News, Nations, and Power Relations
Shahin, Saif

Published in:
Critical sociology

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
News, Nations, and Power Relations: How Neoliberal Media Reproduce a Hierarchical World Order

Saif Shahin
Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Abstract
This article adopts a poststructural approach to examine the relationship between the news media and international relations. It compares 15 years of international aid coverage from two donor nations, the United States and Britain, and two recipient nations, India and Pakistan, to understand the types of identities news media construct for a nation in relation to other nations. Despite their differences, the news discourse in all four nations has a neoliberal orientation. Moreover, neoliberalism underpins a hierarchical structure of relations that privileges some nations as superior and makes other nations willing participants in their own subordination. While scholars of press–state relations regard newsmaking as epiphenomenal to foreign policymaking, this article argues that newsmaking and policymaking are mutually constitutive social phenomena: both draw from and, in turn, reproduce a shared conception of national identity vis-à-vis other nations. In doing so, the article illustrates the productive power of news media in international relations.

Keywords
national identity, capitalism, international relations, communication, United States, Britain, India, Pakistan

Introduction
National identity is commonly assumed to be idiosyncratic. Citizens of a nation are expected to conform to a certain character or partake in a way of life that is exclusively their own and distinguishes them from ‘others’ beyond their borders. Without such an identity, there won’t be an ontological justification for the nation to exist qua nation—with clearly delineated, if sometimes contested, boundaries (Skey, 2010). This idiosyncratic conception of national identity extends to sociological research on media and communication (Crawford, 2012; Song et al., 2019). Scholars who have examined the relationship between news media and national identity view the latter as (1) making a nation unique and (2) antagonistic to transnational/global discourses. Berglez and
Olausson (2011), for instance, observe that ‘national identity in the news media represses transnational political identities’ (p. 35).

Such a conception of national identity, however, obviates the detail that nationalism—or the idea that the ‘nation’ constitutes an ontologically meaningful and politically legitimate community—is itself a transnational phenomenon. Since its emergence in late 18th century Europe, nationalism has diffused around the globe as the dominant mode of social and political organization (Anderson, 1983). A nation does not exist in isolation but ‘in a complex of other nation-states’ (Billig, 1995: 20). One nation’s identity won’t have any meaning if there were no other nations, with their own identities, in comparison to which one would consider one’s own nation to be unique. Therefore, while a particular nation and its people might believe themselves to be one of a kind, the fact that all nations and their peoples do so, ‘othering’ each other in the process, means the practice of national identity construction is global in scope and relational in character (see also, Skey, 2014).

Constructivist scholars of international relations have accordingly emphasized a less idiosyncratic and more relational conception of national identity. Viewing nations as ‘actors’ within a ‘social world’ comprising other actors, Wendt (1992) describes national identity as ‘an inherently social definition of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world’ (p. 398; see also, Giddens, 1979). It is these collectively held social definitions about one another that shape foreign policymaking (Ashley, 1988). Conflict and cooperation in international affairs are therefore the result of the construction of national identities in symbolic interaction (Hopf, 2002).

Building on this constructivist view, I study the news media as sites of national identity construction and consider the implications of this process for relations among nations. My comparative analysis focuses on 15 years of news coverage of international aid from four nations—the United States, Britain, India, and Pakistan. The analysis demonstrates that a shared transnational discourse of neoliberalism structures the national identities of different nations, allowing them to complement and coexist with each other. But they do not coexist on an equal footing. The neoliberal discourse reproduces a hierarchical world order, which not only privileges some nations as superior but also makes other nations complicit in their own subordination. This asymmetry of power ironically emerges from an illusory sense of agency that is inherent to nationhood as a mode of social organization. Finally, while many scholars regard newsmaking as epiphenomenal to foreign policymaking (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 1988), I argue that newsmaking and policymaking are mutually constitutive social phenomena. Both draw from and, in turn, reproduce a shared conception of national identity.

In doing so, the article illustrates the news media’s capacity to exercise what Barnett and Duvall (2005) call ‘productive power’ in international relations. Specifically, they (re)produce—in conjunction with the political elite—hierarchically organized national identities as a structure of meaning-making that, in turn, shapes the aspirations and actions of nations as agents in the neoliberal international order.

**Press–State Relations**

The dominant paradigm in the field of press–state relations is that news coverage of international affairs follows the lead of the policymaking elite (see also, Nakahara and Shahin, 2021). There are different explanations for why this happens. The **indexing** theory argues that ‘mass media news is indexed implicitly to the dynamics of governmental debate’ (Bennett, 1990: 108). If there are differences among policymakers on a particular policy, the news would report conflicting views. But if policymakers are in agreement, journalists too would fall in line. Entman’s (2004) **cascading**
activation model suggests the framing of a foreign issue or event typically begins with the administration and then cascades down to other elites, the media, and finally the public. The elite thus wield considerable control over the media and eventually the public’s perception of international affairs. Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model considers this process to be more instrumental, contending that the elite ‘manufacture consent’ for foreign policy decisions with the help of the news media. The media ‘serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity’ (p. xi)—a nexus of corporate and political power that controls the media through formal and informal channels of coercion.

