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## INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF BARACK OBAMA AS A NEW PRESIDENT

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### ABSTRACT

Content-analyzed television newscasts in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Middle East during 2009 gave the new president more positive coverage than did U.S. media. International news turned negative during the first half of 2010 but remained less negative than U.S. news for most outlets. Positive international news coverage focused on Obama's personality and his capacity to govern, while Middle East policies received largely negative comments. These findings demonstrate a president's limited ability to "spin" international news and underscore key differences among domestic and international news outlets regarding coverage of a new U.S. president.

As a presidential candidate and during his early months as president, Barack Obama sought to build positive feelings, both for the United States and for himself, in the international arena. From the hundreds of thousands of adoring Europeans who greeted the presidential candidate in Germany in 2008 to the new president's 2009 speeches in Istanbul and Cairo (notable for their attempts to connect with Muslim publics), Obama sought to reverse the highly negative views of his predecessor in both Europe and the Middle East (Shear and Sullivan

2009; Zeleny and Cowell 2009; Zeleny and Kulish 2008).

Public opinion polls suggest Obama largely succeeded in making the world view himself and the country he leads more positively, though the enthusiasm for the new president has since cooled somewhat. In Germany, 90 percent of the population said in a survey conducted during April and May of 2010 that they believed Obama would do the right thing in world affairs, down from 93 percent a year earlier, but dramatically higher than the 14 percent of Germans who said they believed Bush would do the right thing in world affairs in a 2008 survey (Pew 2010). In Britain, trust in Obama was at 84 percent in 2010, down slightly from 86 percent in 2009 but well above the 16 percent level of trust British subjects expressed for Bush in 2008 (Pew 2010). Americans are also quite positive about Obama on this measure, with 65 percent expecting him to do the right thing in world affairs, as compared to 37 percent who said the same about Bush in 2008 (Pew 2010).

Several Muslim-majority nations experienced sharper drops in trust in Obama between 2009 and 2010, but in both years evaluations of Obama remained well above those of Bush. In Turkey, 23 percent trusted Obama to do the right thing in world affairs, down from 33 percent in 2009, but far above the mere two percent score Bush received there in 2008 (Pew 2010). In Egypt, the comparable numbers for Obama were 31 percent in 2010 and 41 percent in 2009, as compared to only 11 percent for Bush in 2008 (Pew 2010). In strife-torn Lebanon, 43 percent of those surveyed felt positively about Obama, as compared to 46

compared to 46 percent in 2009 and 33 percent for Bush in 2008 (Pew 2010).

While presidential administrations routinely try to influence foreign coverage of the U.S., few recent American presidents have made international outreach the focus that it has been during the administrations of Obama and George W. Bush (Alter 2010; Brooks 2006; Entman 2004; Kessler and Wright 2007; Mueller 2006; Pew 2006, 2010; Wilson 2010; Zaharna 2005).

How effective has Barack Obama been in influencing foreign coverage of the U.S.? This paper is an exploratory look at how the new president was treated in a variety of international television evening news programs in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Middle East during an 18-month period from January 1, 2009 and to June 30, 2010. The study period is marked by Obama's selection for a Nobel Prize, as well as a decline in Obama's international ratings and a flare-up of Middle East tensions after Israeli commandos killed nine civilians on a Turkish ship near the Gaza strip in late May (Shear 2010). We examine news coverage of Obama overall and look at reports linking Obama to specific areas of evaluation, including his personal character and capacity to govern as well the United States' standing in the world and its policies relating to the Middle East. Throughout this study, we compare these international findings with the tone of comparable coverage of Obama on U.S. network television news and Fox News during that same 18-month period.

### **The Dynamics of International News Coverage**

Given the language challenges inherent in studies involving a range of countries, many international comparisons of news coverage have concentrated on relatively small numbers of nations often grouped by language or region. General classifications of media systems that transcend these common groupings are difficult to develop, even though they can be of great value in international media comparisons.

