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The Case of Sweden

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an up-to-date account of the current research situation in Sweden regarding the reporting of the United States in the Swedish news media.

Media coverage of the United States in Sweden is extensive, not least, of course, in periods when the U.S. is involved in a major international conflict, such as the war in Iraq. This conflict has been a predominant topic in the Swedish news media more or less since it started nearly two years ago. Besides such "big" events, there is extensive reporting on subjects ranging from major political and economical issues to phenomena in American sports and popular culture. It is fair to say that the U.S. is an important subject for Swedish print and broadcast media audiences.

Against this background, and because everything the media report contributes to the Swedish public's image of America, one would expect a substantial body of research regarding how Swedish news media represent the U.S. to their audiences. However, that is not the case. On the contrary, and perhaps a bit surprising, one finds that such research is rather sparse. Even though research directly concerned with the U.S. image is more or less non-existent, there is some research that at least indirectly touches upon the issue. Characteristic of this research is that it addresses the coverage of particular "big" events - the war in Iraq, for instance - while the continuous, day-to-day coverage of the U.S. in Swedish media has hardly been systematically studied.

One exception to the last statement, though, is the hitherto most extensive study on this theme; one that was published in the mid-1970's and dealing with the period of the cold war 1948-1968 (Block 1976). Even though this research is almost 30 years old, and in most respects outdated, it is the most recent attempt to conduct a broad study of the U.S. image in Swedish news media.

Apart from that study, news reporting research in the past 15 years or so has predominantly been about how international conflicts involving the U.S. have been treated in Swedish media. The coverage of the wars in the Persian Gulf (Hvitfelt & Mattsson 1991; Nordlund (ed) 1992), Afghanistan (Nord & Strömbäck 2002; Nordström 2002) and Iraq (Nord, Shehata & Ström-

bäck 2003; Nordström 2003) have been substantially analyzed, as has the reporting of the terrorist attacks in New York City on the 11th of September 2001 (Nord & Strömbäck 2002; Nordström 2002).

Methodologically these studies all draw results almost exclusively from content analyses. The emphasis is on what gets reported and, to some extent, how it gets reported, while not much is being said about why the reporting of a certain event looks the way it does. As we shall see later in this report, the results from the studies also tend to be quite similar to one another.

The fundamental role of the foreign correspondents in producing and transmitting the "news" from the U.S. to Sweden is largely neglected and the research available on Swedish correspondents stationed in North America is at best scant. Some general studies on foreign correspondents do exist; especially worth mentioning is anthropologist Ulf Hannerz's *Foreign News* (2000). Although not concerned primarily with Swedish correspondents in America, Hannerz's anthropological study touches especially on methodological questions of relevance for the Transatlantic News Cultures project.

With the exception of Hannerz's book, all studies cited in this report are written in Swedish, but each contains a brief summary in English, and all quotations used in this article are from these summaries. I will first give a brief account of the characteristics and findings of the relevant studies, followed by a discussion of some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the research, and some reflections on the project at hand.

An early study

The Swedish study most similar to the aims of the Transatlantic News Cultures project was published as a doctoral dissertation in 1976 (Block, 1976). The title of the project, as well as of the dissertation, was *The Image of America in Swedish Daily Newspapers 1948-1968*. Though dated, it is not without value.

Methodologically, the study is based primarily on a quantitative content analysis of major Swedish newspapers. Its focus is on coverage of American foreign and domestic politics. Given the period during which

the study was conducted, it is not surprising that what is called foreign politics refers primarily to the United States' relations to the Soviet Union, China, Latin America and Cuba – and, of course, the Vietnam War.

American domestic politics, on the other hand, are largely limited to issues of racial discrimination and protest. The presidential elections and campaigns were also seen as important ingredients of the domestic politics. The author claims that there occurred a significant shift to negative coverage, during the decades she investigated. This increasingly negative attitude by the Swedish press applied to how foreign as well as domestic politics were reported. She describes the nature of the shift in respective area as follows:

The first concerns the US foreign policy, where the great power position was accepted as a kind of shelter for the free world against Soviet communism, and the image was changed to distaste and fear for the USA, the great power with ambitions to control the whole world. The second concerns America's domestic politics, where the early image looked up to American freedom and democracy as a pattern for the rest of the world, and the latter stressing the problems: race-riots, town-problems, American conservatism, and most important of all, the changes of politicians: from Eisenhower and Kennedy to Johnson, Goldwater and Nixon (Block 1976: 127).

There are but a few conclusions to draw from this study regarding how the Swedish media of today report about the U.S. Problematic international relations, war, presidential elections and campaigns have, of course, continued to draw the attention of the news media, and the reporting of such phenomena are probably still an essential part of the image of America produced in the Swedish news media.

