# Propinquity and News Coverage: The U.S. As Seen in Latin America

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Abstract

Propinquity theory is used to frame a pilot study examining the tone and frequency of U.S. coverage in Latin American newspaper websites. Results of a survey of U.S. news stories appearing in Latin American newspaper websites (*n*=211) did not find significant correlation between the tone of coverage of the U.S. and the frequency of that coverage. Results suggest, however, that repeating the survey with a larger sample might produce significant findings.

*Keywords*: journalism, Latin America, propinquity, news flow

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The relationship between distance and affection has been studied by psychologists and social scientists, on the individual and group level, for many years. Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950) proposed the 'propinquity effect,' wherein individuals or groups are more likely to form relationships of a friendly or romantic nature with those who are around them, and less likely to form such relationships with those who are far away. The propinquity effect does not rely exclusively upon physical, "as the crow flies" proximity, but also is impacted by repeated exposure. This concept, that we as individuals and as groups tend to like and be interested in nearby individuals and groups more than we tend to like and be interested in distant individuals and groups, has been extended to the field of international journalism. This study will review the relevant literature, it will share and discuss the results of a content analysis of newspaper Web sites, and it will and make recommendations for further research.

## Literature Review

Without mentioning propinquity theory directly, Nossek (2004) wrote about an effect in international news coverage that is arguably similar, when "a country's local editing preferences call for coverage of countries sharing a geographical, political or cultural affinity" (p. 347). Nossek (2004) referred to these editing preferences as an "ours or theirs" (p. 362) national frame that leads journalists to use only some of the wide range of available international stories, based on whether the news fits pre-existing national narratives. Ito (2009) did use the word propinquity to describe the kinds of geographical and cultural affinities between countries that have an impact on which international news stories are used by media outlets. Ito (2009) studied international news flows in a selected sample of countries around the world and discovered that geographical distance was one of the top five factors that explain the mix of international stories

during times of normalcy (non-crisis periods). The top factor explaining international flows in Ito's (2009) study was the presence of an international newswire service. For example, U.S. newspapers were more likely to run a story about a country in Africa if that story was filed by Reuters or Associated Press, and less likely to send their own correspondent to Africa.

Wu (1998, 2003, 2007) wrote extensively about the determinants of international news flow. News coverage shapes public opinion, public opinion shapes public policy, and public policy can transform international relations, making it vital for communication scholars to understand how international news coverage flows (Wu, 1998). In a meta-analysis of studies of the determinants of international news flow, Wu (1998) found that the determinants fall into one of two perspectives: 1) the gatekeeper perspective and 2) the logistical perspective. Examples of the gatekeeper perspective include a) reviewing the use of newswire copy versus in-house reporting, and b) the percentage of U.S. news that editors chose to use in their newspapers' international news hole.

In a gatekeeper-perspective study, Link (1984) studied the blend of newswire copy versus in-house reporting at Latin American newspapers, and found no consistent pattern of the use of wire copy, with some papers relying more heavily on regional and international wire services to supply the bulk of their international news coverage, while other papers spending considerable financial resources to support foreign correspondents or in-house writers to repackage international news stories. An example of the logistical perspective would include a review of the impact of geographical distance on whether a country was included in other nations' international news reporting, and to what extent. Tsang (1992) found evidence to support a 'social propinquity' effect between nations, expressed in their favorable coverage of each other in weekly news magazines, based on their geographical closeness and their cultural similarities. Wu

(1998) found that research on geographical distance was mixed, with some studies supporting it as a significant factor in determining international news coverage, and other studies rejecting it as a significant factor.

In a later study, Wu (2003) found that geographical distance seemed to have somewhat of an impact on international news flow, but not a strong one. This study used data gathered from American and British researchers, who collected, coded and analyzed all international stories appearing in print and broadcast media in 44 countries over a two-week period. The results of the study showed that the volume of international economic trade was the dominant predictor of news flow between any two countries in the survey (Wu, 2003). Geographical and cultural propinquity did emerge as predictors among developing countries in Africa, Asia, and South America, but not in Europe or in the U.S. (Wu, 2003). One interesting finding in Wu's (2003) study was that the U.S. enjoyed somewhat of a "superstar" status, garnering coverage that was arguably out of proportion to the subject matter of the news story. Wu (2003) proposed that this "superstar" status may outweigh the geographical proximity effect. This was not to assert that the propinquity effect did not exist, but that it could be overwhelmed by other factors. However, it is possible that this "superstar" status of the U.S. may work to actually strengthen the propinquity argument instead of weakening it.

