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Major International Issues Undercovered By the News Media:

Does Limited Supply Reflect Low Reader Demand?

Andrew Shaver, Shawn Robbins, Nihan Karagul, Clay Bell, Jade Bell, Yuval Cohen, Owen Cooksy, Katie Crumpley, Leonardo Dantas, Jacob Duarte, Fernanda Serna Godoy, Courtney Quach, Dylan Richardson, Milo Rudman, Lekha Sapers, Long Yat Job Tam, Aishvari Trivedi, and Alexandra Wallace

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Major International Issues Undercovered By the News Media

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ABSTRACT

Many major international issues receive minimal news media attention. Does such lack of reporting reflect low demand? We first identify major underreported international issues through in-depth interviews with hundreds of foreign affairs professionals. Through additional interviews with news media professionals, we document significant heterogeneity in news rooms' editorial decisionmaking on international issues. Finally, we estimate demand for news stories on major international issues amongst two populations, U.S. residents and international relations professionals, divided into three distinct groups – 1) international relations faculty at colleges and universities across the United States; 2) current/former senior U.S. government officials who collectively served across (at least) three presidential administrations; and 3) international affairs-focused staffers at major U.S. think tanks. Results reveal significant interest in major undercovered international issues, suggesting that demand stories on these topics may significantly exceed their contemporary supply.

1   INTRODUCTION

Existing research finds that major international issues often receive significantly different coverage levels by major international news media.[2] Why are some major issues covered significantly while others are not? Why, for instance, do particular refugee crises dominate the international headlines while others are scarcely covered even as they involve some of the most largest levels of human displacement? More specifically, does international news media coverage of major international issues reflect consumer demand? This is the central focus of this article.

Using survey experimentation, we estimate demand for international affairs content amongst two distinct populations: 1) U.S. residents; and 2) international affairs professionals consisting of a) international relations faculty at colleges and universities across the United States, b) current and former senior U.S. government officials who collectively served across (at least) three presidential administrations, and c) international affairs-focused staffers at major U.S. think tanks. The results reveal significant disparities between coverage and our estimates of demand.

We begin by identifying a set of major international issues that have been largely underreported by the news media. We identified these by conducting in-depth interviews with foreign affairs professionals whose organizational experiences span the United Nations system; many of the world's largest international non-governmental organizations; major philanthropic organizations; think tanks; and foreign embassies; international associations, amongst others. We call these issues "shadow topics" (and define them more thoroughly below). We then analyze tens of millions of news articles published by major international news media over the past roughly one decade, empirically confirming that the shadow topics we include in this study are significantly less likely to be covered than comparable international issues.

Next, we engage in-depth interviews with with current/former news media executives, editors, foreign bureau chiefs, foreign correspondents and freelance journalists with both direct and indirect insights into the nature of international story selection. These media professionals have worked with many of world's leading outlets reporting on international affairs.[3] We find that factors that influence supply render alignment with demand unclear.

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[2] Throughout this article, we refer to major international news media. We use this term generally to refer to the set of news outlets that are widely engaged in the United States. The specific sets of outlets consulted for our interview, content analyses, etc. varies. However, generally, they consist of major newspapers (e.g. *The Washington Post*) and digital native outlets (e.g. *Politico*). Although many of these are American, they also include major outlets like the *BBC* and *The Guardian*.

[3] Interviewees have worked on/from Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, China, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, Peru, the Philippines, South

First, editorial coverage decisions (editorial selection) vary considerably across outlets. Second, various factors (some largely unintuitive) limit the set of international issues that are reported on (selection on capability). This is a clear departure from existing scholarship on international affairs reporting.

Finally, in survey experiments developed in consultation with news media professionals, we calculate demand for shadow topic news stories—framed in various ways and relative to leading headline news stories—and find that:

1) U.S. residents are nearly as likely to select the shadow topic previews as they are the headline news previews;
2) international affairs professionals were even more likely to. Our results provide significant evidence that observed media reporting patterns on international affairs may not reflect an equilibrium with demand across these heterogeneous populations.

The implications of this research are significant. As discussed below, the major international news media are a central source of the public's and international affairs professionals' knowledge of international events, with implications for their attitudes and behaviors. Results not only point to the existence of unmet demand for major under-covered issues but, combined with existing research, suggest that increases in their coverage may have meaningful impact.

More generally, our research provides a proof of concept—and more generally speaks to the potential—of academic-news media collaboration. Much attention has been paid, for instance, to academic-policy partnerships—even if many of those efforts remain nascent. However, academic-news media collaboration—particularly in the international affairs space—is exceedingly rare. To be sure, the media interview academics on foreign policy issues; they sometimes carry their articles in their pages, electronic or otherwise. However, partnerships rooted in shared understandings of problems, shared collaboration on tackling them—especially where quantitative methods can be brought to bear—is largely untrodden ground, and this effort represents one attempt to cultivate such space.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Highlighting some of the key findings of our surveys and drawing from the broader body of scholarship, we first articulate the importance of patterns of major international news media reporting. That importance, in turn, motivates why understanding what drives patterns of reporting is its crucial—in this case, specifically, whether they reflect consumer demand. Second, we describe our extensive interviews with foreign affairs professionals and how we use those to identify major international issues that are undercovered in the news (in our language, "shadow topics"). Next, we reflect on existing

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Korea, Sudan, Syria, Rwanda, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe, amongst others. They have worked, or have reported as freelancers, for *Al Jazeera, BBC, BuzzFeed, The Christian Science Monitor, CBC, Der Spiegel, France 24, The Guardian, The HuffPost, Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, Public Radio International, Reuters, Vice, The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* amongst others. (Some outlets are not listed here given interviewee requests for anonymity.)

studies on the media's supply of international affairs content, updating this discourse with insights from our discussion with media professionals. Finally, we describe our pre-registered[4] experimental design before presenting the results and discussing their significance.[5]

2   ON THE NEWS MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF MAJOR INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Many major international events receive limited major news media attention. For in- stance, as the news media's gaze has been largely fixed on the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, insurgent violence has forced millions of Sudanese from their country.[6] We estimate that ≈32,000 news articles published by the major international news media reference conflict in Gaza compared to ≈3,400 for Sudan.[7] Given the coflicts' estimated deaths, this gives ≈0.922 articles per conflict death in Israel/Palestine and ≈0.230 articles per conflict death in Sudan.[8]

Yet, other deadly conflicts fall further in the shadows. For instance, Shaver *et al.* (2023) document significant, ongoing violence in Pakistan's Balochistan province—fueled in part by weapons flows from Afghanistan following the United States' withdrawal from that country— that has received virtually no news media attention.

Existing research more generally documents significant differences in the coverage of inter- national events when considered in terms of underlying human costs. Eisensee and Strömberg

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[4] Please see Appendix C.8 for an important caveat regarding a mistake in our pre-registration for the U.S. resident population.

[5] Pre-registrations available upon request by the referees. They are not provided or cited here to maintain author anonymity.

[6] For the latest displacement figures, see: data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation.

[7] To generate this estimate, we used Media Cloud, a multi-university collaboration, that queries the content of news articles published online by a way range of outlets. For this comparison, we generate article counts with the following queries: for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: **(Israel* OR Palestine*) AND (conflict OR war OR fighting OR shooting OR bombing)** covering the period 10/07/2023 (when Hamas' initial attack took place) through 04/08/2024; for the war in Sudan: **(Sudan*) AND (conflict OR war OR fighting OR shooting OR bombing)** covering the period 04/15/2023 (when the war reignited) through 04/08/2024. This query captures all articles referencing 1) either 'Israel' (or any deriviative thereof—e.g. 'Israeli') or words derived from 'Palestin'—e.g. 'Palestinian', 'Palestinians' and 2) at least one word related to conflict: conflict, war, fighting, shooting, or bombing. The logic for Sudan is comparable. For both queries, we search across 87 major news outlets (these include top American newspapers (e.g. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*) as well as digital natives news outlets (e.g. *Politico*.). See the full list here. (Readers with familiartity querying text corpora will likely note that this approach is likely to result in some number of false positives. If we instead limit out queries to article titles only— an approach that is significantly less likely to generate false positives but will surely miss a number of true positives—the reporting patterns are effectively unchanged: 2,383 articles under this approach correspond to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while 375 correspond to the war in Sudan.)

[8] See: https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-181 and https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/.