Jesper Stromback (2007, 2008) developed one leading classification scheme for different media systems based on four-stages of media influence. The first phase is reached when the mass media become the key links between the governors and the governed. This is an important aspect of political development that nearly all modern nations have reached, regardless of the political system in operation. The second stage arrives when the mass media are largely independent from governments and other political actors. In the third stage, the media have become so influential that political actors adapt their behavior to media-oriented visions of newsworthiness in order to maximize their influence in the ongoing political debate. The fourth stage takes this trend a step further, as political actors internalize these values and allow media-oriented visions of newsworthiness to become the dominant ways government officials and citizens evaluate policies and politicians. Adherents of this perspective stress that the progression from one status to another is not necessarily linear or unidirectional. Advanced democratic nations, for example, may temporarily work under the fourth stage during campaigning, but perhaps govern under the third stage (Stromback 2007, 2008).

Another widely recognized classification system for analyzing media systems in advanced western democracies involves three categories: a Liberal model, a Democratic Corporatist model, and a Polarized Pluralism model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The first category is marked by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and commercial media, as found in the United States and to a lesser degree in the United Kingdom and Canada. While the Democratic Corporatist model also contains commercial media, those media tend to be tied to organized social and political groups, as found in Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. The Polarized Pluralist model is marked by a strong centralized state and a relatively weak development of commercial media. This model is found in Italy and other nations of southern Europe, and to a lesser extent in France. (This third category is the closest approximation of the groups of Arab media examined here.)

For our purposes, these perspectives suggest that news coverage in Liberal nations will be greatly influenced by commercial preferences, that is, by responses to audience tastes. News in Democratic Corporatist nations, like Germany, may reflect elite political preferences. In Polarized Pluralist media systems, news coverage may be closely tied to policy preferences of government officials or quasi-governmental authorities controlling a given news outlet.

In addition, this three-part model underscores the importance of considering different journalistic norms around the globe. Interpretative journalism is particularly common in the Polarized Pluralism cultures, where reporters traditionally take a more supportive position

towards politicians. This approach is far less common in Liberal media cultures, where journalistic norms encourage reporters to take more critical or adversarial positions vis-à-vis authority figures (Stromback 2008).

Scholars studying international media in recent years have increasingly turned their attention to Al Jazeera, a Qatar-based satellite news broadcaster that became highly visible internationally following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The network was the only media outlet that had reporters in Taliban Afghanistan, and its coverage of the war offered a street-level perspective that focused on the events of late 2001 as a U.S. invasion of the Muslim part of the world (Jasperson and El-Kikhia 2003). Al Jazeera's reporters provided much less coverage of the military aspects of the war – which were covered in great depth by many western media outlets – and instead focused on the human costs. The sufferings of Afghan civilians, the collateral damage of western bombing campaigns and other humanistic portrayals of the costs of war were standard fare (Jasperson and El-Kikhia 2003). In addition, the network became the preferred place for Osama bin Laden to communicate with the world. While Al Jazeera viewed itself as a prime example of democratic debate in a region where such discussions are in short supply, the channel faced much criticism in the West for allegedly becoming “the bin Laden network” (Bessaiso 2005; Seib 2005). Quantitative analysis of the network's coverage found that evaluations of its objectivity seem to depend, at least in part, on cultural variables. News content that looks like objective coverage of the Iraq war in one culture may seem

harsh or unfair in another (cf., Aday et al. 2005).

In the months following the Afghanistan invasion, the U.S. government focused much of its public diplomacy efforts on Al Jazeera, offering experts for interview programs to help promote the U.S. government's views regarding the Middle East (Zaharna 2005). President Obama has likewise made it a priority to try to build connections with political leaders, the mass media and the public in Muslim nations (cf., Alter 2010; Shear and Sullivan 2009; Wilson 2010; Zeleny and Cowell 2009; Zeleny and Kulish 2008).

