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**The Political and Cultural Dynamics of United Nations:  
Media Scandals from Waldheim to Annan**

**Ingrid A. Lehmann**

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# **The Political and Cultural Dynamics of United Nations: Media Scandals from Waldheim to Annan**

Ingrid A. Lehmann

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## **ABSTRACT**

This Working Paper presents a cross-cultural analysis of media scandals affecting an inter-governmental organization, the United Nations, over a twenty-year time period. In the paper international media scandals are approached and analysed as struggles over power which impact the image of international leaders, i.e. two secretaries-general of the United Nations. Following John Thompson's seminal work on media scandals it is asserted that scandals can seriously to irreparably damage the reputation of individuals and institutions. However, as this study shows, the Waldheim scandal in 1986 which occurred after he had left the United Nations and became enmeshed in issues of the "Second Cold War", did not damage the UN as an institution. In the case of Kofi Annan, two incidents are analysed. The first occurred in 2004 when Annan pronounced the Iraq war "illegal". This prompted an onslaught by US neo-conservative media, while European media treated the issue very differently, thus substantiating the thesis of a "transatlantic media divide" over the Iraq war. The second instance was related to the release of a report by Paul Volcker on the Oil-for-Food program in 2005 which appeared to "absolve" Annan, but which nevertheless led to serious and multiple allegations against him in various U.S. media. Calls for Annan's resignation were, however, not heeded. Again, the media in European countries did not portray the Oil-for-Food program as negatively as in the U.S. Different political cultures are seen to be the determining factor in the variation in media reporting on these scandals.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1986 an outcry erupted in many countries when it was revealed by the media that two-term United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim had lied about his wartime service in the German army. Nearly two decades later, Secretary-General Kofi Annan was implicated in the “oil-for-food” scandal. In both cases, the UN secretariat and several member states were enmeshed in a resultant series of media scandals that deeply affected perceptions of the UN. The “oil-for-food” scandal of 2004-2006 occurred at a time when the UN was called upon to manage and intervene in several international conflicts, from Afghanistan to the Congo, from Haiti to the Middle East. The “Oil-for-Food”-scandal clearly had a negative impact on the organization’s ability to perform its political tasks.

In this paper it is argued that a transatlantic media and opinion divide on the UN which had been observable in earlier decades, grew during the Presidency of George W. Bush and became critical during the second half of Annan’s term in office (2002-2006). This was largely a result of a chasm which developed in the international community over the war against Iraq. Cross-cultural press analysis shows that the scandals dominating Anglo-American media reporting on the UN were minor stories in the non-English speaking press, or were not considered news at all. Consequently, public perceptions of the oil-for-food scandal stories across several countries appeared to be culturally specific: they were viewed very differently in other Western countries, while opinion in the non-Western world varied even more widely.

To analyse this phenomenon over time, the first part of this paper analyzes an earlier UN scandal: the Waldheim-scandal, which first broke in the mid-1980s. The Waldheim case thus offers itself as a comparison to the second case, which relates to the series of media scandals in UN Secretary-General Annan’s second term (from 2004 to 2005).

## **APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL SCANDAL REPORTING**

The theoretical paradigm used in this study is the concept of symbolic power and the symbolic uses of politics. Thompson (2000: 245) defines symbolic power as ‘the capacity to use symbolic forms to intervene and influence the course of events’ and scandals as ‘struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake’. This concept helps to explain the special vulnerability of organizations such as the UN to scandalization: when its moral stature is undermined through allegations of scandal, its power is weakened accordingly. Thompson also maintains that values and norms which give rise to scandals in one cultural context may fall on deaf ears in other environments. Lull and Hinerman (1998) also

underline that scandals are interpreted differently by different audiences. Burkhardt (2006) considers media scandals as specific constructs of reality by the media system itself, a constructivist approach which helps put the different construction of reality about critical international issues by national media into a theoretical perspective.

As Thompson confirmed during the ECREA-Symposium on “The mediation of Scandal and Moral Outrage” which took place at the LSE from 16-17 December 2011, very little has been published to date on the development and dynamics of **international** media scandals and that most mediated scandals are steeped in the national culture of the country concerned.

By contrast, where international organizations and their leaders are concerned, mediated scandals are usually trans-cultural affairs; their dynamics are best traced by comparative media analysis which is the method employed in this study. Scandal reporting about the UN is typically generated by media and NGOs in certain countries, but this reporting is frequently interpreted differently or ignored completely by the media and the public in other countries. We have therefore observed a media and opinion divide on the UN that probably has its origins in various – and varying – national political cultures (Lehmann, 2005a).

**International media scandals are defined here as problematic incidents affecting two or more countries, that arouse media attention, are widely covered by the media in those countries and cause damage to the reputation of individuals, institutions, corporations or nations.**

**CASE STUDY 1:**  
**THE WALDHEIM SCANDAL – COVERAGE AND IMPACT**

***Background***

At the beginning of the Presidential election campaign in Austria in 1986 when the former UN Secretary-General and ex-Austrian Foreign Minister Kurt Waldheim ran against a little-known opponent and looked likely to win the elections, an international media scandal ensued. It began with an article in the weekly Austrian magazine, *Profil* (3 March, 1986) in which Hubertus Czernin disclosed information not widely known about Waldheim's wartime past. The magazine published documents which proved that Waldheim had been a member of a mounted unit of the SA and the NSDSB (National Socialist German Students' Association). One day later, the *New York Times* (NYT) revealed further information about Waldheim's wartime service; namely that he had indeed served with General Loehr of Army Group E in the Balkans. Loehr was responsible for mass deportations of Greek Jews in Salonika and was sentenced to death in 1947 and subsequently executed by a Yugoslav military tribunal.