(2007) find that substantially many more deaths from drought are required to achieve coverage comparable to that afforded victims of volcanic disasters. Shaver *et al.* (2023, p. 2) find similarly disparate patterns across a wide range of international issues, '[f]rom reporting on refugee and asylum-seeker populations, communicable diseases and, separately, natural disasters in other countries, and death sentences handed down by foreign governments...' Such reporting differences are also reflected across regions of the world (Eisensee and Strömberg, 2007; Golan, 2008; Segev, 2015; Dietrich and Eck, 2020).[9]

More generally, the work of scholars including Cohen and Green (2012) point to significant patterns of media underreporting on variables of central interest to scholars of political violence, human rights abuses, and other topics of social science inquiry in which data are otherwise difficult to acquire. For instance, news report data on political violence and social unrest around the world often systematically underreport particular types of political violence and social unrest (Miller *et al.*, 2022; Larreguy *et al.*, 2020; Gibilisco and Steinberg, 2022; Weidmann, 2015; Dietrich and Eck, 2020; Eck, 2012; Kalyvas, 2004; Von Borzyskowski and Wahman, 2021; Croicu and Eck, 2022; Zhukov and Baum, 2016), with implications for the inferences drawn from the widely cited/used datasets (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010; Leetaru and Schrodt, 2013; Sundberg and Melander, 2013; LaFree and Dugan, 2007; Boschee *et al.*, 2015; Salehyan *et al.*, 2012) constructed from such reports (Shaver *et al.*, 2022).

The international affairs professionals we surveyed confirm this with most agreeing or strongly agreeing that '[m]ajor news media reporting on international affairs often leaves out major global issues.'[10] In short, there is significant evidence that many major international issues are left out of major international news media reporting and that, when they are, the reporting they receive lacks important details.

Furthermore, there is significant and growing evidence that these patterns of reporting have real consequences. First, the news media serve as a major source of international affairs information for members of the public (Iyengar et al., 2009; Aalberg *et al.*, 2013; Soroka *et al.*, 2013) and foreign policy elite (Shaver *et al.*, 2023) alike. As Soroka (2003, p. 43) has previously observed, '[f]oreign affairs events most often take place beyond the realm of personal experience–if we learn about these events, it is almost surely the product of media coverage.' This is indeed the case: most U.S. adults obtain their information about the world from the news media (Gallup, Inc, 2019). We confirm this more directly in our survey of U.S. residents.

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[9] Beyond differences in overall levels of reporting, other works points to differences in the type of reporting that different issues receive – e.g. see the case of terrorism: Powell (2011); Huff and Kertzer (2018); Arva et al. (2017).

[10] More generally, (most ≈52.94%) of these current/former officials indicated that the issues they work(ed) on were either not covered by the news media (≈7.69%) or were covered `but generally not in a manner reflecting the importance, trends, nuances, costs, etc. of the issues' (≈45.25%). Specifically, we asked `[w]ere the issues that you worked on during your time in office as a senior government official generally covered by the major international news media?'

There is also significant evidence that the major international news media play a central role in the continuing education of professionals who work, research, or teach in international affairs sphere. Although there is indubitable endogeneity between the issues that international affairs professionals promote and those that the media cover, there is strong evidence of causal effects of the media reporting on international affairs professionals' knowledge. Avey *et al.* (2021) find that hundreds of current/former U.S. foreign policymakers ranked 'newspapers and news magazines' nearly as high as 'classified U.S. Government reports' as a 'very important' source of information for their job (and higher as a 'somewhat important' source). Erdos & Morgan (2015) similarly confirm the centrality of major news media reporting amongst international affairs professionals. Finally, our survey of international affairs professionals further confirms this: between 95% (current/former senior officials) and 97% (international relations faculty) report relying on major international news media as a primary source of information on international affairs. Strikingly, approximately one in three current/former senior U.S. officials and nearly one in every two international relations faculty in our surveys listed only major international news media as their primary source of information. Together, the findings depict broad reliance on news media both across specific job contexts and for more general knowledge of global affairs.

Second, international affairs professionals themselves identify the major international news media as an actor that influences international affairs. Specifically, we asked the current/former senior government officials and think tank staffers in our surveys about the influence of major international news media reporting on 'the work you/your organization did during your time in office as a senior government official (i.e. by influencing which issues were prioritized, affecting funding streams, and so on)?' The results are striking. Amongst current/former senior international affairs officials, major international news media were reported to have moderate to significant impact on their organizations' work between ≈47% and ≈63% of cases.[11][12]

These responses reflect a large body of work depicting direct and indirect media effects on foreign affairs. From influencing public perceptions of and attitudes toward foreign affairs (Baum and Potter, 2008; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Entman, 2004; Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Wanta *et al.,* 2004), governmental foreign relief responses (Eisensee and Strömberg, 2007), and the strategic behaviors of non-state actors (Jetter, 2017), media's effects are substantial.

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[11] Because responses fall on an 11-point scale (0-10), responses of 5 are the center of the scale. ≈47% represents excluding responses of 5 whereas ≈63% includes them. Amongst, international affairs focused think tank staffers, that range spans ≈43% and ≈67%. The wider distribution stems from think tank staffers' tendency to rate media's influence as a 5.

[12] These results are consistent with answers given during our separate, in-depth interview series. Professionals interviewed for this research frequently described international aid and donor assistance flowing to those causes which received significant news media attention and away from those that did not.

3 DEMAND FOR CONTENT ON M AJOR INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Collectively, these empirical realities beg the fundamental question: what determines patterns of reporting on major international issues? Particularly, do such patterns reflect underlying demand? One dominant strategy for assessing determinants of reporting has involved macro-empirical analyses that adopt variables at the country-level (e.g. population size) (Segev, 2015), dyad-level (e.g. trade between country pairs) (Guo and Vargo, 2020; Golan and Wanta, 2003; Zuckerman, 2003; Chang, 1998), international event-level (Chang *et al.*, 1987), etc.

Furthermore, major international news media outlets have generally been considered collectively — whether completely aggregate (e.g. Baum and Groeling (2009)) or based on other broad groupings (e.g. public vs. private outlets (Aalberg *et al.*, 2013; Iyengar *et al.*, 2009), belonging to countries with one regime type or another (Baum and Zhukov, 2015), delivering soft or hard news (Baum, 2002)). Yet, as we discuss below, considerable variation exists amongst the individual outlets that comprise the major international news media.

In Baum and Potter's (2008, p. 50) highly cited model of news media reporting, the demand of foreign policy elite do not factor in to the determinants of reporting patterns (which, as we discuss below, contrasts sharply with our interviews of editorial professionals). Instead, demand is assumed to come from the public generally:

> The media primarily rely on leaders for access to information, that is, for their *supply* of the key market commodity... [And] the media are equally reliant on the demand of the public as the ultimate consumers of this information.

Related scholarship describes reporting processes but without a specific focus on associated demand. For instance, Baum and Groeling (2009) explore variation in foreign policy content at the level of individual statements aired on major television networks, showing that such statements systematically deviate from objective assessments of elite foreign policy views. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether such variation reflects consumer demand, the values (or other non-commercial strategic interests) of the news stations themselves, or some other factor. Other scholars have explored the influence of particular media outlets on the international coverage of other outlets (Guo and Vargo, 2017; Golan, 2006).

Critically, throughout the literature referenced above, although factors likely associated with consumer demand feature within the pages of these studies, direct references to demand are scare, and, at these macro-analytical levels, direct measures of demand are missing. For instance, Baum and Zhukov (2015, p. 387) explore variation in reporting across regime types. They distinguish the suppressive effects on news supply in non-democratic regimes with those capturing 'the 'true' preferences of media organizations operating in Western democracies, most of which are privately owned and typically follow the traditional journalistic standards of newsworthiness to maximize audience'. Still, such 'true' preferences and their direct connection to consumer demand are assumed rather than established.

Furthermore, while a diverse body of work explores demand dynamics across a variety of issue areas (e.g. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010); Chopra *et al.* (2022); Segev (2015); Arango-Kure *et al.* (2014); Chopra *et al.* (2023); Simonov and Rao (2022); Iyengar *et al.* (2004)), we are unaware of any work focused specifically on individual consumer demand for international affairs content. This is the central focus of this article, which we seek to estimate through a pre-registered survey experiment.

4   SUPPLY AND DEMAND ACCORDING TO MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

A central qualitative contribution of this work is to highlight the significant heterogeneity in editorial reporting considerations across major outlets. These insights come from in-depth interviews with current/former news media executives, editors, foreign bureau chiefs, international correspondents and other media professionals with direct insights into leading outlets' international reporting. Many requested (personal/organizational) anonymity. We accordingly limit their identities but note that they work(ed) for numerous organizations found by Erdos and Morgan (2015) as the most influential amongst professionals engaged on defense and national security, or trade/global economic issues—including leading online news outlets; major global wire services; and major television/cable news stations.

In this section, following Parkinson (2023) and Shaver *et al.* (2022), we consider two sources of international reporting variation: editorial selection and selection on capability.[13]

4.1   Editorial Selection

Many outlets pursue markedly different approaches in determining which international stories to cover (and how much attention to devote to them). As one interviewee summarized, describing international reporting:

> There is no set formula in any news room, and certainly it is not consistent across the broadcast or digital journalism landscape... Each news room is different; each editorial leader is different in terms of how they approach coverage decisions.[14]

Clear is the importance of heterogeneity 1) *across* organizations and 2) amongst individuals *within* them. We reflect on both. At the organizational level, audiences targeted by outlets with foreign affairs reporting vary significantly as do the methods by which outlets seek to assess their efforts' efficacy. One interviewee described significant revenue streams that come from the financial industry: '[O]ur client is an international financial person, [a] global citizen who

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[13] Parkinson (2023) describes these `editorial bias' and `access bias'. Shaver et al. (2022) describe them as `editorial selection' and `selection on capability'.