By including five television outlets from Middle East locales, this study permits an examination of the effectiveness of Obama's marketing efforts generally and with respect to key issue areas, like Mideast policy preferences.

Foreign news reports and international impressions about the U.S. are based only partly on the reality of the American experience – the characteristics of the beholder audience are of great relevance (Brooks 2006). Perceptions matter as well for Americans, whose history of isolationism encourages little media coverage or public interest in international matters and even less international travel and second language training than residents of many other affluent nations (Brooks 2006; Stacks 2003/2004). A study found that Americans are mistrUSTful of the international order and inclined to see the international arena as a “dog eat dog” environment (Brewer et al. 2004). Given these factors, it should come as no surprise when U.S. broadcasters close foreign bureaus and reduce international news in

response to general citizen disinterest (Stacks 2003/2004).

The content of American news reporting is often consistent with this self-focused perspective of public opinion. A study that compared African and U.S. news coverage of the 9/11 attacks, as well as the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, found that U.S. news focused on American deaths, even though far more Africans were killed in both attacks (Schaefer 2003). Content analyses have likewise found evidence of ethnocentrism in U.S. media coverage, particularly between the end of the Cold War and 9/11. During 1990, 1991 and 1994, at least 30 percent of the stories on the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS and NBC addressed foreign news, far higher than the 21 percent in 1999 and in 2001 prior to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006: 90). During the 2000 general election, only 10 stories on the three networks focused on any foreign policy topic (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011). Even after 9/11, the world as portrayed by the US media was filtered largely through a single nation: Iraq. In 2003, the year of the Iraq invasion, foreign news increased to 43 percent of news reports on U.S. network television; Iraq alone accounted for 24 percent of the news. That left only 19 percent of the news reports that year focusing on foreign news relating to other parts of the world (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006: 90). During 2009, only three of the top ten most covered topics on U.S. network news focused on international matters. All three topics – terrorism, Afghanistan and Iraq – have significant U.S. military aspects, making them more hybrid than purely international news matters (Media Monitor 2010).

The limited volume of international coverage presented to Americans is not very informative. When network television decides to cover a multi-faceted foreign policy issues, news reports tend to be brief and inadequate and often lack context and complexity (Brown 2003; Entman 2004; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006, 2011; Iyengar 1991; Norris 2003). When examining the conduct of the American military, the U.S. coverage is more positive than that of many international news outlets. A comparative study of news coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal found that U.S. media were far less likely to use the term “torture” than were their counterparts working for news organizations in Britain, Canada, Italy and Spain (Jones 2006). The U.S. media relied on more innocuous terms like “abuse” or “mistreatment” (Jones 2006).

Researchers also have found that international news reporters are comparatively limited in their access to authoritative sources in Washington and may therefore be more reliant on the extensive White House media operation than U.S. television news (cf., Hamilton and Jenner 2003; Hannerz 2004; Hess 2005). This pattern of differential access to Washington sources may lead to more positive coverage of a president in international media, particularly after the intense early days of U.S. military involvement – a time when critical domestic voices tend to keep their own counsel (cf., Auletta 2004; Bennett et al. 2007; Entman 2004). This expectation of more critical domestic media seems most relevant for longer-term comparisons of U.S. and international coverage, while crisis coverage may take a more critical shape outside the U.S. (cf., Jones 2006; Farnsworth et al. 2010).

### **The White House versus the Media: Lessons from the U.S. Experience**

Two general points about U.S. media coverage of the presidency are particularly relevant to this study. First, the White House typically deploys a massive public relations operation designed to portray the president and his policies in as positive a light as possible, creating media-friendly venues to shape the coverage to the administration’s liking. These efforts may be more likely to succeed in international matters (cf., Aday et al. 2005; Bennett et al. 2007; Cohen 2008; Entman 2004; Farnsworth et al. 2010; Han 2001; Mueller 2006). Presidential marketing focuses on personal attributes or presidential “character,” which presidents often are more able to shape than public opinion relating to contentious matters of public policy (cf., Farnsworth 2009; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

