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The International Geopolitical Agenda of Western European Daily Newspapers: Nationalism, Imperialism or Regionalism?

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ABSTRACT

In the debate on the new world information order, a “global North” and a “global South” are all too often contrasted without measuring up the diversity of factors that influence international media agendas. While a number of studies are beginning to study the diversity of situations in the South, too few analyses study the diversity of situations in the North, too often reduced to the analysis of the historical USA-UK duopoly. This analysis seeks to fill this gap by studying the international geopolitical agenda of 12 daily press newspapers located in the four main countries of Western Europe (France, Spain, Germany, United Kingdom). The results show both the existence of a common agenda in line with the hypotheses of the existence of a “global North” but also strong national specificities associated with a form of division of labour in terms of world coverage, with each newspaper covering a specific macro-region in relation to its historical heritage.

KEYWORDS

Media, Flows, Daily newspaper, World, Regionalisation, Western Europe

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le débat sur le nouvel ordre mondial de l'information, on oppose trop souvent un « Nord global » et un « Sud global » sans prendre la mesure de la diversité des facteurs de variation des agendas internationaux des médias. Si plusieurs études commencent à étudier la diversité des situations au Sud, trop peu d'analyses étudient la diversité des situations au Nord, trop souvent réduite à l'analyse du duopole historique USA–Royaume-Uni. Cette analyse propose de combler cette lacune à travers l'analyse de l'agenda géopolitique international de 12 journaux de presse quotidienne situés dans les quatre principaux pays d'Europe de l'Ouest (France, Espagne, Allemagne, Royaume-Uni). Les résultats montrent à la fois l'existence d'un agenda commun conforme aux hypothèses d'existence d'un « Nord global » mais aussi de fortes spécificités nationales associées à une forme de division du travail en termes de couverture mondiale, chaque journal couvrant une macrorégion spécifique en relation avec ses héritages historiques.

MOTS CLÉS

médias, flux, presse quotidienne, Monde, régionalisation, Europe de l'Ouest

The circulation of news from the international press through RSS flows is a fascinating example of linking places on the surface of the globe. It leads to the visualisation in space and time of a considerable mass of information initially made up of small atoms of information contained in the RSS feeds of the newspapers (title and first sentences of the articles). The possibilities of aggregating this press news at macroscopic level are indeed multiple, and their exploration and visualisation raise particularly interesting problems from statistical and cartographic points of view. This paper proposes to apply a wide set of (new) methods of data exploration to the (old) problem of inequalities in global communication order. The example chosen will be that of international news published by 12 major daily press newspapers of four Western European countries (France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom) between the 1st of July 2013 and the 30th of June 2020 in the form of RSS feeds. We will question to what extent the press of these countries –historically and spatially close– offers similar or different coverage of international events, whatever their nature (political, sporting, cultural, etc.). More precisely we will examine to what extent they are still characterised by imperialism and colonial heritages.

In the debate on the new world information order, researchers too often oppose a “global North” to a “global South” without measuring up the diversity of factors that influence international media. While a number of studies are beginning to cover the diversity of situations in the South, too few analyses study the diversity of situations in the North, too often reduced to the analysis of the historical USA-United Kingdom duopoly. This analysis proposes to fill this gap through the analysis of the international geopolitical agendas of daily press newspapers located in the four main countries of Western Europe (France, Spain, Germany, United Kingdom). Geographically close but different in terms of language and colonial history, the media of these countries constitute a privileged terrain for analysing the international geopolitical agenda in terms of temporalities (when do they talk about foreign countries the most?), space (which foreign countries do they talk about the most?) and finally networks of domination (what pairs of countries are most associated by them in the news?).

After presenting the research questions in relation to the concept of International Geopolitical Agenda (Grasland *et al.*, 2021), we will precise how it is possible to answer these questions through the different dimensions, spatial or non-spatial, present in a RSS flows. This will make it possible firstly to evaluate the share of foreign news published by the newspapers of the different countries as well as their variation during time. We will then analyse the geography of press flows by examining whether there is a relationship between the location of newspapers and the frequency of citation of foreign countries. Finally, we will demonstrate

that press news also reveal indirect links of co-citations between countries present in the same news which are directly related to normative relations of domination and inequality. The paper will conclude with a final discussion of the results and some future research directions.

