

The Beijing Controversies

Finnish News Coverage of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995

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The reality of Women's World Conference hits you in the face at the counter of a Huairou department store. Among thick and clumsy Chinese sanitary pads one can find a few packages of Western tampons. (...)

A couple of blocks away, the gathering of the world's women is finally starting for real. After weeks of arguing, the essential issue of women's rights can be brought forward. (Anu Nousiainen: Anarchy and Tampons, *Helsingin Sanomat* 1.9.1995)

In September 1995, the broadest news flow study to date, the Foreign News Flow Project collected its research material. Participation in this project was exceptionally international: nearly 50 countries joined the research. For the first time in flow research history, it was also agreed that there would be an extensive qualitative section, for which one of the predetermined cases was the news coverage of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. This article discusses the Finnish coverage of the Conference within the framework of the flow study tradition.

How Foreign News Flows: A Recent Round of a Long Tradition

Flow studies represent one of the established fields of study within international communication. The methods, scope and angle have varied (e.g. Kayser,

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1953; IPI, 1953; Schramm, 1960; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Östgaard, 1965; Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977; Galtung & Vincent, 1992; Hjarvard, 1995), but the interest in the global or regional volume and projection of foreign news, as well as in the selection criteria exercised, has remained steady since the early 1950s.

Flow studies represent a branch of research that has been frequently discussed and debated, because flow study data was used as ammunition in the Great Media Debate about the new world communication order (NWICO) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Extra media data was eagerly sought especially in the 1970s (Pietiläinen, 1998a:39). Studies were used to certify whether or not the picture of the outside world given in the media was "right", justified and truthful.

Academically, flow studies have rarely been challenging. Most but not all have been crudely quantitative and theoretically thin; the categorization of enormous volumes of data has attracted most of the attention. Obviously the theoretical frame of reference frequently approaches the agenda setting, though it is rarely made explicit. It is assumed that media coverage and images in people's heads are interlinked. If a country, a regime, or an individual gets considerable media attention across borders, that country, regime, or individual is assumed to have a greater chance to be notified, feared or adored by great masses of receivers. The same idea was behind another, slightly older research tradition: the image studies. The best example of these is no doubt the nine-country study by William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril (1953) called *How Nations See Each Other*.

Flow studies can be summarized roughly by stating that there seems to be several sources for imbal-

ance and bias in the foreign news flow, without exception in such a way that the main focus of news remains on extremely few core countries, cities and elite individuals. International news flow is a flow dominated by the strong ones. Industrialized countries and the so-called North for decades have received considerably more attention than the so-called South. There are also regional centres which attract attention far more than other countries around them. All studies note the imbalance, but conclusions vary. Some authors think that core countries and individuals deserve their attention simply because they are more influential; some others say that the image and reality do not fit well together.

Until the early 1990s, the most extensive flow study was *Foreign News in the Media*, carried out in 29 countries in 1979 on the initiative of Unesco and the IAMCR together (Sreberny-Mohammadi & al, 1985). In each country, the study included the media with widest circulation. The outcome of the study – again presented as an admittedly crude simplification – was that the selection of foreign news in practically all countries followed the same pattern. The main focus remained with the 'home region', countries nearby. The second projection was directed to either the United States or Western Europe. As subject areas, most attention was given to foreign and domestic politics, military issues and economy. Countries in Eastern Europe reported more on culture and science and less on crime than the rest of the countries. As gatekeepers, the role of the four big news agencies, *Reuters*, *AP*, *UPI* and *AFP* and the national news agencies was crucial; the own staff covered 10-40 percent of the material.

In the early 1990s, an idea of rerunning the 1979 study came up in several researchers' seminars. With the political changes in Eastern Europe and many developing countries, with the emergence of new media and the use of new technology in news transmission, the world seemed to have changed so much that it was worth checking the news flow situation. Eventhough the technical and substance challenges were known: research funding for comparative international comparison studies is now far harder to get than in the 1970s, the volume of global news flow had grown enormously in 20 years, and in order to retain the comparison component, wide international studies tend to end up with quite crude research designs. Nevertheless in the preparatory meetings and seminars, it was decided that this time qualitative methods and news sources should be emphasized in the study. A series of monographs were planned to be published by the group, whose souls

are professors Robert Stevenson from the University of North Carolina, United States and Annabelle Sreberny from the University of Leicester, United Kingdom.

