

# Eyes of the World



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*By Frank Louis Rusciano*

## *International opinion regards the US*

The attacks of September 11 stimulated interest in how world opinion regards the United States, ranging from discussions of views on “the Arab street” to news magazine covers asking, “Why Does the World Hate Us So Much?”

How does the rest of the world perceive our nation? Beyond certain anecdotal evidence, this issue has been difficult to address. We have been able, however, to shed some light by evaluating how a number of international newspapers conceptualized world opinion toward the United States during the weeks after 9/11. The study used a predesigned questionnaire to analyze all references to “world opinion” about the attacks in stories and editorials published between September 11 and October 31, 2001.

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The newspapers included in the analysis were Argentina’s *Nacion*, Russia’s *Pravda*, Nigeria’s *Guardian*, Israel’s *Ha’aretz*, *The New York Times*, *The London Times*, *The China Daily*, and *The Times of India*. These were chosen to represent several major regions of the world. *The International Herald Tribune* was added as a newspaper that aspires to an international perspective. With the exception of *The China Daily*, which is government controlled, all the newspapers are independently published. The analysis was done in English, except for the *Nacion*, which was analyzed in the original Spanish edition.

Obviously, this sample of nine newspapers couldn’t actually measure world public opinion, or even elite opinion—different newspapers in the same country or even the same city can have very different editorial positions.

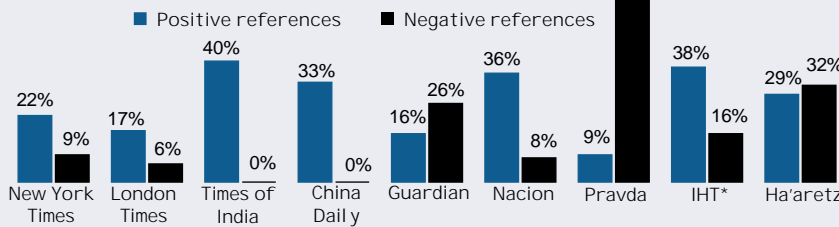
However, analyzing them offered some general guidance about elite perceptions of world opinion. In *Manufacturing*

*Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky held that newspaper discourse tends to reflect the dominant ideological and regime interests of the nation of origin. While a newspaper’s national origin does not determine its discourse, it does provide clues to how certain issues are discussed and certain terminology framed. Our study attempted to discern and interpret those clues.

More important, by indicating changes over time, probably in response to events, the study demonstrated that perceptions of world public opinion can change as the real world changes. Since these are influential publications, these shifts can presumably have an effect on world opinion itself, and even on decisions of the United States government as to how and what it chooses to communicate to the rest of the world.

In the seven weeks of the study, 263 references to world opinion on the attacks appeared in the nine newspapers. Seventy percent of the references

Figure 1  
**World Opinion Toward the US, Post-9/11**



Note: Based on 194 newspaper references evaluating the United States. Neutral references are not shown.  
 \* International Herald Tribune

were in editorials, the rest in reports.

In 90% of the cases, “world opinion” was referenced implicitly rather than explicitly. Explicit references included use of the phrase “world opinion,” or some equivalent such as “international opinion,” “world public opinion,” or “international public opinion.” Implicit references were those that attributed to the world some judgement or reaction, such as “worldwide shock,” “world outrage,” or a “complete political and ideological isolation of terrorists through international cooperation.”

Other implicit references attributed to the world or the international community actual expressions of opinion, noting, for instance, how “the world had ignored” support for terrorism, “the world [would] not forget” the United States, or “the world was appalled” by the attacks.

Consistent with its goal of being “the world’s newspaper,” *The International*

*Herald Tribune* contained the most references—72—comprising 28% of the total. This was more than twice that of the next-highest proportion, from the Nigerian *Guardian* (13%, or 34 references). The rest followed with 12% (*Ha’aretz*), 11% (*The New York Times*), 10% (*Nacion*), 8% (*Pravda*), 7% (*The London Times*), 6% (*The China Daily*), and 5% (*The Times of India*).

These perceptions of how the world felt about the United States in the weeks following the attacks were as diverse as the newspapers and regions studied. In general, positive evaluations outweighed negative ones by a margin of 28% to 18%. [The remaining 54% were neutral. Only those stories which evaluated the United States were included in this part of the analysis, for a total of 194.]