A CORPUS OF WESTERN EUROPE NEWSPAPERS

We selected from the MediaCloud database (Roberts *et al.*, 2021) a corpus of 16 newspapers from 4 Western European countries for which we have both the title of the news and the first two sentences of the description. Indeed, these European countries, spatially close and of similar size, share a common history and their newspapers could therefore produce similar visions of the world. However, they are characterised by different colonial economic and political histories that led them each to develop specific relations with certain parts of the world, in particular through colonisation and the dissemination of their own languages. In a more contemporary way, each of these countries retains specific economic or political relations with such and such country, notably through business strategies, the locations of diasporas or tourist destinations. It might therefore be particularly interesting to compare the coverage of the countries of the World in the newspapers of each of these countries.

Thanks to the data provided by the MediaCloud, we can study a relatively long period of time (7 years) which goes from the beginning of the second half of 2013 to the end of the first half of 2020. Even if the collection of RSS feeds from certain newspapers may experience periods of interruption of a few days or weeks (either because the newspaper ceases to publish, or most often because the collection tool experiences a breakdown), using four newspapers in each country studied makes it possible to ensure regular coverage of the entire period with an average of 500 to 2,000 semantic units per day, corresponding to 200 to 1,000 complete news items.

A NEW MEASURE OF SALIENCE

Most of the work on the press media coverage of countries uses a simple count of the number of news items published to establish a hierarchy of the most/least cited countries. However, as Elad Segev (2014; 2016) rightly notes, this measurement does not take into account the temporal distribution of news, which can sometimes be concentrated over a few days or weeks, sometimes evenly distributed throughout the year. For example, a country like Nepal benefited from very strong media coverage from West European media on the occasion of the 2015 earthquake while remaining largely ignored before and after. Conversely, small member countries of the European Union will be cited more regularly according to various reasons (diplomacy, sporting events, cultural events, etc.). We therefore propose a new measure of salience defined as the proportion of days during which a media published at least one news item on the country concerned. This measure is both simple and robust since it can take into account the presence of discontinuities in the collection of news and eliminate from the calculation the days when the newspaper published no news. It can more easily be aggregated when we have, as is the case here, a sample of four newspapers per country in order to deduce an average national value.

Table 1. Salience of guest countries mentioned by newspapers of host countries

Rank	Guest countries	Host countries				Average
		Germany	Spain	France	UK	
1	United States	94,7	90,8	91,9	89,4	91,7
2	France	83,3	82,2	-	90,1	85,2
3	United Kingdom	84,5	82,0	88,8	-	85,1
4	Russian Federation	82,8	76,1	82,6	82,6	81,0
5	Germany	-	75,2	83,8	76,9	78,6
6	China	77,1	71,1	81,5	81,9	77,9
7	Spain	68,3	-	76,2	73,9	72,8
8	Italy	68,4	71,9	77,7	69,1	71,8
9	Syrian Arab Republic	54,0	48,1	77,6	65,6	61,3
10	Turkey	70,2	45,3	62,7	50,3	57,1
11	Belgium	44,9	60,3	67,6	45,6	54,6
12	Brazil	43,8	57,1	61,4	55,2	54,4
13	Japan	44,4	51,3	64,0	57,4	54,3
14	Australia	33,3	42,1	50,9	80,7	51,8
15	Israel	41,4	44,0	65,3	53,7	51,1
16	India	28,1	39,6	46,5	67,5	45,4
17	Iran, Islamic Rep.	35,1	38,7	54,6	47,5	44,0
18	Switzerland	50,6	39,5	51,4	29,0	42,6
19	Greece	43,8	42,2	45,5	38,3	42,5
20	Mexico	26,5	55,0	38,1	44,5	41,0

