

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Dimitri Neos



IA-Forum speaks with Stephen Hess about his book, [*Through Their Eyes: Foreign Correspondents in the United States*](#). Mr. Hess is Senior Fellow Emeritus, [Governance Studies](#), at the Brookings Institution, and Distinguished Research Professor of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University. He has been Consultant to President on Executive Office Reorganization (1977); U.S. Representative to the U.N. General Assembly (1976); Editor-in-Chief of Republican Party Platform (1976); Chairman, White House Committee on Children and Youth (1970-71); Presidential Adviser on Urban Affairs (1969); Presidential Speechwriter (1958-61).

International Affairs Forum: *Through Their Eyes* is an exploration of the foreign press in the U.S. What was your interest in the subject?

Mr. Stephen Hess: This is the sixth volume of a series of books written to research and explain the press. The genesis of the series started in 1977 as I started to research whether the Washington press corps and its relation to government was a good area to study. I was stunned that there was no 'literature' in the field. The last serious book about Washington journalism was published in 1937 as a PhD dissertation by Leo Rosten (University of Chicago).

I had originally planned this to be a three volume set. The first was about domestic correspondents in Washington (*The Washington Reporters*, 1981). The second book was about the government side of press relations (*The Government/Press Connection*, 1984) that was based on on-site observations within the White House, State Department, Pentagon, Food and Drug Administration, and Department of Transportation. The third book was supposed to be this book, but I wrote two other books in the interim about press/congressional relations, and another that analyzed how the U.S. press covered the rest of the world (*International News and Foreign Correspondents*, 1996). This actually worked well because the current book is the mirror image of volume five. Then I wrote this book that explores the foreign press in America.

IA-Forum: Were there any major challenges that were faced in the research?

Mr. Hess: Yes. Surveying news in the American media is very simple: you can go to the major media sources (e.g., CBS, NBC, New York Times) and count the number of news stories. But what do you do when you have news pieces all over the world in many languages? How can you gather them? We tried the internet as a source, but even where newspapers and magazines have their own websites, they can be very selective about what they post. We asked the embassies if they archived their countries' media. They didn't. We also looked into translation services, but they were far too expensive. What we finally did was ask all foreign correspondents to tell us about the most recent story they had written and send or give us that information in a survey format. We asked them questions about how they wrote the story, what went into the story, and in many cases, the story itself.

In effect, what we produced was a day in the life of foreign correspondents in the United States. Of course, it's not quite accurate because the research didn't take place over the course of only one day. It produced a lot of useful information we could generalize from though.

IA-Forum: A number of foreign correspondent categories were identified in the book, more than what is commonly thought of as news reporters....

Mr. Hess: It turns out a lot of people like to call themselves foreign correspondents. A good deal of them do it full time but there are a fair number of them who are at it part-time and they're not exactly part-timers – that is, they don't do what the full-time correspondents do only less. They are people who may teach art at a New York public school but if they are Portugese they might write about art in America for Portugese magazines. These people I call the 'irregulars'; they make a real contribution and often do fine work. Their composition is different as well. The gender stratification of the 'irregulars' is about fifty-fifty male to female while regular foreign correspondents are about seventy-five percent male, twenty-five percent female.

IA-Forum: Some participants in the survey complained about access to sources. Is that a prevalent problem?

Mr. Hess: What most journalists complain about is access, including Americans. Although the traditional foreign correspondent who moves from country to country after a few years will say that it's worse in some other countries.

Access to the highest level of U.S. government - the President, Secretaries of State and Defense - is what causes the most problems. Some people's jobs depend on it. For example, the bureau chiefs for some Japanese publications are expected to have an interview with the President of the United States within four years. In reality, however, this reflects a level of

misunderstanding by some foreign editors and publishers, especially in those publications that are the most important in their own country.

There's a general lack of access because this is a political capital full of elected politicians who say there are no votes in foreign countries where these correspondents are from. But to some degree, there are. For example, some Mexican correspondents are getting more and more access because the Hispanic population is growing in the U.S. and there is more interaction across the border. So they are almost quasi-American correspondents. There may even be a bit of that with the Canadians. But they are all in line behind American correspondents who have voters directly tied to them and hooks into the American demographics.