The ubiquity of the U.S. in the world of news, entertainment media and politics may mean that the country is, in effect, everyone's neighbor, visible at all times, constantly exerting its influence through its mere presence in television programs, films, music, military actions, public diplomacy, and news coverage. In an in-depth content analysis of the international reporting of one newspaper, the Times of India, Hanson (1995) found that geographical proximity was an important determinant in the paper's international news coverage, with the

Times covering countries closer to India more often than they covered nations further away. Hanson (1995) also found that the U.S. received significantly more attention in the paper's international section than did other superpowers such as Russia and China. In a content analysis of international media coverage of the run-up to the Iraq war, Boaz (2005) found that news media around the world cited and referenced American administration officials such as the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State even more than they did the heads of state of key countries in Europe and the Middle East, and even more than the United Nations' chief weapons inspector, even though the issue of the search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was among the leading stories in the weeks leading up to the start of hostilities.

Having looked at coverage of the U.S. in countries around the world, Wu (2007) studied the flip side of the coin: the amount of foreign news coverage in U.S. media. Wu (2007) conducted a content analysis of international news coverage on the Web site and cable channel of CNN, and the Web site and print version of the New York Times, studying which countries received the most or most-consistent news coverage in the U.S. Similarly to other studies, Wu (2007) found that trade volume and the existence of international news wires or news agencies were the leading predictors of international news coverage in both traditional and online media. At least in the U.S., geographical proximity or cultural affinity had no effect on the range of stories selected for inclusion in each outlet's international news coverage.

With Nossek's (2004) assertion that international news coverage may be subject to an "ours or theirs" effect (p. 362), arguably similar to the propinquity effect, and with other scholars expressing mixed opinion as to 1) whether or not a propinquity effect exists and 2) if it exists, what is the size of the effect, this unsettled state of scholarship suggests the first research question:

R1: Do newspaper websites of Latin American countries that lie in closer physical proximity to the United States cover U.S. stories as international news to a greater or lesser extent that do newspaper websites of more physically distant Latin American countries?

The documented difference in the tone of coverage of U.S. actions and policies in other countries suggests the second research question:

R2: What is the relative tone of coverage of U.S. news in Latin American newspaper websites?

## Methodology

To explore these research questions, I surveyed the international news sections of a selection of Latin American newspaper websites. The newspapers were selected after consulting "4 International Media & Newspapers" (4IMN), an international directory and search engine that focuses on newspapers around the world (4 International Media & Newspapers, 2011). The directory ranks newspaper websites each year worldwide and by region, based on its own proprietary calculation method. The list of "Top 100 Newspapers in Latin America" was consulted, and the following newspapers were listed as the top 10: 1) "La Nación," Argentina; 2) "El Comercio," Perú; 3) "El Universal," México; 4) "El Nuevo Día," Puerto Rico; 5) "Primera Hora," Puerto Rico; 6) "Clarín," Argentina; 7) "ABC Color," Paraguay; 8) "El Vocero de Puerto Rico," Puerto Rico; 9) "O Estado de São Paulo," Brazil; and 10) "El Tiempo," Colombia.

In order to maintain a manageable number of newspapers, five were selected from this list, starting at the top. The first four newspapers were selected, but numbers five and six were skipped, since the set already had one newspaper from that country. The fifth and final paper to be selected was number seven on the list. The final list of papers to be studied therefore included

1) "La Nación," Argentina; 2) "El Comercio," Perú; 3) "El Universal," México; 4) "El Nuevo Día," Puerto Rico; and 5) "ABC Color," Paraguay. Once a day during the time period of September 17 to September 30, 2011, I visited the international news section of each newspaper website listed above, printed that website's international news page, reviewed each page and then printed each story that exclusively or primarily dealt with the U.S. The start date was selected specifically to begin some days after the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington DC, in order to avoid having the strong worldwide coverage of the U.S. anniversary perhaps skew the results of the analysis. With 14 days of coverage from 5 websites, a total of 70 screenshots of each newspaper website's international news sections was printed, 1,031 international news story headlines were reviewed, and 211 stories that exclusively or primarily dealt with the U.S. were printed and collected.

Once all stories were sorted by newspaper and by day, I created a spreadsheet to record the number of stories in each paper's international news section that was principally about the United States. I am able to understand written Spanish at an intermediate level, and therefore was able to tell when a given story has the U.S. as its subject, even if obviously American names or proper nouns were not used in the headline or first paragraph of the story. Since some newspaper websites run 5 to 7 international stories each day, while others run 15 to 30 international stories each day, I calculated the number of U.S. stories each day as a percentage of the total number of daily international stories, and then I calculated the final average for each paper for its coverage of U.S. stories during the two-week time period.

