in one way or another are produced at the home news desk in Brussels, and thus do not necessarily require the involvement of the foreign correspondent. Thus, for example, when Chinese officials visit Belgium, when Chinese companies negotiate with Belgian companies, and when Tibetan activists protest in Brussels, chances are slim that the correspondent, Tom Van De Weghe, is involved in the production of the item. Consequently, during the period under study (2008–2009), he was responsible for 52 news items, that is, 18.5% of all items involving China on the public channel. While one fifth of all the news items on China seems surprisingly small compared to the huge cost of having a correspondent there, a comparison with the output of correspondents working in other countries shows quite a different picture. During the year 2008, the US-based foreign correspondent for the same public channel, Johan Depoortere, produced only 9.5% of all 724 news items involving the United States. It is important to note that Van De Weghe also reports for public radio stations that frequently count on him for stories on China; and he also produces longer documentaries for current affairs programs on both radio and television. However, the flagship newscast of the public station is without doubt the outlet with the widest reach and highest impact on the worldview of the Belgian public. The main question dealt with here is whether the input of the foreign correspondent has sufficient influence on the whole picture that viewers receive about China. The secondary question relates to the specific characteristics of the news items composed by the foreign correspondent himself.

If Wu (2000) is correct, the growing Chinese economy and the economic ties and contacts between Belgium and China (particularly between the ports of Antwerp and Shanghai) should lead to increasing coverage on China in Belgian television news. We expect China to be relatively prominent in the news on a regular basis. If the gatekeeping perspective is valid, attention to China should prove to be driven by special events. Moreover, if our first hypothesis (H1a) is true, stationing a foreign correspondent in China would raise even more attention. Across the entire research period, the mean number of news stories at least partly about China in the Belgian flagship television newscasts was 26 per month (15 stories on the public channel and 11 stories on the private channel).

Figure 1 presents the monthly pattern of items about China indicating considerable variation across the different months of the research period. The

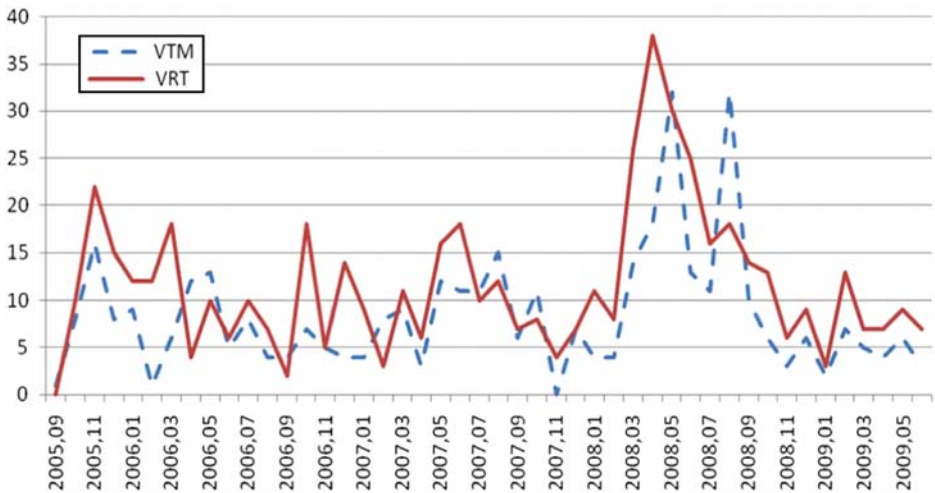


Figure 1. Number of news items involving China by broadcaster per month (n = 922).

presence of several peaks suggests at least partly event-driven journalism about China. The peaks were related to trade missions of Belgian ministers or royals to China (November 2005 and June 2007), natural disasters (the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 and several smaller occasions), human disasters (a mining accident in May 2006), military actions of North Korea (October 2006) and the most salient boost in China coverage: the Olympic Games (including the prelude with the pro-Tibet protests during the journey of the Olympic torch during March and April 2008).

