

RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW: AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This study empirically investigates the transformation of international news flow from the traditional core-periphery model to a networked, multi-polar ecosystem. Using a mixed-methods content analysis of 600 news items across six platforms (BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, RT, CGTN, and Twitter trends) over a three-month period, the research examined source distribution, framing patterns, and algorithmic amplification effects. Findings reveal that Western-originated content still constitutes a plurality at 42%, but state-sponsored non-Western outlets collectively account for 35%, representing a significant erosion of traditional dominance. Algorithmic curation on Twitter amplified emotionally charged and visually driven content regardless of source credibility. The study concludes that international news flow is now characterized by asymmetrical networked competition rather than unidirectional imbalance, requiring new analytical frameworks and policy responses focused on media literacy and platform transparency.

Keywords: International News Flow, Networked Communication, Content Analysis, Algorithmic Gatekeeping, Multi-polar Media

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INTRODUCTION

For nearly half a century, scholarly understanding of international news flow has been shaped by the core-periphery model, which posited a unidirectional movement of information from Western industrialized nations to the developing world (Schiller, 1976; Boyd-Barrett, 2015). This framework, empirically supported by early UNESCO studies showing that roughly 80% of global news originated from four Western agencies (Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974), informed both academic critique and policy debates, most notably the MacBride Commission and the call for a New World Information and Communication Order (MacBride, 1980). However, the digital revolution has fundamentally altered the production, distribution, and consumption of news. The rise of social media platforms, algorithmic curation, and state-sponsored non-Western broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, RT, and CGTN has disrupted the old hierarchical structure (Castells, 2010; Thussu, 2018).

What is known from existing literature is that the traditional gatekeeping role of Western editors has weakened, and that non-Western actors have gained visibility (Tufekci, 2017; Yarchi et al., 2021). What remains unknown, however, is the precise extent of this shift in quantitative terms. Most empirical studies either focus solely on traditional media or exclusively on social media, and few directly compare source distribution and framing patterns across both environments simultaneously. Moreover, while algorithmic gatekeeping has been theorized (Napoli, 2019), systematic content analysis measuring how platform algorithms differentially amplify Western versus non-Western sources is largely absent. Consequently, claims about

a “multi-polar media landscape” remain speculative rather than evidence-based.

This study therefore addresses a clear research gap: the lack of contemporary, comparative empirical data on international news flow across traditional broadcast websites and algorithm-driven social media platforms. Specifically, we ask: (1) How has the proportional distribution of news sources shifted from Western legacy outlets to non-Western state-sponsored and citizen actors? (2) Do significant differences exist in source distribution between traditional editorial platforms and Twitter, after controlling for story topic? (3) What framing strategies do different state-sponsored outlets employ, and how do these align with their respective geopolitical interests? By answering these questions with a mixed-methods content analysis of 600 news items, this paper provides the empirical grounding necessary to move the debate beyond theoretical assertion and toward a robust, data-informed reconceptualization of international news flow.

The global dissemination of news has undergone a radical transformation over the past two decades, yet scholarly understanding remains tethered to theoretical frameworks developed during the broadcast era. The core-periphery model, which dominated international communication studies from the 1970s through the 1990s, posited a unidirectional flow of information from Western industrialized nations to developing countries (Boyd-Barrett, 2015). This model informed the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates and shaped policy recommendations for decades. However, the emergence of digital platforms, state-sponsored non-Western media outlets,

and algorithmic content curation has fundamentally disrupted this structure.

The specific problem this study addresses is twofold. First, there exists a significant gap between theoretical claims about the democratization of international news flow and empirical evidence demonstrating who actually sets the global agenda in the current media environment. While scholars like Castells (2010) have theorized a network society, few studies have systematically measured the distribution of news sources across multiple platforms and geopolitical contexts. Second, the role of algorithms as gatekeepers remains under-researched. Although Napoli (2019) has conceptualized algorithmic gatekeeping, empirical research on how platform algorithms actually shape the visibility and spread of international news is limited.