Empirical studies typically support these theories. Zaller and Chiu (1996) examined news reporting of US foreign policy ‘crises’ between 1945 and 1991 and found that the slant of press coverage was closely associated with the positions of government officials. Although the direction of influence was not apparent, the authors interpreted their data to suggest that ‘the association exists because reporters follow the lead of government officials in deciding whether to slant the news in a hawkish or dovish direction’ (p. 399). Groshek’s (2008) analysis of New York Times and Washington Post articles ahead of the 2003 Iraq War found that ‘increase in the level of consensus within the US government seemed to influence coverage of the pre-Iraq War debate’ (p. 315)—in line with Bennett’s (1990) indexing thesis. Specifically, Groshek found that ‘substantive’ news coverage, which was critical of the goals and rationales of the George W. Bush administration’s policy, declined after a congressional resolution authorized the use of force. Rowling et al. (2015) studied White House, military, and congressional communications as well as news coverage of the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam. They concluded that the Richard Nixon administration’s framing was ‘largely echoed in the press, despite consistent and forceful challenges by congressional Democrats’ (p. 310)—revealing Entman’s (2004) cascading activation model to be at work.

A contrary view, the CNN Effect, gained ground in the 1990s—a time of flux marked by the end of the Cold War and advances in communication technology. Some scholars argued that the advent of real-time television and round-the-clock coverage of conflicts and disasters worldwide was affecting foreign policymaking by making these events highly salient for the public and obliging US policymakers to take action (Culbert, 1998). Later studies showed media attention to foreign events in a number of purported CNN Effect cases had followed policy meetings and discussions, if not actions (Gilboa, 2005). Coverage of US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks, in which the media ‘internalized’ the administration’s line (Reese and Lewis, 2009), further weakened the CNN Effect perspective—although some scholars continued to champion this view (Bahador, 2011).

Thus, the preponderant—although not the only—perspective among scholars of press–state relations is that newsmaking is epiphenomenal to foreign policymaking. The media report the policies formulated by the elite and do so in ways that favor the elite. But this scholarship has two major limitations. First, the empirical focus of most of these studies is media coverage of crises and conflicts—usually ones that involve the United States (Aday, 2017). But neither international relations nor international news is limited to crises and conflicts alone. Interactions among nations take many forms—including cooperative interactions. Second, deterministic theories like indexing, cascading activation, and propaganda model do not explain why elite control over media messages breaks down over domestic news. In her overview of political news framing research, Lawrence (2010) observes that in foreign policy contexts, ‘mainstream media typically show less independence in framing issues and events, instead tending to rely heavily on high government officials to frame the news’. But when it comes to domestic policy, ‘the playing field is more open to a wider variety of would-be news framers, and journalists themselves may exhibit more independence in introducing and sustaining particular news frames’ (p. 267).
News and National Identity

This is where research on the relationship between news and national identity becomes significant. The news media have historically played a vital role in the emergence of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983), and they continue to reinforce nationalism every day in mundane or ‘banal’ ways (Billig, 1995). Drawing on this foundational literature, media scholars have found a strong influence of national identity on news coverage (Crawford, 2012; Rowling et al., 2015; Shahin, 2016; Song et al., 2019).

When national identity is at stake, journalists are more likely to disregard professional values and cover an event in a manner favoring their nation’s elite. Nossek (2004) suggests ‘an inverse relation between professional news values and the national identity of the journalist’ (p. 343). Echoing Nossek’s claim, Hutcheson et al.’s (2004) analysis of *Time* and *Newsweek* coverage following the 9/11 attacks found that US government and military officials stressed ‘American core values and themes of US strength and power while simultaneously demonizing the “enemy”’ and ‘journalists closely paralleled these nationalist themes in their language’ (p. 27).

Other studies indicate news tends to project a positive national ‘image’ or defend the image when it comes under threat. Entman’s (1991) classic study of US news coverage of two mid-air tragedies is an example. When a Soviet fighter jet shot down a Korean Air Lines flight in 1983, leading to the death of 269 passengers and crew, the US media called it ‘wanton killing’. But when a US Navy ship destroyed an Iran Air plane in 1988, killing 290, it was described as an ‘understandable accident’. National identity construction in the news can also be pro-active—anticipating or setting the stage for future foreign policy action. Anker (2005) notes that Fox News coverage on the evening of 9/11 already started espousing a ‘good versus evil’ narrative, which was soon adopted by US President George W. Bush to justify invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. She concludes the news coverage constructed the US as ‘a morally powerful victim ensnared in a position that required it to transform victimization into heroic retributive action’ (p. 22).