The new round of news flow research became considerably more extensive than the previous ones. To date, roughly 50 countries have sent their data from a two-week period in September 1995 to the pool of information, but some latecomers are still expected. The first book based on the material of the international study will be a quantitative analysis. It is already under preparation. The main criterium for selecting media for scrutiny was the same as before. Only media with wide circulations were included.

The greatest surprise in the quantitative results of the new news flow study was that though the world has changed, changes in the news arena seem to be rather small. The news business is still a big guys' business. There still are very few "news superpowers". The greatest crisis areas shifted from the Middle East to Bosnia and the former Soviet Union. But still, one's own continent seemed to be the area focused on most frequently, and as a result, the news flow between the South and the North is still badly unbalanced. The country receiving the most negative coverage globally was Afganisthan, the most positively received was the Vatican. Conflicts still sell well globally, and so do business news and sports. In Europe, reporting on culture catches somewhat more attention than in most other parts of the world. In Eastern Europe, reporting on conflicts concerning other Eastern European countries was minimal, but the news was still not much softer, because politics and economic news dominated the arena. (Pietiläinen, 1998b:67-83)

The stronghold position of the big news agencies seems to be weakening somewhat. They still dominate the news material covering such countries and areas which are not of vital interest to the country concerned; but the areas assessed as most essential are to a large extent covered by various types of correspondent arrangements. (Pietiläinen, 1998b:67-83)

It should be emphasized, however, that the results are still preliminary. Far more interesting than the crude global data will be the news perspectives, quantitative and qualitative, of various countries. The great potential of the study is the fact that any participating country is able to use the global data for its own elaborations. Also, a huge archive of primary media material is collected and translated to be at the disposal of all participants.

The sample was selected in such a way that one joint news item was ensured to appear in the mate-

rial globally: the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It was organized during the sample time period, in September 1995. The participants were encouraged to name other central news items independently. The variation was remarkable; there were not many globally shared issues of concern. Bosnia was one such a crisis area for Europe and the United States, but hardly anywhere outside these regions. An interesting detail is that in September 1995 Bosnia caught far greater headlines in Western than Eastern Europe, though the problem area was in fact closer to most Eastern European countries. The French nuclear bomb tests on the Mururoa area increased the attention given to Polynesia far beyond the average. Still another news item getting much attention in the industrialized world was a car bomb attack in Lyon, France.

The idea with the case studies was to study the particularities of the international reporting in various parts of the world, while the quantitative part characterized the "wholesale" activities in international news flow. A third dimension was the study of news sources. Reports on the qualitative aspects of the international news flow are still under preparation.

In the 1979 study, Finland closely followed the West European model, with Western Europe as a core area. However in Finland somewhat more attention was given to Eastern Europe than in other European countries. The countries which appeared most frequently on the foreign news map were Finland, the Soviet Union, the United States, Sweden, Great Britain, West Germany and Cyprus.

The Finnish world map in 1995 was quite similar to the previous one, with only some slight differences. The map was still very self-centred, because the country appearing most frequently in foreign news was Finland. Hence, a considerable proportion of foreign news in fact described the relations of Finland with the rest of the world; this is a result that has been noticed in several national flow studies earlier (e.g. Vehmas, 1964:68). Roughly every second foreign news item reported on European issues. Still the study caused a surprise regarding this aspect. The coverage of Europe had seemed to be growing continuously during the 1990s, while now the growth seemed to have stopped. News on Asia revealed a considerable growth, news on Africa a clear decline, when figures of 1995 were compared to the 1979 study. The countries of the "inner circle" of news in 1995, in the wide-circulation media in Finland, were Finland, the United States, Great Britain, Sweden, France, the EU, Russia, Germany and

Bosnia. Accordingly, one can say that the basic foreign news interest does not seem to change much, though some "hot news" flash locations appear on the arena for a short while. (Pietiläinen, 1998c:84-98)

The areas covered most frequently were sports, culture and entertainment, international politics, the economy and conflicts. The cradles of international politics and conflicts were located in Eastern Europe, internal problems were most frequently reported from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, while the bastions of culture, entertainment and sports seemed to be Western Europe and the United States. More than two-thirds of the individuals reported about in foreign news were men, and roughly one-third belonged to the established elites. Individuals were mostly reported about in news covering cultural issues. "Ordinary people" were rarely met in the foreign news in roles other than those of targets in conflicts or accidents. (Pietiläinen, 1998c: 84-98)