[14] Interviewee-role #291, President and CEO of the Radio Television Digital News Association. This was echoed by another interviewee, a interviewee-role #12, *Buzzfeed News* reporter.

is interested in a lot of things […] and one of their big interests is: "How do I make money off of this news?"'[15] Another compared coverage decisions across major wire services:

> A lot of [Reuters'] coverage was driven towards a business audience... [Content] that would be more of interest to a general audience was not quite as important for them as it would be for a competitor like *AP* or *AFP*.[16]

Others described their focus on responding to the demands of the American public: 'All news is local.'[17] 'It [is] about covering local stories [and where] they intersect with national [and] international stories...'[18] Yet, in significant contrast, another responded:

> I am asked often if our advertisers or sales of our newspapers have anything to do with our coverage decisions. At the [New York Times], **I can tell you that it doesn't**… [I]t's a pretty healthy media company, and that financial health has given it the luxury of being able to decide how it is going to cover the world and where.[19][20]

Relatedly one senior editor described the importance of news room values in driving coverage:

> [The] Monitor has a deeply embedded set of values that drive our coverage. […] [w]e try to not just do our coverage based on American interests [...] but we also try to keep an eye to stories that... speak to important things that are going on... staying mindful of stories that have dropped off the radar but that have good reason to be covered. The aim is to give a richer picture not only of regions that people might assume they aren't interested in reading about, or are often written about only in limited contexts, but a more accurate representation of the world more broadly.[21]

Still others described their specific focus on writing for foreign policy professionals:

> We want to write about things that are in demand from the one [or] two thousand foreign policy professionals... we care about what [professionals] in the [National Security Council] want to read but not so much the average person.[22]

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[15] #43, journalist for a major news organization.

[16] #13, former *Reuters* journalist.

[17] #150, Former cable news executive.

[18] #292, former director for digital media in *WCBS-TV* and *CBS* Television Stations Group, describing coverage in New York in particular.

[19] #46, Staff writer at *the New York Times Magazine* and former *Wall Street Journal* writer. Bolding applied by the authors for emphasis.

[20] Another New York Times interviewee (#39) confirmed this.

[21] #311, Amelia Newcomb, Managing Editor, *The Christian Science Monitor*.

[22] #287, junior editor at an international affairs related publication.

Yet, even then, the set of policy professionals of interest varies: Another described their outlet's focus more broadly on policy professionals from governments worldwide.[23]

Nor are their efforts to track whether/how well they respond to demand homogeneous. For some, '[i]t's about attracting eyeballs and ears to your broadcast or digital stories... to be as high in the ratings... to get as many unique visitors and video views to your website...'[24] Yet, other media professionals spoke about very different, qualitatively informed processes: '[A] lot of it happens through word of mouth and hearing that a certain high-level person thought that [a given] article was worth reading.'[25] Similarly, other interviewees, directly involved in editorial deliberations and decionmaking, described limited reliance on metrics (page views, clicks, etc).[26] 'We don't really have the technology to do that... [However,] policy impact is seen as very important internally. There is a high premium on it', further describing the importance when the outlet learns that senior policy professionals engaged with their work.[27][28]

At the level of editorial professionals within organizations, additional factors drive supply with unclear alignment with demand. For instance, interviewees highlighted the influence of the particular backgrounds and values of individual editors on coverage decisions in ways potentially orthogonal to the global distribution of international events from which to select. One described tending to take their work on human rights abuses in South and Central America to one particular major global outlet because 'their international editor worked in Latin America as a journalist and so he has a really deep interest in these stories.'[29]

Importantly, editorial teams, even those of leading outlets covering foreign affairs, can be quite small, with the effect that heterogeneity in individual members' backgrounds and knowledge can drive reporting: 'A lot of time, we are not covering [particular international issues] because we all have our biases of areas [of the world] that we know better... We used to have an editor

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[23] #293, senior staff writer with a major economics and politics magazine/newspaper.

[24] #292, gormer director for digital media in *WCBS-TV* and *CBS* Television Stations Group.

[25] #287, junior editor at an international affairs related publication.

[26] E.g. #311, Amelia Newcomb, Managing Editor, *The Christian Science Monitor*. However, she further noted that the dearth was the result of an extended period of understaffing, rather than undervaluing analytics. `This year, *The Monitor* rectified this and is leaning in firmly on analytics to understand how to be most effective in our work.' More generally, this case may speak to variability in practices amongst major news outlets given changing media economics and advances in/access to quantitative methods.

[27] #293, Senior staff writer with a major economics and politics magazine/newspaper.

[28] Though, to be sure, the use of various methodologies is widespread amongst at least some outlets. Even still, the methodologies themselves vary: `Not every company that operates newsrooms participates in this but a lot... conduct market research... There often are focus groups... or traditional research methods... But among the things that are tested is international news and how much of it do you want to see and know about...' (#291, President and CEO of the Radio Television Digital News Association).

[29] #307, journalist with a major wire service.

who was a big Latin America person and now that [region is] a gap in our coverage.'[30] Similarly, multiple interviewees referred to the role of intuition: 'You make it partially on... your years of experience in journalism and as a newsroom leader...'[31]

Adding to the diverse influences on ultimate coverage decisions, some outlets delegate reporting decisions to their international correspondents: '[O]ne of the magical things about the organization... is that correspondents in the field have a great amount of freedom and leeway to decide on what they are going to report about and how.'[32] In such cases, connections to demand may be even more tenuous as decision making occurs outside of editorial headquarters.

4.2   Selection on Capability

We also consider impediments to supply. First, many issues are simply more difficult to cover than others. High costs[33], logistical impediments[34], government censorship[35], and threats to the safety of journalists[36] are factors commonly cited by our interviewees. They described significant variation, for instance, in their ability to access conflict settings around the world — with some, like Haiti, Yemen and Syria, exceedingly difficult to access and others like Libya and Ukraine much easier to navigate.[37]

While such factors are important, if they effectively prohibit reporting, which in turn accounts for mismatches in the supply and demand of international affairs content, our finding would not be particularly interesting as this would suggest that there is no clear way of increasingly supply to meet demand.

However, the story does not end there. Interviewees points to various, more nuanced explanations. Path dependencies appear to have created particular patterns of supply. One described the plausibly exogenous role that historical foreign bureau placement plays in influencing contemporary coverage:

> The Times has only three offices in Africa... [Whereas in Europe] just because of the legacy of other reporters that have been here largely since World War II, there are many offices...

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[30] #287, junior editor at an international affairs related publication.

[31] #292, former director for digital media in *WCBS-TV* and *CBS* Television Stations Group.

[32] #39, journalist with the *New York Times*.

[33] #35, reporter for an international news agency.

[34] #74, sub-regional news director for a major news agency; also, #13, former *Reuters* journalist; also, #47, journalist for a major news organization; also #271, freelance reporter for the *Washington Post* and other outlets.

[35] #11, journalist working for the *New York Times*.

[36] Former *New York Times* reporter; #30, *Reuters* reporter in Latin America; also, #224, French freelance journalist; also, #285, Mexican/French freelance journalist who has reported for big U.S. media.

[37] #4, journalist with a major wire service; #170, freelance journalist who worked with various major North American outlets; and #307, journalist with a major wire service.

[and] it's just more extensively covered. And actually I think that has to do largely with the fact that in the twentieth Century, a lot of places sent these organizations out after World War II to set up offices and the offices are still around... Part of the reason why some of these bureaus stay for as long as they do... [is] there might be a news assistant and a secretary and a driver that work in this place and they have worked at the Times maybe for twenty-five years and **we can't just let go of that person because the news has shifted...** Sometimes the bureau is in a country because it's easier to live there and the correspondent might have children and that has to be taken into account too. So there are a lot of practical issues related to where the office is going to be.[38]

Others independently spoke of the significance of foreign bureau placement on their out-lets' country-by-country coverage.[39] And although cost considerations once again appear to drive reporting decisions under such path dependencies, they are unlike the largely insurmountable restrictions imposed, for instance, by authoritarian governments that deny journalists access to entire territories or by intense levels of wartime violence that effectively prevent news reporting absent military escort. Instead, they appear to be rooted more firmly in historical practices; lifestyle considerations for staff; normative considerations related to the hiring and firing of local staff; etc.

Consistent with these descriptions, in a recent analysis of contemporary reporting patterns, Shaver *et al.* (2023b) provide quantitative evidence of an independent, substantial effect of bureau presence on country-specific reporting levels, indicating that such factors account for meaningful levels of variation in supply. Larson (1979) and Wu (2000) made similar observations decades ago, and this dynamic appears to continue to carry outsized influence on the issues to which readers are exposed despite the proliferation of information and communication technologies and social media potentially expected to erode structural barriers to international news flow. We note the clash with expectations that socio-technological developments—including 'the expansion of blogging and user generated content... [would transform] the very nature of the news selection process... not only influenc[ing] the news selection process but also the very nature of global journalism' (Golan *et al.*, 2009, p. 4).