The second issue here concerns the timing of this study. New presidents were long thought to enjoy a “honeymoon” when they first entered the White House, a brief “settling in” period of relative harmony among White House officials and the reporters who cover them. Studies looking at a range of Cold War era presidents found evidence of a honeymoon effect for several newly elected presidents serving prior to Bill Clinton (Grossman and Kumar 1981; Hughes 1995). Studies of the contentious first act of the Clinton presidency in 1993 found little evidence of a honeymoon, nor was there any evidence of one eight years later for George W. Bush, who took office following an unprecedented legal challenge over the legitimacy of the vote count in Florida (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). But the

presidential honeymoon returned on network news for Barack Obama, who received significantly more positive news coverage during his first year in office than did Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush (Farnsworth and Lichter 2010). This study will allow us to test for evidence of a presidential honeymoon in international news coverage as well.

### Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are tested in this study:

*H<sub>1</sub>: President Obama will enjoy a presidential honeymoon in international media, with coverage of the new president more positive at the start of his presidency than in subsequent years.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: The tone of President Obama's coverage will be more negative on U.S. television news than on international television news.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: The tone of coverage relating to personal character will be more positive than the coverage of the president's policies, particularly those relating to the Middle East.*

These hypotheses draw upon the enthusiasm that greeted Obama's election in many nations, his aggressive international outreach efforts, and the access U.S. news outlets have to a wide range of influential voices willing to criticize the president, particularly as the press-presidential "honeymoon" period erodes. In addition, foreign news reporters are at a considerable disadvantage compared to U.S. reporters in their access to authoritative and critical sources, giving White House spin an advantage over alternative

framing efforts by other political actors (cf., Hamilton and Jenner 2003; Hannerz 2004; Hess 2005).

As discussed above, presidents are often more effective at communicating positive character traits than contested public policy (cf., Farnsworth 2009; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). A presidential-focused news approach seems particularly likely for international coverage of U.S. affairs, since foreign audiences may have limited interest in details of domestic partisan disagreements.

*H<sub>4</sub>: The more positive a nation's public is towards U.S. policies, the more positive the tone of news about Obama will be.*

The European outlets considered here, based in nations where citizens are enthusiastic about Obama at the time of the study, should be more positive than Arab media, located in a region where feelings about the U.S. are not as positive. The Pew (2010) data suggest that Germany's news might be slightly more positive than the BBC, given that Germans are marginally more enthusiastic about Obama. (Pew [2010] does not include all nations with media examined in this study in its international public opinion surveys, but survey evidence from other nations within the Middle East suggests that the populations of Britain and Germany generally were far more enthusiastic about Obama than are people in Muslim-majority nations).

This hypothesis also predicts that Middle Eastern broadcasters will vary in their approaches, with Al-Manar, which is connected to the anti-U.S. Hezbollah, the most negative. More positive news about Obama will come from Al-

Arabiyah, a cable news outlet owned by a member of the royal family of long-time American ally Saudi Arabia. We would expect the other Arab outlets to lie between these two more politically connected outlets.

### Methods and Measures

The content coding process used here involves analyzing and tabulating individual statements during evening newscasts that contain explicitly positive or negative judgments. Any report that President Obama was supporting policies that are failing would be coded as negative. Positive comments include reports that the president's strategies in the Middle East are working and that other political figures support Obama's initiatives. These news stories are analyzed at the statement level, which usually corresponds to a sentence or two. Analysis at this level contains less ambiguity and has higher inter-coder reliability than story-level assessments. Since more than one topic may be evaluated in a statement, a statement may have more than one evaluation. Negative tone includes both negative statements by others, as well as negative contexts described in stories, like a report on Obama's declining public approval numbers. References to Obama are then classified into one of more than three dozen topic areas, including warfare, the environment, the economy, taxes, and matters relating to the president's personal character. Native speakers of each language coded these news reports after undergoing content analysis training conducted by Media Tenor International. Inter-coder reliability exceeds .87 for the variables used here. Further discussion of the methodology employed here can be found on

the Media Tenor website ([www.mediatenor.com](http://www.mediatenor.com)).