The main incriminating fact against Waldheim was **initially** that he had lied about his wartime service in his autobiographies, where he alleged that he had been injured in 1941 and never returned to active service on the Eastern front. His version of the wartime years not only turned out to be untrue, but the fact that he implied that he and his family had actually resisted the Nazis upset many<sup>1</sup>. In the face of his denials, information about his service with General Loehr was revealed on a piecemeal basis during the election campaign and thereafter which fuelled the reporting. As some of that information came from the World Jewish Congress and was published in the U.S., international media reporting about the Waldheim-case became a factor in the Austrian election. Waldheim was elected President after a run-off election but was internationally ostracized during his Presidential tenure: he was never invited by any foreign heads of state (except for three Arab countries). On top of that, Waldheim was put on the "watch-list" for undesirable aliens by the the U.S. Government. For the rest of his life, until his death in 2007, Waldheim maintained that he was a victim of a Jewish conspiracy and that he was treated unjustly (Waldheim, 1996; Cowell, 1996).

Eventually the Waldheim affair led to a wide-spread re-examination by the Austrian public of its country's wartime role and engendered a belated discussion of its Nazi past. As the historians Botz (2006), Mitten (1999) and Rathkolb (2005) have pointed out, the Waldheim

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<sup>1</sup> As Toth (2006: 49) pointed out, Waldheim and his family sought to advance his career through membership in various organizations of the Nazi-regime. .

scandal which led to the exposure of his *Lebenslüge* was a watershed moment in Austrian history in that it caused a fundamental re-examination of the country's cherished self-image as 'the first victim of Nazism'.

### ***Comparative media analysis: election 1986***

Having examined the reporting of the Waldheim affair in three newspapers: *The New York Times* (U.S.), *Die Presse* (Austria) and the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany) during the time-period from 3 March to 14 June 1986, significant differences were discovered in the substance of reporting, the sources the three newspapers used and the framing that occurred.

#### *New York Times (NYT)*

The *NYT* published over 120 articles on the subject in three months, i.e. more than one a day. At the onset of the scandal, in March 1986, the *NYT*, as the leading investigating newspaper in this case, quoted mainly three sources, the Austrian magazine *Profil*, the World Jewish Congress and Waldheim himself who was regularly asked to comment on the allegations presented by the WJC about his wartime service. Its most intensive reporting period began on 25 March when the World Jewish Congress launched its allegations, based on research presented by US historian Robert Herzstein.<sup>2</sup> The evidence presented against him was twofold: first, that he had joined two Nazi organizations in 1938 and, secondly, that he had omitted to mention his service with General Loehr in the Balkans between 1942 and 1945. This period became the subject of speculations by various analysts and commentators, not all of which were factually correct. The *NYT* reported the allegations in an indirect manner, usually in neutral tones and it identified the sources of the allegations (Sciolino, 1986).

#### *Die Presse*

As the election campaign heated up, *Die Presse*, a conservative daily newspaper, focused its reporting on the attacks against Waldheim and the sources of those attacks: articles and comments often used pejorative terms such as 'hunting Waldheim', 'mud-slinging', 'hate campaign', 'smear campaign against Waldheim' and "Waldheim goes on the offensive." *Die Presse* thus followed the tone and content of the Austrian tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* and its influential publisher Karl Dichand who, as a World War II-veteran, supported Waldheim throughout (Manoschek, 2006: 128). Both papers suggested that the campaign against the presidential candidate Waldheim was strategically planned by the rival Social Democrats

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wodak, et al. (1990: 370), the World Jewish Congress sent out 39 press releases on the Waldheim-case between March and June 1986. Wodak and the other researchers in her project team analyzed the WJC news releases on pp. 69-81.

with the help of “their foreign allies”, read the Jewish community in the United States and Israel. *Die Presse* thus appeared close to the pro-Waldheim camp in promoting views, which were widely shared in Austria at that time, namely that foreign detractors were meddling in Austria’s domestic affairs. It also put the Social Democrats into the uncomfortable position of “dirtying their own nest” – *Nestbeschmutzung* was a popular term at that time in Austria and Germany. Framing thus concentrated on patriotic sentiments and Austrian voters clearly responded by voting Waldheim into office with a large majority (Wodak, 1990: 62-63).

### *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

The *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (based in Munich, Germany), by contrast, reported in a more detached and factual manner about the Waldheim revelations, discussing the dilemma this controversy posed for the Austrian voters. It described the mud slinging during this election campaign, often quoting Austrian sources as well as the *NYT*, and Israeli statements as “Criticism from Israel”. A typical article of the *SZ* is one headlined “In Austria few doubt Waldheim’s Victory” (7/8 June 1986), an article which is divided into four paragraphs, the first one focusing on the election and the other three on allegations against Waldheim, including the World Jewish Congress’ threats of a legal suit against the OEVP, the appeal by former U.S. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg to Waldheim to resign and the abandonment of plans by an American university to endow a chair in Waldheim’s name. The framing of the Waldheim case by the *SZ* was of an election campaign fraught with international problems for Austria.

