

The Role of Sanctions in Raising Public Awareness of Human Rights Catastrophes: A New Approach to the Sanctions Question

By Nathan M. Kohlenberg

Abstract:

A half-century of political science research into economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool has largely concluded that sanctions are ineffective at changing the undesirable behavior of foreign states. In this paper, I argue that sanctions serve an important foreign policy goal, namely the promotion of human rights through increased awareness of abuses worldwide, and are therefore a worthwhile pursuit for supporters of human rights.

Introduction

Over the past half-century, economic sanctions have gained in popularity as a tool of foreign policy. Their use has increased many times over since the end of the Cold War. Most political scientists are deeply skeptical, however, of their ability to accomplish their overt goals: the alteration or elimination of the undesirable policies or regimes in foreign countries. Most studies have found few cases in which clear gains have been achieved through sanctions, and with so little variance in the dependent variable, the study of sanctions has largely foundered. In this paper, I argue for a communicative theory of sanctions in which sanctions are effective at raising the profile of human rights abuses within the sender state, thereby serving the interests of human rights campaigners.

This radical departure from traditional sanctions analysis requires us to examine the attention paid to foreign human rights crises in the states that most often use sanctions as a human rights enforcement mechanism, namely the OECD countries of Western Europe and North America. I argue that sanctions can, given the right circumstances, be highly effective at informing the public about these issues by sending cues to the media that these issues are a priority for the national government, and therefore worthy of media attention. However, my research determines that there are important and predictable limitations to sanctions effectiveness in this capacity. Sanctions will, ironically, be less effective when major constituencies within the sender state demand them since in such cases the communicative goal has already been accomplished. They also will be less effective late in a conflict situation, when the sender-state population may have ceased to see the relevance of their own country's involvement.

Sanctions' Effectiveness by Any Other Name...

As there is no shortage of academic study on the effectiveness of economic sanctions at affecting state behavior, I will only address a few of the studies that are relevant to my thesis that sanctions may have an important role in the *sender state*, even when they are ineffective at causing change within the *target state*. One of the first to tackle the question of economic sanctions in a comprehensive way was Peter Wallensteen (1968). In “Characteristics of Economic Sanctions,” Wallensteen attempted to create a language and typology for the analysis of economic sanctions, much of which is still present in the modern academic literature, including terms like “sender state” and “target state.”¹ His pessimistic conclusion that sanctions are ineffective at fomenting policy or regime change in the target state remains the standard thesis that contemporary scholarship attempts to affirm, reject, or qualify. My argument supports his conclusion in the literal sense that I agree that sanctions are ineffective at changing target state policy, but I reject his assumption that this disqualifies sanctions from having significant value.

Most studies have, unfortunately, focused solely on the effects of sanctions on the target state. One study by Adrian U-Jin Ang and Dursun Peksen still addresses the question of what conditions are conducive to target state altering economic sanctions, but instead of focusing solely on target state misperceptions, as many previous studies have, they examine perceptions of issue salience in both sender and target states. Issue salience, which is difficult to quantify empirically, represents the importance that each side ascribes to the issue or question at hand. They attempt to validate one fairly intuitive hypothesis: that the greater the difference in perceived issue salience (sender’s perceived salience minus target’s perceived salience), the more likely sanctions are to succeed. This makes logical sense: each side will be willing to incur higher costs when the issue is of great importance. Thus in situations when the issue is of great

importance to the sender, but not to the receiver, the receiver will relent first, and sanctions will have been “successful” (in the traditional sense). When the situation is of greater importance to the receiver, the opposite will occur. Ang and Peksen offer the example of American sanctions against China after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in which the United States banned arms sales to China in protest of their disregard for human rights. But China did not view the conflict in terms of human rights but rather as an internal threat to the ruling regime’s survival. Because political survival trumps human rights, the United States abandoned its position almost immediately and efforts by some members of Congress to remove China’s “most-favored-nation” (MFN) status were crushed by the Bush administration.²

This logic is critical to the question that I am trying to address. Since all of the sender states I examined in this study are democracies, it is intuitive that sender state issue salience would be related to public opinion and awareness concerning the target state and its human rights situation. I break down issue salience, however, into salience among political leaders and elites, and salience within the general population. Table 1 is a matrix of predicted outcomes given different arrangements of issue salience among different actors.

A few scholars have examined, both quantitatively and qualitatively, news coverage of human rights in Western media outlets, most notably Jay Ovsiovitch in his aptly named article “News Coverage of Human Rights.” His 2005 study of news coverage in the United States of human rights abuses from 1978-1987 found that three major news outlets each representing a different medium (the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and the CBS Evening News) had largely homogenous coverage of human rights issues.³ This is encouraging for my study for two reasons. It suggests that my assumption, which I do not test in this study, that increased coverage of human rights issues serves the interests of those who suffer human rights abuses is an

assumption accepted as valid by mainstream political scientists. Secondly, it is promising for my methodology, because if news coverage of these issues is fairly homogeneous, then selection bias in my news sources should be a negligible factor. Ovsiovitch also found that coverage of human rights issues was, in the 1970s and 80s, biased towards Eastern Europe and Latin America.⁴ Given this Cold War timeframe, this is hardly surprising, but it does demonstrate that the media does not treat all human rights abuses equally. This study further validates this conclusion.

