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Abstract

The United Nation's Truth Commission Report documented the 1980-1992 Civil War in El Salvador. During the Civil War the Salvadoran government's repression was connected to the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests. This analysis focuses on newspaper and television coverage of this event in the United States media. I used the Truth Commission Report as my historical source and compared it to media reports in the United States. I also used a 1989 Radio Venceremos radio broadcast as a source of information. Interviews were conducted in 2006 with Salvadorans to explore their perception of the 1989 media coverage of the Jesuit priest murders.

KEYWORDS: Civil War, El Salvador, Jesuit Priests, Media Coverage, United Nations Truth Commission Report

Media Coverage of the Civil War in El Salvador



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ABSTRACT

The United Nation's Truth Commission Report documented the 1980-1992 Civil War in El Salvador. During the Civil War the Salvadoran government's repression was connected to the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests. This analysis focuses on newspaper and television coverage of this event in the United States media. I used the Truth Commission Report as my historical source and compared it to media reports in the United States. I also used a 1989 Radio Venceremos radio broadcast as a source of information. Interviews were conducted in 2006 with Salvadorans to explore their perception of the 1989 media coverage of the Jesuit priest murders.

How do people find out what is going on in the world? Whether the news occurs in our city or on the other side of the ocean, the media connects U.S. citizens to places and keeps them informed about major events. We usually do not question what the media tells us because we assume it is an objective version of events. In this paper, I explore the subject of media bias using El Salvador's Civil War as the case study. I primarily focus on the 1989 murder of the Jesuit priests at the University of Central America. This research focuses on how the murders of the Jesuit priests were covered by the United States media. I examine the amount of coverage the story received as well as the content of the news stories.

When I began researching the history of El Salvador, I did not know about the civil war. I was surprised that I did not learn about it in school because the United States was very involved. I discovered that the event was extensively covered by the United States media. I found over 200 newspaper articles and over ten television news broadcasts in the United States that gave media coverage about the murders of the Jesuit priests. This stimulated my interest in learning more about the event, the U.S. involvement, and the way that it was covered in the media. I chose to focus on the murders of the six Jesuit priests because that was the last major event before the civil war ended.

My method to determine the objectivity of the media coverage was to analyze newspapers from the United States including the *New York Times*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Grand Rapids Press*. I also took a critical look at transcripts from CBS, ABC, and PBS (Public Broadcasting Station) news, examined a 1989 radio broadcast from El Salvador, and analyzed interviews I conducted in El Salvador with people who experienced the war. The time



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period I examined was November 16, 1989, the day that the Jesuit priests were murdered, to November 16, 1990. I wanted to know how the news story of the Jesuit priests' murders was covered that first year. I examined newspapers with both liberal and conservative editorial positions. *The New York Times* is considered a liberal paper and *The Grand Rapids Press* is considered a conservative paper. I looked at the content of the articles, the length of the articles, and their location in the paper. For television news transcripts, I looked at the length and content of the stories. The news articles, television transcripts, and radio broadcast were analyzed to determine the extent of media bias.

I compared the content of newspapers articles, television broadcasts, and radio broadcast to *The United Nations Truth Commission Report* released in 1993. The report provides a historical and objective account of what happened during the civil war. When I read the articles and transcripts, I analyzed the way the articles were written and what information they tried to convey. I had expected the media to accuse the members of the rebel army of the murders. On November 16, 1989 that did happen. The media in the U.S. reported that the rebels were responsible for the priests' deaths. The U.S. media reports shifted within the next two days to place blame for the murders on the Salvadoran army. A radio station from El Salvador named *Radio Vecercemos* was analyzed to determine how the media in El Salvador covered the story. In 2006 when I was interviewing people in El Salvador, I discovered from them that *Radio Vecercemos* was a popular non-commercial rebel-run radio station. *Radio Vecercemos* accused the Salvadoran army of the murders in their November 16, 1989 broadcast. In my interviews, I learned that the commercial radio stations in El Salvador blamed the rebel army for the murders

of the priests until February 1990 when Salvadoran President Alfredo Christani admitted that the Salvadoran army was responsible for the murders. The mainstream media in El Salvador reported different stories about who murdered the priests. From the interviews I conducted, I learned that the Salvadoran government controlled what the mainstream media reported in order to influence how citizens felt about the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN was the major political party that opposed the Salvadoran government during the civil war.