### ***Framing of the Waldheim-scandal as a UN-scandal***

In the context of this paper it is significant to assess if and how media reporting in 1986 linked the case to Waldheim’s prior ten-year leadership of the UN. The scandal erupted at a time when Waldheim was no longer Secretary-General of the UN and it might even have passed the UN by with little lasting damage to its reputation. As it turned out, a nationally generated news story, i.e. the article by Czernin in *Profil* of 3 March 1986, created international attention and the affair became an international scandal, precisely because Waldheim had been Secretary-General of the UN. In the U.S. the Waldheim story was presented in a manner injurious to the image of the UN (Sanjuan, 2006), holding the organization retroactively responsible for the selection of a Secretary-General with a highly dubious moral stature.

Those UN colleagues who had known Waldheim and who lived and worked in New York in 1986 were stunned by the initial revelations. We indeed did ask ourselves how a man with



this background who had been so dishonest about his past could have been elected Secretary-General of the highest international body, and could have held that position for ten years without anyone discovering the truth of his past. Most people who worked in the UN read the NYT as their main source of news on a daily basis. As such, the NYT's reporting naturally had the greatest impact on staff perceptions. I remember long discussions with the NYT's UN correspondent Elaine Sciolino, who had received copies of original documents related to Waldheim's service in the German army, and who asked me to help her translate some of the texts. The question that kept cropping up was: how could Waldheim's World War II-background have eluded all the major international players, especially countries such as the United States and the Soviet Union given their access to extensive war records?

### ***The New York Times shifts its Reporting***

In June 1986 the NYT focused on the issue of Waldheim's war record and reported Israel's request to access "2000 war crimes files" from the UN's own archives. This issue dragged on for two months and on 8 June the NYT published a long article "A History of the UN - In Just 50 Million Pages," giving details of the little-known UN archive containing war crime documentation and suggesting that some records regarding Waldheim had been moved (Sciolino, 1986b). In the same issue the NYT also questioned what Yugoslavia knew about Waldheim's wartime activities in its country, suggesting that the Yugoslav government was coming under pressure to take a stand, and insinuating that Marshal Tito and people in his entourage were aware of the Waldheim record.

The next day, 9 June, the NYT continued to focus on the Soviet role in this affair in an article entitled "Soviet denounces Waldheim critics". This news story, coming as it did at the height of the Cold War, is significant as it uses the words of a Soviet spokesman who complains against "psychological warfare" by "Zionist forces" and the US government against the UN "in order to discredit the world body." This is the first time it was suggested in the NYT that the Soviets saw the attacks against Waldheim as an attack against the UN.

### ***Conspiracy theories abound***

This subject was picked up by the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of the same day, in a report entitled "New York Times: Soviets knew of accusations against Waldheim." It was implied that the Soviets must have known about the allegations against Waldheim before the disclosures, and used this knowledge to pressure him when he was UN Secretary-General. On 10 June, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* discussed the Soviet role further in an article entitled "Praise from Moscow", which referred to the Soviet government's praise of Waldheim's

achievements during his time as UN Secretary-General and its denunciation of the allegations against him. In another article, the *SZ* reports on Israel's decision not to appoint a new ambassador to Austria and the suggestion by the Israeli Justice Minister that Waldheim would probably face an indictment as an "accessory to war crimes."

In the Austrian media, by contrast, Waldheim's UN service and his long international experience were presented as proof of his dedication to the goals of international cooperation and peace: his UN service was framed in the context of his election campaign for the highest political office and served to mute criticism by his detractors. *Die Presse* reported the discussion of the UN war crimes file in May 1986 applauding the UN Secretariat's "refusal" to make it publicly accessible, as there would be access to a collection of "*Verleumdungen, Verdächtigungen und Anschuldigungen*" ("defamations, suspicions and accusations"). In June 1986, *Die Presse* was still absorbed with the question of who had engineered the "campaign" against Waldheim. Linkages between the World Jewish Congress and the opposition Social Democrats in masterminding this campaign were suggested, as well as actions of "militant Jews" who allegedly engineered the boycott of Austria. Conspiracy theories abounded; ominous detractors located "on the East Coast" of the United States, a well-known euphemism for Jewish owned and operated media, were frequently identified as the perpetrators. (Wodak, 1990: 81ff; Huemer, 2006: 154)

The Waldheim-scandal thus appeared to have had political utility for the Waldheim election managers who successfully counter-framed the attacks on Waldheim as attacks on Austria. For the UN's detractors in the United States and Israel, it subsequently became a further rallying point against the UN during the continuing Cold War. It was also speculated that the Waldheim-scandal was an attempt to embarrass the UN in retribution for the UN's pro-Palestinian stance under Waldheim, and especially the General Assembly resolution of 1975, which had declared 'zionism as a form of racism'.

### ***Interpretation: Different Political Cultures***

In the United States conservatives had gained ground during the administration of President Reagan in what some historians later termed "the second cold war": the United States and other Western countries were still engaged in propaganda battles with the Soviet Union; international events were seen very much through the prism of the cold war. In addition, as Richard Mitten has reminded us, journalists covering the Waldheim affair filtered the information they received 'through assumptions about National Socialism, WWII and the Nuremberg Tribunal'. Mitten concludes that there were 'structural impediments in news

gathering and by the ideological and political filters through which the news passed'. (Mitten, 1999: 68).

The Waldheim affair primarily became scandalous as a result of his own obfuscation of the facts. As so often, "second-order transgressions" (Thompson 2000:17) i.e. Waldheim's dishonesty in relating his World War II service, was an important element in the unfolding of this scandal. At the same time, it was clear to most observers in New York that Waldheim would not have been elected Secretary-General of the UN in 1971 or re-elected in 1976 had his entire war record been known. (Rauscher, 2006:67) As far as Austria was concerned, it prided itself on being a "neutral" country in the Cold War with good connections in both camps. Having benefited as a small country from its neutral and intermediary position, Austria was helped by the growing influence that the group of 77, and other non-aligned such as Yugoslavia, had in cold war diplomacy. It saw Waldheim as one of the architects of that successful foreign policy.