Also, Block's finding that who is president (i.e. Clinton vs. Bush) substantially affects how the U.S. is portrayed and valued by the Swedish media may very well hold true today, just as her claim that the Swedish citizens' opinions on the American engagement in international conflicts greatly affects the Swedish media image United States. Block's study may thus serve as an interesting point of reference and comparison for an updated study on these and similar questions.

Reporting international conflicts involving the US

The more recent and most common studies available are those that address how a particular event or issue was reported. These events were typically wars or other expressions of severe international conflict. Since 1991, four such events have engaged Swedish researchers: the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, the terror attacks on the 11th of September 2001, the subsequent war in Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq. The primary focus of these studies has not, however, been the U.S. image but rather how the conflicts were covered by the Swedish media.

The Gulf War

The first of these studies was conducted in relation to the Gulf war in 1991. This study explores how the war was reported and the depiction of the participants in the conflict is, of course, an important aspect. Within this project Hvitfelt & Mattsson (1992) analyzed how the conflict was dramatized in the Swedish media by, for instance, the language the journalists used in their reports; the uncommonly frequent use of both still and moving images in the news media; and how the major participants in the conflict were characterized. Methodologically, the study builds predominantly on a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

The authors concluded that how the dramatization is done depends on a wide array of factors, including the impact of the national as well as international media system and news politics on how the event is depicted in the media. The study also examined such factors as the background knowledge among the journalists, and the sources from whom the reporters get their material. A phenomenon of particular importance for the staging and dramatization of the Gulf war was the impact of CNN on how the war was perceived by journalists from all over the world. The authors sum up their conclusion neatly in a description of how they found that the western media dramatized the Gulf war:

The Gulf war became a story about good and evil. The good was "we", the allied side. The Swedish media was unambiguously on this side. Iraq was the evil. The evil was to be expelled. From this perspective, the coverage of the Gulf war followed one of the most elementary of dramaturgical schemes. The good be-

came excessively good. The commanding officer of the good, Norman Schwarzkopf, became the favourite and hero of the media. The Gulf war became the classic fairy tale about the prince and the dragon. If Norman Schwarzkopf was the prince, Saddam Hussein was to an even greater extent the dragon. There was nothing evil the dragon could not think of doing. His entire person was evil and he was even given to vice. And in the medias' fairy tale the prince defeated the dragon and liberated the princess, Kuwait (Hvitfelt & Mattson 1992: 181).

In an anthology written within the same research project (Nordlund (ed.) 1992), the issue of how the war was made into something reminiscent of a fairy tale with easily identified heroes and villains is developed further (Johannesson 1992), as is the increased use of war images (Nordström 1992). This volume also contains a comparison of how the Gulf war and the war in Balkan was covered in relation to themes, agents participating in the war, and journalists' sources (Kisch & Lundgren, 1992). Yet another article discusses how sources were accounted for in the media reporting about the war (Bobert, 1992).

Perhaps the most interesting article in the anthology, however, is a study concerning Swedish correspondents' experiences of news reporting from the Gulf War (Nohrstedt, 1992). This study concludes that allied countries' media got a dominating position compared with media from other countries. CNN was especially privileged and the reporting strengthened home opinion in the allied countries, while human sufferings got a rather marginal position in the reports. The same study asserts that the Swedish media did not differ much from other Western media regarding how they depicted war participants. Simply put, the U.S. and its allies were the good guys, Saddam Hussein and Iraq were the bad guys.

11th September and Afghanistan

The terror attack against the U.S. and the subsequent war against Afghanistan is the second of the "big" events in relation to which extensive research regarding media coverage has been conducted. Nord & Strömbäck (2002) studied how the major Swedish news media reported on the first five days after the terror attacks, and on the first five days of the war in Afghanistan. As in the Gulf War studies previously

cited, the result of Nord's and Strömbäck's content analysis shows that elite U.S. sources were the dominant sources of information for the Swedish media, and that this fact obviously had an impact on how they described the events. The results of this study dove-tail with the previously cited Gulf War study.

Nordström (2002) studied how the Swedish evening press reported these two events. He concluded that the tabloids dramatized the events in the same fashion as the Gulf War - a polarization between good and evil. The good, however, is not personified but described rather as abstract phenomena in terms such as "democracy" and "free society." The evil on the other hand is easily personified as Usama Bin Ladin. The sympathies, of course, lay with the U.S. and the victims of the terrorist attack, perhaps most clearly expressed by the Swedish newspaper Expressen's headline the day after the deed: "Today we are all Americans". Like in Nord and Strömbäck, Nordström's results fit well into an emerging picture of how a few dominant American elite sources have a determining impact on how the event will be dramatized in the media outside the United States.

The War against Iraq

The most recent studies are about the coverage of the war against Iraq. Nordström (2003) has made a comparative analysis of how Swedish print and broadcast media covered and reported on the second day of the war, especially how it was dramatized and staged. The results are consistent with the studies previously cited.

