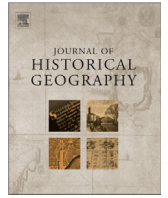




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Geographical imaginaries in *The New York Times*' reports of the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi (1948) and Indira Gandhi (1984)

Gordon M. Winder^{a,*} and Michael Schmitt^b^a Geography, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, 80333, Germany^b Geography, Friedrich-Alexander-University, Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany

Abstract

Geographical imaginaries are used by newspapers to interpret and make sense of foreign news, and to position their imagined readership in front of world events. Coverage in *The New York Times* of two notable assassinations in India is analyzed in order to compare and contrast the geographical imaginaries in use as each killing was constructed as a dramatic news story. Both assassinations were framed by a specific geopolitical context, the post-war reordering of the world in the case of Mohandas K. Gandhi, and the re-energized Cold War in the case of Indira Gandhi. This framing is reinforced by the globalized networks of news production used to report each event. While the analysis shows the expected narration of these events using Cold War narratives and terms, it also reveals shifting forms of Orientalism and civilization discourse at work, as well as ideas about terror, which demonstrate both the wide range of available framings and the variety of possible interpretations of these events. The paper argues that the geographical imaginaries used in this coverage cannot be read off a Cold War lexicon alone.

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Keywords: Assassination; Framing; Geographical imaginaries; India; News geography; Orientalism; Terror

When Mohandas K. Gandhi was shot down by a Hindu extremist six months after India gained independence in 1948, the reporting of his death by *The New York Times* was framed by powerful narratives which were partly rooted in the colonial era. By naming Gandhi the 'living symbol of India' and communicating sorrowful reactions from a select group of world politicians, the *NYT* signalled not only the national tragedy for the Indian people, but its international implications.¹ Recovering from World War II, but with Communism perceived as an emerging threat and with potential conflict fields located around the globe (many of them resulting from the demise of European imperialism), Americans were said to be striving to crystallize a new global order characterized by stability and democracy. In 1984, the same newspaper reported the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (described as 'empress of India') by Sikh militants, in terms which at first glance appear to echo this earlier framing, her death linked to a recurring history of social and religious violence.² Described as a modern but ambivalent leader, with an autocratic style and notable for her role in fostering close

relations with the Soviet Union, her death was interpreted as a challenge for the 'Indian experiment in democracy' and a menace for stability on the Indian subcontinent. Both assassinations were staged on a global scale, and therefore considered to be relevant for Americans, whose country was imagined to play a leading role in world politics.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the *NYT*'s reports of these two assassinations in order to compare and contrast the geographical imaginaries in use as each killing was framed as a dramatic news story. Both were political murders, and both were interpreted in the news rooms of the *NYT* as having political significance, and were therefore awarded considerable attention in the newspaper. While the geographical stage (India) remained the same in each case, different geopolitical contexts shaped the stories. Nevertheless, both assassinations were imagined at the time as manifestations of insecurity, of terror and political violence in a land where people struggle for democracy, and where democracy is said to be flawed, fledgling or absent. These imaginaries emerge from the working of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gordon.winder@geographie.uni-muenchen.de.¹ Millions esteemed Gandhi as a saint, *The New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), Jan. 31, 1948.² L. Carlton, Indira Gandhi, skilled in uses of power, dominated India for two decades, *NYT*, Oct. 31, 1984. By 'framing', we mean a creative, journalistic practice, aimed to contextualize news in a way that makes it relevant for the readership. For a discussion of current conceptualizations of framing and frames see: P. Borah, Conceptual issues in framing theory: a systematic examination of a decade's literature, *Journal of Communication* 61 (2011) 246–263.

a complex and globalised network of news production, that comprises, in addition to correspondents in India, news agencies, editors, experts and officials, placed in western world cities like London, Washington, and New York City, and set to work by a U.S. metropolitan newspaper that claimed to provide its readership with world news.

The research is built on the concept of 'imaginative geographies', a term propagated by Edward Said, and in recent years refined by Derek Gregory.³ He describes them as 'constructions that fold distance into difference through a series of spatializations,' whereby 'distance – like difference – is not an absolute, fixed and given, but is set in motion and made meaningful through cultural practices'.⁴ We assume that the reporting of foreign news by a newspaper, directed to a readership, imagined as a regional or national community, can be seen as one of those cultural practices, as it fabricates various others and their characteristics, and simultaneously actualizes itself.⁵ It is a performance of space and identity, and directly related to knowledge and power. We pay attention to Barnhurst and Nerone's metaphor of the modern newspaper as a social map.⁶ They maintain that, through their form, the broadsheets fade out their own political and economic embeddedness, and pretend to deliver expertise and objectivity. The claim to be an impartial source of information in a democratic society, a role now attributed to both the press and the internet, is highly contested. So, for example the reporting after the 9/11 attacks in the United States led to a large number of academic critiques complaining in various ways about one-sided, self-blinded, and Manichean constructions of the self and the other beneath the roof of a global war on terrorism.⁷ But, the media alone cannot bear the full blame for the production of such 'architectures of enmity,' and it is important to reflect on their role in the wider contexts of both geographies of news production, and changing geopolitics and society, as many researchers within the field of media studies have been doing in diverse ways.⁸