The influence of national identity on news can thus explain what theories of press–state relations are unable to: why journalists appear to follow the political elite’s lead when it comes to international affairs but not—to nearly the same extent—in their coverage of domestic affairs (Lawrence, 2010). Covering international news events, and their nation’s policies vis-à-vis those events, activates journalists’ national identity and their reportage coincides with the decisions of the national policymaking elite. But this need not always be on account of policymakers’ direct influence. It could also happen because policymakers, too, are influenced by national identity in formulating foreign policy (Ashley, 1988; Wendt, 1992)—an understanding of what their nation is or means and how it should therefore act, which they share with the journalists. On the other hand, when journalists are reporting on domestic matters, other kinds of identities—organizational, partisan—become more salient and therefore news coverage appears more independent (Shahin, 2015a; Stroud, 2010).

Newsmaking is, thus, not necessarily as epiphenomenal to foreign policymaking as deterministic theories of press–state relations contend. Instead, the two may be viewed as mutually constitutive phenomena—both informed by journalists and policymakers’ shared conceptions of national identity. This is not to argue that indexing, cascading activation, and the propaganda model are invalid as theories. But the direct, mechanistic, unidirectional process of elite influence over news they describe is more likely to prevail in the coverage of particular situations, especially crises and conflicts—where much of their empirical evidence also comes from. In contrast, the influence of national identity is more diffuse and likely to undergird news coverage of routine events and issues—an illustration of what Barnett and Duvall (2005) call ‘productive power’.
Power in International Relations

Barnett and Duvall (2005) define power as ‘the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate’ (p. 39). Central to their poststructural approach is how power operates through discourse. Incorporating different conceptions of power in international relations theory, they offer a comprehensive four-part typology.

One research tradition views power in terms of nations’ relative material strengths (Waltz, 1979). Barnett and Duvall call this compulsory power, which relates to the direct control exercised by one actor (nation) over another, either intentionally or unintentionally, in the course of their direct social interaction. Another tradition conceives of power as exercised by, and through, multilateral institutions (Keohane, 1984). Barnett and Duvall call this institutional power—actors’ ability to dominate institutions and determine other actors’ ‘circumstances and fate’ through these institutions.

Both compulsory and institutional power are exercised in direct or indirect social interaction between actors with ‘previously constituted’ identities and interests. Structural power, however, deals with relations of constitution (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Structures are constitutive of actors and their capacities, self-understandings, and subjective interests. While structures distribute privileges asymmetrically, they also shape what actors want—thus making actors willing to ‘accept their role in the existing order of things’ (Lukes, 2005: 11). Structural power can thus constrain nations from recognizing their own subordination. Examples include global production relations that order nations into core and periphery positions, making peripheral nations willingly accept their role as providers of raw materials to the industrialized core and as dumping markets for the finished products of core nations (Wallerstein, 1974).

The last category, productive power, also deals with relations of constitution. But instead of being constitutive of actors directly, it is constitutive of the structures that, in turn, constitute the actors. A study of productive power draws attention to ‘systems of signification and meaning (which are structured, but not themselves structures), and to networks of social forces perpetually shaping one another’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 55). Productive power is thus much more diffuse and concerned with discursive processes and practices that produce identities and interests by giving meaning to them. As Barnett and Duvall (2005) note, ‘Discourse . . . is socially productive for all subjects, constituting the subjectivity of all social beings of diverse kinds with their contingent, though not entirely fluid, identities, practices, rights, responsibilities, and social capacities’ (p. 56).

Research Objective

In line with Barnett and Duvall’s (2005) conception of discourse, this article turns attention to news as a discourse that is constitutive of nations in terms of their identities and interests. Previous research on press–state relations has mostly relied on crises and conflicts as its empirical context. In contrast, this study looks at the coverage of international aid, which, in principle at least, is the antithesis of conflict. International aid, or official development assistance, refers to resource flows from one country to another through official agencies with the stated purpose of promoting economic development and welfare, at least a quarter of which is in the form of a grant (Van der Veen, 2011). Rich, developed countries are typically donors of aid while poor, developing countries are its recipients—although some developing countries also give aid to other nations from time to time. The subject of international aid is thus neither time- nor location-specific but of relevance to all nations at all times. It therefore offers a useful comparative context to study national identity in the news from multiple countries over an extended period of time.
The empirical focus of the study is news coverage of international aid in the United States and Britain—two nations that are net donors of international aid—as well as India and Pakistan, that are net recipients of aid in the study period (India in 2017 claimed to have become a net donor; see Sharma, 2017). These four nations have complex and interconnected histories. The United States, India, and Pakistan were all British colonies that eventually gained independence. More recently, Britain and the United States claim to share a trans-Atlantic ‘special relationship’ (Schulze, 2018). Pakistan and the bulk of modern-day India were politically united for centuries and retain cultural similarities to this day. Yet, the two nations came into being following the brutal partition of colonized India and define themselves in contrast to each other—a legacy of the so-called ‘two-nation theory’ from the colonial period that held Hindus and Muslims to be separate ‘nations’ needing separate nation-states (Shahin, 2015b). Another reason for choosing these four nations is that English—on account of their shared colonial history—is widely spoken in all of them and English news media either predominate (the United States, Britain) or have a substantial presence (India, Pakistan) in their media markets.