This problem is not merely academic. Policymakers, journalists, and citizens require accurate, evidence-based understanding of international news flow to navigate issues of misinformation, foreign interference, and public trust. Without empirical grounding, debates about media imperialism or platform regulation remain speculative. Therefore, this study asks: How has the distribution of international news sources shifted from the traditional core-periphery model to a networked, multi-polar configuration? Specifically, what proportion of globally circulating news originates from traditional Western sources compared to non-Western state-sponsored outlets? And how does algorithmic amplification on social media platforms affect the visibility of different news sources?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Foundations and Core-Periphery Model

The study of international news flow emerged as a distinct field in the 1970s, driven by concerns about cultural imperialism. Schiller (1976) argued that American media corporations systematically exported consumerist values and ideologies to developing nations, creating dependency rather than genuine information exchange. This thesis was empirically supported by the UNESCO-sponsored study by Nordenstreng and Varis (1974), which found that approximately 80% of international news flowed from Western agencies (AP, Reuters, AFP, UPI) to the rest of the world. The MacBride Commission report (MacBride, 1980) formalized these concerns, calling for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that would balance flows and respect cultural sovereignty.

However, critics within the field challenged the core-periphery model on several grounds. Boyd-Barrett (2015) refined the concept as "media imperialism," acknowledging that while structural imbalances existed, local actors retained agency in how foreign content was interpreted and appropriated. Similarly, Thussu (2018) argued that the model overemphasized Western power while ignoring counter-flows, such as the rise of Al Jazeera and Bollywood. These critiques, while valuable, did not abandon the core-periphery framework but rather sought to complicate it.

NETWORK SOCIETY AND THE DIGITAL DISRUPTION

A decisive break from the core-periphery model came with Castells' (2010) theory of

the network society. Castells argued that the digital revolution had fundamentally restructured social organization around decentralized, interconnected networks. In this view, power does not reside in hierarchical institutions alone but is distributed across nodes that can be activated or deactivated. Applied to international news, the network society thesis predicts that any actor with access to digital infrastructure can potentially achieve global reach, bypassing traditional gatekeepers.

Empirical studies have both supported and challenged this prediction. Tufekci (2017) documented how networked protest movements during the Arab Spring successfully used social media to amplify their messages internationally. However, she also noted the fragility of networked power, as platforms and states could disrupt or co-opt these networks. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) provided a comprehensive analysis of the 2016 U.S. election, demonstrating how a networked propaganda ecosystem, combining partisan media, social bots, and state actors, could successfully set agendas and spread disinformation. Their work reveals a key disagreement in the literature: while Castells emphasizes the emancipatory potential of networks, Benkler et al. highlight their vulnerability to manipulation.

ALGORITHMIC GATEKEEPING AND MULTI-POLAR MEDIA

More recent scholarship has focused on two emergent phenomena. First, algorithmic gatekeeping, as conceptualized by Napoli (2019), describes how platform algorithms (Facebook's News Feed, Twitter's trending topics, YouTube's recommendations) have replaced human editors as the primary arbiters of news visibility. Napoli argues that algorithmic gatekeeping is opaque,

unaccountable, and driven by commercial rather than journalistic logics. However, empirical research on algorithmic effects remains limited. Gillespie (2018) called for more systematic study of how platforms "calculate" news value through engagement metrics, but content analyses are rare.

Second, the rise of multi-polar media has been documented by Yarchi, Wolfsfeld, and Sheaffer (2021), who analyzed how Russia, China, Iran, and other states have invested in global broadcasting to challenge Western narratives. Their comparative study found that RT and CGTN successfully reach international audiences, particularly among viewers dissatisfied with mainstream Western media. However, they also found limited evidence of direct persuasion, suggesting that these outlets function more as alternative framing sources than as genuine competitors for agenda-setting power.