A concept closely related to the questions both of issue salience and media coverage is “resonance.” There is considerable evidence to suggest that a prime determinant of whether news outlets cover a story is whether the narrative behind the story has an intangible resonance with the news consumers. Margaret Keck addresses this concept in her 1995 article “Social Equity and Environmental Politics in Brazil,” in which she ascribes the change in the international perception of the rural poor from the causes of environmental degradation to the vanguards of environmental justice to the way the issue was framed in the media. By internationalizing the plight of local Brazilian rubber tappers, activists established a narrative that consumers of media, and therefore the media itself, found compelling.⁵ In this paper, I argue that this logic can be applied to sanctions, too, in that when sanctions fit in with a compelling narrative about justice and human dignity, they are effective at rousing public sentiment.

The Argument and the Method of Study

While previous scholars have defined the success or failure of economic sanctions as whether the target policy or regime was changed, I argue in this paper that sanctions designed to curb human rights abuses can be awarded a certain measure of success if they raise the profile of

those abuses within the sender state. This secondary goal can only be achieved, however, in certain circumstances, namely when their application precedes public awareness of an issue that commands a relatively high degree of government and elite attention. In cases in which the public demands sanctions, the communicative function of sanctions cannot be achieved, because public awareness has already reached its practical peak, and further action will see diminishing returns in terms of media attention.

Because the nature of media attention given to perceived economic and security threats differs so greatly from that given to “sympathetic causes” such as human rights and state terror, I have chosen not to include states sanctioned for their perceived military aggression, or for their undesirable economic policies, instead focusing on states sanctioned for their persecution of their own people. It would not be reasonable to compare, for instance, the media coverage of the sanctions regime imposed upon Iraq following the Gulf War to that of the sanctions imposed upon Sudan for its crimes in Darfur since they represent entirely different phenomena.

I demonstrate that sanctions are effective at raising the profile of international crises, so my independent variable of interest is the presence or absence of sanctions. To quantify my dependent variable, namely the media attention that foreign human rights abuses receive, I use the frequency with which stories about the relevant human rights crises appear in a variety of media outlets in the countries by which the sanctions are applied. I chose my media sources based on several criteria, including readership and perceived political bias. Lexis-Nexis is the primary source of data for my dependent variable. Though gathering this data was a time-consuming process, by examining a broad spread of news sources, I believe that I have accurately evaluated my dependent variable, since my indicator (the frequency of news stories concerning a given human rights situation) is so strongly representative of my variable (the

extent of media coverage of the same human rights situation). In order to more clearly establish the causal link between my independent and dependent variable, I have taken temporally broad samples of media coverage, and controlled my findings with data from other states during the same periods, to determine whether public interest is responding to policy changes, or the opposite, is taking place.

To quantify the change in media coverage before and after sanction events, I gathered data on the number of stories about the relevant target state's human rights abuses found in the print media of the sender state in each of the 12 months preceding, and each of the 12 months following, the sanction action. By using a t-test to compare the differences in mean number of news stories per month in the year leading up to sanctions to that of the year following sanctions, I was able to determine the change of coverage in a given sender state after sanctions took place. I chose to compare 12-month intervals because it was a long enough period to generate statistical significance but short enough that I could find control cases in which the control country did not engage in any sanctions activity with the target state during the 25-month study period.

Correlative analysis would not give any evidence of causation without controlling each media market with a foreign media market that would, presumably, not experience the media coverage change resulting from the first country's application of sanctions. In each case, I compared the change in media attention in the sender state to the change in media attention in another English-speaking country that had taken no economic or diplomatic action against the target state during that 25-month period (the 12 months before and after, plus the actual month during which sanctions were applied). I then used that data as a baseline upon which to base my actual sender state data. By doing this, I made sure extrinsic factors such as actual changes in the situation in the target state, were controlled for and were not creating unexpected changes in

media coverage in the sender state that were unrelated to the application of sanctions. In some cases, it was difficult to find another English language media market that did not come from a country that engaged in sanctions activity during the 25-month period. The balance between a long enough study period to generate significant results, and a short enough period that I could find valid control cases, seemed to find equilibrium around 25 months.

For each case, I used the same search terms for news stories for every month in both periods and in both the sender and control state's media. In some cases I changed the search terms for a given country. In Burma in 2008, for instance, Cyclone Nargis created a massive news spike that required me to exclude stories about the storm's devastation. My search terms for that period, therefore, were different than those for the 1992 period, but were consistent across all the months and both countries within each period.

Case selection was a critical part of the designing of this project. There were few cases from which to choose and I needed to make sure that I was selecting cases that represented the phenomenon that I was examining in a wide spread of contexts. Each case yielded interesting and unique results. The first country that I chose to study was Burma. The case of American sanctions in Burma is an instructive one because, as one American diplomat at the embassy in Yangon said in 1989, "Since there are no U.S. bases and very little strategic interest, Burma is one place where the United States has the luxury of living up to its principles."⁶ The United States, the European Union, and many other Western countries have imposed sanctions on Burma since the military government crushed a democratic uprising in 1988.⁷ Nevertheless, Burma's human rights situation has not improved yet has remained largely outside the awareness of the American public. This makes it an interesting, and potentially challenging case to examine in this context.

