

August 1988

Latin American News Coverage: Issues and Problems (Dialogue #117)

Richard Threlkeld
ABC News

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd>

Recommended Citation

Threlkeld, Richard, "Latin American News Coverage: Issues and Problems (Dialogue #117)" (1988). *LACC Occasional papers series. Dialogues (1980 - 1994)*. 20.
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd/20>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) Publications Network at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LACC Occasional papers series. Dialogues (1980 - 1994) by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

**LATIN AMERICAN NEWS COVERAGE:
ISSUES AND PROBLEMS**

**Richard Threlkeld
ABC News**

**Dialogue #117
August 1988**

Published by the Latin American and Caribbean Center
Florida International University
Miami, Florida 33199

Editor: Richard Tardanico
Editorial Assistant: Sofia A. Lopez

PREFACE

Richard Threlkeld was named chief correspondent for "World News Tonight with Peter Jennings" in January 1984. He joined ABC News in January 1982 as a national correspondent, based in New York. Prior to joining ABC News, Threlkeld had been a leading CBS News correspondent, anchorman, and bureau chief for fifteen years. During his career, Threlkeld has won several Emmy Awards and Overseas Press Club awards for his reporting, including: "Inside the Other Side," from the Soviet Union; reports on Lebanon and Grenada; and "The War Machine," a CBS documentary series on the defense of the United States. He attended the Columbia University School of International Affairs, and received a bachelor's degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

This speech was presented at the Sixth Annual Journalists and Editors' Workshop on Latin America, on April 22, 1988.

Richard Tardanico
Editor
Occasional Papers Series Dialogues

LATIN AMERICAN NEWS COVERAGE: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

One hundred and twenty seven years ago, a distinguished reporter from the biggest newspaper in the most civilized nation of the First World went to the Third World to cover a big story. His name was William Howard Russell of the London Times, and he was the great-granddaddy of all of us foreign correspondents. The Third World country to which he journeyed was the United States of America. And the story he went to cover was the outbreak of the American Civil War.

Russell was appalled at the state of journalism, so-called, he found in this backward, barely-developed nation. He found the press slanted, biased, totally irresponsible, and what was worse in his view, the politicians and the policymakers of this adolescent nation lived in terror of the press. "The press," wrote Russell, "rules America."

He arrived at a time when the Union government was trying to establish a mode of dealing with press coverage of this seminal event, the Civil War. A working mode was soon arrived at. It was best expressed by General William Tecumseh Sherman when a reporter requested that he be allowed to visit one of the battlefields because, the reporter explained, he was only trying to report the truth.

"The truth?" General Sherman replied. "We don't want the truth told about things here. That's what we don't want. Truth you say sir? No sir." Later, when three news reporters were killed at the battle of Vicksburg, General Sherman, not a man of moderation, remarked, "That's good. Now we'll have dispatches from Hell before breakfast." It was a judgment with which the secretaries of war and state in the Lincoln cabinet heartily concurred.

As for our foreign correspondent, Mr. Russell, he gamely pressed on, trying to call things as he saw them, despite the obstacles erected by the suspicious, inept, and insular officialdom of this obscure corner of the less-developed world. When the Union troops were routed in the first battle of Bull Run, Russell wrote of the "miserable, causeless panic," and their "scandalous behavior." In a matter of months, Russell's reporting had so displeased Washington that his credentials were revoked and he was put on the next packet boat to London.

For the remainder of the war, British reporters were mostly persona non grata in the North. And British press coverage (and therefore what most of the rest of the world learned about the American Civil War) was necessarily and partly with intent, one-sided, with a definite Southern Exposure.

So what's the point of all this history? Just that the past is prologue. We put words and pictures in the air now, instantly, where before we only put them on paper, sometime after the fact. But as long as we've had journalists, there has been tension, to put it mildly, between the press and the authorities. People in power who are having trouble, and are firmly convinced that if only they can get the press, the newspapers, or the TV newsies to stop reporting their troubles, their troubles will magically go away. And so they do everything they possibly can to make the press go away.