Almost every second news story (43%) in the studied media in Finland was covered by a Finnish reporter or correspondent, and these stories were extensive by volume. Among the most popular news agencies, the Finnish *STT/FNB* was the most frequently used, but it in fact is a "wholesale agent" for international agencies, because it translates and edits predominantly *Reuters* and *AFP* material. Some media also subscribed directly to *Reuters*, which was the source in roughly one third of the items. The variety of agency sources had become more limited in 15 years, because the *UPI* and (*Itar-Tass*) had disappeared almost totally from the arena. (Pietiläinen, 1998c:99)

In Finland, the "media events" of 1995 were the Mururoa tests, Bosnia and the Beijing conference. There was no such Finnish speciality as in May 1995, when the pilot for the Foreign News Flow study was carried out. When others reported on the Victory Day of World War II, the Finnish media concentrated almost totally on the Finnish gold medal and victory of their arch rival Sweden, in the Icehockey World Championship. The Finnish media studies in 1995 included the same media as in the 1979 study; the idea was to emphasize comparability. The results on the Finnish media were recently published as a book (Kivikuru, Pietiläinen, 1998), including both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study.

In the Finnish material, far more interest was in fact directed in the qualitative case studies covering Bosnia, Mururoa and the Beijing Conference of

Women. In the following, one of the cases, namely the reporting on the Beijing Conference will be discussed more in detail.

The Qualitative Case of Beijing

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, China (4.-15.9.1995) and the related NGO Forum (30.8.-8.9.1995) were chosen already in advance as one of the key themes of the Foreign News Flow qualitative analysis, since these events were expected to offer particularly interesting viewpoints to foreign news flow. The FWCW and the Forum became a news item a year before the actual Conference and Forum took place; in addition, these events were thought to bring forth themes unusual to foreign news coverage in addressing equality and gender questions. Especially intriguing was the expectation that the Conference and NGO Forum would unmask disagreements between various nations and cultural regions. The presupposition was that the most obvious debate would take place around the role of the host country China – because of its questionable human rights record and tense foreign relations. It was also speculated that the global role of the 50-year-old United Nations and the importance of such international events as the FWCW would be discussed.

The mission of the Fourth World Conference on Women was to agree upon a Platform of Action. The following items were drafted for this Platform prior to the actual meeting in Beijing: poverty, educational and health services, violence against women, impacts of wars and other armed conflicts on women, economical structural changes and their impact on women, distribution of power and women's participation in decision-making, improvement of the status of women, women's human rights, women and the media, as well as the use of natural resources and other environmental questions. It was envisioned that the topic of women's reproductive rights, in particular, would heat up emotions and challenge diplomatic relations. China as the host country managed to draw attention to its actions towards the NGO Forum already beforehand. The organizers of the Forum had agreed with China on the right of participation for every willing NGO; however, doubtful discussions on the possibilities of various organizations to have influence and participate in the Forum began already in early Spring 1995. Problems were thought to arise with the access of various NGOs to the site of the meeting and in the distribution of their materials. These specula-

tions led to a broader critique of China's human rights situation and foreign politics in general.

But what happened in China after all – according to the Finnish news coverage? The presumptions on the Beijing themes and actors were fulfilled quite accurately, but surprises were found in the format of the coverage. In addition, the Beijing news in Finland was spiced with the simultaneous colourful debate on "imported" Filipino wives: a Finnish businessman was found to be exercising a barely legal immigrant activity or a kind of a dating service by introducing Filipino women to Finnish bachelors. The most interesting turn of events, however, took place after the FWCW and the NGO Forum, in the form of an attack by Finnish Conference delegates against the media. The fuss began with the above cited column "Anarchy and tampons" in the *Helsingin Sanomat* daily and circulated around the following arguments: The media should not have talked about sanitary pads but equality; the media should not have emphasized the disagreements and debates but concentrate on the outcomes and decisions of the FWCW and the Forum.