However, after the election of Waldheim, there was growing concern in Austria about the impact that the ostracization of Waldheim might have on the Austrian international image. But there was no discussion of the consequences of this scandal for the UN, the organization Waldheim had headed for a decade. The UN offices had become a prominent landmark and tourist attraction in Vienna, after the Vienna International Centre with its three skyscrapers opened as a new UN regional headquarters in 1979. The image of the UN in the world as the result of the Waldheim revelations never became an issue for Austrian media coverage in 1986 or thereafter.

The reporting of the Waldheim scandal by the media in three countries thus varied significantly. As it came at a time when he was no longer Secretary-General of the UN its effect on the UN and its international image might have been negligible, but U.S. media reporting became injurious to the image of the UN. The Waldheim-revelations thus appeared to have had political utility for the UN's detractors, especially those in the United States who had gained ground during the administration of President Reagan. They also became a tool in what some have termed a "second cold war" in the mid-1980s. The "politics of embarrassment" worked to undermine the UN's symbolic power in the 1980s and beyond.

**CASE STUDY 2:**  
**“DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS” – THE NEOCONSERVATIVE MEDIA**  
**AND KOFI ANNAN**

We now fast-forward to Case Study 2, a series of allegations against Kofi Annan, the first African Secretary-General of the UN. In his first term, from 1996 to 2002, Kofi Annan, a UN-insider, was largely portrayed in the international media as an international leader of outstanding qualities, although some mocked him as “a rock star of international diplomacy”, and others called him a “secular pope”(Schlesinger, 2006). The positive, often exuberant reporting about Annan lasted for much of his first term, even despite questions which arose regarding Annan’s personal role as Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations during the Rwanda genocide (Dallaire, 2003; Meisler, 2007).

In recognition of the UN’s achievements in conflict management and peacekeeping, Kofi Annan and the UN were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001. With the increased visibility of the UN came initially a growth in public and financial support, but also further demands for the UN to act in the post-cold war environment. This led to expanding budgets and UN responsibilities in the field of peace and security, human rights and humanitarian assistance, health and the environment.

This case study focuses on two media events in Annan’s second term of office, between 2003 and 2006: The first looks at media reporting of Annan’s declaration of the Iraq war as *illegal* in September 2004 and the second analyzes media reporting of the results of the Volcker Commission on the *oil-for-food inquiry* in 2005.

***Event 1: Iraq War “illegal”***

On September 16 2004 Kofi Annan gave an interview to *BBC World* in which he said that the decision to take action in Iraq should have been made by the UN Security Council, not unilaterally. When pressed by the interviewer whether he viewed the invasion as illegal, Annan said: “Yes, if you wish. I have indicated it was not in conformity with the UN charter from our point of view, from the charter point of view, it was illegal.”

These comments provoked an immediate reaction from ‘a former Bush administration aide that they were timed to influence the US November election.’ (BBC World, 2004) Annan’s statement was later termed (by his communications adviser and Under Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor) “one of his few lapses.” Tharoor believes this led to Annan being targeted by

conservative opinion makers in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> It was no secret at that time that many at the UN and beyond shared Annan's sentiments, and that some UN Secretariat political staff had repeatedly called for a clear statement from Annan denouncing the invasion of Iraq (Power, 2008: 436), but it was equally clear that the U.S. government would react quite negatively to open criticism in an election year.

### *U.S. Media Reporting: Targeting the UN*

On 16 September, Patrick Tyler reported in the NYT in neutral tones under the headline "Annan Says Iraq War Was 'Illegal'", on the same day, the official *Voice of America* reported US Ambassador Danforth's reaction who considered Annan's remarks "ill-advised and poorly-timed". On September 17 Tyler's headline read "The Reach of War: Diplomacy; U.N. Chief Ignites Firestorm By Calling Iraq War 'Illegal'". The *Washington Post* (17 September) reported under the headline "U.S., Allies Dispute Annan on Iraq War", citing British, Australian and French officials. The neo-conservative media, led by the *Heritage Foundation's* research team, attempted to exploit Annan's "lapse" in a "web memo" of 17 September "Kofi Annan's Iraq Blunder" in which Phillips and Gardiner called Annan's assertion a "false and spurious" "ill-considered jibe" which "undercuts efforts to stabilize post-war Iraq." (Phillips and Gardiner, 2004). They described Annan's comments "extraordinarily undiplomatic and inappropriate" and questioned "his suitability to continue in his post." On September 16, Lou Dobbs took up the story on *CNN* for his "bizarre statement" and said: "Outrage and anger today after an astonishing statement about Iraq by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan". Dobbs (2004) lamented "the interference that was being run over the course of the past two years [...] by the Germans and the French [...]".

