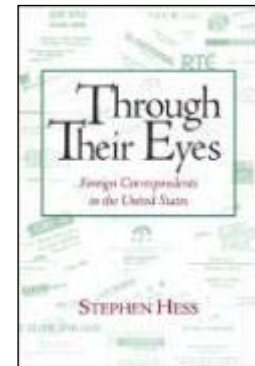


Stephen Hess, **Through Their Eyes: Foreign Correspondents in the United States**, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006, 195 pp., \$44.95 (hardcover), \$18.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Stephen Hess scrutinizes the complex web of relationships between the media and the government in *Through Their Eyes: Foreign Correspondents in the United States*. He examines the role of foreign correspondents in the United States, in particular, how their postings determine international perceptions of America. Through his extensive empirical study of these correspondents (currently, the largest on record), Hess illustrates the evolution of their reporting since the mid-1980s. His questions pertaining to the profession—from background to subject matter to terms and conditions of the post—should be useful and insightful for media scholars, journalists, and diplomats, as well as for those interested in how external perceptions of the United States are created and disseminated.



Hess conducted his research by distributing an extensive questionnaire in 1999 to approximately 2,000 foreign correspondents. His goal was to single out “anyone in the United States who desired to be known as a foreign correspondent” (p. 3). The questionnaire yielded 439 interpretable responses, three to four times more than any previous study in the field. He also conducted 146 interviews in which he asked three major questions: Who are the correspondents? How do they work? What do they report? In turn, he drew conclusions from their answers, which he presents in an easy-to-navigate format, assigning each question a separate section of the book. This clear, concise, reader-friendly structure works well for lay readers and for media scholars, who are provided with rich, complex material.

The section that considers correspondents’ identity is divided into “regulars” and “irregulars” (part-time journalists). The author’s research reveals that the number of foreign correspondents in the United States has increased substantially in the second half of the 20th century. In 2000, Western European correspondents still account for the largest percentage of correspondents living in America, totaling 47%, while Asian correspondents were second, totaling 27% (p. 32).

Although New York is usually assumed to be the home base for a majority of foreign correspondents, Hess finds this to be true for only part-time journalists. Fully 56% of full-time journalists live in Washington, DC, 34% in New York, 8% in California, and only 2% outside of these major media hubs. Full-time male correspondents outnumber female correspondents three to one, but female part-time journalists outnumber their male counterparts. The average age of a full-time foreign correspondent is 42; the median number of years posted in the U.S. is four. A typical correspondent writes nine stories a week, seven of which are filed under hard news, plus two features. Two of every nine stories mention the correspondent’s home country (p. 32).

The author's data show that pre-existing biases affect the objectivity of foreign correspondents' reporting, as "our foreign correspondents arrived in the United States with a collection of stereotypes that they said were cherished by the people in their countries" (p. 57). Hess assesses the impact of these stereotypes, finding that 49% of foreign correspondents describe America as "hegemonic," "imperialistic," "haughty," "arrogant," and "selfish," which are adjectives that he sorts into the "super power" category. Another 17% of correspondents use phrases like "lacking knowledge of the rest of the world," "uneducated," "ignorant," "naïve," which are descriptions that he categorizes as "provincial" (p. 57).

Many foreign correspondents admit to purposely writing stories that embellish typical "American" stereotypes, because their job is to engage readers from their home country. However, this is not true for all journalists. Chang Choi of Korea TV, for example, explains, "The middle class and below . . . hearken to [a negative image]. Our editors put weight on this anti-United States sentiment. Some stories [that are] negative to the United States are appealing to these classes" (p. 58). Olivier Knox of *Agence France-Presse* reaffirms that bias is present. "There is necessarily an element, and I think it is a very small element, of being a foreign correspondent that involves re-enforcing the home country's prejudices" (p. 58). Both of these comments illustrate the tension between objectivity and marketability, as motivations skewed their reports.

A more in-depth analysis of underlying motivations reveals that more than one-fifth of responding foreign correspondents are U.S. citizens—mostly naturalized after years in America—or they are Americans by birth, but grew up abroad and returned as professionals. Many of these correspondents grapple with issues of attachment to both the United States and their home countries. However, their loyalty to America increases the longer they stay—an affiliation that could be problematic for journalists who become too "pro-America." The correspondents confirm that their editors sometimes ask for stories that reinforce stereotypes of "the fat American and fast food" (p. 64). Foreign correspondent Yasemin Congar notes, "It's very challenging because editors ask for such a story, and you would say 'This is not the way you think it is,' and they would say, 'Oh, she is so pro-American now'" (p. 64). This finding highlights the struggle between reporting the truth and pleasing editors at home.

What are the implications of a more technologically advanced world on the work of foreign correspondents? Hess argues that it is easier and more affordable to communicate across international boundaries, and he stresses that, even with constant connectivity, it remains difficult for correspondents to deal with their bosses and publishers in different time zones. He integrates individual chronicles from reporters, discussing their disrupted sleep schedules and longer workdays. Hess notes that "correspondents from virtually every country said that the leash between home and field was getting shorter" (p. 78). Choi elaborates: "Previous correspondents . . . could sometimes lie to the editors. . . . But now with the Internet and CNN and all the information fed directly to our headquarters . . . we correspondents are very worried about that situation" (p. 77). Technology has changed the profession of journalism by requiring correspondents to work around the clock. As currency and relevance become priorities, technology also allows foreign editors to maintain tighter control over their foreign correspondents.

In the "What They Report" section, Hess finds that correspondents from smaller countries are more likely to report on issues that incorporate a home angle. He recounts a situation in which a Finnish reporter writes about a reunion of Thomas Jefferson's descendents, some of whom have Finnish blood. For other countries, proximity to the United States matters. Correspondents, especially those from Mexico and Canada, often try to write about the relationship between America and their home base.

The abundance of information the author provides can be daunting, but by including copies of surveys in the Appendix he helps to elucidate the material. Still, *Through Their Eyes* will clarify for both lay readers and journalists the changing role and significance of foreign correspondents. Hess answers his three questions persuasively by clarifying the relationship between foreign correspondents and the media while illuminating how the rest of the world perceives America, and then by explaining why this view may be distorted. Perhaps inevitably, foreign correspondents, encouraged by their editors and their audience, tend to reinforce stereotypical perceptions about America.