This study is based on a total of 76,844 statements relating to Obama on evening newscasts on five Arab television outlets, two British and two German television outlets and four U.S. outlets (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox News). The sample period extends from January 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, roughly corresponding to first 18 months of the Obama presidency. Coders worked from taped newscasts, and a few broadcasts were missed because of technical glitches involved in the recording of broadcasts. The missing tapes are distributed randomly through the sample period, and there is no reason to suspect the missing tapes, if available, would skew the results. At least two news broadcasts for each region are included in the study in order to gain a general sense of the overall news discussion in a given region.

The Middle East news outlets examined here include the evening newscasts of Al Jazeera Arabic, an editorially independent news channel developed by the emir of Qatar, Al Arabiyah, a Dubai-based affiliate of the Middle East Broadcasting Center (owned by a member of the Saudi royal family), Nile News of Egypt, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), and Al Manar TV, which is connected to Hezbollah (cf., Leenders 2007; Murphy 2006; Seib 2005).

The European news outlets used here include the 10 p.m. newscast on BBC1, Newsnight on BBC2 and the late evening newscasts of two state-owned German broadcasters, ARD Tagesthemen and ZDF Heute Journal. Unlike govern-



ment supported broadcasters in some other nations, both of these international media environments offer significant protection from government pressure regarding the news, though no such insulation can be absolute (Fraser 2000; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Raboy 1996).

## Results

The net tone ratings for the four media groups appear in Table 1. The net tone measure is the percentage of positive tone minus the percentage of negative

tone. Most statements appearing on these television outlets are neutral or mixed in tone, and such statements are not used in the calculation of the net tone figure. A zero percent score represents an equal amount of positive and negative tone. (Tone that was 100 percent neutral would also register as a zero in this classification system). The larger a positive number, the more positive the tone; the more negative the net number, the more negative the tone.

**Table 1: News Coverage of Obama by Media Location**

Location	Year	net tone	negative	positive	no clear n	%	rating %	n
Europe	2009	5.73	9.1	14.9	76.0	13299		
	2010*	-6.76	16.9	10.2	72.9	3000		
Arab	2009	7.69	9.5	17.2	73.4	9976		
	2010*	-3.99	15.8	11.8	72.4	3559		
US	2009	-7.86	15.3	7.4	77.3	35989		
	2010*	-12.01	18.9	6.8	74.3	10901		

N = Number of statements. Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding. This table is based on a content analysis of 29,954 statements relating to Barack Obama on nine international television news networks (ARD Tagesthemmen, ZDF heute journal, BBC1 10 p.m. news, BBC 2 Newsnight, Al-Arabiya, Nile News, LBC, Al-Manar, and Al-Jazeera) and 46,890 statements on four US television news networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox News) from January 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010. \*Data for 2010 through June 30.

As hypothesized, the findings show an international honeymoon effect, with coverage by all media groups more positive during Obama's first year in office than during the first six months of 2010.

U.S. television was the most negative during 2010, and the U.S. media were more negative than the other media groups during 2009. During Obama's first year and a half, the Arab media were the most positive about the new president.

The same data, broken down for the nine international and four U.S. news outlets, are found in Table 2. Obama may have had a "honeymoon" with U.S. network television (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2010), but the honeymoon was more positive and longer-lasting on both Arab and German television. Not one of the five Arab media outlets – regardless of ownership – was as negative about Obama as any of the four U.S. news outlets. Indeed, it is striking how similar these very different Arab news outlets were in their treatment of the new presi-

dent, with all providing mostly positive reports of his first year. Al Jazeera, which has been criticized for anti-U.S. news coverage in the past, was the most positive outlet of all 13 news organizations analyzed here. Fox News was the most negative outlet both during Obama's first year and the first half of 2010, though it edged out BBC2's *Newsnight* only narrowly as the most critical for the latter period. [The Fox analysis includes the entire hour of "Special Report," rather than the first half hour sometimes used by researchers. Because the second half hour contains more roundtable commentary, full hour results may be more negative.] Relatively negative network television newscasts are the norm in the U.S., where presidents face mostly harsh reports throughout their presidencies (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