Belarus is the only European case in my study. With fewer than 10 million people, it also represents by far the smallest of the five countries I examined. I wanted to include a European example in my study for it has often been claimed that we in the Western world are more tolerant of human rights abuses when the victims are non-white. Also, Belarus, like Burma, represents an abject failure of sanctions in the traditional sense because the unreformed oppressive regime remains in power.

Sudan is another state that has become economically isolated as a result both of its abysmal human rights record and its role as a state sponsor of terror. In response to sanctions, Sudan has cultivated strong ties with states outside of the traditional human rights enforcement regime. Like China it has successfully replaced most of the markets now closed to it with others.⁸ This in turn, may have contributed to the International Criminal Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for the country's leader, President Omar al-Bashir, on charges of crimes against humanity.⁹ The case of Sudan is interesting because the direction of causality between the application of sanctions and the public outrage that developed regarding the genocide is, at first glance, unclear.

South Africa represents an interesting and challenging case to study because sanctions are often considered to have been successful in hastening the demise of the white minority government and the apartheid system. It is also a case of high resonance, especially in the United States, because the racial component of the human rights abuses was so reminiscent of the struggle for civil rights in this country.

The last case that I investigated is that of the civil war in Angola. The Angolan Civil War raged nearly uninterrupted from 1975 until 2002 and cost hundreds of thousands of lives. It represents a salient case in the history of human rights based economic sanctions because

sanctions were imposed by the UN and the United States on the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in 1993, despite the fact that the United States had backed the anti-communist militants for almost more than a decade.¹⁰ But with the Cold War mindset melting in Washington D.C., human rights became increasingly important to our foreign policy objectives, leading President Bill Clinton to approve a ban on sales of weapons and fuel to the militants in September 1993. This radical reversal of policy came despite representatives of UNITA spending considerable sums on public image campaigns in the United States.¹¹ Besides being an illuminating study of how government policy affects public opinion, this case also highlights the important role of public and media opinion in foreign relations.

These five cases formed the backbone of my study. Each case brings something testable to the table. In the case of Burma, it is the relative absence of an outcry despite heavy U.S. sanctions for over 20 years. In the case of Belarus, it is its quiet suffering in such proximity to the Western European heart of the international human rights regime. In the case of Sudan, it is the strong public reaction, and major UN and ICC involvement. In the case of South Africa, it is the powerful resonance in countries with a history of racial struggle like the United States, and relative lack of resonance in other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia. In the case of Angola, the efforts by UNITA to deliberately influence public and elite opinion in the United States through public relations and lobbying, and their ultimate failure, create a particularly fascinating situation.

Sanctions Preceding Awareness: The Cases of Burma and Belarus

Burma has been under military rule since 1962, when General Ne Win deposed the democratically elected government and installed himself as dictator. Despite pursuing a path of

economic development known as “the Burmese Way to Socialism” (which was once famously described as an amalgam of Buddhist and Marxist illogic) Burma was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement and thus largely escaped the attention of the Western world during the Cold War. A democratic uprising that began in early August 1988 received international attention when it was violently suppressed by the ruling junta.¹² This repression, as well as the imprisonment of the country’s new democratically elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, led to condemnation by many members of the international community and set the country on a course of international isolation that continues to this day.

One of the first countries to impose serious measures against the junta following the 1988 uprising was the United States. On June 16, 1993, President Bill Clinton imposed an arms embargo on the Burmese regime. At the time, only Australia and New Zealand had taken measures to punish the junta, both countries banning the export of military technology and refusing visas to leaders of the regimes and their families.¹³

Since the United States was one of the first countries to apply sanctions to Burma, it offers a unique opportunity to test the communicative theory of sanctions. In order to do this, I compared American media coverage of human rights abuses in Burma in the 12-month period preceding the application of sanctions to coverage in the 12-month period following. Media coverage was quantified by the number of stories mentioning human rights abuses in Burma appearing each month in six major American Newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. I excluded from my analysis the month in which the sanctions were actually imposed, so as to exclude stories about that event itself. The results (Table 2) are quite striking. The number of stories jumped 94 percent from an average of 3.92 stories per month

during the 12-month period before the application of sanctions to an average of 7.58 stories per month during the 12-month period after sanctions were imposed.

These results, while encouraging, cannot be meaningfully interpreted in isolation, since events in Burma, or elsewhere in the world, could have caused a spike in coverage of the human rights situation there. Therefore, I analyzed British news sources over the same period (Table 3). My basket of British print media consisted of *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. What I found was that coverage of human rights abuses in Burma in these four papers jumped only 28 percent, from an average of 2.42 stories per month in the first 12-month period to 3.08 in the second. This suggests that while roughly 28 of the 94 percentage points in the American jump are likely attributable to international or Burmese events, the other 66 percentage points are attributable to uniquely American phenomena. The most likely of these is the presence of American sanctions on the Burmese regime.