In order to judge the relative tone of Latin American coverage of news stories concerning the U.S., I performed a content analysis, reading each story and making a judgment as to whether, in my opinion, a disinterested third party would be left with a net positive, a net neutral,

or a net negative impression of the United States upon finishing that article. The coding scheme was to assign a value of 1 to every article that could be judged as positive toward the U.S., a value of 0 to every article that could be judged as neutral toward the U.S., and a -1 to every anti-U.S. article. In order to assure reliability in the coding process, 10 articles were randomly selected, photocopied again, and given to a native Spanish speaker who was not born in the U.S. This coder and I both coded the same 10 articles, and the results were compared. Using Holsti's test of inter-coder reliability, the coder and I agreed on 8 out of 10 articles, leading to an inter-coder reliability of 0.80.

With this level of confidence in the coding scheme, I proceeded to code the remaining articles, giving each one a 1, 0 or -1 for the positive, neutral or negative tone of its coverage of the U.S. After coding each article, I calculated the average value of all coded articles, organized according to newspaper. A data set was compiled which included 1) each newspaper's percentage of international stories dealing with the U.S.; 2) the average tone of each newspaper's coverage of the U.S.; and 3) the distance in miles from the capital of each country to Washington DC, which is the definition of the geographic distance between any two countries (Wu, 2003). This data set was keyed into the PASW statistical software package, and Pearson's correlations were calculated on a two-by-two basis, looking for correlations between each set of two variables.

## Results

Table 1 illustrates each newspaper's U.S. news as a percentage of their total international news.

| Table 1 | La Nacíon | El Comercio | El Universal | El Nuevo Día | ABC Color |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | |
| US news as percentage of paper's total international coverage | 20.5 | 19.13 | 23.55 | 30.94 | 16.62 |

El Nuevo Día, of Puerto Rico, had the highest percentage coverage of U.S. news in its international section of the five papers. El Universal of Mexico had the second highest percentage, followed by La Nación of Argentina, El Comercio of Peru, and ABC Color of Paraguay.

Table 2 illustrates the average tone of all the U.S. news stories for each paper during the two-week period.

| Table 2 | La Nacíon | El Comercio | El Universal | El Nuevo Día | ABC Color |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Average tone of paper's coverage of US: 1=positive, 0=neutral, -1=negative | 0 | -0.55 | -0.07 | -0.09 | 0.07 |

El Comercio had the highest negative rating, with -0.55. El Nuevo Día and El Universal also had negative ratings, with -0.09 and -0.07, respectively. La Nación had an average of 0 for the tone of its coverage, and ABC Color had a positive rating of 0.07 for its U.S. coverage.

Table 3 illustrates the distances between Washington DC and the capital city of each newspaper.

| Table 3 | La Nacíon | El Comercio | El Universal | El Nuevo Día | ABC Color |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Buenos Aires, Argentina | Lima, Peru | Mexico City, Mexico | San Juan, Puerto Rico | Asuncion, Paraguay |
| Distance of each capitol from Washington DC, in miles | 5,218 | 3,495 | 1,887 | 1,545 | 4,579 |

A Pearson correlation was run on these three subsets of data.

**Correlations**

| | | Distance from the US in miles | Average tone of paper's US coverage | US news as a percentage of paper's total international coverage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Distance from the US in miles | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .233 | -.546 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .705 | .341 |
| | N | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Average tone of paper's US coverage | Pearson Correlation | .233 | 1 | .114 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .705 | | .856 |
| | N | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| US news as a percentage of paper's total international coverage | Pearson Correlation | -.546 | .114 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .341 | .856 | |
| | N | 5 | 5 | 5 |

With R values ranging from .114 to -.546, and P values nowhere near statistical significance, I inspected the data set again, looking for outliers. The one seeming outlier was the -0.56 average for the tone of U.S. coverage of El Comercio, the Peruvian newspaper. So I deleted the El Comercio data and ran the correlation again.

**Correlations**

| | | Distance from the US in miles | Average tone of paper's US coverage | US news as a percentage of paper's total international coverage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Distance from the US in miles | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .797 | -.593 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .203 | .407 |
| | N | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Average tone of paper's US coverage | Pearson Correlation | .797 | 1 | -.921 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .203 | | .079 |
| | N | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| US news as a percentage of paper's total international coverage | Pearson Correlation | -.593 | -.921 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .407 | .079 | |
| | N | 4 | 4 | 4 |

This analysis produced somewhat better results. No p-value was considered statistically significant, although the correlation between a paper's U.S. news coverage as a percentage of their total international coverage and the average tone of their U.S. coverage was close to significant, with p=.079, and a high inverse R value (R=-.921). Correlations were relatively high between a paper's distance from the U.S. and the average tone of the paper's U.S. news coverage (R=.797), although they were not statistically significant (p=.203).