When the General Assembly session opened in New York the following week, Annan's statement was closely reported by the media worldwide. The NYT of 22 September headlined "Annan Reiterates His Misgivings About the Legality of War in Iraq", and in the article Warren Hoge reported that Annan 'stuck to the point by citing the example of Iraq in his larger argument about the primacy of international law and how it applies to advanced powers as well as unprincipled individuals' (Hoge, 2004). On the same day, Claudia Rossett, a fellow at the *Foundation for the Defence of Democracies*, another conservative think tank, wrote on the opinion page of the *Wall Street Journal* ("What's 'Illegal'? – Kofi Annan helped Saddam Hussein steal food from babies") linking Annan's statement to the Oil-for-Food program which, to her, is the "real issue", i.e. how money for humanitarian relief in Iraq was diverted to commissions on oil sales. Rossett, who became one of the leading investigative reporter on Oil-for-Food in coming months, said it was high time to mend "a system in which

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<sup>3</sup> Tharoor in personal interview with author, Salzburg, November 2008.

a U.N. Secretary-General feels free to describe the overthrow of a murderous tyrant as ‘illegal,’ but no one at the top seems particularly bothered to have presided over the tyrant’s theft of food from hungry children.” (Rossett, 2004). Here we can notice a shift in reporting; Annan began to be blamed for ills associated with the Iraq war, which by now was in full swing. Annan’s detractors such as William Safire began referring to the scandal as “Kofigate”. James Traub, one of Annan’s biographers, described what then ensued as a “witch hunt” (Traub, 2006).

### *Scandal-dumping*

One scandal-story after another emerged: in addition to a series of reports about sexual abuse in the UN’s peacekeeping mission in the Congo, there were allegations of sexual harassment by the head of UNHCR, former Dutch prime minister Ruud Lubbers (who eventually resigned), there were reports of misuse of funds in the UN’s own Office of Internal Oversight Services and, in November, a vote of no confidence by the UN Staff Council. Finally, there were the continuing revelations about Annan’s son Kojo who, it slowly emerged, had continued to receive payments from Cotecna, a Swiss company with a contract from the Oil-for-Food Program.

The neo-conservative *Washington Times* and the *Weekly Standard* worked hard to keep these stories alive, but the liberal NYT also played a role in maintaining the momentum on the oil-for-food scandal. Judith Miller, a reporter for the NYT who had depended on Iraqi sources for much of her reporting about alleged weapons of mass destruction in 2002/03, and whose reporting was later seen as severely distorted by over-reliance on Iraqi sources such as Ahmad Chalabi, continued to report on oil-for-food in the NYT. After Miller’s resignation from the *Times*, a former colleague and long-time UN bureau chief, Barbara Crossette urged to take a closer look at her reporting, which was “personally damaging to Secretary-General Kofi Annan because the reports were frequently based on half-truths or hearsay peddled on Capitol Hill by people determined to force Annan out of the office” (quoted in Meisler, 2007: 289).

On December 4, 2004, Republican Senator Norm Coleman of Minnesota, wrote an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* “It’s time for UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to resign.” According to Stan Meisler, former *Los Angeles Times* journalist and Annan’s biographer, “the campaign against Annan became so fervent ...that many analysts assumed the White House was behind it.” (Meisler, 2007: 290). But it was exactly these suspicions that caused an international backlash. The EU25, including the UK, supported Annan and demonstratively invited him to the EU-summit; 55 African states and their leaders, including Mandela and

Mbeki, expressed their support, and on 8 December the General Assembly gave Annan a standing ovation, the applause lasted several minutes. The White House backed off and Kofi Annan would complete his second term in office two years later in 2006.

### *European Media Reporting*

While Annan was under siege in the U.S. in December, European media reported in quite a different tone: *Agence France Press*, in a report from Geneva, wrote on 1 December: “Annan’s son never touched oil-for-food contracts in Iraq: Cotecna”. On 5 December, Matthias Krause reported in *Der Tagespiegel* under the heading “Why is Kofi Annan currently being criticized?” in which the criticism of Annan is linked to his declaring the Iraq-war “illegal”. (Krause, 2004). *Der Spiegel* of 6 December wrote under the heading “General Annan, Sekretary Kofi” that “Kofi Annan, tough but quiet, is the new favourite enemy of the American right.” On 9 December, *The Independent* (London) used the following headline: “This witch-hunt against Kofi Annan is the real scandal”, the *Financial Times* of the same day published an opinion piece by Quentin Peel: “Stop this demonizing of the UN.”

### **Event 2: “Hell no”**

At the end of December 2004, a lull can be observed in the attacks on Annan, primarily because the media focused on the international relief effort for the Asian Tsunami, in which the UN and its agencies were needed. However, by February, reporting heated up again when the first interim report of the Volcker Committee<sup>4</sup> was issued which implicated the head of the Oil-for-Food program, Benon Sevan, a senior UN official who had arranged to receive Iraqi oil allocations “for a friend”. Sevan himself had, according to the Volcker-report, received under \$ 150,000 in the process and was later indicted in a New York court.

On 29 March 2005 the Volcker-Committee was to issue its second interim report which focused specifically on the circumstances under which the Swiss company Cotecna<sup>5</sup> had received a major UN contract given Cotecna had previously employed Kofi Annan’s son Kojo. Prior to the release of the report Annan’s staff was told informally by Volcker that it would clear him personally of serious wrong-doing; Annan’s communication advisers were thus able to prepare their media strategy in advance for that day (Traub, 2006: 324-7). Annan’s Chief of Staff, Mark Malloch Brown, a former Communications Director of the World Bank with a

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Volcker, the highly respected former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, had been appointed by Annan to investigate the allegations regarding Oil for Food earlier in 2004.