The aim of this paper is thus not to criticize the *NYT* for its way of reporting, but rather to retrace how it tried to make sense out of the stories, to show how it framed the stories to deliver global news to a national and metropolitan U.S. readership, and to investigate the role of geographical imaginaries in reporting. We build on previous work that exposes how modern newspapers used foreign news to legitimize and construct various local, regional and international identities, as well as the national identities which were a major focus of Benedict Anderson's work on the role of the media in community formation. Geographies, imagined at various scales, framed relations between imagined readers and imagined others in modern newspapers.⁹

The object of our study is the whole news story that develops in print following an assassination, and which comprises a set of related and sequent texts and visualizations. We assume that there is a recurring pattern of issues addressed during each reporting, and in order to allow for better comparison between coverage of the assassinations, we disassembled reporting into four narratives, together capturing most of each news story. First, we argue that, because of the sudden and unexpected nature of the murders, the newspaper needs to point out the relevance of the killing for its readers, as the starting point for an interesting news story that should hold their attention for at least several days. Thus the newspaper will write the assassination as (1) an unexpected political tragedy, and as a singular and outstanding happening in time, which threatens regional and global stability, and can be related to superior ideas about political eras and spatial regimes. Then, we investigate the newspaper's engagement with the immediate and dramatic consequences of the attack in the home country, which we describe as (2) public performances of turmoil, with funeral and succession ceremonies restoring symbolic order. Under the heading (3) criminal investigations and dramas of justice, we analyze the newspaper's treatment of questions of responsibility and, eventually, punishment. Finally, we examine (4) the international performances of sorrow and remembrance that comprise an imagined geography of a who's who of powerful and respected world leaders, and that can be interpreted by the reader as a manifestation of the current geopolitical order. Our argument is that, in writing such themes, journalists creatively employ geographical imaginaries and assert imaginative geographies as key elements of their framing of the assassination.

We assume that the dramatic news stories that we analyze share some features with the more recent media events identified in current literature.¹⁰ In particular, they played outstanding roles in the newspaper for at least several days following the event, and they contributed to community formation. However, we can only speculate about the extent to which these events interrupted every day routines among readers, and we have not considered the interactions among diverse media covering these events. Further, we can only acknowledge that readers interacted with the news, as they passively read and formed imagined communities and as they actively reacted to the news of yesterday to make the news of tomorrow.

Our analysis first addresses the geographies of the *NYT*'s news. We analyze the amount and placement of the stories, and then the shifting networks of news production during the reporting of the events. Second, with respect to coverage of each assassination in turn, we consider the geographies in the news fabricated during the media events. We discuss the ways in which the *NYT* portrayed the

³ E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, London, 1978.

⁴ D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, Malden, MA, 2004.

⁵ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 2006.

⁶ They argue that the modern newspaper is designed according to the modern logics of rationalism and simplification so that the front-page, as its recognizable face, 'boils the complexity of the geographical world down to the minimum of lines and labels needed for political and commercial tasks.' K.G. Barnhurst and J. Nerone, *The Form of News*, New York, 188f.

⁷ M. Hannah, Torture and the ticking bomb: the war on terrorism as a geographical imagination of power/knowledge, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 (2006) 622–640; D. Kellner, 9/11, spectacles of terror, and media manipulation, *Critical Discourse Studies* 1 (2004) 41–64; P. Reuber and A. Strüver, Diskursive Verräumlichungen in deutschen Printmedien. Das Beispiel Geopolitik nach 9/11, in: J. Döring, T. Thielmann (Eds), *Mediengeographie*, Bielefeld, 2009, 315–332.

⁸ Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (note 4), chapter 2; See D. Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*, London, 1994; E. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, London, 1994; E. Herman and R. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*, London, 1997; S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How US Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, New York, 1999; T. Thrall, *War in the Media Age*, New York, 2000; B. Hamm, R. Smandych (Eds), *Cultural Imperialism: Essays on the Political Economy of Cultural Domination*, Peterborough, 2004; J. Lynch and A. McGoldrick, Peace journalism: a global dialog for democracy and democratic media, in: R. Hackett, Y. Zhao (Eds), *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, Lanham, Maryland, 2005, 269–312.

⁹ G.M. Winder, Imagining world citizenship in the networked newspaper: *La Nación* reports the assassination at Sarajevo, 1914, *Historical Social Research* (2010), 141 and 148; G.M. Winder, *The Los Angeles Times* reports Japanese earthquakes, 1923–1995, in: C. Mauch, S. Mayer (Eds), *American Environments: Climate-Cultures-Catastrophe*, Heidelberg, 2012, 133–157, 152; G.M. Winder, Mediating foreign disasters: *The Los Angeles Times* and international relief, 1891–1914, in: A. Janku, G. Schenk, F. Mauelshagen (Eds), *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion, and Politics*. New York and London, 2012, 195–226.

¹⁰ A. Hepp and N. Couldry, Introduction. Media events in globalized media cultures, in: N. Couldry, A. Hepp, F. Krotz (Eds), *Media Events in a Global Age*, London and New York, 2009, 12; See also S. Cottle, Mediatized rituals: beyond manufacturing consent, *Media, Culture and Society* 28 (2006) 411–432.

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