As Figure 1 indicates, however, these assessments varied somewhat according to newspaper—the Nigerian

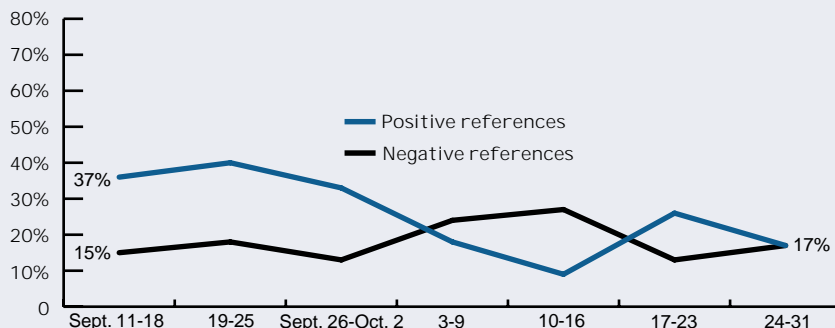
*Guardian*, Russian *Pravda*, and Israeli *Ha’aretz* all showed negative evaluations of world opinion outweighing positive ones. Positive outweighed negative in the other six newspapers.

The reactions of leaders abroad reflected these findings. Two weeks after the attacks, a former German minister of economic affairs stated that “the United States enjoys a wave of sympathy and friendship around the world.” Similarly, the Gulf Cooperation Council representing six Arab Persian Gulf nations stated it was “willing to enter an alliance that enjoys the support of the international community to fight international terrorism and to punish its perpetrators.”

These results did not tell the entire story, however. During the period under study, perceptions of world opinion toward the United States shifted.

In the weeks up to October 3, the positive evaluations overall far outweighed the negative (see Figure 2). But in the next week, the negative outweighed the positive; and while the findings reversed themselves again in the week starting October 17, the high levels of international support did not recur. Indeed, by the end of the study, the percentages of positive and negative evaluations were equal in the foreign press studied.

Figure 2  
**Opinion of US Shifts Over Time**



Note: Based on 194 newspaper references evaluating the United States. The figures represent a single crosstabulation of the positive and negative references for all newspapers by week. Neutral references are not shown.

	Positive	Negative
September 11-18	37%	15%
September 19-25	40	18
September 26-October 2	33	13
October 3-9	18	24
October 10-16	9	27
October 17-23	26	13
October 24-31	17	17

A likely reason for this shift was the American and British bombing campaign against Afghanistan, which began on October 7. When the United States took military action in response to the attacks, its international image probably shifted in certain foreign newspapers from injured party to aggressor.

**T**errorism is a thorny subject for world opinion because it is a *method*, rather than an ideology, a nation or a leader. In the newspapers' references to world opinion, terrorism was roundly condemned by all the nations studied. But problems arose regarding how to define "terrorism," beyond the horrible examples in New York and Washington, DC.

For instance, should terrorism be defined to include unintended civilian casualties in a military campaign, along with the intentional targeting of civilian populations? Since the answers to such questions remain in dispute, it is very difficult to reach an international consensus on the term's meaning or legitimate responses to it.

This problem was evident in an analysis of the moral and pragmatic components of world opinion in the newspaper stories. The moral component refers to *values* that are shared internationally. Examples of press statements included in the tally of the moral component were, "The attacks on September 11

violate the norms of all civilized nations," and "The international community judges terrorism to be abhorrent."

The pragmatic component encompasses shared *interests* and was exemplified in these stories by such statements as "The entire world is threatened by terrorism," and "The international community has a common stake in preventing such attacks."

**I**n past studies of world opinion, such as "Toward a Notion of 'World Opinion,'" a 1990 article by the author that appeared in *The International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, the moral component tended to be more common and more important than the pragmatic. The moral component partially explained the influence of world opinion over international affairs—indeed, morality tended to be central to discussions of the power of international opinion to influence events or the actions of leaders or nations. In this study, however, the moral component appeared in fewer cases (42%) than the pragmatic (46%).

These components were further analyzed in terms of the power or influence world opinion was assumed to have regarding the crisis. A story or editorial was determined to reference the "power" of world opinion when it mentioned any influence or force world opinion was assumed to exert over world affairs.

Power was either referenced directly by some synonym such as "power," "force," "influence," or "coercion," or indirectly in terms of a specific effect world opinion was supposed to create. Examples of the latter would include "the country will change its behavior out of deference to world opinion" or "international pressure has prompted a change in rhetoric, if not policy, among certain major nations."

In the post-September 11 news stories, the moral component was not correlated with the power of world opinion; the presence of the pragmatic component was.

**G**iven the difficulties of defining "terrorism," it appears that the judgements rendered regarding world opinion were driven more by the interests nations were perceived to share than by their values. Put another way, the newspapers generally acknowledged that, irrespective of any moral consensus, attacks such as those on September 11 threatened the peace and security of all nations.