When watching, listening to, or reading the news, people might not realize that the media has an agenda. "Agenda setting occurs because the press must be selective in reporting news. News outlets, as gatekeepers of information, make choices about what to report and how to report it" (Littlejohn 280). Whether liberal or conservative, most news media have an editorial position that slants the reporting towards one point of view. "One bias, which we refer to as ideology, reflects a news outlet's desire to affect reader opinion in a particular direction" (Shleifer 1). This is not always done consciously, but it does occur often. In my analysis, media bias is present when a story is slanted to show one point of view. For example, the amount of coverage a story gets may correspond to a pre-existing bias on the part of the reporters who created the story or the editors who are in charge of editing the story. The responsibility of a reporter and editor is to make sure that the public stays informed but sometimes their bias shows through in their work.

Journalistic practice is based on the assumption of objectivity. Objectivity is practiced to provide the public with information that does not reflect the journalist's feelings towards a story.

Objectivity is generally regarded as treating or dealing with facts independently of the mind, personal feelings or prejudices while journalistic objectivity is usually seen as the selection, collection and dissemination of information which reflects the reality without involving [the] journalists' own preferences, biases or opinions. (Cheng 1)

The goal of objectivity is to report all sides of the story with no bias and to provide background information pertaining to the story. Though complete objectivity is not possible, some media outlets are closer to this goal than others.

To understand the murders of the priests, readers need to know the historical context of the war in El Salvador. From 1980 through 1992, the United States participated in the Civil War in El Salvador. The United States media presented the civil war as a simple conflict in which the United States did not play a major role. In fact, the U.S. helped the Salvadoran government out of fear that El Salvador would adopt a socialist government. Starting in the late 1970s and throughout the civil war, the Salvadoran government repressed civilians who spoke out about the election fraud and the mismanagement of land. During this time, many innocent people were attacked, injured, killed, or they disappeared. A group known as the "Death Squad" attacked the people while the Salvadoran government turned away. Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke out against the injustices, the violation of human rights, and the repression by the government. Archbishop Oscar Romero asked then President Jimmy Carter to stop sending monetary aid to the Salvadoran government but his plea was not answered. One month later, on March 24, 1980 Archbishop Romero

was murdered by the Death Squad while performing Mass in the chapel of the Hospital de la Divina. Archbishop Romero's murder precipitated the twelve-year civil war.

The murders of church clergy escalated after the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero because the clergy spoke out against the government repression of the Salvadoran people. In December 1980, four church women from the United States, Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel, were abducted while coming from the San Salvador airport in El Salvador and were raped and brutally murdered by the Salvadoran National Guard. After these high profile murders of U.S. citizens, the United States press started to pay more attention to the escalating civil war in El Salvador because U.S. citizens had been killed.

The six Jesuit priests of the University of Central America spoke out against the government's repression whenever they could. Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the priests, was a frequent guest on the FMLN-operated radio station *Radio Veceremos*. The army wanted the priests killed because they were suspected of supporting the revolution. The priests wanted the people of the country to have rights, but they did not support the war.

They weren't the brains behind the revolution. They were part of our national conscience, the critical, scientific conscience that searched for the roots of the conflict by researching our history, to try to find a path to peace and national reconciliation. (Vigil 228)

On November 16, 1989, Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín Baró, Segundo Montes, Joaquín López y López, Amando López, and Juan Ramón Moreno were murdered in cold blood along with their housekeeper, Elba

Ramos, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Celina Ramos.

The Truth Commission report went into detail about the murders of Oscar Romero, the four American church women, the Jesuit priests, and others who were murdered during the war. The report goes from the planning of the murders to the cover-ups.

The lieutenant in command, José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra, gave the order to kill the priests. Fathers Ellacuría, Martín-Baró and Montes were shot and killed by Private Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi, Fathers López and Moreno by Deputy Sergeant Antonio Ramiro Avalos Vargas. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers, including Corporal Angel Pérez Vásquez, found Father Joaquín López y López inside the residence and killed him.

Deputy Sergeant Tomás Zarpate Castillo shot Julia Elva Ramos, who was working in the residence, and her 16-year-old daughter, Celina Mariceth Ramos. Private José Alberto Sierra Ascencio shot them again, finishing them off. (United Nations 47) (See Appendix C.)