Presidents are often thought to be particularly effective at marketing themselves, winning elections and raising their public approval ratings by focusing attention on matters of personality or character (cf., Farnsworth 2009). In Table 3 we see that remains an effective part of the way the president is presented in 12 of the 13 outlets. Only Fox News was more negative than positive. The most positive reporting on character was found in a variety of international media: ZDF *heute* journal, Al Jazeera, BBC2, and Al Arabiyah ranked in the top four. U.S. network television news

reports were consistently positive, but less so than in most international outlets.

Matters of governing are a somewhat different story. The domestic partisan disagreements that have marked the Obama presidency, and the deal-making and compromises necessary to secure legislative approval for his stimulus bills, health care reform, and environmental legislation – do not always look pretty, particularly to foreign eyes. In parliamentary systems, a majority governs with far less obstruction than a minority can exert in the U.S. political system. Even so, two Arab media often viewed as particularly critical of the U.S. – Al Manar and Al Jazeera – were the two most positive outlets in their assessment of Obama's capacity for governing. Al Arabiyah, a relatively pro-U.S. news outlet, was slightly positive in this regard, though not as positive as the two German news outlets.

The six English-language news outlets were the most negative in their reports on Obama's governing. As expected, the U.S. television programs, with their ready pool of authoritative critics on Capitol Hill, aired particularly critical reports. The most negative in this case was CBS. Fox News ranked third on this measure, behind second-place BBC2 *Newsnight*. NBC was the fourth most negative news outlet when it came to discussions of Obama's governing performance.

**Table 2**  
**News Coverage of Obama by Media Outlet**

News Outlet	Year	net tone	negative %	positive %	no clear rating %	n
ARD Tagesthemen	2009	7.41	10.5	17.9	71.6	3400
	2010*	-3.32	13.5	10.2	76.3	993
ZDF heute journal	2009	7.94	10	17.9	72	4145
	2010*	-4.55	14.3	9.7	76	966
BBC1 10 news	2009	0.07	6.6	6.7	86.8	2870
	2010*	-8.14	18.4	10.2	71.4	528
BBC 2 Newsnight	2009	6.21	8.8	15	76.2	2884
	2010*	-16.18	27.1	10.9	62	513
Al-Arabiya	2009	4.40	4	8.4	87.6	3754
	2010*	-4.88	9.9	5	85.2	1085
Nile News	2009	9.47	6.6	16	77.4	2175
	2010*	-5.10	8.3	3.2	88.6	824
LBC	2009	2.38	5	7.4	87.5	755
	2010*	-1.13	1.1	0	98.9	265
Al-Manar	2009	6.27	21.4	27.6	51	1770
	2010*	-3.95	32.9	29	38.1	835
Al-Jazeera	2009	17.54	15.4	32.9	51.7	1522
	2010*	-2.00	19.8	17.8	62.4	550
ABC	2009	-2.03	9.6	7.6	82.8	7157
	2010*	-7.10	13.7	6.6	79.7	1789
CBS	2009	-5.09	14.6	9.5	75.9	5465
	2010*	-8.56	16.8	8.2	75	1566
NBC	2009	-1.86	11.1	9.2	79.7	6359
	2010*	-6.29	13.5	7.2	79.3	1829
Fox News	2009	-13.45	19.4	6	74.7	17008
	2010*	-16.32	22.7	6.4	70.8	5717

N = Number of statements. Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding. This table is based on a content analysis of 29,954 statements relating to Barack Obama on international television and 46,890 statements on U.S. television newscasts from January 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010. \*Data for 2010 through June 30.