To examine the production of national identity in newsmaking, I examine news coverage over a 15-year period: 2001 to 2015. This period is significant for multiple reasons. First, it follows the 9/11 attacks, which led to great chaos in world affairs and may be viewed as a new era in international relations. Second, this period saw political power shift hands in all four nations being studied: between Republicans and Democrats in the United States, Labor and Conservatives in Britain, centrist Congress and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party in India, and between military rule and parliamentary democracy in Pakistan.

The empirical objective of my research is, therefore, to examine news coverage of international aid in the United States, Britain, India, and Pakistan between 2001 and 2015 in order to understand how news media reflect and reproduce their respective national identities. The larger purpose of this comparative analysis is to (1) distinguish common features of identity construction across these nations constituting a ‘transnational’ discourse, (2) consider the implications of this discourse for relations of power among nations, and (3) evaluate the relationship between newsmaking and foreign policymaking in the light of this discourse.

**Method**

**Data Sampling**

Data were sampled from the Factiva news archive through a two-step procedure for each nation. An initial search for the terms ‘international aid’ or ‘foreign aid’ appearing in headlines and lead paragraphs in all US news outlets—including offline and online versions—for the time period 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2015 yielded more than 8000 articles. I then identified a range of national and regional outlets that had the highest volume of coverage, including *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, *CNN*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Deseret Morning News*, and *Boston Globe*. Searching within these outlets yielded a US sample of 2954 news articles, excluding duplicates.


I decided to focus my analysis only on paragraphs that mentioned the names of the respective nations in each of the four samples. It was in these paragraphs that news coverage was most likely
to engage in national identity construction; such purposive sampling would therefore tailor the data to meet my research objectives and also make its volume more manageable for discourse analysis. I used ‘regular expression’, a natural language processing technique that locates character strings, to identify relevant paragraphs from each sample.


**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis was conducted using Derrida’s (1972) method of deconstruction. This post-structural approach to reading texts makes two assumptions. First, the meanings of ‘things’—whether material objects or immaterial ideas—can only be constructed in relation to other things. Specifically, things are understood in terms of what they are not, or what Derrida called *différence*—which binds things into binary oppositions. Second, binary opposition is never between equals. Rather, a ‘violent hierarchy’ is socially inscribed into the binary, making one thing superior and the other subordinate. For instance, a hierarchy is inherent in the good–evil relationship; ‘good’ isn’t simply ‘not evil’ but also better than and therefore superior to evil. The construction of meaning is thus the construction of relations of power.

The purpose of deconstruction is twofold. One is to identify how things are differentiated from other things to construct meanings. The second is to ‘deconstruct’ the hierarchy in the meanings by laying them bare. Kraidy (2002) has interpreted deconstruction as a guiding strategy for reading and analyzing news discourse. The analysis proceeds in two phases. The first is to identify the ‘explicit statement’ of the discourse—its intended meaning. The second is to distinguish from it the ‘implicit gesture’ of the discourse—or its underlying implication, which the discourse betrays without intending to.

Drawing on the constructivist understanding of national identity as ‘meanings’ ascribed to nations in relation to other nations, I carried out discourse analysis in three steps. First, I distinguished the social categories that the news media created and placed their own and other nations in terms of binary oppositions—such as rich/poor, developed/developing, democratic/undemocratic, and so on. Next, I evaluated the characteristics being associated with these categories and which characteristics were deemed to be more desirable or aspirational—and therefore superior—than others. Examples included the ability to donate or receive aid, access to international markets or lack thereof, ability to exercise foreign investment, and so on. These two steps helped me distinguish what Kraidy (2002) calls the ‘explicit statement’ of the text. Finally, I identified the ‘implicit gesture’ of the discourse in terms of action implications—or what a nation ought to or was expected to do because it belonged to one or the other category. For instance, being ‘poor’ and lacking in foreign investment implied undertaking economic reforms that would make a nation more attractive to investors.

**Transnational Neoliberalism**

Multiple discourses emerged from the analysis of news coverage. In this article, I focus on the discourse of neoliberalism, defined as the belief that ‘the market is the most efficient and moral
institution for the organization of human affairs’ and should ‘replace all other institutions (e.g. family, state, community, and society) as the primary mechanism for producing, promoting, and preserving social order’ (Springer et al., 2016: 3; see also, Harvey, 2005). This belief underpins capitalism, an economic system where the means of production are privately owned and commodities (goods, services) are sold in a ‘free’ market—that is, where prices are not imposed from outside but result from the supply and demand of commodities driven by the motive of profit maximization. Like classical liberalism, neoliberalism holds individual freedom in the highest regard—thus undermining the significance of communal institutions and leading to an increasingly atomized condition of existence (Ampuja, 2012). But it also defines individual freedom as the ability to buy and sell in the free market and be driven chiefly by the motive of profit maximization (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017). Under the neoliberal ideology, the creation and maintenance of such a system thus becomes the raison d’être of human activity, while its fallouts are either ignored or perceived as necessary evils (Bodley, 2000). Such a system is able to operate only when there are sufficiently large numbers of consumers and they are motivated to consume, creating the constant demand for commodities that suppliers can then meet and derive continuous profit from. Capitalism, therefore, cannot survive without the driving force of a social ideology—such as neoliberalism (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017).