Instead, as Chang (2009, p. 14-16) observed, even as the world has grown increasingly interconnected—increasing opportunities for the world's 'shadow topics' to rise to the fore—'[historical] structural imbalance and unequal flow in international communication are being reproduced... [such that] as far as... coverage of foreign news are concerned... most countries...

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[38] #46, staff writer at *the New York Times Magazine* and former *Wall Street Journal* writer. Bolding applied by the authors to emphasize the particular emphasis on maintaining bureau presence even as news-relevant geographies potentially shift.

[39] #39, journalist with the *New York Times*; #150, former cable news executive; and #311, Amelia Newcomb, Managing Editor; *The Christian Science Monitor*.

turn out to be largely invisible'. Indeed, our interviews speak to this paradox— as one interviewee described from a different angle:

> Governments [worldwide] are getting more savvy as to media's role in the world [...] governments are actively trying to play the information game, even governments that didn't try to do it that much before. This moves you [as a journalist] into the role of a competitor [...] an adversary [...] I find that it's getting more difficult to get at the stories that are critical of governments or systems.[40]

4.3   Joint Influences of Editorial Selection & Selection on Capability

A third, even subtler set of factors that emerges from our interviews concerns the impor- tant role that `intersectionality' plays in the lack of coverage of many major international issues receive. We define intersectionality as the blending of two or more issues/issue areas, which, on their own might attract news coverage, but once combined, result in stories that are much less likely be to covered. Our analyses of these cases suggest this happens for various reasons, which we group under two broad themes. In such cases, both editorial selection and selection on capability are often at play, making difficult efforts to distinguish between them—though by no means rendering such dynamics any less important.

First, the issues combine in ways that make the resulting issue more likely to fall outside the areas of expertise/focus of foreign affairs professionals and/or journalists. Consequently, they lack experts to advocate for their coverage by the news media (or more generally to educate news media staff about their existence/importance in the first place) and/or they lack the designated news media staff assigned to cover such issues in the first place.

As one global development public relations professional explained when describing development and humanitarian issues that tend to fall through the cracks: '[A given issue] really has to correspond with what the beat is for the reporters... [particularly] when you talk about news coming from low and middle-income countries.'[41] In short, many major issues that occur in low and middle-income countries simply fall outside the purview of journalists assigned to those countries, a problem exacerbated, they continued, as

> there are fewer and fewer people whose job it is to write about news from low- and middle-income countries, and that is largely because [news] bureaus are closing, newspapers have less resources, and so the first that goes typically is the international bureaus and reporters abroad.[42]

For example, interviewees from the World Diabetes Foundation described significant underreporting of the costs of chronic illnesses like diabetes during war and other

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[40] #271, freelance reporter for the *Washington Post* and other outlets.

[41] #128, global development public relations professional.

[42] Ibid.

humanitarian crises—and, therefore, the resulting lack of planning for the treatment of chronic illnesses in governments'/intergovernmental emergency response operations.[43] Thus, while media might report significantly on chronic diseases in their health pages, and they might report on war in the international pages, the example issue falls through the cracks nearly entirely as it does not cleanly fit within either focus area.

Second, issues often combine in ways that make them more difficult to report on. Difficulty manifests in various forms. In some cases, resulting issues may be considered taboo. One interviewee with the United Nations Population Fund—the UN entity focused on sexual and reproductive health—described the significant difficulty he faces in encouraging reporters to focus on international patterns of sexual abuse within disabled communities:

> The scale of sexual abuse that people with learning difficulties or other difficulties face is just shocking... but, disability is something that media don't really know how to talk about... When it comes to disability [and sexual abuse], I think maybe there is sort of a stigma there... [and] I am not finding it easy to get journalists interested... the intersection between sex and disability is a place where there are [important] stories that have to be told but it's difficult...[44]

In other cases, the difficulty comes from relatively complex subject material. Rather than engaging in more detailed reporting to clearly convey the issue, journalists may ultimately avoid such topics as they/their editors instead focus on content more readily accessible to readers. For instance, one interviewee, an expert on the persecution of minority groups worldwide, described the lack of coverage of the persecution of Armenians in Syria during the Syrian Civil War given the complicated nature of walking readers through the issue, requiring them to first understand the historical presence of Armenians in Syria and so forth:

> [A] group could be known well but they might not be in the "right" place for editors or readers to make sense of. For example, there are Armenians in Northern Syria who have been victimized in similar ways to the Yazidis and Syriac Christians but in a way "they are out of place." The Armenians are easier to cover if they are in Armenia or in Nagorno-Karabakh... But when they are in northern Syria... it [is] more difficult to... make sense of or portray in a news piece.[45]

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[43] #189, representatives of the World Diabetes Foundation.

[44] #182, Media Specialist, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The UN official also provided statistics substantiating the claim: `Women with disabilities are up to ten times more likely to experience gender violence', which is particularly striking given the already high base rate of psychological, physical, and sexual amongst females in general. Furthermore, `[y]oung women and girls with disabilities have the lowest levels of sexual health information and education.'

[45] #190, International affairs professional at Anti-Defamation League.

Collectively, the numerous and often independent heterogenous sources of variation in supply we identify raise fundamental questions about their relationship to general demand for content—particularly as concerns major global issues that have received little coverage in spite of their significant (human or other) costs associated.

5 IDENTIFICATION STRATEGY

5.1 Shadow Topics in International Affairs

We first briefly describe what we call shadow topics as they are a central theme of this article, and understanding how they are defined and identified will assist readers. Broadly, shadow topics are international issues that: 1) involve significant human, environmental, or other cost or benefit (or the expectation of significant cost or benefit), according to the inter- national affairs professionals interviewed for this research, and 2) have received minimal major international news media attention.[46]

The task of identifying shadow topics is complicated because such issues are, by definition, largely unreported. To identify them, we have conducted more than 200 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current/former international affairs professionals from across:

i)   the United Nations system

ii)   major international NGOs

iii)   international affairs-focused think tanks

iv)   major internationally focused philanthropic organizations

v)   foreign country embassies based in Washington DC

vi)   international associations, amongst other organizations

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[46] We leave the definition (and accordingly in-depth interview question wording) intentionally general to accommodate various possible responses from policy professionals. Sometimes, `shadow topics' responses refer to clearly discrete issues (e.g. bottom trawling). In other cases, `shadow topics' refer to particular aspects of broader issues that are well covered by the news media, while the particular issue is not. For instance, whereas (many, though not all) new refugees displacements receive significant coverage, issues like chronic displacement, which affect huge numbers of displaced persons, are scantly covered. In other cases still, entire countries, or regions of countries, were described as `shadow topics'—this occurred particularly around cases (e.g. the Democratic Republic of the Congo) where multiple major issues (e.g. large scale political violence, refugee flows, internal displacement, communicable disease outbreaks) are afflicting the population but collectively underreported. We give additional examples below.

In addition to representing a wide variety of organizations, interviewees have also worked across a broad range of issue areas – from international criminal issues to international maritime issues to international postal issues, to name just several distinct examples. After defining shadow topics, we asked interviewees about any such issues relevant to their current or former work in foreign affairs that they have observed.[47] Very rarely did interviewees not share a shadow topic with us.[48] Major, under-covered international issues abound.

Interviewees highlighted a wide variety of shadow topics ranging from the educational consequences of 'period poverty'; patterns of elder abuse around the world; environmental con- sequences of bottom trawling; harmful effects of in-door cooking with biofuels; loss of indigenous languages; non-communicable disease treatment in crisis settings in which delivered aid typically does not include resources needed to manage such diseases; to name just several. In some cases, entire countries were identified as shadow topics by interviewees given high rates of suffering across multiple, largely unreported dimensions (e.g. the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Yemen).

5.2 General Strategy

In brief, we sought to estimate demand for shadow topics relative to major domestic and international news headline events amongst 1) U.S. residents; and 2) international affairs professionals comprising a) international relations faculty across the United States, b) current and former senior U.S. government officials with a foreign policy focus, and c) international affairs-focused staffers at major U.S. think tanks. Although we do not specify an exact estimate of demand against which to compare our estimates, given very low rates of coverage of 'shadow topics' (by definition), we would expect similarly very low levels of demand for them if demand is driving their supply. (Instead, as we will show, *substantive* demand for shadow topics is effectively indistinguishable from that for leading headline news items.)[49]

To do so, we designed an online survey experiment intended to mirror news preview displays on the leading pages of news outlets' websites.[50] To create conditions in which respondents would choose amongst a set of presented news items based strictly on interest, respondents were told that their survey participation would begin/continue after they had first taken some

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[47] The general language used to ask this question is provided in Appendix B.1.