The Foreign News Flow research did not analyze the entire Beijing coverage but focused in principle only on two research weeks (3.-9.9. and 17.-23.9.1995). However, the data collected amounts to 92 stories in electronic media and the press, and can still depict the essence of the news coverage, as well as, in the Finnish context, give possible explanations for the minor media circus that followed. The data for this qualitative analysis of the electronic media includes the main television news broadcasts of the public service *Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE)* and the commercial channel *MTV 3*, as well as the main radio newscast of *YLE*. During the research period, Beijing was present in a total of nine newscasts (*YLE* radio with four stories, *YLE TV* with three stories and *MTV3* with 2 stories). Since the coverage on the FWCW and the Forum had already begun in the press much earlier than in the electronic media, and continued quite some time after the research period, the data for the qualitative analysis was chosen to include all the Beijing stories from three newspapers published in Helsinki: the biggest Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat* ("HS", circulated nationwide), the popular nation-wide evening paper *Ilta-Sanomat* ("IS"), and *Kansan Uutiset* ("KU" – "People's News", a small news paper formerly closely affiliated with the Left Alliance Party). These papers published a total of 38 stories, or 40% of the researched Beijing coverage: HS with 20, IS with six, and KU with 12 stories.

The basic observation evolving from the data is that the Fourth World Conference on Women received a wide coverage in every medium, and that the coverage, quite expectedly, concentrated on the opening week of the FWCW. Television news focused on the opening ceremonies, the radio followed the events for a bit longer and more broadly, but the Finnish press stirred up the debate before and after the actual events. The controversy and media criticism began with the infamous "Anarchy" column, which was published four days prior to the beginning of the FWCW, and continued well after the end of the Conference. The electronic media did not see this aftermath as news, but commented on it, for instance, in a television talk show, in a few radio programmes and in the Opinion Section of the HS newspaper – where the editor-in-chief of the *YLE radio* news delivered his defence statement about the criticism on the Beijing coverage.

Galas and Confrontations: Actors and Themes of the Beijing Coverage

And then to other topics. The disputed UN's women's conference has been opened in Beijing with flashy ceremonies. The practical work of the conference, however, is expected to be difficult. Conflicts between the viewpoints of the Nordic and Islamic representatives arose already during the opening day. (*YLE TV* news lead on 4.9.1995)

The actors and themes in the Finnish news coverage on Beijing matched the expectations – and more: they seemed to follow a setting of a Medieval drama. There were spectacular festivities, there were wars between the true believers from the North and strangers from other cultural regions, there was the Dragon China and, on the other hand, the Fortress Europe protecting the views and demands of the Finnish representatives. Themes concerning the status of women were introduced via conflicts between differing cultures – let it be nations or interest groups. The main characters in the conflicts were, on one hand, China versus the participants of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum. On the other hand, the Vatican and the Islamic countries were described to have formed an "unholy alliance" against the liberal Northern Europe and the Nordic countries in particular. When describing the actors of the official FWCW, the news coverage concentrated on countries and their representatives, with the exception of the semi-political celebrities, such as Winnie Mandela and

Hillary Clinton. The coverage of the NGO Forum, then, often showed individual women "experiencing" the situation, rather than bringing forth organizations working for particular issues.

The nature of the various media also resulted in some differences in the coverage. The electronic media concentrated, as expected, on the themes and events of each news day. China, then, was the key actor of each news item. When describing the NGO forum, for example, *YLE's TV* and *radio* news gave voice mostly to Western participants to reflect on their expectations, experiences and the general atmosphere, and in this context the news even dared to use the word "feminism" when interviewing the American women's activist Betty Friedan. However, no matter how much enthusiasm the participants showed, China's position as a host country was, in every story, the underlying common denominator and the most prominent one. The issues and purpose of the Forum were undeniably overshadowed by the disagreements with its host. Similarly, both *YLE* and *MTV3 TV* news showed the opening ceremonies of the FWCW in great length, but remembered to comment critically on the security arrangements by China and to illustrate this with pictures of soldiers and security guards.

Also the press placed a great emphasis on the practical arrangements of the Conference and the NGO Forum, but actors and themes were more broadly defined than in the skeleton-like short TV and radio news stories. *Helsingin Sanomat*, with its role as the "Nation's First Newspaper", offered the widest coverage and addressed all the same issues as the electronic media, but had already begun in early September 1995, to build up the drama around China's problematic position. In these background stories, readers were not prepared to understand the issues which would be taken up in the Conference and in related events, but rather the expectations for drama and conflicts between China and participants were created. These preceding stories gave the impression that the UN would take the meeting of 10.000 women to a fairytale or nightmare land, where the abbreviation "NGO" alone is a synonym for anarchy. In all of its coverage, HS emphasized the disagreements between China and "others". The official China, often the police as its representative, received criticism through quotes from the UN officials as well as from the celebrity participants, from Bhutto and Clinton to Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. The Chinese people, on the other hand, were described in a more sympathetic light – interested but a bit lost regarding the actual happenings of the FWCW and the forum. In sum, nations, officials/

representatives and celebrity individuals formed the star group of actors. NGOs, for instance, were often only in secondary and passive roles (typically objects of criticism by China) and main actors only in two stories: one describing a sponsored teleconference between women in Finland and NGO representative in China, another reporting on the status of the women's movement in Namibia.