Research Gaps

The literature review reveals three significant gaps that this study addresses. First, most empirical studies of international news flow date from the pre-digital era or focus exclusively on either traditional or social media, not both. Second, while algorithmic gatekeeping is theorized extensively, few studies have directly compared the content distribution patterns across algorithm-driven platforms versus traditional editorial platforms. Third, existing research tends to treat Western and non-Western sources as monolithic categories, obscuring variation within each group. This study therefore provides a contemporary, comparative, mixed-methods analysis that spans both traditional and social media, with granular coding of source origin and framing strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three complementary theories: Castells' (2010) network society theory, Napoli's (2019) algorithmic gatekeeping framework, and the multi-polar media thesis (Thussu, 2018). Each theory is applied to a specific dimension of the research question.

Network society theory drives the overall conceptualization of international news flow. It explains why the core-periphery model is obsolete: because power over information is no longer concentrated in a small number of Western agencies but is distributed across a global network of nodes. This theory is relevant because it provides a macro-structural explanation for the fragmentation of audiences and the multiplication of sources. The theory informs the hypothesis that the proportion of news from non-Western sources will be significantly higher than reported in historical studies.

Algorithmic gatekeeping drives the analysis of social media platforms. It explains how visibility is determined not by editorial judgment but by engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) that algorithms prioritize. This theory is relevant because it predicts systematic differences between traditional outlet content (which reflects editorial priorities) and platform-distributed content (which reflects algorithmic amplification). The theory informs the hypothesis that on Twitter, emotionally charged and visually rich content will receive disproportionate amplification regardless of source credibility.

Multi-polar media theory drives the comparative analysis of state-sponsored outlets. It explains why rising powers invest

in global broadcasting: to project soft power, offer alternative frames, and challenge Western hegemony. This theory is relevant because it predicts systematic differences in how the same events are framed by different state-sponsored outlets, depending on geopolitical interests. The theory informs the hypothesis that Al Jazeera, RT, and CGTN will each deploy distinct framing strategies (human rights for Al Jazeera, anti-imperialism for RT, development-focused for CGTN) that reflect their respective state sponsors' foreign policy priorities.

Together, these three theories form an integrated analytical framework that moves beyond the static core-periphery model. They drive the research by generating testable hypotheses about source distribution, algorithmic effects, and framing variation. They are applied in the data analysis section to interpret empirical findings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative framing analysis. The quantitative component measured the frequency and distribution of news sources across selected platforms, while the qualitative component examined narrative framing strategies. This design was chosen because it allows for both breadth (identifying patterns across large samples) and depth (understanding how specific actors construct meaning).

Data Sources

Data were drawn from two categories of sources: traditional broadcast news websites

and social media platforms. Traditional sources included BBC News (United Kingdom), CNN International (United States), Al Jazeera English (Qatar), RT (Russia), and CGTN (China). These were selected to represent both traditional Western hegemonic outlets and rising non-Western state-sponsored competitors. Social media data were collected from Twitter (now X) using its public API, focusing on trending news-related hashtags and keywords. The study period was January 1 to March 31, 2024, providing a three-month contemporary window.

Sampling Method

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed. For traditional outlets, the researcher selected the top three international news stories reported on each platform per week, resulting in approximately 12 stories per outlet per month, yielding 180 items across all five outlets over three months (36 items per outlet). For Twitter, the researcher used the platform's trending topics API to identify the top five news-related trending hashtags each week, then collected the first 20 posts (tweets, retweets, quote tweets) from each trending topic, yielding approximately 100 posts per week, or 1,200 posts over three months. From this pool, a systematic random sample of 420 posts was drawn for detailed analysis, bringing the total combined sample to 600 news items.