**Table 3**  
**News Coverage of Obama's Personality and Ability to Govern**

News Outlet	Topic	net tone	negative %	positive %	no clear rating %	n
ARD Tagesthemen	Personality	14.40	8.8	23.2	68	125
	Government	8.35	11.1	19.5	69.4	431
ZDF heute journal	Personality	19.81	8.2	28	63.8	207
	Government	7.90	15.1	23	61.9	582
BBC1 10 news	Personality	10.42	10.8	21.3	67.9	240
	Government	-7.99	11.2	3.3	85.5	338
BBC 2 Newsnight	Personality	15.32	13	28.3	58.7	470
	Government	-19.60	30.2	10.6	59.3	199
Al-Arabiyah	Personality	13.02	5.7	18.7	75.7	653
	Government	3.88	5.4	9.3	85.3	129
Nile News	Personality	4.39	4.4	8.8	86.8	342
	Government	0	0	0	100	41
LBC	Personality	0	2.1	2.1	95.7	281
	Government	--*	--	--	--	--*
Al-Manar	Personality	7.45	11.7	19.1	69.1	94
	Government	42.86	7.1	50	42.9	14
Al-Jazeera	Personality	19.38	14.4	33.8	51.9	160
	Government	38.10	0	38.1	61.9	42
ABC	Personality	7.30	5.5	12.8	81.7	507
	Government	-2.78	11.4	8.6	79.9	324
CBS	Personality	5.86	7.7	13.6	78.8	273
	Government	-21.71	27	5.3	67.8	152
NBC	Personality	8.05	4.5	12.6	82.9	596
	Government	-12.28	22.8	10.5	66.7	171
Fox	Personality	-8.37	17.5	9.2	73.3	633
	Government	-16.18	22.7	6.5	70.8	612

N = Number of statements. Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding. This table is based on a content analysis of 29,954 statements relating to Barack Obama on international television and 46,890 statements on U.S. television newscasts from January 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010. \*Insufficient number of cases to classify (less than 10).

**Table 4**  
**News Coverage of Obama regarding US Standing in the World and Middle East Policies**

News Outlet	Topic	net tone	negative %	positive %	no clear rating %	n
ARD Tagesthemen	US Standing	7.66	16	23.6	60.4	457
	IPLS	-12.88	20.5	7.7	71.8	313
ZDF heute journal	US Standing	7.38	14.6	22	63.4	610
	IPLS	-6.67	15.3	8.6	76.1	255
BBC1 10 news	US Standing	7.68	8.1	15.8	76.2	768
	IPLS	-2.29	2.3	0	97.7	218
BBC 2 Newsnight	US Standing	8.59	8.3	16.9	74.8	1630
	IPLS	-1.57	3.7	2.1	94.2	191
Al-Arabiyah	US Standing	-1.40	8.7	7.3	84	3934
	IPLS	-0.63	4.5	3.9	91.6	1742
Nile News	US Standing	2.24	13.1	15.4	71.5	1919
	IPLS	-1.74	10	8.3	81.7	1555
LBC	US Standing	-2.27	12.5	10.2	77.3	176
	IPLS	0.26	2.1	2.4	95.5	380
Al-Manar	US Standing	0.75	34.9	35.7	29.4	2269
	IPLS	-14.43	33.5	19	47.5	1802
Al-Jazeera	US Standing	10.64	24.9	35.5	39.6	1926
	IPLS	-0.75	22.8	22	55.2	1193
ABC	US Standing	10.49	2.5	13	84.6	162
	IPLS	-9.18	12.2	3.1	84.7	98
CBS	US Standing	-0.58	5.8	5.3	88.9	171
	IPLS	-10.61	12.1	1.5	86.4	66
NBC	US Standing	0.43	5.1	5.5	89.4	235
	IPLS	-5.56	7.4	1.9	90.7	54
Fox	US Standing	-12.37	18.7	6.3	75	380
	IPLS	-6.93	9.9	3	87.1	202

N = Number of statements. IPLS = Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Syria. Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding. This table is based on a content analysis of 29,954 statements relating to Barack Obama on international television and 46,890 statements on U.S. television newscasts from January 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010.