[48] When the survey experiment described in this paper was developed, we had conducted a relatively small subset of these, serving as the basis for the shadow topics which chose to include in the experiment.

[49] Indeed, as reviewers will see from the original pre-registrations, our early expectation in this project was that 'shadow topic' demand would be low, and our original focus was on the potential to re-frame 'shadow topics' presentation in ways that might increase interest in them. Experimental results, however, revealed the much more striking, important, and unexpected result of consistently high demand in such content, regardless of framing.

[50] For research with similar survey design strategies please see Valentino and Weinberg (2017) and Zhukov and Baum (2016).

time to catch up on the day's news. We then randomly displayed to each respondent shadow topic article previews alongside previews of leading domestic and international news article headlines,[51] which they were asked to choose from. To achieve a design mimicking major news outlet styles, we drew directly from actual news previews published on major news websites, editing that content to produce final previews in consultation with news media professionals.[52]

Below, we first describe the populations from which we recruited survey participants. We then describe the survey/experimental designs in additional detail before turning to our statistical tests and results.

5.3   Survey Respondents

We surveyed two populations to estimate their demand for news about major undercovered international issues relative to headline news stories: 1) U.S. residents and 2) three sets of international affairs professionals: a) international relations faculty at colleges/universities across the United States, b) current/former senior U.S. government officials who served across (at least) three presidential administrations, and c) international affairs-focused staffers at major U.S. think tanks.

The U.S. residents were recruited by Cint, a digital consumer insights firm. Cint recruited online panels of U.S. residents who are at least 18 years of age. 5,383 respondents completed our survey[53], representing all U.S. states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, representing a diverse makeup of partisan, gender, ethnic and racial identifications; ages; educational backgrounds; and employment statuses. About half of respondents reported having traveled internationally. In Appendix D.1, we report the summary statistics of the U.S. survey sample[54].

In collaboration with William & Mary's Teaching and Research in International Politics (TRIP) (Avey *et al.*, 2023), we sent surveys to three targeted groups of international relations professionals: 1) 5,356 international relations faculty members across 973 U.S. colleges and universities; 2) 3,579 current/former[55] professionals who served across the Bush II, Obama, and Trump presidential administrations on issues relating to U.S. trade, development, or national security and who held the rank of 'assistant/deputy director' (or equivalent) or above; and 3)

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[51] As we discuss later, minimal edits were made to leading domestic and international news article headlines to ensure that survey respondents would not recognize them as stories they had already seen/read about.

[52] In Appendix C.3, we provide tables summarizing the original news titles and the titles of both domestic and international news used in our experiment with minimal modification for the experimental design purpose.

[53] Defined here as those who completed both attention checks of our survey, which we used to ensure the quality of responses received.

[54] The appendixes can be found here: www.andrewcshaver.com/s/MediaLSE_Appendix.pdf

[55] A number of these individuals have remained or returned to government service. Thus, throughout this article, we therefore refer to these individuals as current/former officials.

3,690 professional staff with an international affairs focus employed by major U.S.-based think tanks. Additional details about these groups and the process by which they were identified and contacted can be found under Appendix C.5.2, D.2 and in Avey *et al.* (2023).[56]

Amongst the international relations professionals, we received a total of 1,347 survey responses.[57] The majority of participating faculty members indicated working on international relations/global politics and comparative politics and included Adjuncts (≈2.98%), Assistant Professors (≈9.32%), Associate Professors (≈30.31%), Chaired Full Professors (≈10.81%), Emeriti (≈5.96%), Full Professors (≈32.92%), Lecturers/Senior Lecturers (≈3.35%), and Visiting Instructors/Visiting Assistant Professors (≈0.75%).

The current/former senior government officials served in government for an average of 21.65 years and included military officers (nearly all general officers) (≈5%); political appointees not-confirmable (deputy assistant secretary of defense, office director, special assistant) (≈21.07%); professionals at the GS/GG 13/Band 4 level (≈0.71%); professionals at the GS/GG 15/Band 5 level (≈18.57%); Senate confirmable policy or department/agency leaders (≈22.14%); and SES-level civil servants (≈22.14%).

Finally, all responding think tank staffers confirmed that they work(ed) on international, global, or foreign policy issues and reported a wide range of specific focus areas – from environmental protection to migration and refugees to democracy and civil society to peace and security, and various issues in between; approximately 61.69% described holding either senior or board member positions.[58]

5.4 Experimental Design

Test Respondents were shown three news article previews displayed side by side, mimicking news content presentation typical of front page major international news media websites (e.g. *cbsnews.com*, *foxnews.com*, *washingtonpost.com*).[59][60] As described below, in addition to 'shadow topics' previews, respondents were exposed to a wide range of topics closely modeled after actual headlines news items. These included stories about celebrities/entertainment, sports,

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[56] There is no overlap between interviewees and surveytakers. Importantly, this rules out any possible obfuscation of results that may arise were the individuals who raised shadow topics with us the same who were then asked about them through the experiment.

[57] Specifically, we received 805, 281, and 261 responses from the IR faculty, current/former policymakers, and think tank staffers, respectively.

[58] Appendix D.2 reports the basic information about the three IR professionals that participated in our survey.

[59] For laptop and tablet users, the three news previews were displayed horizontally; for mobile phone users, they were displayed vertically. The order of three previews were randomized for each respondent for each round of the question. See Appendix C.4 for more details.

[60] Consistent with the front page layout designs of many major news websites, each news preview was constructed to contain 1) an image; 2) a small caption under the image with details about the photo and/or its source; 3) a news title; and 4) a short summary of the news item under the title.

environment and climate change, technology, economics and business, domestic politics, international affairs, violence and conflict, art, public health, amongst others.

Our goal is to understand how demand for 'shadow topics' compares with that for headline news content—the set of national and international stories deemed most worthy of the time and attention of millions of viewers. As we describe and address later, this produces a clear interpretation of results: 'shadow topic' interest *vis-`a-vis* that of leading news content. It also puts 'shadow topics' up against the highest standard—the set of content that news agencies deemed most important to display on their front (online) pages. As we will show, we estimate nearly identical demand (sometime slightly lower, sometimes slightly higher) between 'shadow topics' and these headline news controls. As will further later show, these results are not driven by differences in international vs. domestic content.

Before they were presented with the previews, the U.S. resident surveytakers were shown the following message: 'Before starting the survey, please take a brief moment to catch up on a few short news stories randomly pulled from today's headlines. *Simply click a **preferred** article on each of the next several pages.*' On each of the three subsequent pages, they were then simply asked to select their preferred article from amongst the set of previews.[61][62] The international affairs professionals were presented with the experiment just one time given survey space constraints, and both the question and the news previews were presented on the same page. (See Appendix C.1 for demonstrations of both.)[63]

Of the three news previews simultaneously displayed, one featured shadow topic news content[64], while the other two showed leading domestic or international news content. The pool of non-shadow topics for the U.S. resident survey consisted primarily of U.S. domestic news, with 3 out of 21 of the total headline news previews focused on international issues. By contrast, given their clear interests in foreign affairs, international affairs professionals were shown only headline news items dealing with international events.[65] All previews were randomly drawn from a pool of previews – shadow topic previews from their own pool and headline news items from their own. Furthermore, the display order of three previews was

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[61] The instruction reads as `[p]lease choose your preferred article amongst these short stories.'

[62] The instruction in the IR professionals survey was modified slightly: `Before proceeding, please take a brief moment to select one of these short news stories we pulled from today's international news headlines that is of most interest to you. (Simply select a **preferred** article and then click the arrow to proceed.)'.

[63] The stories were not actually pulled from the day's headlines, and we included language debriefing survey respondents about this at the end of the survey.

[64] The set of possible shadow topics displayed to respondents included 1) the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA henceforth), 2) bottom trawling, 3) indoor cooking with bio-fuels, 4) global prevalence of elder abuse, 5) `period poverty', 6) the loss of indigenous languages, and 7) protracted refugee displacement. (See Appendix B.2 for additional description of these shadow topics, Appendix C.6 for selected AfCFTA news previews.)

[65] See Appendix C.6.2 for additional details.

randomized every time previews were displayed in order to eliminate any potential biasing effect of that might result from preview positioning.