In order to determine whether the presence of a foreign correspondent made a difference, the focus of the analysis is on differences in the amount of coverage between the private channel and the public channel both before and after the public channel sent its correspondent to China. Before his departure, the public channel had 29% more news coverage of China than the private channel and, with the correspondent on the scene, the gap increased to 43%. Taking into account only the 2009 coverage – after the correspondent had a full year's experience without any major event – the difference exceeded 70%. Thus, the presence of the foreign correspondents clearly increased the amount of coverage. Furthermore, while great or dramatic news events still determined high peaks in news coverage, the impact of the correspondent seems to have increased the coverage of China during periods in which no special events took place, which confirms H1a.

Regarding issue diversity, the detailed issues of news items were recoded into eight main categories. The first noticeable point in Table 1 is that the focus on tragic events that Sparks (2010) found in British tabloid newspaper coverage is not evident at all. Only a surprisingly small part (one item in ten) of the China coverage is about tragic events such as natural disasters. The arrival of the foreign correspondent in China (marked column 5) does not much change this overall picture.

Most of the issue categories evolve more or less to the same degree and in similar directions on both the private and public channels. The share of international news on both stations remains by and large the same, while the public channel constantly pays 10% more attention to issues like international cooperation, war, and peace than its

Table 1. Distributions of issues in the coverage on China by broadcaster and time period (in %).

N = 922 Issues ⁸	Private channel		Public channel		(Foreign Correspondent)	Total 2005–09
	2005–07	2008–09	2005–07	2008–09		
Disasters	11.1	13.0	10.4	11.6	(15)	11.5
Economy	29.6	19.6	25.2	21.3	(31)	23.7
Social affairs	35.1	22.1	25.5	24.6	(27)	26.6
International news	13.4	14.6	24.5	24.2	(15)	19.7
Politics (internal)	1.5	3.3	4.2	9.8	(11)	5.0
Sports	6.5	36.2	4.3	16.5	(12)	16.6
Human rights	2.3	5.3	3.4	7.0	(8)	4.7
Other issues	26.2	18.4	29.4	16.1	(8)	22.3

Note: Numbers in brackets represent the percentage of items made by the foreign correspondent.

private counterpart. The attention to human rights and internal Chinese politics shows the same pattern: on both private and public channels, attention to these issues doubled. Attention to sports in China exploded on the private station, and hence became the most covered commercial China topic in the period 2008–2009. Attention to sports increased more moderately on the public broadcaster, whereby sport was not the most prominent issue. The fact that most sport issues dealt with the Olympics and were thus not covered by Van De Weghe makes it difficult to see an impact of the foreign correspondent.

Only two issue categories show differences that can be attributed to the presence of the foreign correspondent. First, and most in line with the theoretical assumptions, is the difference between attention to social issues across the channels and periods. Whereas the amount of social affairs news items dropped from one third (35.1%) to a fifth (22.1%) of all items on the private station, the public station managed to keep their share of social affairs issues at the same level during the entire period. The fact that the editor-in-chief sees it as a crucial part of the assignment of a foreign correspondent to cover issues from within society clearly supports the assumption that this difference is due to the presence of the foreign correspondent. In addition to social affairs, economic issues show a similar trend by a strong decrease on the private channel and a much more limited decline by the public broadcaster.

Consequently, there is not much difference in issue-coverage attributable to the presence of the foreign correspondent. The fact that the correspondent contributed only 52 items might explain the lack of large shifts in the overall picture. Looking at the items made by the foreign correspondent himself, only few somewhat noteworthy differences can be seen in coverage of social and economic issues as well as politics and disasters, which are issues covered slightly more by the foreign correspondent himself. Issues such as international news and sports appear to be covered a great deal less by the foreign correspondent.

Therefore, it can be said that the difference in the evolution of issue coverage between both stations is low, resulting in great similarities for six of the eight issue categories. Items made solely by the foreign correspondent diverge somewhat from

the general picture, but the reports of the foreign correspondent are too few in number to change the overall picture. Only coverage of social affairs and economic issues diverge, and these items also are covered slightly more by the foreign correspondent.