Compared to HS, the evening paper *Ilta=Sanomat* could be said to have followed its "lighter" mission and genre. Its coverage left mostly aside the main issues or even conflicts in Beijing, and focused almost solely on the actions of the (well-known) Finnish representatives. The only other information worth of reporting was the heavy rain which disturbed the closing ceremonies of FWCW. *Kansan Uutiset*, on the other hand, offered the most conventional and official kind of reporting on Beijing. It gave voice to individual participants of the FWCW and the forum, but especially to the delegates of various countries. The official representatives were presented in a news-agency like manner: "Sweden", "the United States", "Guatemala" and "Ecuador" gave their opinions, agreed or disagreed. *Kansan Uutiset* did not leave aside the conflicts between the host and the participants, but rather gave much more room to the descriptions of disagreements and compromises between the participants. It was emphasized that issues related to the status of women are difficult because so many views exist on different political, cultural and religious levels.

Traditional News in a Supporting Role: Style of the Beijing News

The opening celebration was a spectacular gala. Winnie Mandela, the wife of the president of South Africa Nelson Mandela, was late for the opening, which caused quite a hassle (...) (Reporter Sinikka Arteva in *YLE TV News* 4.9.1995)

The Foreign News Flow project's expectations of the actors and themes of Beijing were accurate; however, a closer analysis of the data revealed a surprise concerning the style of the news coverage. Conventional news reporting with facts was overshadowed by features and human interest journalism. On the scale of traditionalism, *Kansan Uutiset* represented the conventional coverage, whereas the unofficial main news sources, *YLE*, *MTV3* and *Helsingin Sanomat*, mixed in a more popular approach. *Ilta=Sanomat*, although close to the tabloid

press in its style and content, was most surprising in that it took the Beijing topic as much as it did.

In the electronic media, the Beijing coverage did not deviate from the normal time-restricted news format. Rather, associations to human interest journalism were found in the language and visualization of the news. The events tackling the status of women were not even described in a seemingly "neutral" manner; on the contrary, it was made very clear who the good and bad characters in the stories were. For instance, the first *MTV3* news item on Beijing, on 3.9.95, presented towards the end of the newscast, reported that Chinese police had "had a fight" with the NGO participants. The concrete evidence of the fight was that the police had denied access to Islamic demonstrators from Huairou to Beijing, and that some policemen had abused Canadian women who were handing out information on the Tibetan situation.

The other major conflict – between Northern Europe and the Islamic countries – was also well described and illustrated in the electronic media to provide elements for a clear standing on this issue. The views of the liberal Northerners were described very factually whereas the representatives of the Vatican-Islam alliance "got furious" when disagreements "were heating up emotions". *YLE TV news* (4.9.95), for example, first showed a short interview with a Finnish MP, who summarized women's rights as human rights and gave an account of the common EU standing on women's reproductive rights. Then Sudan's male representative and Iran's female delegate were given their turn, with the journalist's lead: "The demand to bury cultural differences makes Islamic countries furious." Pictures of veiled women accompanied the interview with Sudan's representative; when the Iranian delegate appeared on the screen, the journalists commented: "The member of the Iranian parliament is following the opinions [of the Sudanese delegate], and the interpreter wouldn't even say the word 'sex' aloud". Another evidence of this "mixed style" of the Beijing news in the electronic media was the coverage of the opening of the World Conference. As in cultural reports, the news items emphasized how "fabulous" the gala was, how full of "fireworks of colour and music", and how the opening "didn't leave anyone untouched".

In the press coverage, this cocktail of formats and styles was even more obvious. The profiles of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Kansan Uutiset* were not unexpected as such, but rather illustrated the ways in which a big and a small newspaper cover a "ne-

cessity” topic – one that is not too exciting but rather distant, with links to world politics. “Women’s issues” provided an extra twist that gave these news items particular tones and colour, which influenced the extent and style of the coverage.