Figure 1: Example Experimental Question in Survey of U.S. Residents[66]

Please choose your *preferred* article amongst these short stories.
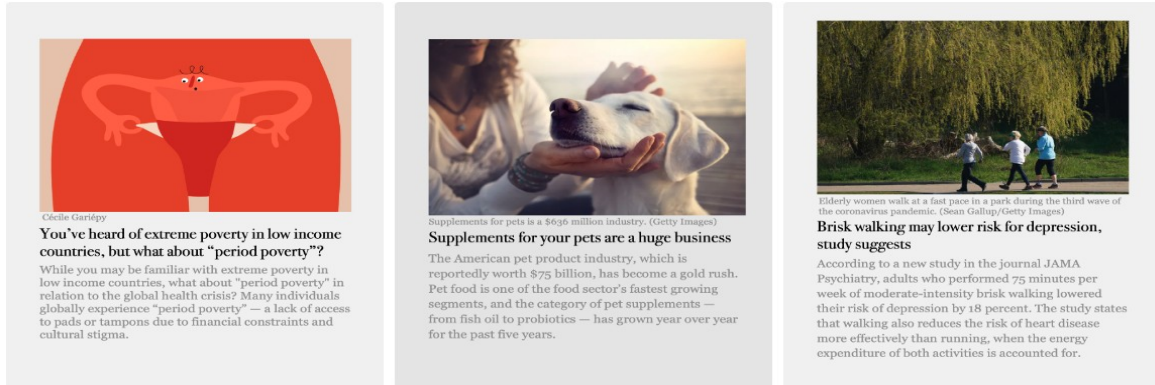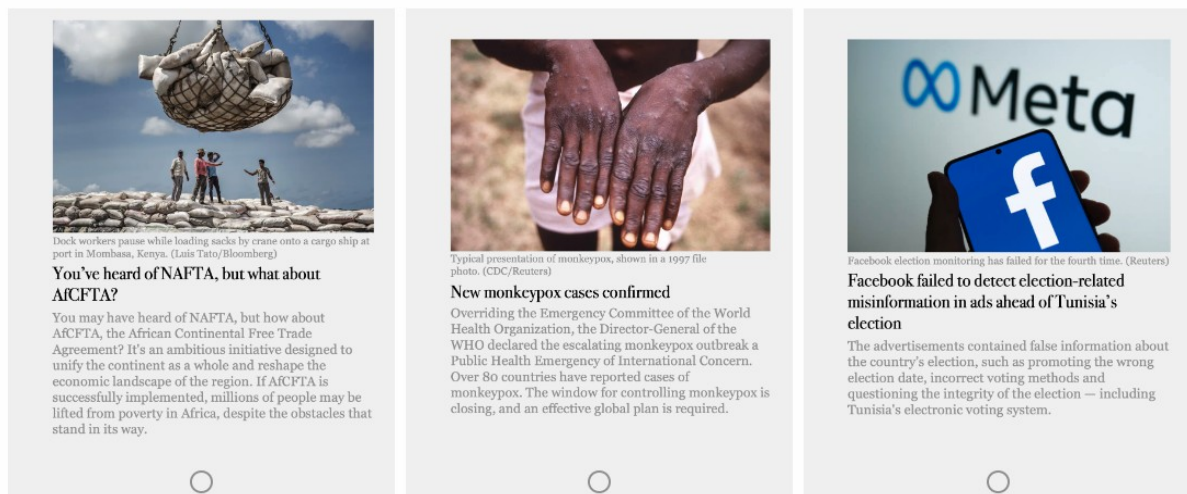
Figure 2: Example Experimental Question in Survey of International Affairs Professionals[67]

Before proceeding, please take a brief moment to select one of these short news stories we pulled from today's international news headlines that is of most interest to you. (Simply select a ***preferred*** article and then click the arrow to proceed.)

To ensure that the article previews were developed in a manner reflecting news media reporting styles, we consulted news media professionals about their design, and all news

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[66] This figure displays an example round of the survey experiment administered to U.S residents. Given space constraints, we only include a single preview for brevity. Appendix \ref{app:non-shadow-us} for a complete list of non-shadow topic previews displayed to US residents.

[67] We only include a single preview here for brevity. See Appendix C.6.2 for a complete list of non-shadow topic previews displayed to international affairs professionals.

previews were edited by an external copy-editing professional who applied *Associated Press (AP)* style across all text elements to ensure their uniformity.

For each shadow topic preview, we generated one baseline news article preview about that topic. This baseline preview was based on an actual news article previously written by a major news outlet on the subject, which was edited as minimally as possible to ensure that survey respondents were exposed to actual professionally designed news content.[68] We also generated eleven alternative shadow topic previews to which different frames were applied.[69] In all cases, the frames involved making specific edits to the baseline article. The frames varied significantly —some provided first-hand accounts focusing on individuals directly affected by the shadow topic; others framed the issue in more quantitative terms, including statistics and data graphics in place of photos; others still focused on directly connecting the issue to the United States (complete details are provided in Appendix C.2).[70] Just as shadow topics themselves were randomly presented to respondents, so too was their framing.

Next, with respect to the alternative headline news previews, to ensure that they are as realistic as possible, they consisted of minimally modified versions of actual headlines news previews published in recent years on the front web pages of leading major international news outlets.[71] The modifications ensure that readers do not recognize any of these control stories as events that have already occurred, and they are edited to produce plausibly new stories.[72] However, using actual former headlines news article previews as our starting point ensures that readers are exposed to the actual images and languages news media professionals use in the production of headline news items. Critically, in comparing shadow topics with headline news content displayed on leading news sites, we have attempted to hold shadow topics previews against the highest standard—those national and international items deemed most worthy of

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[68] Edits were applied only to the extent required to reflect the global nature of the shadow topic accurately. For instance, we were unable to identify any articles written by the major international news media on global patterns of elder abuse. Thus, we modified an article that had been written on U.S. domestic elder abuse to reflect its international nature.

[69] These included the shadow topic, `well-known issue comparison', `govenmental discourse', `public (social media) discourse', `engagement brings change', `condensed presentation', `quantitative presentation', `optimistic', `firsthand account', `national identification', and `personal/community identification' frames, (see Appendix C.2 for details).

[70] The U.S. resident survey takers were exposed to all eleven frames. Given the small sample size of the international affairs professionals, they were exposed to three frames.

[71] See Appendix C.3 for the complete list and selection process.

[72] For instance, one of the *BBC*'s headline news articles published shortly prior to the start of the experiment concerned a lawsuit filed by Brad Pitt against Angelina Jolie regarding ownership of a vineyard (BBC, 2022). We modified the preview to indicate that a judge had thrown the suit out—a plausible (but not actual) development in the news story intended to ensure that respondents who were shown this preview were shown the type of content that is actually displayed as headline news but in a manner that they would not recognize as something that had actually occurred.

front page attention. We do not simply seek to assess interest in shadow topics but in interest relative to content that dominates the headlines.

Overall, the experiment contained four different randomization processes: randomization across shadow topics; randomization across shadow topic framing; randomization of preview display order; and, finally, randomization of headline news preview controls.[73]

5.5 Statistical Testing

We estimate demand for shadow topics by the probability of their selection (S) by respondent i during survey round r[74], varying at random the framing to which they are exposed ($F_{i,r}$) and randomizing the two alternative headline news article previews to which they are simultaneously introduced. In our primary specification, we estimate the following model:

$$P(S_{i,r} = 1 | F_{i,r}, \ bX_i, \gamma_s) \ = \ logit^{-1}(\alpha \ + \ \sigma \ F_{i,r} \ + \ \beta' \ \mathbf{X}_i \ + \ \gamma_s)$$

Here, $\mathbf{X}_i$ denotes respondents' demographics.[75] Shadow topic fixed effects are given γ_s.[76] We use quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo simulation to generate uncertainty estimates. We generate separate results for U.S. residents and international affairs professionals and further disaggregate amongst the three sub-populations of international affairs professionals.

Finally, we carry out a variety of robustness tests that confirm the stability of the results. These relate to including additional covariates; survey completion status; engagement checks; across-wave and across shadow topics-results; and sub-group testing that demonstrates the consistency of our results when the headline news controls are considered in terms of specific characteristics (specifically, whether they are international or domestically focused and, separately, whether they are focused on discrete or protracted issues). Robustness checks

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[73] See Appendix C.4 for more information about the randomization process.

[74] $r \in \{1,2,3\}$ denoting each round of the experiment for U.S. resident surveytakers. For the international affairs professionals, $r = 1$ as they were only administered the experiment once.

[75] For U.S. residents, we include age, gender, education, race, ethnicity, income, political party identification, interaction with foreign countries at work, during travel or living, employment status, veteran status and the state they reside in the U.S. See Appendix C.7 for exact questions included in the survey. For the international affairs professionals, we include gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, their main source(s) of information about international events/affairs, partisan identification, political position on economic issues and social issues. Additionally, in sub-population regressions (e.g. regenerating results with only faculty members), we include additional covariates that are specific to that population but not the others (e.g. in the case of IR faculty, their rank (e.g. associate professor) within the university.) See Appendix C.7 for specific questions in the surveys.

[76] For the U.S. resident survey, we collected approximately 55 responses daily from September 2022 to March 2023, thus we include time fixed effect to control for variables that are constant across respondents but vary over time. See Appendix C.5 for details in survey implementation.

demonstrate that demand for 'shadow topics' news items is highly consistent. For parsimony, we describe and report these results in Section 6.2.[77]

6   RESULTS

The central findings are that we 1) estimate significant demand for shadow topics news amongst both U.S. residents and the international affairs professionals and 2) find that demand is highly persistent, varying only marginally across the various framings that were applied.