<sup>5</sup> [www.iic-offp.org/documents](http://www.iic-offp.org/documents)

strong P.R. background joined Annan's office in January 2005 and personally appeared at many press briefings at critical times.<sup>6</sup>

The press was, however, also well prepared for the launching of "Volcker II" and reported in a critical tone of its publication in advance: Claudio Gatti and Mark Turner wrote in the *Financial Times* on March 23 "Annan son received \$ 300,000 in Cotecna Payments"; Yochi Dreazen in the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on 25 March: "Panel to Criticize Annan for Lapses in UN's Oil-for-Food Program" and on 26 March, the NYT reporters Warren Hoge and Judith Miller wrote: "Oil-for-Food Commission Is Said to Criticize Annan." These reports were in part based on leaks by members of Volcker's investigating team<sup>7</sup>, some of whom disagreed with Volcker's more benign assessment of Annan's role. At that stage rumours were circulating in the media that Paul Volcker might do a "snow job" (or cover-up) on Annan.

### *Annan's Media Management*

When the second Volcker report was published on 29 March, Annan immediately spoke to the press at UN headquarters and declared his "great relief" at "this exoneration." When asked during his press conference whether he would resign, Annan replied in a decisive fashion: "Hell, no!" At the press conference, Annan and his staff attempted to use the opportunity to underline the importance of his own reform proposals. This was a deliberate response which, according to Edward Mortimer, his Director of Communications, was part of their strategy to "change the conversation" by focusing on the important work the UN was tasked to perform.<sup>8</sup> In terms of coverage on that day, the *Associated Press* news agency reported neutrally: "Volcker: No Clear Oil-for-Food Conflict for Kofi" and *CNN* headlined its report: "Probe finds U.N. chief didn't influence oil-for-food contract." The NYT, on the other hand, in a report by Hoge and Miller, found a new "scandal": "Oil Report to Say Aide to Annan Culled Files." (Hoge and Miller, 2005). This issue, whether Iqbal Riza, who had been Annan's Chief of Office until the end of the year, had deliberately shredded files to evade the oil-for-food inquiry, became a subplot to the continuing Annan scandal saga in weeks to come.

On the next day, March 30, the UN press office issued a series of press releases in its attempt "to change the conversation." In addition to a statement by Mark Malloch Brown entitled "Burden of Proof in Oil-for-Food Probe Shifts to Accusers Now, UN Official Says ", Malloch

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Response to Questions on Oil-for-Food Inquiry by Secretary-General's Chef de Cabinet*, Press Briefing, 23 March 2005 (<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs> )

<sup>7</sup> During the daily press briefing by the Secretary-General's spokesman on 28 March Fred Eckhard complained "[...] but someone is leaking, and it's resulting in 'death by a thousand cuts' for us and we'd prefer that that not happen." (<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2005/dbo50328.doc.htm> )

<sup>8</sup> Edward Mortimer in interview with author, Salzburg, 8 April 2008.



Brown asserted that “it is no longer up to the United Nations to prove its innocence of wrongdoing, but for its accusers to prove its guilt” and went on to say that the Volcker-report clearly showed that management reforms were necessary. In another press release of the same day Malloch Brown claimed that “management reforms are now underway” to address the issues criticized by Volcker. When asked about the shredding of documents by his predecessor, Malloch Brown claimed that these had been duplicates destroyed for practical reasons of space.

### *Media annoyance led to more criticism*

This attempt at scandal management did not, however, go down well with the correspondents, as several members of the UN press corps were now thoroughly annoyed by Annan and Malloch Brown.<sup>9</sup> The latter frequently answered questions from the press corps instead of Annan himself, which was seen as a weakness of Annan who, in the past, had been much more accessible to journalists. On 30 March, at least twenty-four articles appeared in the English-speaking media (as reflected in “UN in the News”, the in-house press service). The tone of those articles was more critical than in the past, most negative were the tabloid *New York Sun*, the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Financial Times*, which picked up on the shredding-issue. Even the *Independent*, which had been sympathetic to Annan in the past, now spoke of a “gradual erosion of Annan’s credibility.” The NYT, which reported that Annan “didn’t intervene in Iraq contract”, in an editorial called the verdict on Annan as “mixed.” The next day, March 31, the tone grew more doubtful with headlines such as “Kofi Limping Along”, “UN Must Move Beyond Annan”, “Pressure on Annan May Be Too Much”, and “U.S. Wants Him Weak.”

### *German-language reporting at that time*

The idea that the pressure was growing on Annan was also a theme in the headlines of several European media, but it was reported in much more subdued tones. *Salzburger Nachrichten* (31 March 2005): “Annan remains under pressure”, the Austrian daily *Der Standard* reported on 29 March “Annan’s Son reportedly earned 400,000 Dollars at UN contractor”, and on 30 March under the headline “UN Committee spotlighting Annan’s role in oil-for-food scandal”. The *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (30 March) reported about “Corruption in the Iraq-Assistance Program – UN investigators chide Annan” and a commentary of the same day “Annan’s weakness”. On 2 April the *SZ* reported that potential successors to Annan were

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Malloch Brown recently published his own account of the affair in his book *The Unfinished Global Revolution – The Pursuit of a New International Politics* (2011. New York: Penguin) He terms *oil-for-food* a result of UN incompetence rather than UN corruption and maintains that: “the UN took the fall for a scandal that was much bigger than its own part in it.”(171)

being mentioned. In general, these articles in the German-language press, while reporting the criticism of Annan, were much less prominently placed than the daily front-page news stories of the *NYT*. Also, the *SZ* (1 April) reprinted a comment from the British *Guardian* suggesting that there were clear neo-conservative motives to discredit the head of the UN. *Der Tagesspiegel* (3 April) carried a two-page article about Oil-for-Food “Komplott im Untergeschoss” which points to the UN’s “culture of organized irresponsibility”, but also to the “continuing witch-hunt of U.S. media against Annan, which is scandalous itself.”