Several studies have previously examined the influence of neoliberalism on media broadly and particularly on media systems in the United States, Britain, India, and Pakistan, respectively (e.g. Artz, 2015; Chakravartty and Roy, 2013; Fuchs and Mosco, 2016; Hoops et al., 2016). Here, I focus on the transnational character of neoliberalism as a news discourse and how it structures the national identities of each of these nations to produce asymmetries of power. In addition, I draw attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between newsmaking and foreign policymaking that this discourse reveals.

**United States as Capitalist Superpower**

The US media split the international society into Rich/Developed and Poor/Developing. They also credited capitalism for the prosperity of rich nations—sometimes the only reason why the rich were rich and the poor poor. In doing so, journalists did not simply disregard but even reinvented history, obviating the role of centuries of colonialism, exploitation, and slavery and blaming the poor nations for their own poverty. As a Deseret Morning News (2005) columnist noted,

Let’s examine the ‘vicious cycle of poverty’ myth and whether foreign aid is a necessary ingredient for economic development. The United States, Britain, France, Canada and most other countries were once poor. Andrew Bernstein of the Ayn Rand Institute wrote in an article titled ‘Capitalism is the Cure for Africa’s Problems’ that pre-industrial Europe was vastly poorer than contemporary Africa . . . Some economic development ‘experts’ attribute Africa’s troubles to its history of colonialism. That’s nonsense, because some of the world’s richest countries are former colonies, such as the United States, Canada, Hong Kong and Australia.

Capitalism was thus constructed not simply as a feature of the US economy but as a virtue the nation possessed—and nations, in general, ought to possess. Indeed, the US media viewed the export of this virtue to be the cornerstone of US foreign policy. As a Washington Post (2015) article observed, US trade policy had been a ‘pillar’ of the nation’s foreign policy since World War II. Following the war, ‘America encouraged trade with Europe and Japan—allowing more of their exports into the United States—as a way of achieving our political goals. Trade would build their prosperity, and their prosperity would promote democracy over communism’. 
News coverage was typically supportive of policy decisions that were viewed to be in line with the nation’s capitalist identity. But when policymakers were seen as departing from this normative expectation, journalists were quick to remind them of America’s ‘role’ in the world. For instance, well-known foreign policy commentator Fareed Zakaria wrote, ‘What the rest of the world—particularly poorer countries—really wants is for the US to continue its historic role in opening up the world economy. For a struggling farmer in Kenya, access to world markets is far more important than foreign aid or U.N. programs’ (Washington Post, 2008).

What these examples illustrate is that newsmaking didn’t always toe the line laid down by the policymaking elite: journalists also differed with policymakers over particular policies. But these differences were not arbitrary; instead, they followed the logic of national identity. Criticism of policies would be based on the conception of America’s status and role in international affairs—a conception that journalists expected policymakers to share.

Democracy was another attribute of the rich and developed—and closely linked with capitalism. The news media presented capitalism as economic freedom and democracy as political freedom. Together, they constituted two sides of the coin of ‘freedom’ that the United States—‘land of the free’ and ‘leader of the free world’—represented and defended. For instance, in a CNN (2001) broadcast 5 weeks into the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan—codenamed ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’—a discussion about Taliban’s fall was followed by the reporter claiming: ‘...as soon as people know that we’re from an American organization, they’ve been coming up to us and saying we thank the United States, because they have given us a chance at a new freedom’.

A paradox lay at the heart of this national identity construction. Although capitalism and democracy were deemed valuable because they supposedly brought freedom and choice to people around the world, US journalists also took it for granted that Americans would control and ‘manage’ these freedoms and choices for other nations—making the point of these ‘freedoms’ moot. For instance, there was consensus over the need for US administrators and military personnel to manage the ‘fledgling’ democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq as the war years went by. Similarly, American journalists viewed their nation as legitimately managing the ‘free’ market—either through its influence over the vanguards of global capitalism such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) or through direct and indirect control of the economies of other nations.

A New York Times (2003) article observed that foreign aid originated ‘in the waning days of World War II, when American and European economists met in Bretton Woods, N.H., and conceived the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank’. It said aid served as a political tool all through the Cold War era and was used by the United States to create or support democracies, thus expanding its global influence. And then the article added: ‘[B]y the 1980’s the bank and the fund, basically run by the US State and Treasury Departments, were heavily managing the markets of borrowing countries’ (author’s italics). Articles like these, while glorifying capitalism and democracy because they supposedly brought freedom and choice to people everywhere, failed to acknowledge that such freedom had little meaning if people’s lives were still being ‘managed’ by another nation.

A neoliberal discourse thus suffused US news coverage and shaped journalistic representations of American national identity as capitalist and democratic. Free market economics and freedom of political choice were deemed to bring development and prosperity. The media explained policy decisions by resorting to this national identity. They expressed support for policies that were in line with this identity. However, they also questioned policies and actions that appeared not to be, suggesting alternatives that reinforced the neoliberal ideology. Crucially, though, capitalism and democracy were ultimately valued not because of what they were supposed to bring—freedom and choice—but because they were American values. That is why journalists saw no contradiction in
talking about international free trade and freedom of political choice being ‘managed’—as long as the United States was doing the managing.