And journalists from the First World, who travel to the Third World to ply their trade, are going to run into obstacles that will alter their product. They will also carry with them a certain amount of First World baggage. What press critics call "bias." What I prefer to call my "perspective." But that will also change the shape of their product.

Finally, it ought to be recalled that even in 1861, the London Times was over here in America trying to cover a civil war, not only because of its high-minded dedication to journalism, but because it was trying to sell newspapers and make a profit. The American TV networks go to San Salvador, Managua, and Tegucigalpa these days for more or less the same combination of reasons.

Every day, all around the world, the decisionmakers of the network news divisions, those unelected, unaccountable, mostly-anonymous people who decide what you see and hear on the news every night, try to wheedle as much news as they can out of the authorities in Washington or wherever. Those unelected, mostly-anonymous bureaucrats who decide, in the last analysis, the issues of war and peace. If the comments of a whole long list of frustrated American presidents who have tried to deal with the State Department are any example, those foreign-policy bureaucrats can seem pretty unaccountable, too.

It seems to me those frustrated chief executives and their aides are mistaken if they think they are going to make any eternal, rational, and reasonable order out of foreign policy. It doesn't happen that way. It is a diffuse process that involves a lot of little people making a lot of little decisions in a very big world, and it is hostage to events beyond anyone's control--events that very often define foreign policy.

The point is, that's the way the news business works too--almost exactly. And well-meaning people who hope to make some eternal, rational, and reasonable order out of the collecting of the news are going to suffer the same frustration.

The authorities get concerned and angry when the TV news ignores a big, significant development in their view, to banner-headline something that is

trivial (in their view). From Damascus to Tegucigalpa they complain, "The TV news isn't interested in what we're interested in, and vice versa." But why should we be? The TV news is after a good story. A story is a story is a story.

The authorities wring their hands at the acceleration of the news. Now there are live TV pictures, worldwide, almost instantly, of every world crisis. There are TV newsmen making solemn pronouncements, moments after the event, telling us what it all means. The diplomats cringe with suspicion that their bosses in the White House are watching their TV sets and tailoring their policies to what they see. The professionals see what William Howard Russell saw in the America of a century ago. "The press rules America."

History has decided that Mr. Russell's observation was wrong. The fears today are equally so. Still, TV news has changed things for policymakers, just as the telephone and the overseas cable have turned the once all-powerful foreign ambassador into not much more than an errand boy. The TV news has become just one more factor for a harried policymaker to worry about. But certainly not the most important. And honestly, we're not that hard to handle. Collectively we journalists are not nearly as smart as the policymakers we cover. And not nearly as smart as we think we are. A president or a secretary of state who can't figure out how to outsmart the TV news is going to have a devil of a time outsmarting the Congress, the Western allies, or the Russians.

An American secretary of state and his staff have a couple of goals in life. To keep the peace and try to make America number one. A TV news executive has a couple of goals in life. To serve the truth and to try to make whichever network he works for, number one. The TV news is a business,

more profitable than ever. The object (not the whole object, but a big part of it) is to make a profit. To get as many people as you can to watch you. In the TV news, the object is the same as in widgets or porkbelly futures. Buy low, sell high. If a TV network can find a way to increase its audience for news, and do it cheaper, it will. Overseas news costs money and it is the conviction of most TV news executives that most Americans are more interested in what goes on in America than what goes on elsewhere. These costs are the reason that networks feature stories of child sex abuse during ratings sweeps months, for instance, rather than "Whither Salvador after Duarte," or "What's Doing In San Pedro Sula?"

It is a process that can be overdone and it is tempered by competition. Still, if you want to know why we don't cover the hissing fuses, only the explosions, consider the budget process. If so many foreign stories look like we've just discovered the country in question, if we're not very good at covering the foremath or the aftermath, but only the math, consider the budget process. Consider the news business.