The influence of the presence of the local correspondent does not seem to be large concerning the content of the news. However, which actors dominate the news about China? According to H2a, more actors would be featured in news items once the foreign correspondent arrived on the scene. There was indeed an increase in the number of actors per news item on the public channel, from 1.1 actors per news item before 2008 to 1.3 actors per news item after that. However, this increase seems to be related to factors other than the presence of the foreign correspondent. The increase in the number of actors on the private channel is even larger, from 1.2 to 1.5 actors per news item on China. Even if the amount of actors for the news items made by the foreign correspondent is 2.5 per news item, this increase does not seem to substantially affect the general picture. Therefore, H2a cannot be confirmed.

H2b, the other hypothesis on actors, deals with actor diversity and states that the news would be less elite-dominated when a foreign correspondent was present. Table 2 shows which actors were featured on television news about China. For instance, in the period 2005–2007, 7.6% of the news items on China contained the speech of an expert. Thus, surprisingly, H2b must be rejected outright based on the observation that television news about China is not elite-dominated. Elite actors do not even account for one third of all actors. Furthermore, with the foreign correspondent stationed in China, there is an even smaller increase of Chinese government actors.

The only difference the foreign correspondent seems to make is that there are slightly more civil society actors (NGO representatives, protesters, etc.) and experts, which comes mostly at the expense of elite actors outside China. Looking at the sourcing pattern in the items made by the foreign correspondent, it is confirmed that his reports have something to do with the difference. Even more interesting is the observation that 62% of his news items contain at least one (and often more than one) common person. The foreign correspondent thus seemed to have a special way of

Table 2. Percentage of news items on China per broadcaster and per time period containing at least one actor.

Type of actor (N = 922)	Broadcaster	1	2	Difference (2 – 1)
		2005–07	2008–09	
Elite (Chinese government) ⁹	Public	4.0	6.9 (11)	+3.0
	Private	2.4	7.2	+4.8
Elite (others)	Public	25.0	17.8 (9)	-7.2
	Private	21.3	22.2	+1.0
Expert	Public	7.6	13.5 (25)	+5.9
	Private	15.9	16.7	+0.7
Civil society	Public	19.9	21.6 (38)	+1.7
	Private	25.1	20.6	-4.6
Common people	Public	17.0	27.8 (62)	+10.8
	Private	21.7	37.8	+16.0

Note: Numbers in brackets represent the percentage of items made by the foreign correspondent.

source selection, and his “over” reliance on civil society actors and experts aligns with the idea of foreign correspondents that are embedded in local networks. However, the conclusion once again is that stationing a foreign correspondent does not make a great deal of difference to the kind of actors in the total news coverage of China.

Regarding the tone of the items, H3 predicted that more color and/or tone in the news would be present in items contributed by the foreign correspondent. Table 3 shows that on the public and the private channel, more discernable tone entered the coverage. On both channels, more than 40% of the news about China in the 2008–2009 period included at least one positive or negative reference to China, or both. The largest increase, however, was not realized by the public channel’s foreign correspondent but by the private channel, which was mostly due to the more positive references China received in the latter’s news coverage of the Olympic Games.

In general, negative references are present far more often than positive ones. The question is whether or not the presence of a foreign correspondent ensures critical expertise journalism. The answer can be determined by taking a closer look at the tone of only the items that are actually contributed by the foreign correspondent. It is clear that reports from the foreign correspondent were much more often colored by tone than the other news items (more than four out of five of his news items included some kind of tone). Thus the foreign correspondent does indeed contribute different new items, but in one way or other the effect is negated by the remaining coverage of China that is created at the Brussels home news desk.

The final hypothesized effect (H4) was the increased attention, both visual and verbal, to the local population and their daily life in China. Two measures were used: (a) the presence of pictures of everyday life activities (Chinese people working or eating, traffic, housing and recreation); and (b) whether or not the reporter made verbal reference to everyday life in China. Table 4 indicates an overall increase in references to the daily life of common Chinese people on both channels. The increase in visual attention on the public channel is significantly larger than the rise in the coverage of the private broadcaster, thus direct contact with the Chinese people had a clear effect: the foreign correspondent gave the overall coverage a more bottom-up characteristic.

