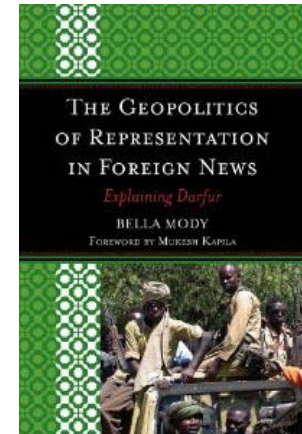


Bella Mody, **Geopolitics of Representation in Foreign News: Explaining Darfur**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, 478 pp., \$100 (hardcover), \$36.48 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Alex Laverty
University of Southern California

In *Geopolitics of Representation of Foreign News*, Bella Mody and her team of graduate students examine the economic, political, and geographic predictors and influences on media organizations in seven countries between 2003 and 2005. Their sample was based on news articles that mentioned the east Sudan region of Darfur. The book's findings show how reporting differs across the Global North-South divide, especially how different ownership characteristics, audience targets, and levels of national interest in Darfur affected how the news was reported. The volume assesses more than 1,200 articles to understand what causes the same event to be reported differently in different countries. Mody and her students provide detailed findings on how foreign news is reported in different countries.



Mody presents patterns and a geopolitical model of predictors to illustrate how differences in media firms' characteristics affect the way that foreign news is reported. She uses articles from six print newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Le Monde*, *the Guardian (UK)*, *the People's Daily*, and *Al-Ahram*. She also examines four online media organizations: *BBC.co.uk*, *English.AJazeera.net*, *Mail & Guardian Online*, and *China Daily*. These outlets cover samplings from the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, Egypt, Qatar, and South Africa. With these sources, Mody and her team identify more than 3,000 articles that mentioned Darfur during the time frame of 2003 to 2005. Of that total, 1,200 are placed in the comparative model used to generate the findings. The author arrives at this smaller number by selecting articles in which Darfur was mentioned in 50% or more of the text. Of the news organizations that had a substantial amount of coverage, every other article was included in the final sample, presumably to make the final sample size more manageable for coding and indexing.

The analytical study lays out the differences of media firms and their coverage of foreign news. Mody's team of graduate students collected and coded the news stories, and they contributed to the study, with their respective term papers becoming the foundation for the finished product. The investigation rested on a theoretical framework of three literatures not often combined—political economy, international relations, and political communication—as well as on an analysis of manifest content that is a part of media research. Mody begins with a literature review that summarizes previous research in comparative journalism studies. She shows how the comparative cross-national study of the news about Darfur was constructed and introduces the three dimensions of the study: timing and type of representation, frequency and types of explanation, and comprehensiveness and influences on comprehensives of coverage.

A subsequent chapter, co-authored with Michael McDevitt, addresses the moral agency of journalism and identifies a watchdog role, which "is conventionally understood in the context of domestic news coverage, in which reporters bring institutional corruption to light of public scrutiny" (p. 47). He contrasts the watchdog role with that of journalism in mobilizing conscience, defined as "establish[ing] identification with victims in another part of the world, in cultures that are often mysterious to the media consumers" (p. 47). Although the watchdog is an adversarial position, mobilizing conscience is said to require cooperation with government elites. Moral mobilization is treated as a motivator of journalists that can be generated or blunted, but the book only tangentially connects this aspect to the findings. Examples of the failure and the reasons for failure of a moral mobilization are addressed with regard to Darfur, but no empirical data is directed at moral agency.

One chapter provides background to the conflict in the region of eastern Sudan (Darfur), and another chapter recaps the rebellion, its causes, and the reporting of the conflict. In addition, as a study of how media differ in reporting foreign events, it seemed odd not to find some statement justifying the objectiveness of the author's account of the rebellion. Still, the overview provides a sound examination of the reasons that news organizations in the Global South and in the Global North, as well as online news intended for extra-national audiences, interpreted events differently.

The Global South findings compare Egypt's *Al-Ahram*, South Africa's *Mail & Guardian Online* and China's leading English and Chinese newspapers. The Global North comparisons are drawn from the UK's *Guardian*, France's *Le Monde*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The third comparison builds on the English-language websites of the *BBC* and *Al-Jazeera*, supplemented with 10 appendices that contain data on Sudan, comparative data, and indicators used in the study. These data sets will be the basis for future journal articles.

Geopolitics of Representation of Foreign News reinforces important findings in comparative journalism studies. First, the limitations of news organizations in presenting foreign events are three-fold: the lack of historical perspective of current events, the tunnel vision focus of coverage of one crisis at a time, and a preoccupation with events that have direct domestic linkage. These factors often influence what is reported. The lack of perspective or background of events can be influenced by causes such as colonialism of the Global South, national interests, or business interests in privately owned newspapers or in those that rely on revenue from advertising. The implication is that news outlets will hesitate to cover stories that offend their sources of revenue or that show these sources in a negative light. The analysis also showed that the news outlets deferred to government sources, even the privately owned U.S. newspapers. Mody argues that national interests are still a significant predictor of news coverage in all countries, but notably in both the U.S. and U.K. news organizations, despite claims "that they are the watchdogs against state abuse of power" (p. 322).

A theme that permeates the analysis is that more extensive, in-depth reporting of foreign news can prevent or mitigate foreign crisis. The presumption is that the more focus that is placed on foreign events by the media, the more the citizenry will push for a resolution of the crisis, causing government officials to pay more attention to the event. Shining a light on hunger, disease, and mass murder, as well as on the roles that governments, multinational corporations, and multinational governmental

organizations play in resolving or causing these tragedies, will help educate and mobilize the electorate to pressure individuals and entities that can positively influence these matters. Mody and her collaborators contend that the provision of information can transform the way that crises unfold because of the action that civil society and governments will be forced to undertake to prevent or mitigate crises.

The findings reinforce earlier cross-national studies, which concluded that the same news event is reported differently due to the location of the news organization. In addition, Mody and her team show substantial differences between the geopolitical location of that organization in regard to its location in the Global North or South. The comprehensive coverage of Darfur is substantially higher in media corporations located in the North. The extent of coverage and news group location is related to the expressed national interest in Darfur. This reaffirms beliefs that national interests are a major influence on the focus of the lens of domestic media organizations regardless of the intended audience.

The profusion of data sets that compare these six print newspapers and four online news organizations by their location show that the factors of ownership, national interest, and intended audience add to our understanding of the way foreign news is constructed. Despite the propagation of information related to the global rise in Internet penetration, representations of news by journalists are still the primary form of education for out-of-school adults. News is reported and viewed differently, depending on how and when the news is transmitted back to the intended audience and by whom. Mody makes a straightforward but important statement in the conclusion—that the domestic media organization is the only window to the foreign that many people will ever use to view the rest of the world. How this window is constructed is critical to understanding how audiences obtain information about world events. When this window is manipulated by corporate, government, and national interests, audience understanding of foreign events will differ, depending on the characteristics of the organizations presenting foreign news.