6.1   Primary Results

We estimate significant demand for shadow topics news amongst both U.S. residents and the international affairs professionals.[78] U.S. residents were nearly as likely to choose a shadow topics preview (≈28.67%) as they were major headline news previews. International affairs professionals were more likely, chosing shadow topics in ≈36.62% of cases.[79] (See Figure 3.)

These results are striking. Amongst U.S. residents, for instance, we find that interest in issues like elder abuse worldwide and the costs of menstruation in countries where it is stigmatized fared about as well as, and in some cases better than, major headline news items, including Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and a lawsuit involving Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (to give just two examples). (Demand across individuals headline news previews are displayed under 'U.S Residents, Headline News Preview Interest' in 4.)

Also of significant note, estimates of demand for shadow topics are highly stable. When these shadow topic previews are reframed in manners substantially altering their presentation from baseline previews, we observe little change in their selection, evidence of underlying interest in the topics themselves and not in some peculiarity of the original news framing.

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[77] Please see Appendix C.8 for discussion of several deviations from the study's pre-registrations, and Appendix E for primary regression result.

[78] Please see Appendix C.5 for details on survey response rates and other details about survey implementations.

[79] Results amongst the three groups of international affairs professionals are similar: estimated demand is ≈37.27% for IR scholars, ≈33.94% for former senior foreign policy professionals, and ≈37.31% for IR professionals in U.S.-based think tanks.

Figure 3: Primary Results from Survey Experiment[80]
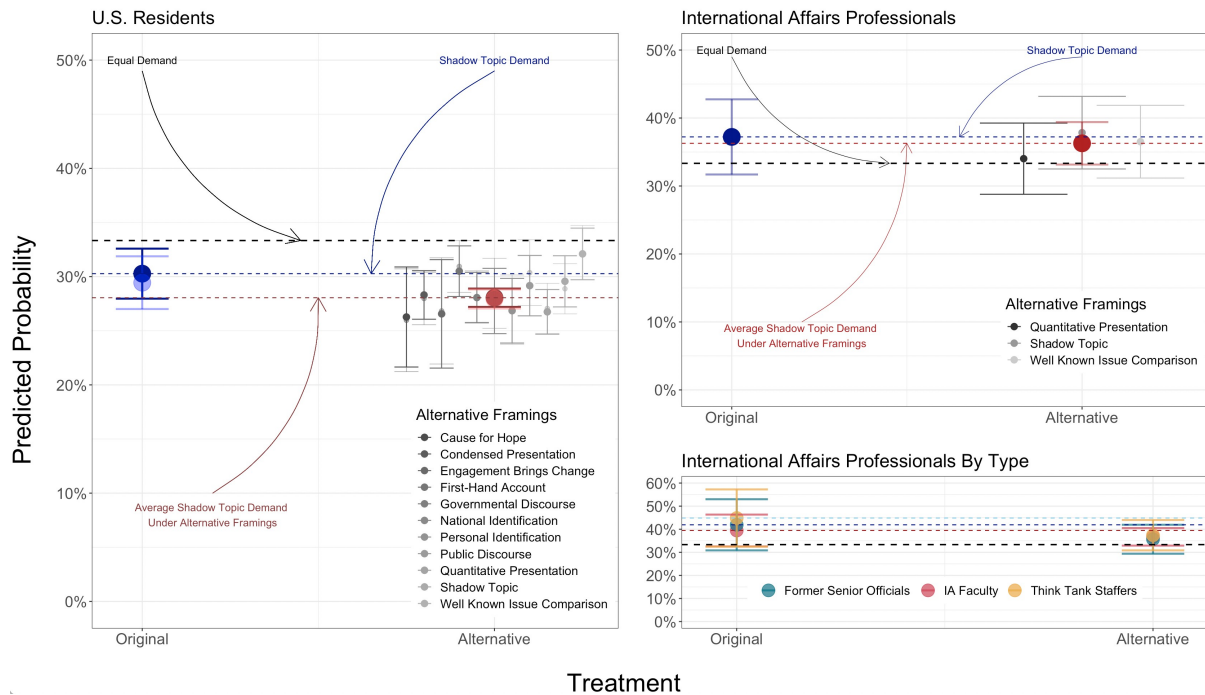
6.2 Robustness Checks

Text The results are robust to a variety of additional tests. First, we address the possibility that survey participants selected answers in some random or haphazard manner. If so, selection of shadow topic previews would be expected in about 33% of cases, calling into direct question the results that we report. This is perhaps of most concern as regards U.S. resident survey takers who were recruited from online panels and compensated monetarily for participating. We address this concern in four ways, which reveal clearly that this was not the case.

   i. We included two separate attention checks in the survey of U.S. residents, subsetting the dataset used to generate results to only those individuals who successfully completed both

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[80] This figure depicts significant estimated demand for ``shadow topics'' news article amongst both the U.S. residents and international affairs professionals. Clockwise from left: The first plot displays the predicted probability of `shadow topic' article selection under the original framings (blue) as well as under the alternative framings (red) (for corresponding regression results see Appendix Tables 9 and 10). The second plot shows the same results for the international affairs professionals (see corresponding regression results in Appendix Table 18). Finally, the third plot disaggregates results across the three sets of international affairs professionals (see corresponding regression results in Appendix Table 19). Overall, all three plots show significant and highly stable interest in `shadow topic' article previews relative to leading headline news items.

checks and who were, therefore, clearly reading the questions and answering questions accordingly.[81][82][83]

ii. For one quarter of U.S. resident respondents, we asked them to explain why they chose the articles they did.[84] We then manually inspected their responses, subsetting the response to those who offered plausible answers and regenerating results.[85] Estimates of demand are very similar. See 'U.S. Residents, Cases of Confirmed Engagement' in Figure 4.

iii. We generated results subsetting the data shadow topic by shadow topic. If respondents had selected article previews at random, we should observe little difference between demand estimates across the shadow topics. This is not the case. Rate of selection varies across topics. See 'U.S. Residents, Shadow Topics Compared' in Figure 4.

iv. Finally, and directly following the preceding point, we also generated the predicted probabilities of each headline news preview being selected. Again, if previews were selected at random, these should also not vary significantly. This is also not the case: We find significant differences in interest across the headline news items, ranging from a predicted probably of ≈27% on the low end to ≈50% on the high end. See 'U.S. Residents, Headline News Preview Interest' in Figure 4.

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[81] The entire survey included two attention-check questions, one placed prior to the knowledge questions and one placed following the knowledge questions. The attention check question is designed to determine whether respondents read questions in our survey carefully, so respondents know the correct answers after reading the full question instructions.

[82] Per the pre-registration, we subset responses to individuals who completed the entire survey (and not just the two attention checks). If we instead subset responses to only individuals who passed the two attention checks, results are virtually identical. For parsimony, we do not report them in the paper but can gladly supply them should the referees wish to see them.

[83] We did not include attention checks in the survey of international affairs professionals given that these participants completed the survey voluntarily (and thus did not face any clear incentives as paid respondents might) to rush through responses. More generally, we are much less concerned about spurious responses from this population of individuals that currently hold or previously held positions of public trust/influence and had volunteered to participate in the survey to help advance research.

[84] Following three rounds of news headline selection, respondents were asked to: `[p]lease explain in just a sentence or two why you made these particular news article selections. What stood out or was otherwise more interesting about these two choices than the others?'.

[85] If a respondent provided a valid reason for their selection—for instance, indicating that the topic falls within their interests—we coded the answer as a case of clear engagement. If a respondent provided a vague answer—for example, repeating the content of the news previews—we code it as a `maybe'. Finally, if they provided an irrelevant or nonsensical response, or if they stated directly they did not know why, we coded the answer as not engaged. Two members of the research team collaborated to code the responses during a first round of review. They then cross checked the `maybe' entries during a second round. We then generated both conservative and liberal estimates, treating the ambiguous (`maybe') cases as illegitimate and dropping them in the conservative case (retaining ≈74.17% of the approximately one quarter of relevant survey responses) and keeping them in the liberal case (retaining ≈91.16%). Results are consistent under both approaches.

Second, as described in Experimental Design, U.S. resident surveytakers were administered the experiment three times. To address concern that participation in rounds two and three might have been influenced by participation in preceding rounds, we generated test results by round. Results of rounds two and three are consistent with those of the first. See 'U.S. Residents, First, Second and Third Waves Compared' in Figure 4.

Third, for the survey of U.S. residents, results are robust to including a series of political covariates as well as information on issues related their knowledge of, attitudes toward, and sources of information about foreign affairs. (As described in this study's pre-registration, responses to these questions may introduce post-treatment bias, if influenced by the experiment itself, might bias estimated treatment effects. Thus, we do not include these in our primary specification and instead generate results with them included separately. Furthermore, asking these before the survey experiment would have carried the risk of influencing experimental results (Blackwell *et al.,* 2023).) A description of these additional controls appear in Appendix C.7. Results are effectively unchanged when these additional covariate adjustments are applied, see Appendix D.2. Finally, results are robust to adding two respondent-wave specific alternative headline news preview indicators ($N_{i,r}$).