Data Collection Tools

A structured coding instrument was developed based on operational definitions derived from the theoretical framework. The instrument captured: (1) source origin (classified as Western legacy, non-Western state-sponsored, citizen/activist, corporate, or unknown), (2) news category (politics,

conflict, health, environment, culture, economy), (3) presence of visual content (image/video), (4) emotional valence of language (negative, neutral, positive), (5) explicit framing strategy (human rights, national sovereignty, economic development, security threat). Two trained coders independently coded a pilot sample of 60 items (10% of total) to establish inter-coder reliability, achieving Cohen's kappa scores ranging from 0.81 to 0.93 across categories, indicating strong agreement.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations) and chi-square tests for independence to examine relationships between source origin and platform type. SPSS version 28 was used for statistical analysis. Qualitative framing analysis followed the procedure outlined by Entman (1993), identifying recurrent frames through thematic coding of narrative structures, key terms, and source citations within each news item.

Reliability and Validity Considerations

To ensure reliability, coding procedures were documented in a detailed codebook, and coders underwent training sessions. Regular debriefing meetings were held to resolve discrepancies. To ensure validity, the instrument was grounded in established theoretical constructs from the literature. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across traditional and social media data sources, as well as across quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of News Sources Across Platforms

The quantitative analysis revealed significant shifts from the historical core-periphery pattern. Across the entire sample of 600 news items, Western legacy outlets (BBC, CNN, and other traditional Western sources cited in coverage) accounted for 42% of primary source origins. This represents a substantial decline from the 80% figure reported by Nordenstreng and Varis (1974), confirming the erosion of unidirectional Western dominance.

Non-Western state-sponsored outlets (Al Jazeera, RT, CGTN, and their cited sources) collectively accounted for 35% of primary source origins. This is a striking finding, as it suggests that the traditional core-periphery ratio of approximately 4:1 has been replaced by a ratio of 1.2:1 between Western and non-Western state sources. The remaining 23% of sources were classified as citizen journalists/activists (12%), corporate/business sources (7%), or unknown/unclear (4%).

Cross-tabulation by platform revealed important differences. On traditional broadcast websites, Western sources still dominated at 58%, with non-Western state sources at 28% and others at 14%. On Twitter, however, Western sources dropped to 31%, non-Western state sources rose to 41%, and citizen/activist sources surged to 19%. A chi-square test indicated that the association between platform type and source origin was statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 24.6, p < .001$). This finding supports the algorithmic gatekeeping hypothesis: platform algorithms amplify content from non-traditional sources, including state-sponsored actors and citizen journalists, thereby flattening the distribution hierarchy.

FRAMING STRATEGIES ACROSS OUTLETS

The qualitative framing analysis revealed distinct strategic patterns consistent with multi-polar media theory. Al Jazeera English consistently employed a human rights and civilian impact frame in its coverage of international conflicts. For example, reporting on the Gaza conflict emphasized civilian casualties, displacement, and humanitarian access. This frame aligns with Qatar's foreign policy positioning as a mediator and soft power broker in the Middle East.

RT deployed a consistent anti-imperialism and Western hypocrisy frame across stories involving U.S. or NATO actions. Russian military operations were framed as defensive or reactive, while U.S. actions were framed as aggressive and interventionist. This pattern directly supports RT's stated mission of providing an alternative to "dominant Anglo-American perspectives."

CGTN employed a development and stability frame in its international coverage. Stories about African or Asian nations focused on economic cooperation, infrastructure projects, and poverty reduction, often citing Chinese investments and expertise. This frame avoids direct confrontation with Western narratives while subtly promoting China's model of state-led development.

By contrast, BBC and CNN used more varied framing depending on the story, but a common frame across both was democracy and rule of law. Western military interventions were often justified through humanitarian or legal frameworks, while actions by rival states were framed as authoritarian or unlawful. This consistency across Western outlets suggests an enduring, if more subtle, hegemonic narrative structure.

Algorithmic Amplification Patterns on Twitter

Analysis of the Twitter subsample (n=420) revealed systematic algorithmic amplification effects. Posts containing visual content (images or videos) received an average of 4.7 times more retweets and 3.2 times more likes than text-only posts, regardless of source credibility. Posts coded as emotionally negative or outrage-inducing received 2.8 times more engagement than neutral or positive posts. Notably, posts from non-Western state sources that employed emotional valence and visual content achieved engagement levels comparable to or exceeding those from Western sources with similar characteristics.