A fair amount has to do with the size of the organization, too. The smaller the organization, the most likely you are to have a one person bureau, and you can't do everything.

IA-Forum: An interesting comment made by one of survey participants is that he felt overwhelmed by too much information...

Mr. Hess: In one of the early surveys I did, I discovered that it was very difficult for the newly arrived correspondent to deal with the avalanche of information that comes out of the U.S. government and is readily available. But you find that the longer they're here, the less troubled they are by this problem. They become knowledgeable about the system and country and learn to sort out what is important and what is not. It was a strange complaint but can be just as important as not having enough information, especially when you're on deadline and have to decide what to choose.

IA-Forum: The advent of new technologies - internet, satellite communication, cable tv, podcasts, etc. - has had a considerable effect the way people communicate, access information and speed that they receive it. What effects have these emerging technologies had on foreign correspondents?

Mr. Hess: In many ways, that's the story. In the pre-internet, pre-cable TV world the reporter often had little contact with the home office and many filed their pieces by slow mail which could take a number of days to be received. This impacted the type of story they could file. The story had to be fresh when it arrived a week or two later.

There was an axiom named after a British reporter from the Daily Telegraph who said 'happiness is in direct proportion with distance from the home office'. Meaning that they were much freer to pursue what they wanted to pursue. The distance from the home office has become shorter with these technologies and the degree to which the home office can direct more and more the direction they want coverage to be. Some countries tend to keep

their reporters on shorter leashes. The French, for example, seem to keep reporters on the shortest leash with more stories being directed from Paris.

Then there's the CNN effect. Newsrooms around the world have satellite tv with access to CNN or the like and have a constant flow of information from the U.S. They may see a story being reported and call their reporters in the United States and say, "There's a chase going on in upstate New York." To which the reporter may say, "So what?" or the home office may want them to go there, not realizing that it's two hundred miles away. So it causes a disconnect between the reporter and home office that's not always productive.

Another aspect is the time differences. If, for example, the home office is in Europe, the correspondent is six hours behind so the editor back home is reading the New York Times online while you're asleep. So there were certain games now being played in that regard – by the time they woke up, their editor may have a good idea of what they wanted their reporter to be covering.

There are all sorts of ramifications because of technology. Some perhaps producing less useful news when you have less time to check sources than when the world moved at a slower pace.

IA-Forum: The U.S. finds itself in an unpopular position with much of the media overseas currently. Do the home countries receive accurate reporting from their foreign correspondents here?

Mr. Hess: There are several aspects to that. First of all, how foreign correspondents get their news. There is a degree of 'borrowed news'. Reporters we surveyed, when asked about what they do in the morning, responded that they read the New York Times, Washington Post, looked at CNN, etc. That gives you a sense of where they're getting their first exposure to news. This is reflected in what they write, particularly if they have to file their story by noon for the home office. They can't call the government before 9 a.m. and then they have the problem of access – so they have to rely to a certain degree on 'borrowed news' to get their stories in on time.

On the other hand, if foreign operations took their stories from the wire services, they could release more of their own foreign correspondents to work on special things that wouldn't be done by the New York Times and Washington Post. These are stories that may have special appeal to someone in another country. They are often local angle or regional stories that are interesting to people in those foreign countries, such as human interest stories about people who have come to the United States and done well or say, the Irish Times reporting on something with the Irish community in Boston. By and large, the larger countries aren't interested in

these kinds of stories, while, for example, some of the Scandinavian countries are very interested in local angles.

But is the news accurate? It's as accurate in some regard as the American press is accurate. People would then ask, "Well, how accurate is the American press?" Part of this again is related to the size of the organization. Certainly publications like the New York Times, Washington Post, L.A. Times, and Knight-Ridder newspapers have far more resources both in terms of numbers and access than foreign correspondents. They are getting more and better information than the foreign press.

There are some who claim, particularly conservative critics, that because many foreign correspondents are in New York and Washington, they're buying into more liberal news. I'm not one of those believers, particularly off the editorial page – I know too many good foreign correspondents.

IA-Forum: What surprised you in your research?

Mr. Hess: What surprised me was that given the reputation of the United States around the world and the focus of some virulent reporting, foreign correspondents in the United States are quite friendly and quite sympathetic to Americans and to some degree, the American government. I found them to be a moderating influence on what's in the press of most countries. There appeared to be a real distinction between that part of a newspaper or a publication that was written back in the country and that part that was filtered through their own correspondents in the United States. If that assessment is correct, the U.S. government would be very wise to spend a lot more time and attention helping these correspondents to get access.