These men killed the priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter to make it look like they were murdered by the FMLN. They wanted the FMLN to lose the peoples' respect and support. In 1980, the army murdered the American church women and tried to blame the FMLN for their murders.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky conducted a study comparing news coverage of Jerzy Popieluszko, a Polish priest murdered on October 19 1984 in Poland, to the news coverage of Romero, the four American churchwomen, and the murder of church clergy in Guatemala from 1980 to 1985. He used *Time*, *Newsweek*,

The New York Times, and CBS News (transcripts accessed via Lexis Nexis) as his sources. The study showed that Popieluszko received more news coverage than the murders of Romero, the American church women and the church clergy in Guatemala combined. Chomsky suggested after Popieluszko, the American churchwomen received the most coverage because they were U.S. citizens who were killed in a foreign country.

When four American churchwomen were found murdered in December 1980, the impact upon the media was threefold. For the first time, the Salvadoran conflict became a television story since now it provided 'bang bang'. It brought the bloodshed right into American living rooms. (James 9)

In addition to the quantity of news coverage, Chomsky also looked at the content of the stories. There were quite a few details left out of the coverage when it came to the stories of the American churchwomen, but every detail was mentioned when it came to Popieluszko, from the way the Polish police found his body to the trial of his murderers.

We may note the failure of *Time* and *New York Times* to mention the bruises (which both of these publications mentioned and repeated, as regards Popieluszko); the failure to mention the destruction of Jean Donovan's face; the suppression of the degrading and degraded use of the nuns' underwear; the failure to give the account of the peasants who found the bodies. These and other details given by Bonner and suppressed by *Time* and *The New York Times* (and also *Newsweek* and CBS News) add emotional force and poignancy to the scene. Such details are included

for a Popieluszko, but not for four American women murdered by a U.S. client state. (Chomsky 62)

I read the newspapers that Chomsky referred to in his study about the American church women and noticed that the content of the articles lacked detail about how the women were murdered. Most of the articles started out talking about the women but then shifted their focus to the war in El Salvador. During the week that the women were killed, only three articles about them appeared in *The New York Times* and only two articles in *Time*. For my analysis of the media coverage of the Jesuit priests, I adapted the model Chomsky's used for his analysis of the media coverage of the four American church women

The United Nations Truth Commission Report is my historical source and was used to compare what the media reported to what actually happened. Out of all of the newspaper publications, *The New York Times* provided the most complete coverage of the murders of the priests, with 73 articles written from November 16, 1989 to November 16, 1990. In the middle of the year, the story about the priests was not major news but *The New York Times* had very small articles ranging from 30 to 60 words, reminding people of the murders. Not all of the newspapers had the murders on the front page, but most of the articles were located in the first section of the paper for the first week. The first two days after the murders *The New York Times* reported that the rebels could have been responsible for the murders of the Jesuit priests but by the third day their articles reported that the Salvadoran army was responsible. The content of the articles was consistent with the *United Nations Truth Commission Report*, which stated that the Salvadoran army was responsible for the murders. The

television transcripts I read from CBS, ABC, and PBS also were consistent with the *United Nations Truth Commission Report*. (See Appendix A.) The content was similar to the news articles when it came to assigning blame for the murders on the Salvadoran army.

Radio Vecercemos was a FLMN-operated radio station that broadcasted from the front-lines of the war. From the outset, *Radio Vecercemos* broadcasts reported that the army was responsible for the murders of the priests. Since the radio station was run by rebels, it was not surprising that they blamed the army. More surprising were the news articles and the broadcasts from the United States blaming the army for the murders. After I conducted more research about how the United States media covered the Jesuit priests' murders, I learned that the media reports supported the information obtained from people I interviewed.

While in El Salvador, I conducted interviews with people who were between the ages of 18 to 35 when the Civil War occurred. When conducting the interviews in El Salvador, I assumed that what the people were telling me was not known by the United States media. I asked questions that referred to the media coverage of the murders of the Jesuit priests and the American church women. I asked why they believed the Jesuit priests were murdered and most said because the Salvadoran army believed that the priests were working with the FMLN.

The reason that they killed them was for the same reason they killed Father Romero. They were on the side of the poor and needy and for that reason they were defamed, they were persecuted and assassinated (Hernandez).

I also asked how they learned about the murders of the American church

women and the priests, and most said that they learned of the murders through radio broadcasts. I learned that during the time of the civil war, people living in the city had limited access to electricity and even less electricity was accessible in the countryside. Because of the lack of electricity, television as a source of news was not an option for most people. At the time of the civil war, the literacy rate was low, so the best way for people to receive their news was through battery operated radios. All of the people I interviewed mentioned how there was a big difference between the commercial radio stations and the FMLN-run radio stations. "At the time there weren't that many different radio stations, and they were pretty much controlled by the economic powers of the government" (Hernandez).