German, Austrian and other West European media did not take the oil-for-food revelations as seriously as their counterparts in the United States, and accorded them much lower priorities in their reporting and their editorial comments. In 2007 two of my students<sup>10</sup> wrote term papers about the comparative media coverage of the Oil-for-Food allegations. They discovered that stories that made front-page in the *NYT* were routinely relegated to the business pages of the Dutch and Austrian newspapers which they analyzed.

### *Interpretation: Another cultural Divide?*

In the United States news stories about various scandals mushroomed and deeply affected perceptions of Kofi Annan and the UN. A British participant-observer Ambassador David Hannay wrote in 2009 that Annan’s authority was continuously challenged by the scandals which to Hannay appeared orchestrated by “a lynch mob in hot pursuit of its quarry” by people who “probably preferred that the UN should not be successfully reformed.” (Hannay, 2009:275). Hannay, who had chaired a high-level panel on UN reform in 2004, regretted that Oil-for-Food received more media attention than UN reform: “Oil-for-Food became the ultimate weapon of mass distraction.” Sir Brian Urquhart, the former UN Under-Secretary-General and astute observer of the United States, similarly saw the oil-for-food-scandal as “a useful distraction from the steadily worsening news from Iraq.” (Urquhart, 2006).

The oil-for-food scandal occurred at a time when the UN had been called upon to assist in many international conflicts, from Afghanistan to the Congo, from Haiti to the Middle East. Although reporting on these conflicts and the UN’s role in them did not cease as a result of the oil-for-food furor, these real crises and possible solutions to them were often overshadowed by the latest scandal news. The UN’s credibility in the United States and other English-speaking countries was clearly damaged and impacted the organization’s capacity to deal with the myriad of tasks before it. Although Annan survived the personal attacks and completed his second term in office in December 2006, he was a “lame duck” and not able to see through many of his reform initiatives.

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<sup>10</sup> Marlene Topf from Austria and Suzanne Goossen from the Netherlands

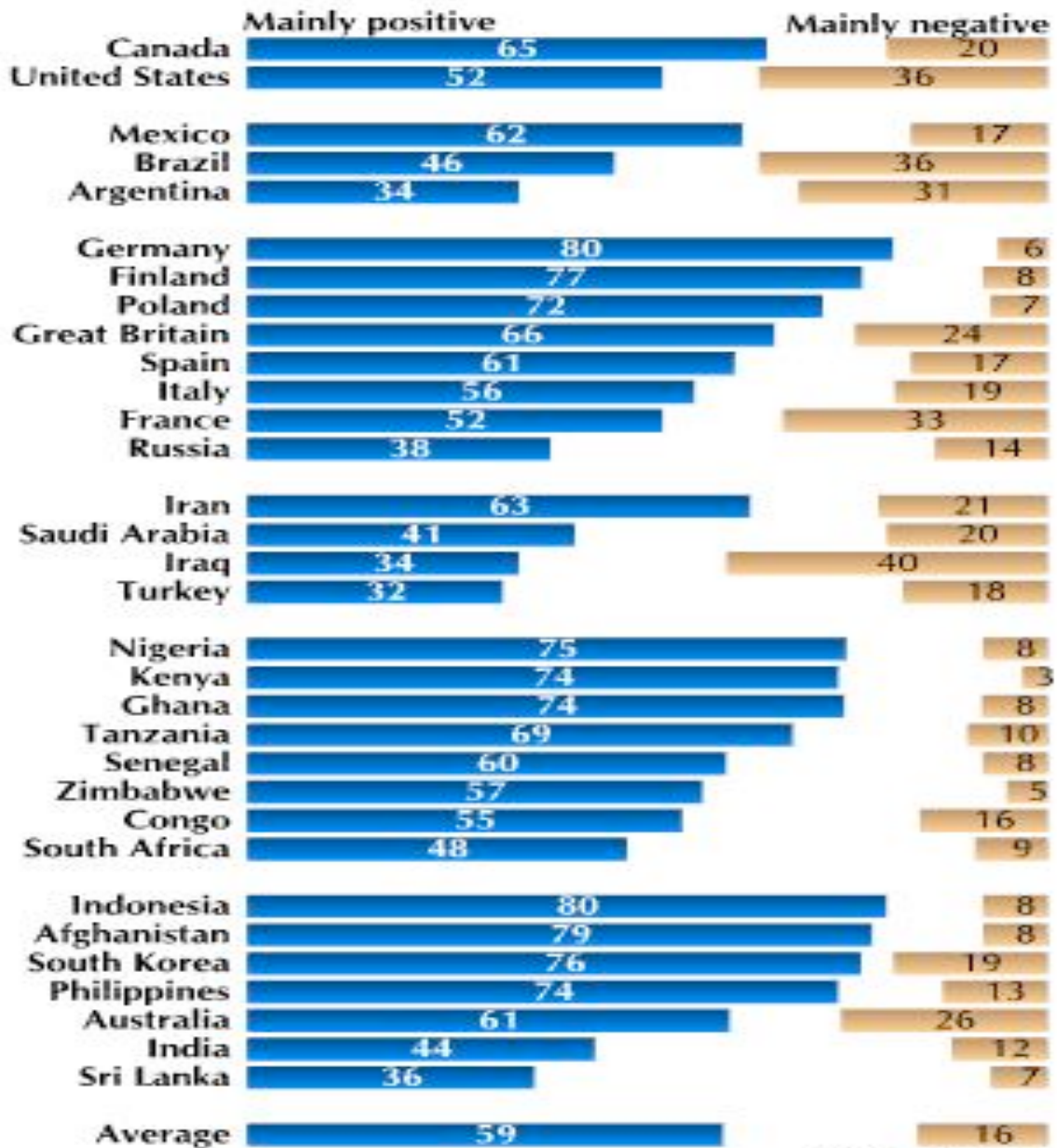
*Political Discourse Culture – the dominant factor?*