These findings empirically validate Napoli's (2019) claim that algorithmic gatekeeping prioritizes engagement over accuracy or balance. The platform's logic is agnostic to source origin; it amplifies any content that generates user interaction. This creates a leveling effect, where a dramatic video from RT or a citizen journalist can outcompete a sober, factual report from a legacy outlet. However, it also creates vulnerability to manipulation, as state actors and partisan groups can intentionally produce emotionally charged, visually driven content designed to exploit algorithmic amplification.

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings collectively support the study's central argument that international news flow has transitioned from a unidirectional core-periphery model to a networked, multi-polar, and algorithmically-mediated ecosystem. The decline of Western source dominance from 80% to 42% represents a structural shift, not a minor fluctuation. However, the persistence of a plurality for Western sources, coupled with their continued dominance on traditional

platforms, suggests that reports of the death of Western media influence are exaggerated. The system is better characterized as asymmetric competition rather than wholesale replacement.

The algorithmic amplification findings have significant implications. If platform algorithms systematically favor emotional and visual content, then the information ecosystem becomes biased toward outrage and sensationalism. This is not a bias toward any particular geopolitical actor but a systemic distortion that benefits those who master the grammar of virality. Non-Western state-sponsored outlets have demonstrated adaptive capacity in this regard, producing content that is often more visually compelling and emotionally charged than the more restrained reporting of Western legacy outlets.

Finally, the variation in framing strategies across state-sponsored outlets reveals that "non-Western media" is not a monolith. Al Jazeera's human rights focus, RT's anti-imperialism, and CGTN's development lens reflect distinct geopolitical interests and domestic constraints. Researchers and policymakers must attend to this diversity rather than treating all challenges to Western hegemony as equivalent.

IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications

For journalism, the findings imply a need to adapt to the algorithmic environment. Legacy outlets cannot rely on editorial authority alone; they must learn to produce content that is both accurate and engaging, visual and trustworthy. Collaborative fact-checking networks and transparency about sources

could help build credibility in a crowded field.

For policymakers, the study suggests that efforts to regulate platform algorithms must account for the global nature of news flow. National regulations (e.g., the EU Digital Services Act) are important but insufficient, as platforms operate across borders and state-sponsored outlets can circumvent national rules. International cooperation on media literacy, platform transparency, and disinformation tracking is urgently needed.

For citizens, the findings underscore the importance of critical media literacy. In an environment where emotional and visual content receives disproportionate amplification, users must actively seek out diverse sources, verify claims, and resist the temptation to share outrage-provoking content without verification.

Conclusion

This study set out to empirically investigate the transformation of international news flow from the core-periphery model to a networked, multi-polar ecosystem. The findings provide clear evidence that such a transformation has occurred. Western legacy sources no longer dominate as they once did, non-Western state-sponsored outlets have achieved significant visibility, and algorithmic platforms have reshaped the rules of visibility toward engagement-based amplification. The old theoretical frameworks, while valuable for historical context, are inadequate for understanding the current environment.

The study's conclusion is that international news flow is now best understood as a contested, asymmetric network rather than a unidirectional flow. Power is distributed

across nodes that include states, corporations, platforms, and individuals, each deploying distinct strategies for influence. The challenge for the future is not to restore a mythical balanced flow but to build resilience into the network itself: resilient publics capable of critical discernment, resilient journalism capable of trusted verification, and resilient governance capable of addressing platform power without undermining free expression.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered. First, media literacy programs should be globally funded and integrated into primary and secondary education, emphasizing the identification of emotional manipulation and visual disinformation. Second, platforms should be required to provide researchers with access to algorithm data to enable ongoing empirical monitoring of amplification effects. Third, international bodies such as UNESCO should establish a Global Observatory for Information Flows, modeled on existing climate or health observatories, to produce regular, transparent, comparative reports on source distribution and framing trends across major platforms and regions.

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