## Discussion

Removing the Peruvian newspaper data from the analysis produced an extremely strong inverse R-value and a hauntingly-close-to-significant p-value for the correlation between the tone of a newspaper's coverage of the U.S. and the amount of coverage it devotes to U.S. This

suggests that there may in fact be a relationship between the two measurements, and that this relationship is inverse: as the percentage of U.S. news within a paper's international news website section rises, the tone of its coverage of the U.S. becomes more negative. With N=4, it can be argued that the sample size was too small to get good results. Such a small sample size and the possibility of a statistically valid relationship would be good reasons to run the experiment again, this time looking at a larger number of newspapers than just 4, and for perhaps a longer time period than two weeks. But the El Comercio outlier was interesting for another reason. The content analysis of the tone of Latin American newspaper coverage of the U.S. did not include judgments of where each story fell on the spectrum bounded by straight-up, formal, objective coverage on one end and sensationalistic, tabloid-style coverage on the other end. However, if this had been done, it might have had an impact on the overall results.

Reviewing the stories again, the U.S. stories in El Comercio seemed to be more sensational, dramatic, and tabloid-style in their reporting. The stories were about more lurid topics, such as the recent unauthorized biography of former Alaska governor Sarah Palin. The El Comercio story was headlined "Sexo, cocaina y adulterio: la biografia no authorizada de Sarah Palin," translated into English as "Sex, cocaine and adultery: the unauthorized biography of Sarah Palin." Other El Comercio stories focused on tabloid-style topics such as the "Ten Ugliest Police Booking Photos of American Criminals" and images of Occupy Wall Street protesters being dragged away by police. The stories in the other four newspapers, on the other hand, seemed to fall much more on the formal, objective-news end of the coverage spectrum, Much coverage was given over to the execution in Georgia of Troy Davis. The majority of this coverage was rated negative by both coders. Other stories that received wide coverage during the two-week sample period were the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York, the

plane crash at the air show in Nevada that provided the dramatic YouTube video, and the U.S. assassination of radical cleric (and American citizen) Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen.

However, let us return to the two research questions posed. R1 asks: "Do newspaper websites of Latin American countries that lie in closer physical proximity to the United States cover U.S. stories as international news to a greater or lesser extent that do newspaper websites of more physically distant Latin American countries?" The results shown above seem unable to answer that question, since the correlation between the newspaper's distance from the U.S. and its coverage of the U.S. as a percentage of its international coverage is not statistically significant (P=.404, N=4). It is possible that repeating the study by adding more Latin American newspapers and a longer period of time would generate results that were more statistically valid.

R2 asks: "What is the relative tone of coverage of U.S. news in Latin American newspaper websites?" This question can be answered by reviewing Table 2. On a scale of 1 for positive coverage, 0 for neutral coverage, and -1 for negative coverage, the Peruvian newspaper by far had the most negative coverage of the U.S., with -.55. Three of the five papers had overall negative coverage of the U.S., with El Comercio (Peru) joined by El Nuevo Día (Puerto Rico) and El Universal (Mexico) in presenting, on average, negative coverage of the U.S. Coverage by La Nación (Argentina) averaged exactly 0 over the two weeks that were analyzed, meaning their coverage was neutral, with positive, neutral and negative stories balanced against each other. ABC Color (Paraguay) was the only paper that had slightly positive coverage of the U.S., with an average of .07. Again, with the exception of the El Comercio coverage as an outlier, the other four newspapers were all very close to 0, meaning their coverage of the U.S., while slightly shaded pro or con, could be viewed by the average reader as more or less neutral to the U.S.

R1 asked whether proximity to the U.S. would affect the amount of coverage of the U.S. that Latin American newspapers used in their international news holes. The results suggest that another research question would have further illuminated the issue: "Does proximity to the U.S. affect the tone of Latin American news coverage of the U.S.?" That question was posed in a roundabout way by the correlation between distance to the U.S. and tone of coverage of U.S. news. Even with the Peruvian paper removed from the data set, the results (R=.797, p=.203) are far from statistically valid. However, in looking at the data (minus El Comercio), the two papers with net negative tone in their reporting are the two countries closest to the U.S. Mexico shares a common border with the U.S., while Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the U.S., its status that of not quite a U.S. state and not quite an independent nation. Paraguay and Argentina, the two countries most distant from the U.S., had slightly positive and exactly neutral tones, respectively, in the U.S. stories their editors chose to run in the international news sections of their newspaper websites. Again, expanding this study to include newspaper websites from additional countries in Central and South America could help explore whether or not physical distance from the U.S. corresponds to the tone of coverage of the U.S.