Source: MediaCloud

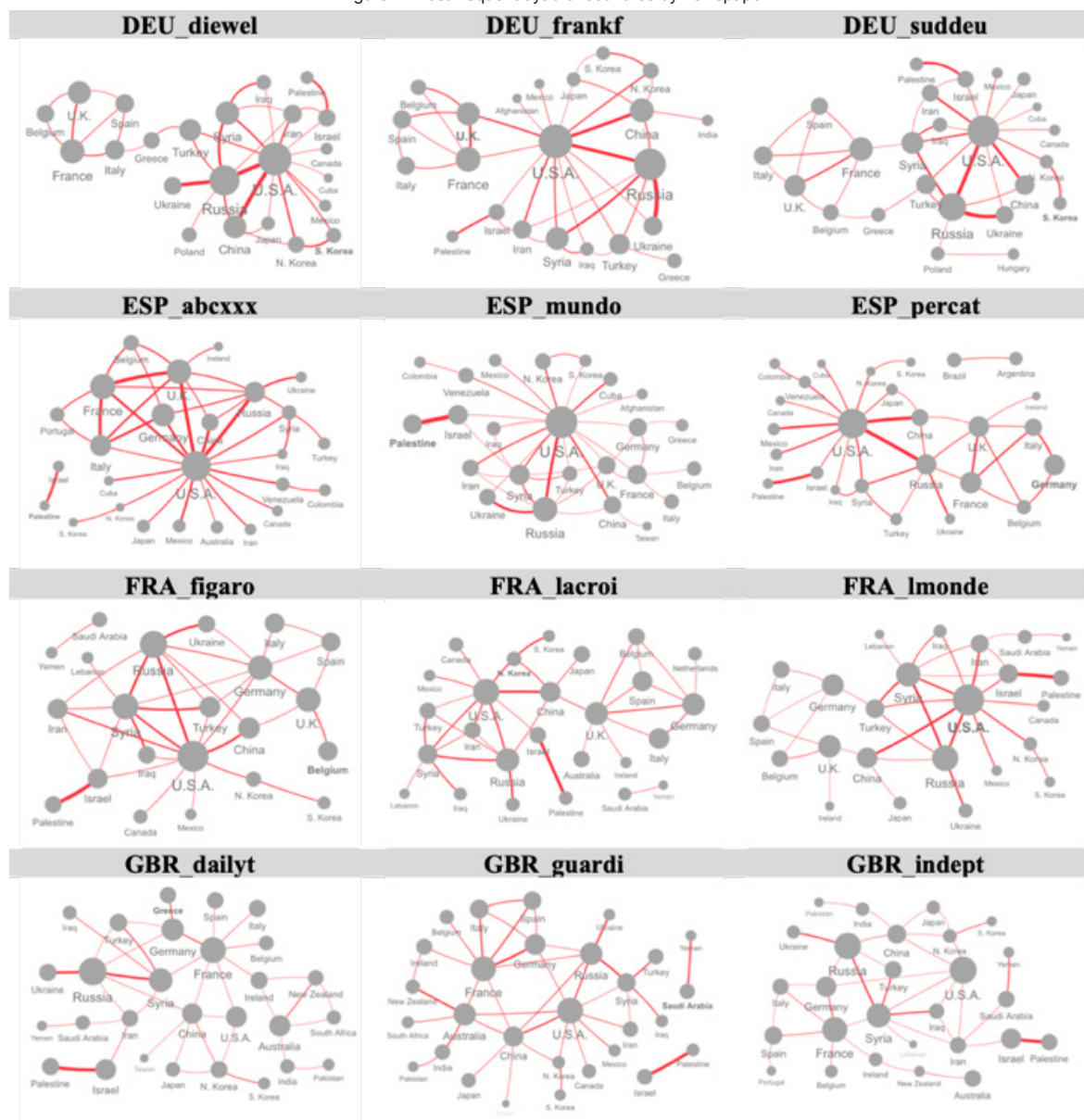
Note: The salience of a country is measured by the proportion of days when a country is mentioned at least once by a single media. The table presents the average salience observed in the different media of each country and the final value for all countries.

As can be seen in table 1, the countries which are presented most frequently in the agenda of Western European newspapers are generally powerful and distant countries (USA, Russia, China, Brazil, Japan, Mexico, etc.), powerful neighbours (France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, etc.) or countries going through economic or political crises that have had a significant impact on Western European countries (Greece, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Israel, etc.). The fact that Ukraine does not appear in the twenty most cited countries is explained by the period of media coverage of the 2014 crisis, which is relatively limited with regard to the study period chosen.