These findings are significant because the stories in the American media were, by and large, not about the sanctions. Many of the stories were not even about Burma, specifically, but rather mentioned the human rights situation there in the context of other issues. This suggests that simply by imposing the sanctions, the United States government sent a cue to the American media that Burma was a priority for the American government, and was an issue that their readers were likely to care about.

In order to further test this theory I examined British media coverage during the months before and after the 1996 Common Position adopted by the EU, which condemned Burma's human rights record, imposed an arms embargo on their state, a travel ban on their leaders, and a freeze on their European assets.¹⁴ To do this I used the same basket of four major British newspapers and again analyzed the 12-month periods preceding and following the adoption of

the Common Position, breaking them into one-month increments (Table 4). I found that coverage leapt 43 percent between the two periods, from an average of 5.83 stories per month in the year leading up to the application of sanctions, to 8.33 stories per month in the year. This considerable increase comes despite the fact that in the months before October 1996, when the Common Position was adopted, the prospect of EU sanctions on Burma received significant media attention in Britain. This obviously lessens the degree of apparent increase in media coverage since those stories were applied to the time period *before* sanctions, as if they were part of British media's normal coverage of Burma. In truth, they belong among the stories *resulting* from the sanctions, since they were a product of the looming possibility of sanctions. This is a testament to the magnitude of the increase.

Still, this increase would not tell us anything without a control case. Since the United States already had applied sanctions in the relatively recent past, I used Canadian media as my control case for the British media as Canada would not apply sanctions to Burma until 2007. My basket of Canadian print journalism consisted of *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Gazette*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Ottawa Citizen*. Once again, I chose these publications for their large circulations, broad readerships, and the diversity of their perceived ideological biases. These newspapers published an average of 13.83 stories about human rights in Burma per month for each of the 12 months leading up to the EU's Common Position, and published an average of 16.50 stories per month during the next 12 months (Table 5). This 19% increase is muted when compared with the 43% increase in British media coverage, suggesting, once again, that a significant increase in awareness did take place after the imposition of sanctions.

The implications of this finding are notable because the process by which the EU established the Common Policy was different than that by which the United States established its

arms embargo. While the United States government passed the American embargo on Burma, the Common Position was established by the European Union, not the government of the United Kingdom. It is possible that the difference in the apparent effects on media attention is partly because British citizens and journalists take less “ownership” of the actions of the EU than their American equivalents do of American government policy or than British citizens would of UK government policy. This is, of course, purely speculative and would require corroborating evidence to state confidently.

The last case of sanctions on Burma that I investigated proved the most difficult to test, and ultimately yielded the least compelling results. Nevertheless, they do corroborate the theory I have established thus far, and illustrate the phenomenon further. Canada applied sanctions on Burma in 2007. These were some of the most sweeping sanctions that any Western state has instituted against the junta and include a full export ban on all non-humanitarian goods and services, including financial services.¹⁵

I first examined the 12-month periods before and after these sanctions were instituted, but found two events that compromised my data. The first was the civil unrest during the autumn of 2007, the violent suppression of which was one of the precipitating factors that caused the Canadian government to impose sanctions.¹⁶ The media spike associated with the “monks’ protest,” as it came to be known, was so great as to obliterate any other trends that might have been present. I was forced, therefore, to exclude the months from August 2007 to December 2007 from my data, leaving me only eight months of data from before the sanctions were imposed. The second event that skewed my data was Cyclone Nargis, which came ashore in Burma on April 27, 2008. Nargis remains the most deadly named storm in the history of the North Indian Ocean basin, and is estimated to have caused at least 138,000 deaths, mostly in

Burma.¹⁷ Coverage of the cyclone saturated the Western media outlets. Rather than drop these months, too, from my study, I chose to exclude stories with “Nargis” or “cyclone” in them. This returned the numbers to their expected levels, but it likely cost me interesting data, because I believe that the Canadian sanctions on Burma probably amplified media attention of the disaster.

With the data thus normalized, I found, once again, a 43 percent jump in media coverage from the year before the sanctions (minus the four months immediately prior to their establishment, during the monk’s protest) to the year after (Table 6). This jump, from 9.63 stories per month before the sanctions to 13.75 stories per month after, was, coincidentally, identical in magnitude to the one in the UK after the adoption of the Common Position. However, this time I had to dig deeper to find a control case. The United States, the European Union, and Australia had all either renewed or strengthened their sanctions on Burma during either the 12 months before or 12 months after Canada’s sanctions. This had the potential to compromise their usefulness as a control.

One of the only countries with an English language media that had not engaged in sanctions activity during this period was South Africa. Using *Business Day*, *The Mail and Guardian*, and *The Sowetan* as my basket of South African newspapers, I examined media coverage of Burma during the eight-month and 12-month periods of Canadian coverage I had compared (Table 7). I discovered that South African media coverage of Burma actually *fell* 58% between those periods, from an average of 3 stories per month in the 8-month period to an average of only 1.25 stories per month in the 12-month period. This makes the 43 percent increase in Canadian media coverage appear even more dramatic. The South African data must be taken with a grain of salt, however. The limited media coverage (only 39 stories in the combined 20 months) came disproportionately from a single publication, *Business Day*. Data

largely from a single source is probably not representative of the entire body of South African media, let alone of the English-speaking world's media coverage. This leaves the Canadian example an interesting, but fundamentally weak piece of corroborating evidence.