## Limitations and Further Research

This study suffered from several limitations, the most critical being the small number of newspaper websites. For a mixed quantitative analysis/content analysis such as this one, a larger N would have perhaps made the results more statistically valid. Another limitation was the short time frame involved. Two weeks was a very brief snapshot, a small slice of time that perhaps did not allow sufficient breathing room for the run of events and story flows, preventing a more meaningful analysis of how international media really cover the U.S.

Beyond these limitations, research into international news flow, propinquity and the amount and nature of coverage of U.S. news has been a bit unsettled, with some researchers finding that something akin to a propinquity effect is real and measurable and other researchers failing to find evidence of this effect or its strength. Based on the results of this study, which combined a content analysis of the tone of Latin American newspaper website coverage of the U.S. with a quantitative analysis of the frequency of stories about the U.S. and the percentage of their international news coverage that focused on the U.S., my recommendation is to consider this to be a pilot study. The results are by no means exhaustive, and, admittedly, not statistically valid, likely due to the small number of newspaper websites included in the study. But I think that the results do, in fact, suggest some directions for further research. Chief among the recommendations would be to expand the number of newspaper websites surveyed. The 4IMN directory lists the top 100 Latin American newspaper websites, based on its own analytics, and is updated yearly. This would make it very simple to survey a much larger sample of the papers during a given period of time, making sure to draw equally from newspapers in Central and South America.

It would be worthwhile to more closely analyze the stories about the U.S., specifically looking at where the stories lie along the spectrum from objective reporting to tabloid-style, scandal-and-gossip reporting. It would be interesting to see if the Peruvian paper was alone in using a tabloid style of reporting, or if other top newspapers used the same kinds of sensationalistic reporting about the U.S. In a similar vein, Nossek (2004) wrote about the level of professionalism, or lack thereof, by journalists when they are writing about events in other countries, depending on whether their country was involved economically or politically. Nossek (2004) wrote that "the journalist's domestic viewpoint is inseparable from his or her professional

norms and considerations" (p. 346) and that both internal and external forces act upon the news delivered by journalists. It would be interesting to repeat the 2004 study by looking at Latin American newspapers to see if national identity and patriotism are discernible in the way those reporters and editors cover news in their neighboring Central and South American countries versus the U.S., Europe, Africa and Asia, looking to see if reporters give more (and more positive) coverage to trading partners or political allies (socialist countries such as Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela vs. free-market capitalist countries such as Colombia, Peru and Chile).

Another dimension that could be explored is that of the use of wire service copy versus in-house writing (Wu, 1998). During the content analysis of the five Latin American papers included in this study, I noticed that La Nación, the Argentine newspaper, predominantly used its own in-house writers or foreign correspondents when reporting on political or social events in the U.S. The other four papers seemed to use regional and national wire services at least half of the time. In addition to the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Reuters and UPI, newspapers made use of Spanish-language news wire services such as EFE and ACI Prensa, the Spanish-language version of the Catholic News Agency.

## Conclusion

This study was conceived with the goal of exploring some of the relationships between the U.S. and countries in Central and South America by expanding Festinger, Schachter and Back's (1950) concept of propinquity, or "I like my close neighbors better than I do my distant neighbors, and I like the neighbors I see every day more than the ones I see less often," to include some of the U.S.'s hemispheric neighbors, and then viewing the concept through the lens of international news coverage. The lack of statistically valid results from this study was certainly disappointing, but upon further review, may not be completely surprising. After all, the

scholarship on geographical effects on quantity and tone of news coverage has been, in effect, all over the map, with some researchers finding evidence to support it (Adams, 1986; Chang, Shoemaker and Brendlinger, 1987; Dupree, 1971; Haynes, 1984; Tsang, 1992; Wu, 2003) and other researchers finding no such evidence (Hicks and Gordon, 1974). The one close-to-valid result, which inversely correlated tone of coverage of the U.S. with the amount of coverage of the U.S. in a paper's international news section, implies there may indeed be something out there. At least it suggests that, instead of propinquity theory's maxim of "to know me is to love me," the corollary for international newspapers covering the U.S. may be "to cover me is to dislike me."

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