A NETWORK DOMINATED BY THE “NORTH”?

The newspapers of the four Western European countries studied remain similar in many respects in the way they structure international information. Because of their membership in the “global North”, they obviously offer a biased vision of international news that places the United States and Russia at the centre of the game, followed by China and themselves. Considering only the most cited countries or the most frequent dyads, the geopolitical map of the world seems to be reduced to the West, its main rivals and the countries whose crises affect them most directly (fig. 1)

Figure 1. Most frequent dyad of countries by newspaper



Source: Data extracted from MediaCloud

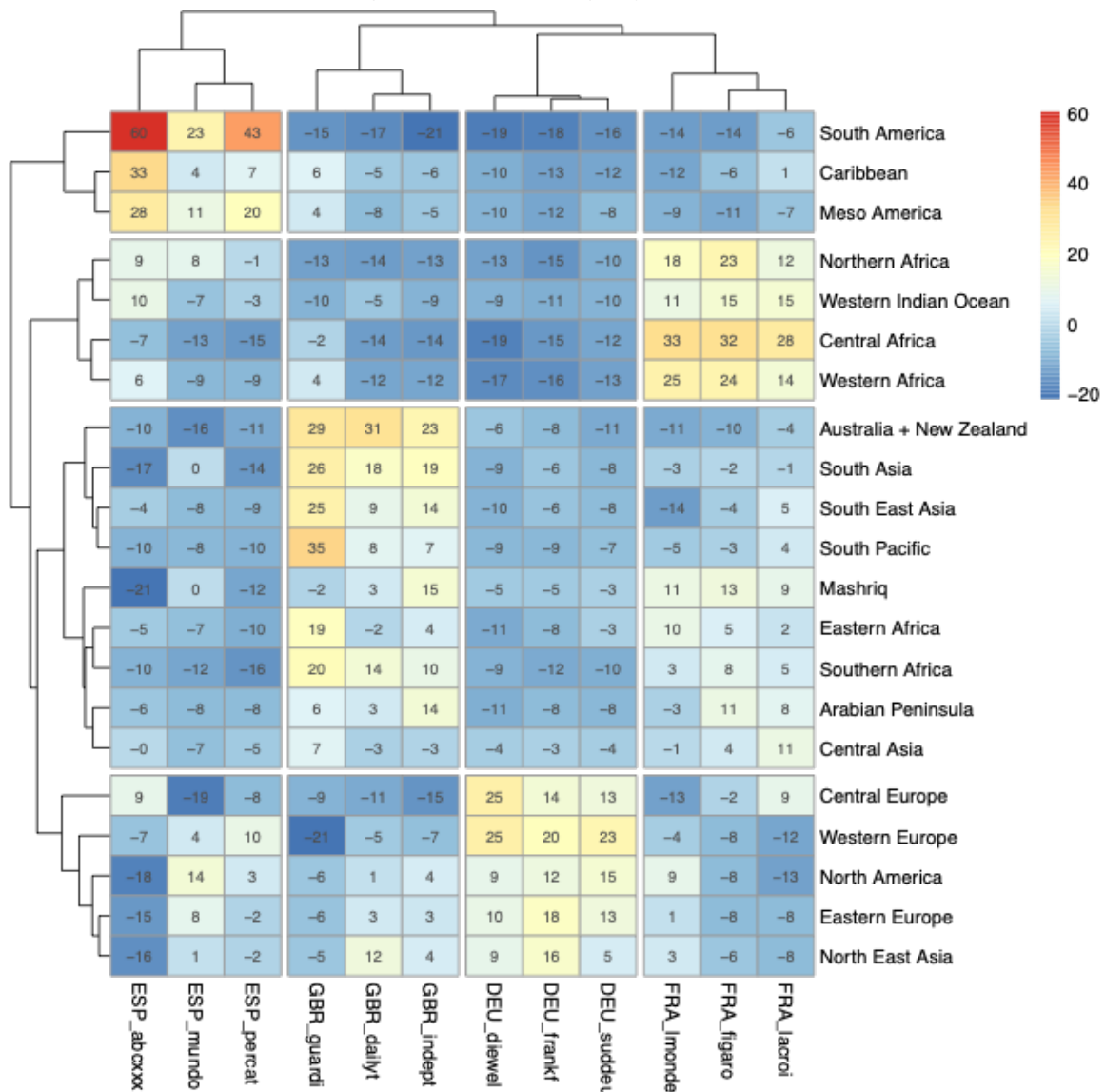
Comment: The figure presents, for each media, the most important dyad of countries measured as a number of days where at least one news associated them together. Notice the frequent existence of a subgroup of EU countries in German and Spanish news.