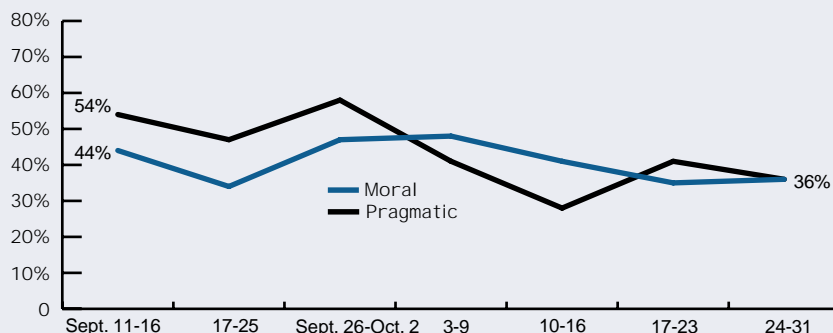
This perspective was reflected in a number of newspaper reports and editorials where the attacks were interpreted not as being solely against the United States, but as an assault on the very notions of "civilization" or "civilized society."

Like the balance between positive and

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Figure 3

### Moral Component Holds Steady, Pragmatic Shifts Sharply



**Note:** Based on entire sample of 263 newspaper references. The figures represent a single crosstabulation of the positive and negative references for all newspapers by week.

	Moral	Pragmatic
September 11-16	44%	54%
September 17-25	34	47
September 26-October 2	47	58
October 3-9	48	41
October 10-16	41	28
October 17-23	35	41
October 24-31	36	36

negative references, this view also appeared to be affected by the United States' response to the attacks in the week of October 3 to 9. As shown in Figure 3 on page 13, the percentages of references to the moral component of world opinion were fairly consistent over time during the study; at no time did they include a majority of the citations, instead varying between 33 and 47% of the references to world opinion.

By contrast, the pragmatic component was more evident in the first three weeks of the crisis, appearing in a majority of cases in two out of the three weeks. This pattern shifted sharply after October 3, when the percentage of pragmatic citations dropped below that of the moral citations. As with the positive references to the United States, the pattern recovered somewhat in the week of October 17, only to converge in the final week of the study.

It seems reasonable that the pattern of positive references to the United States and that of citations of the pragmatic component should appear so similar. Other nations could find common cause and a common interest with our country while the United States was viewed as a victim of these attacks; all countries could identify with the threat such actions pose to world order. Once the United States took aggressive action in

response, though, certain newspapers perceived that world opinion no longer reflected internationally shared interests, and instead focused upon the implications of seemingly unilateral action by our nation and Great Britain.

The changes in the foreign press' perceptions of world opinion over time do not appear to have been lost on the Bush administration. Early in October, prompted in part by the British, the administration released partial evidence linking Osama bin Laden to the attacks on the United States and providing the basis for their suspicion that Afghanistan was harboring him. This effort continued past the dates included in this study, with the release of videotapes of bin Laden discussing the attacks and rejoicing over the resultant loss of life.

Given the apparent importance of events to media perspectives on world opinion, it remains the province of future research to test whether this new evidence affected opinion toward the United States' actions in a more positive direction.

It is natural for citizens to react to a trauma like the attacks on September 11 by feeling under siege from a hostile world. It is also natural to seek to divide the world into our allies and our enemies, into those for us and those against us. The preceding analy-

sis suggests that these reactions, though natural, oversimplify the way other nations view the world's intentions towards the United States.

World opinion about this country, or on any subject for that matter, is an ongoing process that may potentially affect our international image and shift it in response to events. An international consensus might arise through a negotiation among the different perspectives on world opinion; the evidence here suggests, however, that such a consensus eluded American efforts, at least through October 31, 2001.

Assessing international attitudes toward the United States is a far more complex matter than merely asking whether the world "hates us." In the foreign press, "the world" is not seen as a place necessarily friendly or hostile to the United States. Rather, other nations' newspapers picture something akin to McLuhan's "global village," where sentiments must be courted and won to one's side through consistent effort. ●

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## Suspicious Minds

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cans tend to believe in agency more than in luck. Close to three-fifths repeatedly disagreed with a Pew item asserting that "success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control." When spectacular developments occur, people tend to believe they were caused by powerful groups or forces.

Interpreting a survey taken within a week of the assassination of President Kennedy, Paul Sheatsley and Jacob Feldman remarked,

It is hard for most people to understand the psychic processes of a mentally ill person who seemingly acts at random; it is much easier to ascribe the event to an organized conspiracy with a conscious goal. Moreover, the conclusion that mentally ill people not responsible for their behavior are at large among us... is both bizarre and threatening. Presumption of some sort of conspiracy removes some of the caprice from the situation and thus provides a less threatening inter-

pretation, especially if one does not really take it too seriously.

Americans' readiness to believe in conspiracies and government coverups has consequences as well as causes. It is part of a vicious circle that both fosters and is nourished by the feelings of distrust and disengagement from civic life. In extreme cases, it can motivate destructive anti-social acts. It stokes a suspicion of government which contributes to keeping those most in need of assistance alienated from the public institutions which might be able to help them. ●