In Table 4, we turn to one of the major international issues of the Obama presidency — improving America's standing in the world. As a group, the four European news outlets were quite positive about U.S.'s global prospects, though the most positive outlet of all was Al Jazeera, closely followed by ABC News. The other two U.S. broadcast networks provide roughly neutral coverage of Obama on this topic, as did the four other Arab news outlets. Once again, Fox News was the most negative in its assessments of the Obama administration.

The other comparison in Table 4 concerns Obama's policies regarding Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Syria, the two countries most likely to be involved in armed confrontations with Israel. Al Manar, a Hezbollah news outlet, was the most negative, followed relatively closely by ARD Tagesthemmen, CBS News and ABC News. German media were more critical than British news programs, and most of the other Arab news outlets were relatively close to neutral on this topic (two percent net negative or less). Fox News was less negative on this measure than two of its network broadcast rivals, with NBC the least negative of the four U.S. news outlets.

## Conclusion

This comparative media study offered a number of insights regarding news coverage of the first 18 months of the Obama presidency. The new president enjoyed a powerful honeymoon in international media — particularly during his first year — as was hypothesized (H<sub>1</sub>). The new president's reception was more positive in international media, as was hypothesized (H<sub>2</sub>). Likewise,

hypothesized (H<sub>2</sub>). Likewise, reporting on the president's character was a major part of international news reports, and was an area where Obama was highly regarded (H<sub>3</sub>).

In a departure from our expectations and from past research, however, the President Obama received relatively favorable treatment in Middle Eastern media in all the topics examined here — often more positive reports than those found in European media. The reports from the region were consistently more positive than the coverage Obama received from U.S. media — even when controversial U.S. policies in the region were the subject of those evaluations!

The most surprising aspect of this departure from past studies (and from our hypothesis H<sub>4</sub>) concerns the very positive treatment Obama regularly received on Al Jazeera, a source of particular concern for Washington during the Bush years. The end of the Bush presidency and Obama's outreach efforts to Muslims appear to have triggered more enthusiasm for the U.S. than one would have expected based on relatively low public opinion numbers relating to the U.S. (cf., Pew 2010). This suggests the need for some refinements in theories positing that television news caters closely to viewers' tastes, at least for this president and for this region of the world. It may also suggest that Al Jazeera, at least as of 2009, might be viewed as a media outlet in the second or perhaps the third stage of development under the Stromback (2007) model.

The European media, particularly German news reports, on the other hand, performed largely as expected under the terms of this final hypothesis. German

news stories tended to be more positive on most measures than U.S. and U.K. media, demonstrating the utility of examining news content in light of public perspectives in the nation where the media are based (cf., Hallin and Mancini 2004). Of course Obama's special outreach efforts to Germans, including his unprecedented appearance in Berlin in the midst of a presidential campaign (cf., Wright 2005), may also continue to pay dividends in news content there.

Research involving additional nations – most notably Italy and France for the Europeans – can help provide fuller tests of the various classification models proposed by other scholars, as well as untangle the explanatory factors when public approval of the U.S. in a given nation closely corresponds with the level of support political leaders give the U.S.

president (cf., Hallin and Mancini 2004; Jones 2006; Pew 2010; Stromback 2007, 2008).

Finally, this study examined only one president and one part of his presidential term. Future research in along these lines can determine whether the findings here are unique to the first part of Obama's presidency or whether they apply more generally to other presidents at other times during their administrations. Given the significant declines in Obama's popularity during his second year in office – together with the highly challenging issues of Afghanistan, Iran, health care, the continuing economic crisis, and the BP oil spill – the findings presented here may represent the high-water mark for international news coverage of this new president.

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