REGIONALISATION OF INTERNATIONAL AGENDA

The fact that the most powerful countries in the world, the closest countries and the countries in crisis enjoy significant and equivalent media coverage in each of the four Western European countries can give the misleading impression of an alignment of their media agendas. There is undoubtedly a strong correlation between each of the spatial distribution of the newspapers, but this is fundamentally linked to the effect of what could be called the “top-agenda” relating to the unmissable events broadcast by the major news agencies and picked up around the world. But there is also a “bottom-agenda” relating to the smallest, most remote or least

powerful countries, for which the inclusion on the agenda depends much more on the privileged links established between what Wu (2000) described as “host countries” –where media are located– and “guest countries” –who are mentioned in the news. We can highlight this second agenda by calculating the average coverage of countries according to their location in the 21 subregions of the world proposed by the United Nations and by measuring the deviations from the average profile of the 16 newspapers (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Saliency of world region by media outlets



Source: Data extracted from MediaCloud

Comment: This table present the studentised residuals of a chi-square test realised on the contingency table crossing the media and the number of day of apparition of the country of each region. Negative values < -2 (in blue) indicate significant under-representation of a region by a media and positive values > +2 (in orange) indicate significant over-representations.

A double classification carried out on the relative residuals of the contingency table crossing media and subregions of the world highlights a very strong structuring of national agendas and reveals that each of the Western European countries is specialised in the coverage of a region of the World. French newspapers offer significantly stronger coverage of Northern Western and Central Africa, Western Indian Ocean and Mashreq. Spanish newspapers favour Latin America and –to a lesser extent– Northern America. British newspapers favour Southern and Eastern Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa, Mashreq, Arabia Peninsula and the Pacific space with a specific focus on Australia and New Zealand. German newspapers are much more focused on Europe at large, Northern Asia, and North America.

DISCUSSION & PERSPECTIVES

Even if this conclusion was expected, all the analyses confirm the still structuring role of the national level in the circulation of international press news (Hafez, 2013; Grasland *et al.*, 2021). Whether we consider the temporalities or the list of countries cited and co-cited, there is systematically a stronger correlation between the statistical distributions of two newspapers of a same country than between two newspapers from different countries. Contrary to predictions made after the end of the Cold War, the world is certainly not flat and geography is not dead.

A whole part of the World is literally invisible if we stick to the highest citation frequencies (Segev, 2014; Leconte *et al.*, 2015). Distance and power explain to some extent a lesser citation of small, poor and remote countries (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup

& O'Neill, 2017; Wu, 2000; Segev, 2016; Grasland, 2020), but world transformations make increasingly questionable these explanation mechanisms by the laws of gravitation.

Even if they still largely obey universal laws, press flows now seem to be increasingly structured in blocks of macro-regions separated by barriers between which certain countries ensure a privileged role of mediators or bridges. The example of four Western European countries having been colonial powers and having disseminated their language in the world during this process (interrupted in the case of Germany) shows privilegedly the way in which historical legacies continue to mark the present. The Commonwealth for English newspapers, Latin America for Spanish newspapers, Africa and part of the Levant for French-speaking newspapers, are all regions with privileged media coverage, while Germany offers significantly stronger coverage by default from Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia. The ambition to “decolonise” the international cannot therefore be reduced to questioning an abstract “imperialism” opposing a global North to a global South. It presupposes a more in-depth reflection on the interplay of languages and historical legacies which, in press flows as in trade flows, remains a major reality. In a way, the linguistic diversity of the West European press allows it to provide fairer and somewhat more diversified coverage of the whole world than that of great powers such as China, Russia or the USA.

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