Examination of the specific items contributed by the foreign correspondent confirms his influence. In 54% of these items he refers to everyday life in China, and in 81% of the items, concrete footage of everyday activities by common Chinese people

Table 3. Percentage of news items with tone on China per broadcaster and per time period.

N = 922	Broadcaster	1	2	Difference (2 – 1)
		2005–07	2008–09	
Negative coverage on China present	Public	24.6	34.0 (64)	+9.4
	Private	24.2	32.2	+8.0
Positive coverage on China present	Public	14.9	14.7 (37)	–0.2
	Private	4.3	17.8	+13.5
Positive and/or negative coverage present	Public	33.0	40.9 (81)	+7.9
	Private	27.1	43.3	+16.2

Note: Numbers in brackets represent the percent of items made by the foreign correspondent.

Table 4. Percentage of news items on China per broadcaster and per time period referring to everyday life in China.

N = 922	Broadcaster	1	2	Difference (2 - 1)
		2005-07	2008-09	
Visual reference to everyday life in China	Public	11.2	30.1 (81)	+18.9
	Private	7.2	19.4	+12.4
Verbal reference to everyday life in China	Public	2.2	14.3 (54)	+12.1
	Private	0.0	11.1	+11.1

Note: Numbers in brackets represent the percent of items made by the foreign correspondent.

is present. Even without being certain about their rationale, these findings are indeed intriguing. Do they show that a reporter is actually present in that country? Is it unavoidable when reporting from a certain country? Or is it indeed a deliberate step towards what Neveu (2002) called the fourth generation of (political) journalism, with a more bottom-up approach that cares much more about the concerns of the population, the reporter standing by the people? This finding is striking, and it is completely in line with what the editors in chief claimed that foreign correspondents should be doing: bringing breaking news from the spot, being immersed in other societies, and bringing these foreign worlds into the living rooms of the viewers at home.

Conclusion and discussion

The case study about the news coverage of China on Belgian television news failed to show that stationing a foreign correspondent in a faraway country necessarily led to significant changes in the overall content coverage. Only one of four hypotheses about the coverage was confirmed: the strategic decision to assign a foreign correspondent led to an increase in the attention given to China, particularly when no major events took place there. Support of the other hypotheses was limited. No significant differences in terms of issue coverage, sourcing patterns, and tone seem to hold between the two stations (public and private) and the two time periods (before and after the placement of the foreign correspondent). The point to keep in mind is that this conclusion refers to the impact of the foreign correspondent on the *general* picture of China.

The items contributed by the foreign correspondent, however, did show distinctive characteristics, which *were* in line with the expectations. Most certainly, a correspondent living in a foreign country has advantages such as the correspondent's local network and expertise, as well as his greater access to local news sources that are otherwise inaccessible for making quality news items. The findings show that the foreign correspondent quoted more ordinary people, experts and civil society actors, gave more verbal and visual attention to daily life in China, and allowed for more color and tone in his reports.

Looking more qualitatively and in depth at the items contributed by the foreign correspondent, the dual function of his assignment clearly is prominent. While many of his items dealt with the deepening of major events – the Tibetan protests on the eve

of the Olympic games, the Sichuan earthquake, the contaminated milk powder scandal, the consequences of the economic crisis for the internal Chinese market – a second group of items dealt with less event-driven coverage and put the consequences of the rapid social and economic transition of China on the news agenda. Recurring themes were the gap between poor and rich, the lack of improvements of human rights, and the issue of freedom of the press. The fact that Tom Van De Weghe was beaten and robbed by local authorities when covering the problems linked to AIDS villages (villages with an extremely high concentration of HIV-positive and AIDS patients without proper medical care) made major headlines in the Belgian press, thereby increasing the attention to these topics, which the Chinese government would rather have kept hidden. However, also some positive aspects of the transforming Chinese society were covered: leisure activities of ordinary Chinese people, shopping by middle-class families, winter sports holidays on artificial snow in the hills surrounding Beijing, the experience of the Chinese New Year, visiting the Harbin ice and snow sculpture festival, professional life in China, following young graduates in their first steps on the job market, and the daily struggles of farmers. These items all show aspects of Chinese society that would otherwise be less likely to reach ordinary Belgian citizens.

