

Studying the Media

Newspapers suffer from the same biases that we have seen in our textbooks for years. Among the features of recent stories on Haiti include little or no use of Haitian sources; coverage of events that confirm a pre-existing bias or political sympathy while ignoring events that contradict biases or politics; and failure to present historical background, or presenting it in distorted ways. For students to form opinions and participate in public policy debate on Haiti, it is essential that they learn to be critical readers of the press.

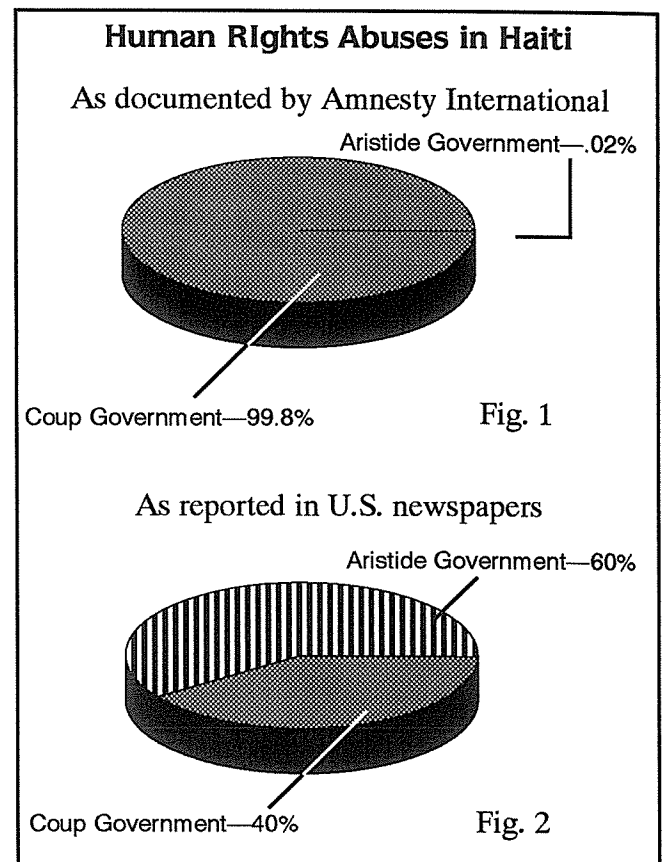
A report by the Boston Media Action (BMA) demonstrates trends in the coverage that is still evident today. It also provides a model for students for evaluating contemporary reporting (for example, recording the frequency of various sources, checking for accuracy, who benefits from what images, and/or examining what percentage of articles provide the reader any historical context.)

Boston Media Action (BMA) analyzed 415 articles on Haiti from 4 mainstream papers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Miami Herald*) for their coverage of the coup. They found that the print coverage of Haiti systematically distorted the human rights record of President Aristide while underplaying the terror practiced by the coup government.

The Aristide government did have documented human rights abuses during its seven months in office—26, according to Amnesty International, of which around two-thirds were attributed to the army, an army that bitterly opposed Aristide (Fig. 1). In contrast, the coup government in roughly the same period of time had 1,867 executions, 5,096 illegal and arbitrary arrests and 2,171 cases of beatings and shootings as documented by the Haiti Platform for Human Rights. These are conservative estimates that do not take into account the suppression of freedoms of press, assembly and so on.

In the first two weeks of the coup, however, print media devoted 60% of all paragraphs on attributable human rights abuses to Aristide, and 40% to the coup government. The media may consider this “balanced” coverage, but it was in fact fraudulent, given the true ratio (Fig. 2). It fostered the myth that the illegal coup government of Haiti was not worse than the Aristide government.