The commercial radio stations were highly controlled and censored by the Salvadoran government.

We listened to mainly guerilla stations because the commercial radio stations were under the big pressure by the government to say the [their] truth. They were passing information by the army and the government. It was by law. If they don't do this the government would be repressive. (Alegria)

According to some of those interviewed, the commercially run stations gave a lot of misleading information. "There was a lot of what they call disinformation going on. But the rebel radio, *Radio Vecercemos* gave a lot of news that you couldn't get anywhere else" (Starr).

From those interviews, I learned about life during the time of the civil war and how the media in El Salvador covered it. Civilians recognized the difference between the way the commercial radio stations covered events during the civil war compared to the non-commercial radio stations.

The Salvadoran government had a big influence on the information that the commercial radio stations reported. Most civilians listened to the non-commercial radio stations because they trusted the information that was reported.

My research did not support my initial hypothesis. My hypothesis was that there was not a lot of U.S. media coverage of the murders of the Jesuit priests. During my research I changed the focus from “were the murders of the Jesuit priests covered,” to “how were the murders of the priests covered by the media” and “did media bias occur.” Though my

initial hypothesis was not supported, I did notice bias in the articles and the broadcasts from the United States, but it did not pertain to coverage of the priests. *Mediawatch.org* stated that the United States media was biased in favor of the Jesuit priests and failed to mention the murders of Salvadoran government officials after the priests’ murders. They felt that the United States media paid more attention to the priests because they were church clergy and at the time, American citizens were protesting the United States government sending aid (Media Research Center).

Media bias presents a certain view point of a story and determines what is newsworthy. When we watch, read, or listen to any type of media, we have to keep in mind that there is always more than one side to a story. Though some media organizations try to be objective, some bias may still come though in their coverage. It is up to the people to find out what is going on, and it may take looking at three or more sources to get an objective idea about a story.

Appendix A

Name of periodicals used and dates

New York Times

November 1989, December 1989, January 1990, February 1990, April 1990, May 1990, June 1990, July 1990, August 1990, September 1990, October 1990, November 1990

San Francisco Times

November 1989, December 1989, May 1990, September 1990, November 1990

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

November 1989, December 1989, January 1990, March 1990, May 1990, June 1990, September 1990, November 1990

St. Petersburg Times (Florida)

November 1989, December 1989, January 1990, February 1990, March 1990, May 1990, September 1990, November 1990

Washington Post

November 1989, December 1989, January 1990, February 1990, March 1990, April 1990, May 1990, June 1990, August 1990, September 1990, October 1990

Appendix B

Name of Sources	Number of Articles	Average Word Length of Article
New York Times	73	762
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	43	832
Washington Post	34	735
St. Petersburg Times (Florida)	19	899
San Francisco Chronicle	11	740

Appendix C.

The United Nations' Truth Report, From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador

In the early hours of 16 November 1989, a group of soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion entered the campus of José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador. They made their way to the Pastoral Centre, which was the residence of Jesuit priests Ignacio Ellacuría, Rector of the University; Ignacio Martín-Baró, Vice-Rector; Segundo Montes, Director of the Human Rights Institute; and Amando López, Joaquín López y López and Juan Ramón Moreno, all teachers at UCA.

The soldiers tried to force their way into the Pastoral Centre. When the priests realized what was happening, they let the soldiers in voluntarily. The soldiers searched the building and ordered the priests to go out into the back garden and lie face down on the ground.

The lieutenant in command, José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra, gave the order to kill the priests. Fathers Ellacuría, Martín-Baró and Montes were shot and killed by Private Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi, Fathers López and Moreno by Deputy Sergeant Antonio Ramiro Avalos Vargas. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers, including Corporal Angel Pérez Vásquez, found Father Joaquín López y López inside the residence and killed him. Deputy Sergeant Tomás Zarpate Castillo shot Julia Elva Ramos, who was working in the residence, and her 16-year-old daughter, Celina Mariceth Ramos. Private José Alberto Sierra Ascencio shot them again, finishing them off.

The soldiers took a small suitcase belonging to the priests, with photographs, documents and \$5,000.

They fired a machine gun at the façade of the residence and launched rockets and grenades. Before leaving, they wrote on a piece of cardboard: "FMLN executed those who informed on it. Victory or death, FMLN."

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