And consider access. Increasingly, we will find it difficult to get into places in the world, especially the Third World, where news is happening. Especially news that presents the place we are covering in a bad light. The Third World is getting wise to the First World's TV news coverage. And when we do get in, as we are finding increasingly in Latin America, we will be hostage to whatever the authorities there will let us see and cover. We'll have to get to the truth as best we can in difficult circumstances, just like Mr. Russell.

As always, we'll be looking for good stories, plain and simple--not just significance. Not just what will best serve the current interest of the local government, the local U.S. ambassador, the State Department, or

the American people. A story is a story is a story. We'll be trying to do it with an American perspective. An American bias, if you will. By asking ourselves as reporters (and then trying to answer) a fundamental question. "Why should we care? Why should our American viewers care?"

If you are a journalist, you pay certain penalties for attempting all of the above. The TV news people, and the rest of the American press, get thrown out or get roughed up now and then, whether it's at the Marriott Hotel in Panama City or the Camino Real in San Salvador. Just for trying to cover news. Just for being who they are. Just the way Washington dealt with William Howard Russell more than a century ago. If the newsies aren't there, the reasoning goes, the bad news will go away.

And that's not just the thinking these days South of the Border. Eminent authorities on American journalism, no less than Mayor Ed Koch of New York City and Henry Kissinger, have sternly recommended that Israel bar TV cameras from the "troubled," I love the understatement in that word, the "troubled" West Bank and Gaza Strip. The argument goes, barring the TV cameras worked in the Grenada invasion, worked for the British in the Falklands, and has worked in South Africa the past two years. Not to mention Iran-Iraq, and so forth.

I'm not surprised that Henry Kissinger is peddling this line, considering the awful things he managed to get away with in Cambodia in the early seventies, before the press found out. What's surprising is the number of otherwise reasonable people and democratic governments who are buying this line. The temporary absence of TV cameras didn't prevent the invasion of Grenada from becoming one of the most inept U.S. military actions in U.S. history, although it did, temporarily, prevent the U.S. military from suffering embarrassment because of it.

The restrictions on TV cameras have certainly not altered the violent turn of events in South Africa, nor has the absence of pictures of the same made the Western World any more hospitable toward the South African government's repressive policies and actions.

And in the West Bank and Gaza, the continuing violence, the escalating violence, has typically taken place when there is no foreign press, no TV camera present. There is not, to my knowledge, a single TV picture of the killing of any of the more than one hundred Palestinians who have died in the disturbances there this year.

What those who insist on "no pictures please" fail to understand, is that most of the time the press, and particularly the TV news, doesn't lead public opinion. It follows it, often a long way behind. And very often, follows it slavishly.

It wasn't the TV news pictures that lost the Vietnam War, by undermining public opinion. The critics have it backwards. The fact that eventually, the Vietnam War got to be so unpopular among the American public at large, was every bit as influential in determining how that war was covered by us in the press, in setting our own bias. If the American public felt palpably less enthusiastic about the Vietnam War in 1969 than it did in 1965, why would it be so hard to understand that we combat reporters who covered it also felt differently about it over time.

The TV news certainly has followed this same pattern in Central America the past eight years slavishly enough. It's a bad way to cover the news, but it is understandable and very typical. As a reporter, you went to Central America in 1981 for the same reason the late Willie "the Actor" Sutton said he robbed banks. Because that was where the money was. In Central America, that's where the news was. And Central America has been

news for one central reason. The Reagan administration has made it so, in one place or another, for the past eight years. Journalists follow the flag. They're supposed to.

When the Reagan administration decided that El Salvador was threatened with armed communist revolution and that it occupied the most favored spot in America's front yard (or backyard, I never got it straight which), then the TV networks invaded the place, taped big TV signs on every available twelve-passenger van in San Salvador, and began covering the war with more people and office space, in some cases, than they had in Washington. When the Reagan administration finally got Napoleón Duarte elected in a reasonably democratic election and got him some aid, it decided that Salvador was "fixed," and promptly ignored it. It ought not to be too surprising that the TV networks closed all their bureaus forthwith, retreated to Miami, and henceforth spent what time they did spend in Central America, covering Nicaragua, which the administration (which has never been able to rub its tummy and pat its head at the same time) decided was the new singular threat to the security of Brownsville, Texas and points North.