What we are left with is highly suggestive evidence that, even when exigent circumstances are controlled for through analysis of other media markets, sanctions have effectively raised the profile of human rights abuses in Burma in the sender states, even as they have failed to alter the policies or change the regime that they were designed to defeat. It seems reasonable to speculate that the mechanism by which this takes place is the agenda-setting power of national governments. By sanctioning a state, Western governments declare the situation in that state to be a national priority and worthy of media attention. In a world in which column inches are a finite commodity this is unquestionably a positive outcome for human rights activists and the victims of human rights abuses.

The case of Belarus in 2006 provides further corroboration of the theory. One of the last outposts of tyranny in Europe, Belarus was missed by the "color revolutions" that swept most of the Eastern Bloc autocrats from power. Alexander Lukashenko has ruled the country with an iron fist since 1994 and opposition members, and even candidates, have faced all manner of violence at the hands of the state, including imprisonment, torture, and murder. Though Lukashenko's administration was a pariah in the international community for many years, disgust with his administration came to a head in the EU and US in 2006, when sham elections kept him in power for a third term.

In March 2006, the European Union and the United States dramatically broadened their travel restrictions on Lukashenko's administration to include many members of his government. This was in response to the brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters who objected to the results

of the rigged elections. During the 12 months leading up to these sanctions, stories mentioning Belarus' human rights situation appeared an average of 3.16 times per month in my basket of American newspapers. During the 12 months following the sanctions, the same basket of newspapers average 4.75 news stories per month. This represents a statistically significant increase of 50 percent (Table 8).

In order to control for exigent circumstances, I compared these numbers to those of a basket of Australian newspapers. Australia, which has historically taken a more hands-off approach to the enforcement of a human rights regime relative to North America and Western Europe, did not change its diplomatic stance towards Belarus. The change in its media coverage from 1.58 to 1.67 stories per month during the same interval was a negligible 5 percent increase (Table 9). This suggests that approximately 45 of the 50 percentage point increase seen in the American media can be attributed to the strengthened sanctions program the United States applied in March 2006.

This makes intuitive sense. As we can see from the relatively low level of coverage both before and after the application of new sanctions, Belarus has not, historically, been a focus of attention by the American public or print media. After all, despite being in Europe, it is a small country with relatively little strategic, military, or economic significance. As with Burma, it took little political action to raise awareness a significant amount. This suggests that sanctions were successful in their communicative capacity since they raised public awareness of an abusive state in which the values of democracy and freedom were being trampled.

Media Saturation: The Cases of Sudan and South Africa

The human rights disaster that has taken place in the western region of Sudan known as Darfur has established itself in the American consciousness as the human rights challenge of the decade. It has been the subject of countless rallies, concerts, and fundraisers, and its president remains the only sitting head of state to be indicted by the International Criminal Court.¹⁸ However, there is considerable evidence that the causal relationship between public awareness and government policy runs in the opposite direction than in the case of Burma.

In April 2006, President Bush strengthened the sanctions that President Clinton had levied against Sudan in 1997.¹⁹ While President Clinton's initial sanctions program had been to punish a known state sponsor of terror, President Bush's were a response to the humanitarian crisis that had captivated and horrified Americans. Many Americans had gathered in New York City earlier in the month to protest the situation in Darfur, and to demand that the United States do something about it.²⁰

Over the 12 months prior, the six major American newspapers identified in the previous section published an impressive 41.75 stories about genocide in Darfur per month (Table 10). In the following 12 months, that would grow 34 percent to 55.75 stories per month, i.e. nearly two per day, sustained for a year. Taken in isolation, these numbers would suggest that President Bush's sanctions package *did* have a significant impact on the American media's coverage of the unfolding disaster. But the data from other states that did not apply new sanctions during this period tells a different story.

In the Canadian media, for instance, stories about Darfur leapt 60 percent, from 31 per month in the preceding 12 months to 59.75 per month for the following 12 months (Table 11). This impressive surge has no cause in Canada. The Canadian government made no policy change towards Sudan during this time. And this is verified by the data from England: a 61% increase

over the same time, from 16.17 stories per month during the first period to 26.08 per month during the second (Table 12). The Canadian and British data track each other closely, and both greatly exceed the growth in the American media's already mighty numbers.

Even a casual glance at the headlines from this period, especially from the autumn of 2006, reveals the true story. By late 2006, the situation in Darfur was deteriorating rapidly and this is reflected in the sharp increase in coverage in the British and Canadian media. In the United States, however, where Darfur had been a hotly discussed topic for over a year, the media had neared a saturation point. After publishing 41.75 stories a month for over a year, the American newspapers could only increase their coverage 34 percent when things began to deteriorate. They just did not have the column inches for a 60 or 61 percent increase over their 2005 and early 2006 numbers.