**Britain as Capitalist Second-in-Command**

Like the US media, the British media also constructed Britain, along with other ‘rich’ and ‘developed’ nations, as capitalist in a number of ways. One of these was to look upon business leaders as people with the right answer—even on matters that had little to do with business or commerce. For instance, a Times (2010) report asked CEOs to come up with proposals to improve Britain’s security. The CEOs’ top three proposals were: ‘Use the private sector to cut defense procurement and support’; ‘work with the US administration to reduce our efforts in Afghanistan’; and ‘re-justify Britain’s foreign aid effort to the public in terms of national security’. The British media thus viewed the nation as being legitimately run for, and by, the private sector. The role of elected government was seen as facilitating the industry’s control over Britain’s own destiny as well as its international forays—in conjunction with the United States.

From sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia, the government’s efforts to create new international markets for British businesses and defend the interests of British private investors were normalized—irrespective of the impact they had on local populations or the natural environment. This, in fact, was considered the central purpose of Britain’s foreign policy—including international aid policy. For instance, a Financial Times (2009) report on British investments in Rwanda noted that businesses were worried about the taxes they had to pay locally: ‘The Rwandan Revenue Authority has been funded by Britain’s department for overseas development . . . But the authority’s approach has been aggressive and some foreign investors have taken flight’. The article criticized the British government for not forcing the Rwandan authority to relax the tax burden on foreign investors and wondered why Britain wasn’t using its influence—on account of its development aid to Rwanda—to make this happen. This was after the article had acknowledged that taxes paid by British and other foreign investors were necessary for Rwanda to develop its economy and reduce dependence on foreign aid.

The British media thus viewed capitalism as the only worthwhile economic system—even the only possible economic system—not just for Britain but for all the nations of the world. Nations were expected to be, or on the path of becoming, capitalist. Institutions that facilitated international private investment and trade flows, like the World Bank and IMF, were held in the highest regard. Their authority was viewed as superseding those of national governments, and journalists would chide any nation that dared to defy them. For example, a Telegraph (2012) article pulled up Argentina for nationalizing private pension funds and refusing to pay its debt to foreign creditors. The reporter complained that ‘instead of negotiating in good faith with its creditors, it ratchets up its defiance’, and called on the British government to stop providing aid to such an ‘irresponsible nation’. The article went on to worry that ‘the ease with which Argentina has flouted its obligations encourages its government to think it is able to behave however it chooses’—implying that the sovereign government of Argentina should not have the freedom to act as it deemed fit.

Thus, much like the US media, British news coverage of foreign aid was shaped by a *neoliberal* discourse in which Britain was constructed as a capitalist nation and capitalism itself was constructed as a natural human predilection. Any nation that stepped out of line was deemed to be engaging in irresponsible and unnatural acts—requiring disciplining and punishment. The British media also constructed Britain as a nation with the authority to mete out such punishments, albeit in coordination with the United States. British news coverage was thus quite in sync with and even complementary to US news coverage. Both anointed the United States as a ‘superpower’ that legitimately controlled and managed a neoliberal international order. Within this order, British media avowed a secondary power status for Britain—of a nation that acknowledged US hegemony and acted as its second-in-command, helping it ‘manage’ a neoliberal world.
India as Capitalist Emerging Power

Unlike the United States and Britain, India’s low per capita income makes it one of the poorest nations and a net recipient of foreign aid—at least until 2015 (Kim and Connolly, 2021). While acknowledging this indigence, the Indian media still constructed India as a capitalist nation, and capitalism as the magic bullet that was going to turn the nation prosperous. They did so primarily by constructing India of the present day as a New India—neoliberal in outlook and avidly seeking foreign capital investment from the United States and Europe—as opposed to the Old India that was hostile to the West and relied too much on government investment. The Old India’s ‘socialist’ economic policies were blamed for the nation’s penury and underdevelopment: they were said to have held it back from fulfilling its ‘promise’. But beginning in the early 1990s, a program of structural ‘reforms’ had ‘liberalized’ the economy and set India ‘free’.

Like their Western counterparts, India’s news media sometimes championed and sometimes challenged the policymaking elite—depending on whether or not their policies were in line with the nation’s capitalist identity. Specifically, the media expressed concern over the pace at which reforms moved forward and urged the elite to hasten the privatization of public sector companies, allow more foreign investment into more sectors of the economy, and focus on the development of export-oriented industries and services. Journalists unabashedly adopted a Bretton Woods-centric view of the nation. For instance, an article noted, ‘The World Bank’s Doing Business 2006 report estimates the difficulty [of doing business] across countries, and ranks India 116th out of 154 countries, far worse than China (91), Sri Lanka (75), Bangladesh (65) or Pakistan (50)’ (Economic Times, 2006). It argued that the government should adopt a more aggressive liberalization program to become more business-friendly.