Similar results were reached in a more extensive study by Nord et al. (2003). This study investigated how the major Swedish news media reported and described the war, specifically the sources the journalists used, which themes dominated, and the descriptions of the participants in the conflict. Among the conclusions of the study is that the elitist sources - especially those in America - dominated. From this, the authors conclude that sources associated with the US-led coalition were cited more often than Iraqi sources. They also conclude that there was a pro-American trend in the coverage of the war:

There is an overrepresentation of sources belonging to the US-led coalition; the rhetorical figure: "America, the defender of freedom and democracy" is more

common than its functional counterparts: "America, the oppressor of poor people in the third world" and "America, the world's police"; America is portrayed as the liberator of Iraq more often than its occupier; and the war is rarely described as a crime against international law (Nord et al 2003: 126).

Foreign correspondents

Besides the above-mentioned minor study on Swedish correspondents experiences from the Gulf War (Nohrstedt, 1992), there is little literature about Swedish foreign correspondents, and even less about Swedish correspondents in the United States.

There is, however, one recent study about foreign correspondents worth mentioning - Hannerz's (2004) anthropological study on foreign correspondents as producers and organizers of "flows of culture." The correspondents studied by Hannerz are western Europeans and North Americans working in Asia, Africa, South America and other parts of the world. Though the study is not about Swedish foreign correspondents stationed in the United States, it is of methodological interest in relation to the Transatlantic News Cultures project. Hannerz draws upon a combination of anthropological methods such as interviews and what he calls multi-local fieldwork in order to gain insight in the culture or "tribe" of the correspondents and into the actual circumstances under which they conduct their daily work. He examines the careers of the correspondents, and what he describes as the continued ordering of the activity of the correspondents and their room to manoeuvre and improvise. He describes the main focus of his study:

As an anthropologist, however, I also wanted to see the foreign correspondents in interaction with their wider reporting habitat, as correspondents in Africa or as correspondents in Japan, with an eye to how their depiction of specific foreign places emerges. The large anthropological storehouse or alternative views of the things foreign correspondents choose to write about and, for another thing, with an opportunity to think about what kinds of phenomena they somehow do not get around to writing about (Hannerz 2004: 9).

Hannerz's methodology would be crucial in a study on Swedish correspondents working in the United States if we want to gain a more substantial knowledge about

how the image of the United States is constructed in the Swedish media. These foreign correspondents can be seen as the mediators transmitting the news from the United States to the Swedish news media, making it important to know under what circumstances they work, to which and what kind of sources they access, and to what kind of networks they belong.

Some conclusions

Limited as they are, the available studies do provide some valuable information on the reporting of the United States in the Swedish media; more importantly they give rise to new questions. The array of studies examined in this review seems to agree on a couple of conclusions. The most obvious of which is that the image of the United States in the Swedish media's coverage of each of the three studied conflicts was predominantly positive, especially compared with the image given by the same media of America's counterparts in the conflicts. How can this unequivocally favourable image be explained?

One part of the explanation hinted at in the studies is the suggestion that portrayals of conflicts include the predominance of American sources (especially elite sources) as suppliers of information to the Swedish media, and the influence of American news companies – most notably CNN – on the Swedish coverage of the wars in question.

These results give rise to issues hardly mentioned: to what extent the image of the USA in Swedish media is "determined" or influenced by the image of the United States given by the predominantly American sources and in the American news companies from which the Swedish media gets its material. Perhaps a more important question related to how this affects the credibility of the correspondents as well as the Swedish news media in general.

The impact of American sources on the Swedish media's coverage of international conflicts involving the United States also raises questions about general effects on Swedish journalism, in terms of how news stories are told and dramatized, how the agents of a news story are characterized, and how the evaluation of news is done. These questions are critical when framed by the Swedish media's increasing dependence on American sources.

The content analyses of the studies described above do not suffice because the data say nothing about why certain aspects of an event are covered while other aspects are more or less neglected. Neither do the content analyses contain any information about the working conditions of the foreign correspondents and other circumstances affecting what they report to their home offices. An inquiry into the conditions of their activities is crucial for the understanding of the central position the foreign correspondents obviously occupy in the production of foreign news. They function as mediators transmitting and explaining politics and news from the United States to Sweden. Such a research mission demands examination of the economic conditions they work under, the editorial policies, professional values, legal provisions, as well as the nature and extent of their access to governmental, parliamentary, congressional and other sources like political parties, academics, and think tanks.

The overriding conclusion of this review is that there is a substantial lack of Swedish research both regarding the image of the United States in Swedish media and regarding Swedish foreign correspondents working in the United States. The research that has been conducted is either outdated or in the form of content analyses of the reporting of particular major events, notably international conflicts involving the United States. There is almost no contemporary research to be found on the ongoing day-to-day coverage, which clearly suggests topics for future research.

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