This strongly suggests that American action in Darfur was the result, not the cause, of American public focus on the disaster. For whatever reason, Darfur drew attention and garnered sympathy in a way that previous humanitarian crises seem not to have and in a way that it appears not to have in other Western countries. After all, considering that the four British newspapers printed roughly two-thirds as many stories about Burma in the year prior to American sanctions as the six American newspapers, their rate of only 16.17 stories per month to the American papers' 41.75 seems positively anemic. American public awareness of Darfur, relative to other human rights situations, simply far out-paced British and Canadian awareness even before the Americans applied sanctions.

The implications for the American political system are good. Americans became passionate about a cause that did not directly affect them, they lobbied their political leaders through letters and phone calls, and the government passed the policies that were demanded in an

attempt to deal with the situation. The implications for American foreign policy are more mixed, however. Having not served the purpose of informing the public or cueing the media to pay attention, it is unclear whether the sanctions served any purpose at all. Though the crisis is finally winding down, four years later, it is unclear whether American sanctions had anything to do with that. Without knowing the counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened if we had never applied sanctions), one cannot say whether sanctions sped, slowed, or had no effect at all on the decrease in violence, though most of established theory would posit no effect.

A similar phenomenon occurred in the case of sanctions on South Africa in the late 1980s. The anti-apartheid movement in North America and Western Europe dates back to the early 1960s but failed to pick up significant momentum until the 1980s. By the early part of that decade, however, a campaign of divestment by colleges, universities, and socially responsible corporations, along with the promotion of an enumerated set of worker's rights known as the "Sullivan Principles," had raised public awareness of the horrors of apartheid. The anti-apartheid movement lobbied the US and UK governments, both of which had followed policies of "constructive engagement," to take a harder line with Pretoria.²¹

This makes for an ideal test case for our theory of media saturation for while the movement was strong in both countries, the UK's complicated relationship with its former colony prevented the Thatcher government from taking significant action against South Africa. In the United States, however, activists successfully persuaded congress to pass a strong sanctions package, which was so popular that it survived a veto by President Reagan, making it the only veto override on a foreign policy bill in the 20th century.²²

Despite this historic accomplishment, American media coverage of South Africa tumbled from an average of 77.8 stories per month during the year leading up to sanctions to an average

of 37.7 stories per month during the following year, a 51.5 percent decline (Table 13). If the change in circumstances in South Africa was simply so great as to obscure the sanctions' effects on media coverage, we would expect to find a much greater decline in British media coverage, since the United Kingdom took no significant action against South Africa during this period. But the decline in British media coverage, from 53.5 to 20.8 stories per month, was, at 61.2 percent, only marginally greater than the American decline (Table 14). This suggests that the contentious and comprehensive American sanctions program at best only slowed the decline of coverage of apartheid South Africa by 10 percent or so. This is largely because the debate over sanctions generated a large amount of media coverage, while coverage of the implementation and effects of the sanctions was almost non-existent. One could argue that if congress had delayed the passage of the sanctions package more attention would have been paid to South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement's interests might have been better served. What is clear from the differences in the British and American experiences of this issue is that sanctions had a minimal effect on public awareness of South Africa because the sanctions had come as a result of an already high level of public awareness and high degree of media saturation. The fact that the nature of the news coverage of South Africa in the United States suggests a strong emotional resonance of the South African struggle indicates that a high degree of resonance may contribute to the implementation of sanctions, in this case even involving a veto override, but not contribute to their effectiveness in a communicative capacity.

Combat Fatigue: The Case of Angola

In September, just months after lifting the American arms embargo on the government of Angola, the United States established an arms and fuel embargo on the National Union for the

Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) insurgency movement that had fought the new government and the communist-backed People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) that had established it for almost two decades.²³ This whiplash-inducing policy shift reflected the changing political reality of the post-Cold War era: the MPLA, once the tyrannical puppet-regime of the Soviet Union was now the legitimate government of the Republic of Angola, while UNITA, once the scrappy defenders of freedom, was now a terrorist insurgency responsible for widespread human rights abuses. With no Soviet Union to contain, the United States had an interest in a stable Angolan government, even a left-leaning one. This meant that when UNITA leaders hired American lobbyists to defend their interests in Congress, they were fighting an uphill battle to persuade the political class in America that their cause was just.²⁴ This effort, of course, failed.

One might expect that the embargoing of a recent ally would generate considerable press attention and keep the spotlight of public interest on the situation in Southwest Africa. But the American news media's coverage of the conflict in Angola during the 12 months after the American imposition of sanctions on the UNITA group dropped 42 percent compared with the 12 months prior to the sanctions, from an average of 33.08 stories per month before the sanctions, to 19.08 per month after the sanctions (Table 15). This would appear to contradict the theory of communicative sanctions except that media coverage of the Angolan conflict in Canadian and British media fell even further, by 52 percent in both cases (Tables 16 and 17, respectively).