Figure 4: Robutness Checks Results [86]

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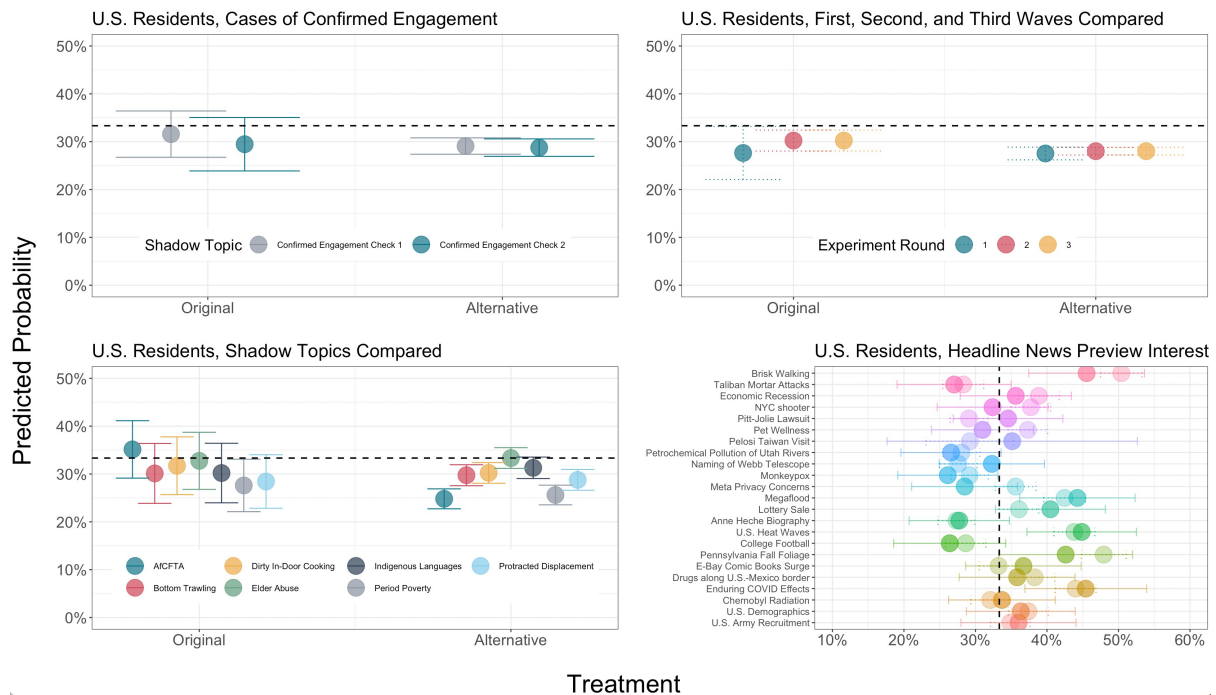
[86] This figure displays various experimental estimates. Clockwise from top left: The first and second plots display the predicted probabilities of `shadow topic' selection under both the original and modified framings (average). The first plot includes only those individuals who provided responses describing their answer choices (see corresponding regression results in Appendix Table 16). The second plot displays the probabilities disaggregated by survey round (see corresponding regression results in Appendix Table 17). The third image displays the predicted probabilities at which each of the alternative headline news articles were chosen (with corresponding regression results given in Appendix Tables 12 and 13, respectively). Finally, the last image displays predicted

Fourth, readers might wonder about possible alternative selection dynamics that comparisons with headline news controls may capture given their heterogeneous characteristics. For instance, for U.S. respondents, headline news controls consist of both domestic and international issues, raising the question of whether interest in 'shadow topics' reflects more general respondent preferences for domestic or international content. The heterogeneous nature of headline news controls is a feature, not a bug, of the study—the assorted set of issues covered through the headline controls reflect the rich diversity of issues news readers encounter when engaging with the online pages of major news organizations. Nevertheless, we address this issue in two ways: first, we compare 'shadow topics' previews to only international affairs headline news controls and then to those controls that are entirely domestic. Second, 'shadow topics' headlines tend to deal with broader chronic issues, whereas some headline news controls deal with discrete events (e.g. Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan).[87] Again, we compare 'shadow topics' previews to only discrete event headline news controls and separately to only those dealing with protracted issues (e.g. the impacts of long Covid). Results, displayed in Figure 5, are substantively unchanged.

Figure 5: Additional Robutness Checks Results [88]
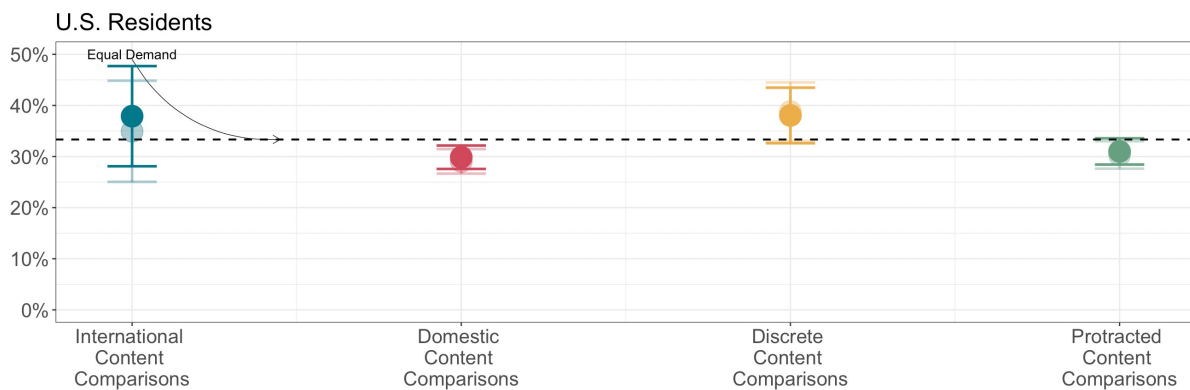
Fifth, related to the preceding point, Muralidharan *et al.* (2023) show that in cross-cutting designs, omitted interactions between distinct treatments can bias results when interaction effects are non-zero. Accordingly, for the robustness checks in which various framings were randomly assigned, we generated saturated model results (Table 11) in which we include

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probabilities disaggregated by `shadow topic' (see Appendix Tables 14 and 15 for corresponding regression results). Collectively, the results provide strong evidence that the primary results are not the result of respondents choosing answers at random.

[87] In the accompanying R code, we detail the specific categorization choices we make.

[88] This figure displays 'shadow topic' demand estimates when compared with headlines news previews that are 1) international only; 2) domestic only; 3) discrete events only; and 4) protracted events only (see corresponding regression results in Appendix Table 20).

controls for both international headline controls and, separately, discrete headline controls, along with two- and three-way interactions. Results are effectively unchanged.

7   CONCLUSION

Our research corroborates the existence of significant gaps in the coverage of major global issues. The separate parallel interview and survey efforts we carry out depict significant reliance on the news media for information on foreign affairs as well as significant causal impacts of media reporting on international affairs processes. Yet, the results of our survey experiment suggest that there is little connection between actual patterns of reporting on undercovered international issues and our estimates of demand for such topics across distinct populations: U.S. residents; international relations scholars; cur- rent/former senior foreign policymakers within the U.S. Government; and think tank staffers with an international affairs focus.

Importantly, to the extent that concern over consumer demand drives limited reporting on the world's shadow topics, our results may serve to dispel editorial concerns that featuring shadow topics in their (digital or physical) pages might not generate interest (a concern that has been directly expressed in discussions with news media professionals).

More broadly, our findings raise questions about previous claims of limited American interest in international affairs news (Baum, 2002; Moisy, 1997) and uniquely contribute to literature on consumer demand for content given previous focus on corresponding shifts towards more entertaining soft-news issues (Prior, 2007) and consumer 'preference [for] sports, crime, entertainment, and weather' over 'politics, international relations, and economics' (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013). To the contrary, respondents' preferences suggest substantial and robust interest in major undercovered global issues—even when presented with soft (and other) headline alternatives.

Just as importantly, our results speak not only to a domestic political audience but, to best of our knowledge, they are the first direct assessment of demand for content amongst in- ternational affairs professionals. Accordingly, the results contribute to a vast literature that questions whether major international news media is more responsive, and therefore vulnerable to, elite demands (Zaller and Chiu, 1996; Bennett *et al.*, 2006)—or whether its reporting decisions have direct impacts on such professionals in the first place.

Our results contribute more generally to discourse on equity and inclusion on the inter- national level by not only highlighting many individuals/communities globally that face lack of attention in the face of significant hardship but by providing early evidence that greater attention to such communities may not accompany reductions reduced consumer interest.

Finally, our research provides a proof of concept for greater academic-news media collaboration. We have demonstrated how news media professionals may contribute to the design of research in a manner providing insights to academics and news editors alike. We hope that this project will inspire future such efforts and more generally encourage conversation about the need for and potential benefits of academic-news media collaboration.

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