Kansan Uutiset paid relatively much attention to the Beijing Conference, and the drama embedded in the FWCW and the NGO Forum gave this news an additional importance. On the other hand, this small paper was very dependent on the news agencies’ output; over 50% of its stories originated from them. The *Finnish News Agency STT/FNB* proved indispensable to *Kansan Uutiset*, and the paper could influence its profile only by selecting the stories offered, not adding to them. However, KU made efforts to create a “presence” in Beijing in that it publicized a report by a participant and a few interviews with an official Finnish representative after the Conference.

Helsingin Sanomat seemed to follow another, well-planned strategy: regardless of the follow-up criticism HS received from the participants, the data alone shows that HS seemed to disregard the Beijing news item as being substantially important, but seemed to rather consider it as a topic for “in-reality” features. The presence of the paper’s own journalist in China was emphasized – only someone on location can know that tampons are over priced in Huairou... (Anarchy and tampons, 1.9.95). HS also made the clearest distinction between the FWCW and the NGO Forum, compared to any other medium: readers might not have been aware of the difference, but the style of HS reporting left no questions in this respect. The NGO Forum, marginal to the international power politics, was described in colourful headlines (Anarchy and tampons 1.9.95, “Chinese clean-up. Beijing is free of dust and impoliteness. The Women’s Conference can begin”. 3.9.95, “Is Loimaa on the line? Is China following us?” [article on the tele conference] 3.9.95). In contrast, the FWCW – where nations’ officials were negotiating – was approached with a more respectful tone (for instance: “Hillary Clinton criticized China’s human rights situation. The participants were surprised at this strong standing” 6.9.96, Nordic participants criticized China’s nuclear testing. Also Finns participated in a demonstration in Beijing” 8.9.95). In sum, HS started with light, “on location” columns, continued with a tabloid-like dramatization of conflicts, and ended up upset and irritated almost a month later, responding in an editorial to the criticism made by the Conference participants on its coverage (21.9.95).

The (Unbearable?) Lightness: Lessons Learned from the Beijing News

Journalism from the times of the Iron Curtain seems to be the ideal of those Beijing Conference participants who criticized the press and YLE TV news on the manner of covering the event. (...)

Already in advance the Conference was doomed in the media as unsuccessful. This accusation is very strange. Both the officials preparing the Conference and the NGO representatives informed beforehand that there were great difficulties even to keep to the decisions of the Cairo Population Conference. Many organizations boycotted the Beijing Conference or were forced to stay home because of the terrible arrangements. (...)

When a tightly-knit group works hard towards a goal, everything else tends to be left aside. The group spirit grows and the joy of success is great. There is nothing wrong with that but one must keep a sense of reality and understand that outsiders might not share the same bliss. Some of the criticism seems paranoid. It is stupid to waste energy in a war against imagined repression when the achievements of the Conference should be translated into action. (HS Editorial “Childish Anger” 21.9.1995)

Did the Conference representatives have a real point in the criticism of the Beijing news coverage? As one of the participants stated (HS 21.9.95), did the stories concentrate too much on veiled women and let the hot topic of the Filipino wives overshadow the Conference? Or was the above cited HS editorial right in referring to the “childish anger” of some Finnish Beijing participants?

The analysis of the TV, radio and newspapers stories on Beijing, to say the least, shows that the opening of the Fourth World Conference on Women (4.9.95) received “good” coverage: the event was reported in the press headlines and it was the first foreign news item in the electronic media. On the other hand, TV and radio concentrated on the two conflict topics: China versus participants and the Nordic versus the Vatican – Islamic approach on the status of women. The news items described in this article did not touch upon other concrete political and economical themes which were on the agenda of the Conference and the Forum. Neither did these

news stories debate about the role of the 50-year-old UN in global politics. The observations related to these themes and actors were, in fact, the essence of the criticism: Agreements and the consensus on the Platform of Action were not discussed.

In addition, the comparison between the news coverage by *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Kansan Uutiset* may shed light on other aspects of the critical views. The different approaches of these papers on Beijing and on journalism in general became clear at the beginning and end of the coverage. Both papers only surfaced the issue, but in different ways. KU revealed its leftist history more strongly than usual, in that it emphasized solidarity, in this case, solidarity towards women. HS, in turn, represented itself as the forerunner of a kind of new journalistic practice – of “live broadcast”, as this on-location feature reportage is called within the paper. However, when HS was criticized, it reacted strongly, as seen in the above cited editorial. From the viewpoint of the Beijing coverage, this editorial can also be interpreted as paternalistic – especially since simultaneous with the coverage of China, HS published a series of stories on the Filipino wives in Finland (altogether 21 stories, of which 19 were published in September-October 95). This parallel coverage, more than anything else, reveals the standing of HS on the status of women in general.