This leads us to wonder a) why the coverage fell so much, and b) why the fall in coverage was only somewhat smaller in the United States, despite the new sanctions. Both are products of "combat fatigue" on the part of the media and public attention. The Angolan Civil War had raged

since 1975 and until the collapse of the Soviet Union had been considered an important proxy war within the Cold War. Suddenly, with UNITA definitively the underdog in a contest that no longer had serious implications for the Western world, the Western media grew weary of covering what was beginning to seem like an endless and irrelevant civil conflict.

In this context, the new sanctions were simply not enough to give the declining American public interest more than a slightly slower decline. This is unfortunate, because the Angolan Civil War would not truly end until 2002, and would become part of the Great African War, which would prove the bloodiest conflict since WWII. The Great African War cost nearly 4 million lives with Angolan involvement, both on the part of the government and the remaining UNITA forces, contributing significantly to the bloodshed.²⁵ While it is once again impossible to evaluate the counterfactual, it seems irrefutable that greater international awareness of the events taking place in this region and greater media attention to the actions of the actors involved would have helped promote restraint on all sides and possibly contributed to a movement for international intervention to stem the slaughter.

Conclusions

It is evident from the data that sanctions do have an effect on media coverage and public awareness of human rights abuses under certain circumstances. The case of Burma illustrates that when the abusive situation has received little media attention in the past and the public is uninformed, the application of economic sanctions can raise attention in the sender state even when no change in coverage takes place in other similar states. The case of the British media after the application of sanctions by the European Union suggests that this holds true, albeit perhaps to a lesser degree, for multinational institutions like the EU, not just for sanctions by

national governments. The case of Belarus reinforces some of the lessons of Burma and contradicts to some degree the popular belief that we are more apt to reject obvious tyranny in our own cultural neighborhood. Belarus' oppression has gone mostly ignored, despite taking place on the doorstep of some of the most ardent advocates of the human rights regime, like Germany, France, Sweden, and others.

The cases of Sudan and South Africa raise the issue of establishing causality and suggest that in a saturated media environment sanctions may do little or nothing to promote awareness. The issue of causality is a critical one because sanctions theorists have long suggested that sanctions serve to placate domestic constituencies rather than serve an actual greater foreign policy good. In fact, they may be right when it comes to sanctions on Sudan, which have likely been ineffective and which all of the evidence suggests arose because of public outcry in the United States. In South Africa, too, they failed to increase awareness (though they may have accomplished more important goals, a question outside the scope of this paper). But this does not seem to be the case in Burma, where media coverage was very low prior to the imposition of American sanctions rising only in the months following the sanctions program. The concept of media saturation is also important, because it suggests that, as other theorists have argued for different reasons, sanctions will be imposed in the situations in which they are least effective. Ang and Peksen note that sanctions will be most often imposed when they are more important to the target state than the sender state, which is the perfect circumstance for them to fail to achieve policy changes. Even if we lower the standard of success to improving public awareness of human rights issues, if sanctions are only imposed when the public is already informed about the issue, and is actively demanding sanctions, this measure of success may prove illusory as well.

The case of Angola and the American embargo on UNITA reinforces our understanding of the limitations even of communicative sanctions. While they may “slow the bleeding” of public and media attention, if the public is losing interest in an issue, sanctions are unlikely to change that in the long run. This is unfortunate because even though few would have predicted the chaos and suffering that would blossom out of the conflicts in Southwest Africa, if they had, they would have likely needed means other than sanctions to refocus the West’s attention on the crisis, where it belonged.

Table 1 –Predicted Government Action and Its Effects

	Situation is an elite priority	Situation is not an elite priority
Situation commands significant public attention before sanctions action	Sanctions will be applied, but they will have little effect in terms of raising public awareness; examples include South Africa in the 1980s and Angola in the 1990s	Sanctions will be applied, but they will have little effect in terms of raising public awareness; examples include Sudan in the 2000s
Situation commands little public attention before sanctions action	Sanctions will be applied, and they will effectively raise public awareness of the issue; examples include Burma in the 1990s, and Belarus in the 1990s and 2000s	Sanctions will not be applied; examples include Uzbekistan in 2005

Table 2 – American Media Coverage of Burma, June '92 through June '94

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before June '93	3.917	Mean # of Stories Per Month After June '93	7.583
Variance	7.720	Variance	50.447
Percent Change	93.6%	T-Test P-Value	0.0325**

Sources: The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Los Angeles Times, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Table 3 – British Media Coverage of Burma, June '92 through June '94

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before June '93	2.417	Mean # of Stories Per Month After June '93	3.083
Variance	5.538	Variance	7.356
Percent Change	27.6%	T-Test P-Value	0.0970*

Sources: The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, and The Independent

Table 4 – British Media Coverage of Burma, October '95 through October '97

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before October '96	5.833	Mean # of Stories Per Month After October '96	8.333
Variance	32.515	Variance	14.242
Percent Change	42.9%	T-Test P-Value	0.0719*

Sources: The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, and The Independent

Table 5 – Canadian Media Coverage of Burma, October '95 through October '97

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before	13.833	Mean # of Stories Per Month After	16.500
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October '96		October '96	
Variance	92.515	Variance	148.091
Percent Change	19.3%	T-Test P-Value	0.2679