What we also found is that many foreign correspondents are also often sad to leave and go to their next assignment. In fact, a reason why the U.S. gets such a good break through the foreign correspondents is that a number of them decide to stay and become American citizens. For example, the most important foreign correspondent of my lifetime, Alistair Cooke (Manchester Guardian, BBC), became an American citizen in 1943 and spent much more of his life as an American citizen than as a British one. So when you talk about 'through their eyes' you find that many of these people decide to become citizens in this country.

Another factor in this sympathy to Americans is that lot of the foreign correspondents have received some schooling in the United States. They go to U.S. universities, become exchange students in some cases. One German bureau chief who had been an exchange student in high school said, "You make the best friends in your lifetime in high school". He's not anti-American at all.

IA-Forum: Do you see many op-eds from the U.S. being published overseas?

Mr. Hess: American writers who tend to be of the left such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said are often published around the world. They are probably far better known as commentators than Thomas Friedman (New York Times) or Jim Hoagland (Washington Post). They are articulate, prolific and make an effort to have their material widely circulated.

IA-Forum: Have you talked to anyone in the foreign press since the recent Danish cartoon incident?

Mr. Hess: No, I haven't.

IA-Forum: Any thoughts on it?

Mr. Hess: If you study American political cartoons, you'll find that our greatest cartoonist, Thomas Nast, who worked during the Civil War and Reconstruction period for Harper's Weekly, was virulently anti-Catholic. There's nothing that says our cartoonists shouldn't or won't be outrageous. The truly great ones often were. In that case, the offensiveness had to do with somebody's religion but that is the way we treat the press here.

As another example, there was an experience with a cartoon at just about the same time as the Danish controversy here in the States. It was a cartoon by Tom Toles of the Washington Post. He drew a cartoon that thoroughly offended the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/opinions/cartoonsandvideos/toles_main.html?name=Toles&date=01292006). They thought it disparaged American fighting people, the Secretary of Defense, etc. So what did the most powerful military group of the United States do? They sat down and wrote a letter to the editor of the Washington Post, they didn't blow it up.

So I have very little sympathy with the counter point of view regarding the Danish controversy in terms of sensitivity. That's a view held by some American cartoonists and editors as well. If you believe in free speech and free press, you can't allow something to be taken off the table. How you deal with it is another question, and many editors may not choose to publish it – for commercial reasons, psychological reasons, etc. – and this happens all the time. But the idea of just taking something off the table because a large group is offended by it is a very dangerous message.

IA-Forum: How healthy is the state of journalism currently here?

Mr. Hess: In many areas, it's much better than it was when I started my research. I see American reporters who are far better educated and trained and prepared to do serious journalism. So that's a good feeling that I have.

Then there's the issue of what Daniel Patrick Moynihan called 'the dumbing down' of our society. It may be dumbing down, but we're also broadening out. For those that seek out information, it's everywhere – from publications available in drugstores to university bookstore, direct tv, satellite radio, etc. It's just a matter of choosing it. For the person who just listens to a little news on the radio while driving home or watching some news on tv before going to bed, then you have to ask whether they're getting sufficient information to be a good citizen.

If you look at journalism from the top-down, what goes on in the boardrooms, there can be excessively commercial decisions made that reflect on what and how much news we get. For example, foreign bureaus all over the world were closed after the Berlin Wall had fallen. Those closings were largely for commercial reasons and were a real loss to journalism.

IA-Forum: Where do you see journalism going?

Mr. Hess: We are at an interesting transitional moment in the history of journalism with this tremendous explosion of information that is available in a number of ways. You have to figure out how to make a profit on these new technologies, make them commercially viable. So it's a commercial question as well as a question of better journalism. I am far less worried than most. I've seen how we've made this transition before – from newspapers to radio, radio to television – and read the obituaries for newspapers, radio, and television. It never works out that way. All of the 'old' media somehow finds a place and sort themselves out. For example, AM radio was pronounced dead but found an audience for talk radio. I don't know how all this will sort itself out. But it will happen.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Hess.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org