On the whole, the Beijing news coverage in the Finnish media deserves some thanks, since it gave space and importance to women and women’s issues much more than (foreign) news usually tends to do. The quantitative account of the data from the two research weeks shows that Beijing news followed the usual foreign news pattern: nations or their representatives accounted for almost half of the actors, private individuals for some 20%. In this case, however, half of the actors were female, less than 20% were male, and the rest were “indefinable” – organizations, nations, governments and so on. Not surprisingly, in the Beijing news “women’s issues” amounted to almost 70% of all the main topics, 5% of the topics concerned international politics and 5% addressed human rights as the main issue. These figures are emphasized when comparing them to the news research of the *YLE* (Sana 1995) and to an analysis of a news day in 71 countries (*MediaWatch* 1995). During both the “regular” constructed newsweek of *YLE* and the one particular newsday of *MediaWatch*, women represented only some one fourth of the actors, and there were hardly any “women’s issues” to be found.

The lesson learned of the Beijing coverage highlights two distinctive trends – one illustrates and

follows the traditional criticism of the negative crisis-based orientation of the news, the other suggests a general change in Finnish journalism. First of all, the analysis of the news on the FWCW and the Forum tells about the role of international politics and especially about the role of the UN in the media. The UN, although the organizer, did not become a central actor in the Beijing news, but when there is a conflict situation where this organization is involved (for instance as in Bosnia during the Foreign News Study), it becomes newsworthy. The *MediaWatch* research illustrates the same tendency: one third of the news items on one day, in 71 countries, were about politics and catastrophies, whereas other international issues, such as UN related topics, amounted to only one percent of the stories. Secondly, there seems to be a change in expressive style going on in the Finnish media, and to which all the media analyzed here tried to respond in their own way. The coverage on the Beijing women’s conferences emphasized the fact that this change is ongoing, since it made the media focus on a theme outside of the traditional mainstream news journalism.

The Beijing lesson to journalism and its critique is, in simple terms, the following: news journalism is undergoing a process of becoming lighter, and “more popular”. This process can first, or easiest, be seen in the coverage of unconventional topics, such as the Beijing’s women’s conferences. This kind of popularization may provide more space for unconventional themes in newscasts. On the other hand, it also takes a toll on the substance of these themes and/or emphasizes dramatic and controversial elements, more suitable for human interest journalism. In other words: contrary to the criticism, was the lightness of the Beijing coverage in fact bearable? If the coverage would not have focused on controversies, would Beijing have been in the news agenda at all?

The main Beijing lesson to news flow studies, however, is that qualitative approaches bring forth aspects which would never have been traceable by quantitative means. This does not suggest that quantitative research would be outdated or useless. Although a cliché, it seems that these two approaches not only complement each other but are essential to a full understanding of the nature of the foreign news and the complex structures that produce and distribute it. For example, a quantitative approach was enough to show that even the crisis of Bosnia is still a “regional” one, without global dimensions, in that its coverage concentrated on Western Europe and Northern America. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis seems fruitful in detecting more

subtle features of journalism and its infrastructures. As described above, the qualitative approach was able to link the style and the content of the Beijing coverage with the resources available for the particular media. In addition, it detected the widely speculated – if not yet researched – trend of the popularization of news. This analysis showed glimpses beyond the slogans about tabloidization, in that it depicted some differences between crude tabloid journalism and "light news". *Ilta=Sanomat*, for instance, did not deviate from its role as a tabloid-oriented evening paper – neither did the more "serious" Finnish news media go into tabloid topics. Yet, the way the latter discussed the Beijing news was

clearly less heavy than their traditions would lead to expect.

At this stage, our analysis of the Beijing coverage was still more a finger exercise than a systematic qualitative search into the depths of the texts and contexts concerned. If taken one step further, and given the chance of having similar case studies on various media in various countries for comparison, the exercise would become intellectually thrilling. In short, a balanced quanti/quali approach in flow research might make the flow tradition far more challenging and demanding. So far, the flow study has predominantly sufficed for the provision of data only – no doubt often very relevant data. With one step further towards the dimension of qualitative research, the flow data may create the potential to develop a complex network of questions on the essence of journalism.

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