Sources: The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Gazette, The Vancouver Sun, and The Ottawa Citizen

Table 6 – Canadian Media Coverage of Burma, December '06 through December '08

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before December '07	9.625	Mean # of Stories Per Month After December '07	13.750
Variance	15.125	Variance	96.386
Percent Change	42.9%	T-Test P-Value	0.0869*

Sources: The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Gazette, The Vancouver Sun, and The Ottawa Citizen

Table 7 – South African Media Coverage of Burma, December '06 through December '08

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before December '07	3.000	Mean # of Stories Per Month After December '07	1.250
Variance	10.000	Variance	1.477
Percent Change	-58.3%	T-Test P-Value	0.0860*

Sources: Business Day, The Mail and Guardian, and The Sowetan

Table 8 – American Media Coverage of Belarus, March '05 through March '07

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before March '06	3.167	Mean # of Stories Per Month After March '06	4.750
Variance	3.788	Variance	12.568
Percent Change	50.0%	T-Test P-Value	0.0963*

Sources: The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Los Angeles Times, and The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Table 9 – Australian Media Coverage of Belarus, March '05 through March '07

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before March '06	1.583	Mean # of Stories Per Month After March '06	1.667
Variance	2.811	Variance	1.697
Percent Change	5.3%	T-Test P-Value	0.4466

Sources: The Age, The Australian, The Canberra Times, The Herald Sun, The Mercury, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Tablelands Advertiser, and The West Australian

Table 10 – American Media Coverage of Sudan, April '05 through April '07

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before April '06	41.750	Mean # of Stories Per Month After April '06	55.75
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Variance	139.659	Variance	277.659
Percent Change	33.5%	T-Test P-Value	0.0139**

Sources: The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Los Angeles Times, and The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Table 11 – Canadian Media Coverage of Sudan, April '05 through April '07

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before April '06	31.000	Mean # of Stories Per Month After April '06	49.75
Variance	93.273	Variance	588.750
Percent Change	60.5%	T-Test P-Value	0.0129**

Sources: The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Gazette, The Vancouver Sun, and The Ottawa Citizen

Table 12 – British Media Coverage of Sudan, April '05 through April '07

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before April '06	16.166	Mean # of Stories Per Month After April '06	26.083
Variance	33.970	Variance	393.174
Percent Change	61.3%	T-Test P-Value	0.0603*

Sources: The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, and The Independent

Table 13 – American Media Coverage of S. Africa, September '85 through November '87

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before September '93	77.750	Mean # of Stories Per Month After September '93	37.667
Variance	748.932	Variance	99.697
Percent Change	-51.6%	T-Test P-Value	0.0002***

Sources: The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Los Angeles Times, and The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Table 14 – British Media Coverage of S. Africa, September '85 through November '87

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before September '93	53.500	Mean # of Stories Per Month After September '93	20.750
Variance	892.091	Variance	91.295
Percent Change	-61.2%	T-Test P-Value	0.0015***

Sources: The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Times, and The Independent

Table 15 – American Media Coverage of Angola, September '92 through September '94

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before September '93	33.083	Mean # of Stories Per Month After September '93	19.083
Variance	179.902	Variance	49.174
Percent Change	-42.3%	T-Test P-Value	0.0027***

Sources: The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Los Angeles Times, and The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Table 16 – Canadian Media Coverage of Angola, September '92 through September '94

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before September '93	32.917	Mean # of Stories Per Month After September '93	15.667
Variance	463.902	Variance	42.061
Percent Change	-52.4%	T-Test P-Value	0.0099***

Sources: The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Gazette, The Vancouver Sun, and The Ottawa Citizen

Table 17 – British Media Coverage of Angola, September '92 through September '94

Mean # of Stories Per Month Before September '93	30.500	Mean # of Stories Per Month After September '93	14.500
Variance	14.41274688	Variance	5.265669257
Percent Change	-52.4%	T-Test P-Value	0.0014***

Sources: The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Times, and The Independent

Notes

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- ¹ Wallenstein, 1968: 248
 - ² Ang et al., 2007: 135
 - ³ Ovsiovitch, 2005: 671
 - ⁴ Ibid.: 671
 - ⁵ Keck, 1995: 411
 - ⁶ Richburg, 1989
 - ⁷ Howse et al., 2008: 168
 - ⁸ Author Unknown, 2008
 - ⁹ Corder, 2010.
 - ¹⁰ Wright, 1997: 171
 - ¹¹ Burkholder, 1993
 - ¹² Aung-Thwin, 1992
 - ¹³ BBC, 2009
 - ¹⁴ European Union, 1996
 - ¹⁵ Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2008
 - ¹⁶ Mydans, 2007
 - ¹⁷ BBC, 2008
 - ¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2010
 - ¹⁹ United States Treasury Department, 2008: 1
 - ²⁰ Sweet, 2006
 - ²¹ Hamill, 1995
 - ²² Roberts, 2009
 - ²³ Wright, 1997
 - ²⁴ Burkholder, 1993
 - ²⁵ The Economist, 2002

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