This paper has traced the history of UN- related media scandals over several decades and examined how they played into the hands of UN critics, mostly in the United States. These scandals helped shape the image of international organizations in the United States as inefficient, corrupt and dangerous. This view was particularly strong during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

During those periods, conservative and neoconservative values dominated the U.S. foreign-policy agenda. As a consequence, American political culture, with its stress on America-first, military prowess and the trend towards unilateral action led to different approaches to international relations than those maintained by many European countries. Reporting differed widely in other Western nations which contributed to a growing transatlantic media and opinion divide on many issues on the international agenda. While in Germany support for the UN grew during this period, opinion polls in the United States saw support for the organization dip to the lowest point in the 60-year history of the organization.

As far as U.S. media were concerned, after 2001 “patriotic journalism”, a disturbingly uncritical coverage of the drive to war in Iraq, as well as negative perceptions of the role of the UN and other intergovernmental organizations came to dominate even the mainstream media in the United States. The NYT, in particular, which had reported in comparatively neutral tones about the Waldheim revelations in the 1980s, played an unsavoury role beginning in 2002, when it relayed false news about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Its role in reporting the allegedly scandalous aspects of the oil-for-food program was also prominent and, as Russ Baker pointed out, very dubious (Baker, 2005).

## Evaluations of the UN



BBC, 12/2005

## CONCLUSIONS

The history of UN-related media scandals illustrates that they played into the hands of UN critics, mostly in the United States. These media constructs helped shape public opinion of international organizations in the U.S., and were linked to unilateral political tendencies in both the Reagan and the Bush Administrations. However, reporting differed widely among Western nations and contributed to a growing transatlantic media divide, especially in the run-up to the Iraq-war.

Contrary to beliefs that the globalization of the media has led to a breaking down of cultural barriers and frontiers, this study shows that cross-cultural communication gaps and perception differences on political and security issues widened rather than narrowed in the twenty-year time period analyzed here. Media framing of the two scandals analyzed followed predominantly national political preoccupations and prejudices, with the media often taking their cues from governmental leaders and opinion makers. This study's findings concur with theories on media framing and political discourse as developed by Entman and Bennett. Their models help us understand the interrelationship between political power and media framing, as well as the cultural specificity of the reporting of international events. (Entman, 2004; Bennett, 2007; Bennett, et al., 2007).

Media reporting and public perceptions of the Oil-for-Food-scandal, much more than the Waldheim-scandal, reflected a transatlantic media and opinion divide, thus further substantiating writings by Krugman (2003) and Lehmann (2005). As this study shows, many of the UN-related "scandal" stories between 2002 and 2006 originated in neo-conservative think tanks and their media outlets in the United States and were subsequently picked up by U.S. mainstream media, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Based on this preliminary study, it is however difficult to argue that the neo-conservative media in the United States dominated the news reporting on the UN during the second term of Kofi Annan.

More detailed studies are needed to explore the dynamics of scandal reporting in this case. As this paper shows, the Waldheim scandal which erupted in 1986 occurred after he had left the UN. The Waldheim affair was enmeshed in issues of the "Second Cold War", but did not damage the UN as an institution in the long run. The Waldheim scandal was essentially a national scandal with international ramifications due to his prior ten-year service as the UN Secretary-General. The second case, that of Kofi Annan, is more complicated and could be explored further through media analysis of the oil-for-food scandal and its reporting in different countries around the world.

In both cases, Thompson's thesis that scandals can irreparably damage the reputation of individuals and institutions is only partially substantiated. Waldheim was ostracized, he was never able to travel abroad freely as President of Austria and his name was never removed from the "watch-list" of the U.S. government. However, the organization analyzed here, i.e. the UN, did not suffer irreparable damage as a result of its former Secretary-General having been exposed to have had Nazi affiliations. In the second and very different case of Kofi Annan, he appeared to have suffered some damage at the time the media exposed the oil-for-food scandal and other scandalous affairs in the UN Secretariat, but his long-term reputation as a person of international renown was not significantly affected. Following the end of his second term, Annan dedicated himself to various philanthropic endeavours through his Foundation. In 2008 Annan was called upon to mediate in the Kenyan post-election conflict where he succeeded in forging a compromise which received wide international acclaim.

However, Thompson's concept of media scandals as struggles over symbolic power is also substantiated by these comparative case studies. When Annan was targeted by neo-conservative media in the U.S. following his "lapse" over the Iraq war in 2004, other countries and regional organizations came to his support in the General Assembly. As a result the demands of the U.S. for his resignation led nowhere. The trans-atlantic media and opinion divide over Iraq thus helped Annan and the UN in the long run, as different perceptions of this conflict played out in various UN fora. While the UN lost much support with the American public, it gained influence in many parts of Europe.

*Public perceptions do matter in international affairs and international organizations.* Such organizations cannot afford to ignore criticism of their work by major member states, especially when those members apply leverage intended to project national interests and policies onto the international stage. The complex communication challenges posed by international media scandals must be professionally addressed by these organizations. Media management has become a critical skill in the public relations efforts of the UN and similar agencies; most of all they must be aware of increased media scrutiny and must plan to manage their policies accordingly.

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