The carefully crafted items contributed by the correspondent are nevertheless drowned in a river of other stories not involving him. During his stay in China, the foreign correspondent appeared in only one fifth of the China-related items. The question that arises is obvious: Is stationing a foreign correspondent in a faraway country worthwhile? In the case of Belgium, a small country whose public broadcaster has limited resources, the conclusion is that the investment was great while the impact on the overall portrait of China was limited.

It is however important to note that nothing can be said in the present study about the actual images that Belgian viewers have about China. This study began with the notion that the general image of a country such as China, which is built up by a longitudinal exposure to a large number of items, is likely to make a difference in people's minds. However; it may be that television news can make a difference with only a few compelling news items. While the quantitative content analysis revealed that items made by the foreign correspondent were pushed aside by the more numerous desk items, it could well be that the opposite is true regarding viewers' perceptions. Indeed, it could be that mainly the items contributed by the foreign correspondent really affected peoples' minds.

If the latter is the case, then the public broadcaster made the correct decision regarding their foreign correspondent. He provides subjects that otherwise would be neglected, actors whose existence was unknown, and tones as well as nuances in an often colorless world of foreign news. Last but not least, the foreign correspondent fits well in contemporary journalism that tries to leave behind old ways and does not believe that the best stories can be made with the information made available by governments and other elites. A foreign correspondent, like the one from the Belgian public service broadcaster stationed in China, takes a bottom-up approach by not abandoning critical expertise journalism, which is still seen as the core duty of journalism, but by applying it to create a truthful picture of the real ways of life and problems in Chinese society. Is it because this kind of news coverage is what really matters, or is it a way of reaching out to the audience in the home country, raising

their interest by showing equally ordinary people and stories, and inviting them to inform themselves better about other societies?

The answer is unclear, of course, but either way, even if the general picture of a country in the news does not seem to change much because of their input, foreign correspondents might nonetheless be well worth the large investment. Before this estimation can be made, however, further research is needed on the impact of the coverage provided by foreign correspondents.

Notes

1. Belgium is a linguistically segregated federal country. There are Dutch-speaking and French-speaking people, forming two communities, each with its own media landscape. When we speak of Belgium in this paper, we refer to the largest community, which is Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community.
2. Personal Interview, Wim Willems, editor-in-chief of the VRT (public broadcaster), 2 June 2009.
3. Personal Interview, Wim Willems, editor-in-chief of the VRT (public broadcaster), 2 June 2009; Personal Interview, Stef Wauters, editor-in-chief of the VTM (private channel), 15 June 2009.
4. Personal Interview, Wim Willems, editor-in-chief of the VRT (public broadcaster), 2 June 2009.
5. Personal Interview, Stef Wauters, editor-in-chief of the VTM (private channel), 15 June 2009.
6. Personal Interview, Inge Vrancken, head of the foreign news desk, VRT (public broadcaster), 2 June 2009.
7. Negative coverage on China involved human rights issues (Tibet, political prisoners, and the death penalty), limited freedom of the press, totalitarianism, corruption, indifference to individual suffering, environmental problems, and so forth. Positive mentions involved praise for the great organization of the Olympics, opening up for more freedom, reference to progress in political reform towards Western standards, mentions of good policy by the Chinese government, and so forth.
8. Economic news includes financial news, trade, employment, mobility and communication. International news includes issues of international cooperation, war and peace. Politics involves issues such as institutional reform, elections, organization of parliament and government, civil society, and state ideology.
9. We distinguish between two kinds of elite actors: Chinese government actors (including politicians of all levels, civil servants, police and military in China) and other elite actors (mainly foreign politicians and representatives of international organizations).

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