As weeks went on, the accusations against Aristide lessened. But by this time news about Haiti was no longer on the front page and public opinion had already been influenced. No attempt to critically reexamine earlier coverage appeared. An exception to this is the

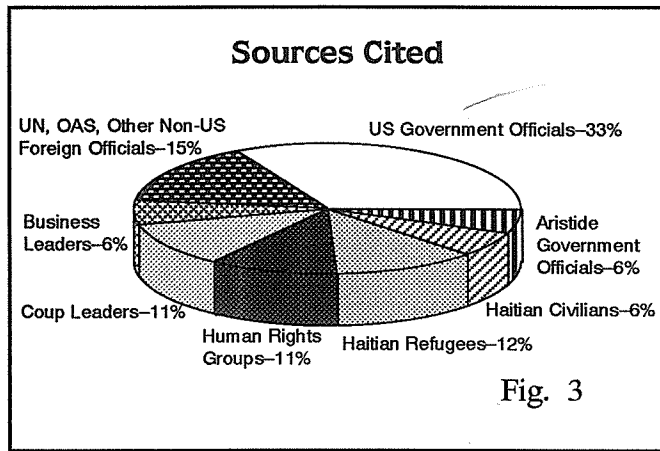


widely read *New York Times* which continued to devote more space to purported abuses by the Aristide government than to the blood-soaked coup, by a ratio of 46:54 coup:Aristide. The figures are astonishing when one notes that for the entire nine-month period of the study, Aristide was out of the country, his government driven underground by a well-documented army rampage.

The Memory Hole

The absence of reporting on any historical background prior to the coup was systematic. Fully two-thirds of all stories contained no mention whatsoever of anything which had occurred prior to the coup. This cannot be explained away by the at-the-moment quality of standard news stories. BMA found that absolutely no historical perspective appeared in over half of the supposedly in-depth articles marked as “news analysis.”

Mention of the pivotal role of the United States in Haitian history—for example, that the United States wrote Haiti’s Constitution, founded its army, and has given support to every dictator of this century—is absent. On the rare occasion when journalists did mention the historical role of the United States, it evoked nostalgia. Howard French, for example, remarked in the *New York*



Times that “[t]he United States occupied the country from 1915 to 1934, skeptical diplomats and Haitians often point out, and that achieved little more than a pause in the country’s cycle of tyranny and instability” (January 28, 1992). Similarly, *Boston Globe* foreign policy critic David Nylan commented that “Haiti has always been a spooky backwater, an exotic and dangerous place. Previous U.S. interventions never wrought the result desired” (April 28, 1992). Of the 415 documents from the press examined, a critique of U.S. policy could only be found in a handful of letters to the editor.

The coverage allows a perpetuation of the myth that violence is endemic to Haiti and as such the U.S. government can do little, try as it might.

Haitians. What Haitians?

All four cities—New York, Washington, Boston, and Miami—have active Haitian communities, with recently-exiled democratic leaders. These leaders have not been interviewed by the press. It is not that this popular and realistic Haitian perspective is rebutted or even disparaged by the press; it is for all intents and purposes nonexistent. Figure 3 provides an example of the limited consulting of Haitian sources in its documentation of stories reporting on the debate as to whether Haitians are political or economic refugees.

Excerpts from a report prepared by Boston Media Action. For a complete copy, write to the Haiti Communications Project, 25 West St., 2nd Floor, Boston, MA 02111.

Teachers: See suggestions for classroom activities related to this article in *Teaching/Action Ideas*.

Reading Between The Lines

(1) Reading the articles on the front page about Haiti, what impression do you get of the Haitian people? Who is quoted? Whose voices don’t make page one? If you were a reporter in Haiti, how would you try to cover events more fully?

(2) Whose opinions are quoted most frequently in the articles? Tally the comments. How many are from the State Department? How often are people from progressive organizations in Haiti quoted? (Remember, individuals may be interviewed, but that still masks any evidence of organized opposition in Haiti.)

(3) Aristide is the democratically elected President of Haiti. Is he ever quoted for a statement he has made directly to the press, or are his comments in response to a quote from the State Department?

(4) Does the media provide any background information? For example, when discussing the return to Haiti of Aristide, do they describe the social policies he was in the process of implementing before the coup?

(5) What adjectives are used to describe the Haitian military? Can you find any clippings which describe them as the “U.S. trained military”?

(6) Cut out all the photos from the articles about Haiti. Separate the images of North Americans from the images of Haitians. Post them on the wall for the whole class to see. What adjectives would you use to describe the North Americans? What adjectives would you use to describe the Haitians? (From a lesson by Martha Matlaw and Rachelle Resnick).

(7) What are the implications of the coverage? What impact does the media have on opinions in the United States about Haiti and U.S. policy towards the region?