And typically, the TV networks never spent a lot of time covering Honduras, other than to waltz over to Palmerola Air Base now and then to see which U.S. National Guard unit was down on maneuvers. So we were as surprised as official Washington when it turned out this month that Hondurans do have a refined sense of national pride and have long been outraged at the Reagan administration's attitude that Hondurans will do anything Washington wants and say "thank you" to boot, for enough American aid.

Perhaps if we'd been covering all this more extensively, or sooner, we might have saved the administration from itself. From the moment the Reagan folks took office, it is now clear, they were determined to run the

Sandinistas out of town, no matter what, short of a full-scale U.S. invasion. Which is, of course, the only thing that might have done it. The Reagan people were determined to take one from the communist column and put it back in the Free World column, as they saw it.

Seven years later, the whole misbegotten contra business has bloodied the Nicaraguan landscape and muddied the record of the Reagan administration with lies and law-breaking. It has probably damaged Mr. Reagan's place in history and handicapped George Bush's attempt to succeed him. Maybe if American journalism, including us TV people, had worked a bit harder and a bit earlier, exposed some more of the shenanigans, we might have saved Washington from a lot of agony, not to mention the Nicaraguan people. It is to their credit, the Sandinistas and the contras, the Costa Ricans and the rest of the Central Americans, that they finally, wisely, gave up on Washington as a peace broker and went ahead and did it themselves.

The U.S. government could still salvage something out of this mess they've created in Central America--with a timely and generous economic aid package. A real Caribbean initiative that's not a payoff but a real help. Something that includes European aid. Something that involves multiyear commitments and trade concessions, as well as some measure of debt relief and trade and banking help.

An effort that includes Nicaragua, and treats it as something that ought to be, Sandinistas or no, an integral part of Central America, thus returning Central America to what it truly is, a region.

I wish I could say I thought that was going to happen. On the contrary, I'm convinced that Central America has left this Washington administration with such a bad taste in its mouth, that the new administration, Republican or Democrat, is very likely to return to normalcy in the way the

United States handles Central America--which is to say, treat it as if it did not exist.

As a political issue in U.S. politics, the contra issue survived the primary season only as far as New Hampshire, when the peace talks began. Ironically, by getting the peace process started, the Central Americans may have done themselves something of a disservice, by giving Washington a handy escape hatch to forego future aid and consideration. Yet I'm certain Central America will be glad to trade Washington's inattention for some peace and quiet, at long last.

And, for reasons we have already noted, we can depend on the TV networks to follow suit and complete a policy that has already begun. The making of Central America into a non-region again...that in terms of news coverage, sort of drops off the face of the earth.

I hope that doesn't happen. For one thing, I think the time has passed when Washington can ignore Central America and expect it to mind its manners, keep quiet, and behave itself.

We may have been seeing the future this month in Honduras. For another thing, it would mean upwards of one hundred thousand Central Americans have died in the past decade, and not a few journalists who have friends in this room...all of them for nothing, or at least for not very much.

May those of us in the TV news will have learned from our experience in Central America in the 1980s, we are not nearly as smart as we think we are. Maybe it will instill in us a proper humility, although I very much doubt it. Us TV newsies could use some lessons in humility from the TV newsies in Thailand. At the end of the TV news in Bangkok, every night, the newscaster says, in so many words, that's the news from the Thai Broadcasting Service, good night and thank you. It is accompanied by a gesture of humility and

respect for the audience. It is a sign-off I have been trying to get the networks here to adopt. But anyway, to all of you, and in the name of William Howard Russell of the London Times, thank you very much.