The media eulogized capitalist success stories from around the world. Times of India (2015), for instance, contrasted the rapid growth of Singapore’s free market economy under Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew with the socialist policies of Nehruvian India.

When Lee Kwan Yew became Singapore’s first prime minister in 1959, its per capita income was $400. Today, it is $55,000. No other country has gone so fast from rags to riches. Yet in the Nehru-Indira era, Indian socialists viewed Lee with contempt as a neo-colonial puppet destined for humiliation and poverty. As things turned out, India earned maximum humiliation as a beggar for foreign aid, and the number of poor Indians doubled in 1947-77 even as Singapore soared.

The Indian media thus wholeheartedly adopted a neoliberal outlook and constructed India’s identity as a capitalist nation. Like the US and British media, they linked capitalism with prosperity and development. By accepting the authority of Bretton Woods institutions over their own government, they also legitimized US hegemony within a hierarchical international order. However, they were not content with an entirely subordinate position for India either. Instead, they constructed India as an ‘emerging’ power within the hierarchy—with its own companies and private investors setting up shop around the world. With unmistakable glee, news articles reported the exploits of Indian capitalists buying out foreign companies and making ‘major’ foreign investments. The pace of neoliberal reforms was viewed as determining the speed with which the nation would climb up the ladder of international power politics.

Pakistan as Capitalist Cog-in-the-Wheel

Much like the Indian media, the Pakistani media also acknowledged that the nation was poor—but, at the same time, viewed it as being ‘on its way out’ thanks to capitalism. In this narrative, capitalism was presented as the natural path to ‘development’. Attracting private investment, especially
‘foreign investment’, was considered the major national goal. The media kept reminding the government of the importance of this goal and urging the political elite to ‘reform’ laws and policies toward that end. Journalists would make specific suggestions on how to go about it. A 2005 article, for instance, lauded President Pervez Musharraf’s army rule for providing legal protection and ‘permission for 100% equity ownership . . . to foreign investors’. But it added that even though Pakistan was ‘on its way to economic recovery . . . more needs to be done to attract foreign investment’ (Business Recorder, 2005).

Foreign investment was viewed as an end in itself rather than a means to other ends. To illustrate, Pakistan Observer (2011) noted that ‘the government must ensure peace in tribal areas as soon as possible’ because ‘Pakistan’s volatile internal security situation has discouraged foreign investment’. In this worldview, peace in tribal areas mattered not because it would save lives or make Pakistan a better place to live for its citizens but because it would make foreign capitalists more willing to invest money in Pakistan. Capitalism was thus not simply viewed as a feature of Pakistan’s economy but formed the very core of Pakistani national identity.

With such a sense of national identity, Pakistan’s media assessed their nation’s ‘worthiness’ in terms defined by foreign investors and purveyors of global capitalism. Just like in India, Bretton Woods institutions were held in high esteem. Even passing references to Pakistan by World Bank and IMF officials were reported with unmistakable excitement. As Business Recorder (2006) said,

In January 2005, a top International Monetary Fund official congratulated Pakistan for its ‘successful implementation’ of reforms that led to ‘impressive turnarounds’ in macroeconomic trends. One month later, the World Bank president praised Pakistan’s ‘terrific’ economic progress, but emphasized that Pakistan ‘has a long way to go in terms of achieving its human development goals’.

The Pakistani media’s coverage of international aid was thus similar to India’s in recognizing the legitimacy, indeed desirability, of the authority of Bretton Woods institutions over the destiny of Pakistan—and, by proxy, the hegemony of the United States, which ‘managed’ these institutions. Meeting the expectations of foreign capital was viewed as the raison d’etre of national policymaking. The media lauded the government when it conformed to the nation’s capitalist identity: they also questioned and challenged it when it appeared to be wavering from it. In doing so, the media rationalized and legitimized a subservient status for Pakistan—a cog in the wheel of transnational neoliberalism.

**Conclusion**

My analysis indicates the presence of a transnational discourse of neoliberalism underlying the news coverage of international aid across all four nations and structuring their respective national identities. Two types of identity emerged from this discourse: one based on *relations of property*, the other on *relations of position*. First, all four nations shared a common capitalist identity. But capitalism was not seen as simply a feature of their economic systems. Rather, it was deemed a ‘property’ that was foundational to their self-definitions and a cornerstone of each of their unique national histories. In the United States and Britain, the media credited capitalism for making them rich and developed; in India and Pakistan, capitalism was viewed as the ticket to future prosperity. This rags-to-riches narrative also reveals the fluid nature of national identity—a recognition that nations are not always the same but can move from one social category into another and thus have control over their own destinies. In doing so, the neoliberal discourse reinforced the agency that is afforded to nations as social ‘actors’.

That is what makes national identity construction as a *relation of position* all the more ironic. News coverage in every nation ascribed a different status and role to their respective nations in the
international arena: the United States as a global superpower, Britain as a second-in-command, India as an emerging power, and Pakistan as a subservient cog-in-the-wheel. Although these identities are distinct, they are not idiosyncratic. Rather, they cohere with and complement each other. It wasn’t just the US media that constructed the United States as a superpower—the British, Indian, and Pakistani media also acknowledged this hegemony and rationalized it as necessary to enable the smooth functioning of the global order and maintain its neoliberal character. In addition, they positioned their respective national identities at different degrees of subordination relative to the superpower. The media thus willingly avowed an inferior status for their own nations and reproduced a hierarchical structure of international relations with legitimized asymmetries of power.

Media scholars have mostly viewed national identity in idiosyncratic terms and suggested a tension between national identity and transnational ideas (Berglez and Olausson, 2011; Crawford, 2012). The analysis presented here, however, indicates nationalism and transnationalism are not dissonant but dialectical phenomena (see also, Song et al., 2019). Nationalism itself historically emerged as a transnational movement, spreading from Europe to other parts of the world (Anderson, 1983). Today, transnational discourses—of which neoliberalism is but one example—continue to mold the ways in which nations perceive and define themselves. In poststructural terms, such discourses may be viewed as providing the structure within which agents—such as nations—are able to create meanings of and for themselves in relation to one another. These meanings subsequently shape agents’ thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and actions vis-à-vis each other—their foreign policies. This is an iterative process: agents’ beliefs and actions, in turn, reproduce these discourses across space and perpetuate the structure through time—a process that Giddens (1984) called ‘structuration’.

Understanding national identity construction in news coverage from such a poststructural perspective is important because it lays bare the asymmetries of power that the media normalize. Derrida (1972) observed that a ‘violent hierarchy’ is inscribed into meanings as they emerge in the différance between things. This hierarchy is apparent in the identities based on relations of position among the four nations. But it is also latent in identities based on relations of property. While the United States and Britain are, or have long been, capitalist nations, India and Pakistan are in the process of becoming capitalists. Their property of capitalism is thus of an as yet inferior quality, creating the need for them to follow the lead of those that have traversed this path before them, viz., the United States and Britain (Shahin, 2015b). With such an identity construction, these nations willingly forfeit control over their destinies to other nations and open themselves up for exploitation—ironically spurred by an illusion of agency that this process of change proffers.

The poststructural analysis presented here has significant implications for our understanding of press–state relations. Structural theories such as indexing, cascading activation, and propaganda model view newsmaking as epiphenomenal to foreign policymaking—delineating direct, mechanistic, and unidirectional processes through which the policymaking elite influence journalists and their coverage of international affairs (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). But this study shows that is not always the case. Journalists in all four nations at times agreed with and at other times argued against the policies of their respective political elite, even offering alternative policy propositions to them. But their approvals and admonitions were not arbitrary—they followed the logic of national identity. Policies that journalists believed to be in line with each nation’s identity were applauded. But when policymakers appeared to be veering off course, journalists pointed out what the elite ought to be doing and explained their disagreement by taking recourse to national identity. They expected their elite to share with them a ‘common sense’ of national identity, the same meanings of being American, British, Indian, or Pakistani, respectively.

Constructivist scholars of international relations have long observed the influence of national identity on foreign policymaking (Hopf, 2002; Wendt, 1992), while media scholars have noted its impact on newsmaking (Berglez and Olausson, 2011; Nossek, 2004). This study suggests that
instead of relying on mechanistic models of unidirectional elite control over the media, press–state relations may be envisaged in terms of mutual constitution—with both journalists and policymakers drawing on and, in turn, reproducing a shared understanding of national identity. The media thus wield what Barnett and Duvall (2005) have called productive power, or the capacity to produce ‘systems of signification and meaning’—in the form of national identity—as part of ‘networks of social forces perpetually shaping one another’ (p. 55). Such networks incorporate policymakers and, potentially, various other sources and sites of public and private discourse. Nor are they bounded by national borders—as evident from the transnational character of the neoliberal discourse. It is this intersubjectivity that makes national identity such a powerful meaning-making structure, in turn shaping the aspirations and actions of nation-states.

Future research should investigate other sources and sites of national identity construction, specifically how they cohere with identities produced in news and policy discourses. Scholars may also examine news coverage beyond the four nations that are the subject of this study, especially in so-called ‘rogue’ nations such as Iran and Venezuela and ‘rivals’ to US hegemony, such as China. This could potentially expose the limits of the neoliberal discourse in structuring national identities. Researching news contexts other than international aid could also reveal alternative discourses. The time period of this study, 2001–2015, largely predates the electoral success of populist nationalists in the United States, Britain, India and, eventually, Pakistan. Research from subsequent years could examine if this near-simultaneous shift in their respective domestic politics led to a change in their respective national identities—or if the identities distinguished here were further entrenched.

Acknowledgements
This article is based on my dissertation work at the School of Journalism and Media, University of Texas at Austin. I thank my dissertation advisor Professor Stephen D. Reese and dissertation committee members, including Professors Mary A. Bock, Thomas J. Johnson, Bartholomew H. Sparrow, and Joseph D. Straubhaar, for their guidance and support.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Saif Shahin https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7608-7283

References


timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/‌Swaminomics/lessons-for-india-from-singapore/