

**NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2012
RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
(EXEMPLIFIED BY “ROSSIISKAYA GAZETA”)**

**ОСВЕЩЕНИЕ ВЫБОРОВ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА РОССИИ
В 2012 ГОДУ НА СТРАНИЦАХ СМИ
(НА ПРИМЕРЕ «РОССИЙСКОЙ ГАЗЕТЫ»)**

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This study investigates “Rossijskaya Gazeta’s” (an official publication of the Russian Government; it means “Russian Gazette”) coverage of the 2012 Russian presidential campaign. Overall, coverage of election information was the most common topic (62%), followed by voters (24%) and policy positions

(4%). Candidate Putin and his supporters received roughly the same amount of coverage (49% out of all statements in which any candidates and supporters were mentioned) as all other candidates and their supporters combined (51%). “Rossijskaya Gazeta’s” presidential campaign coverage was primarily neutral (63%), with a clear tendency to use a positive tone towards Putin and negative remarks concerning his main opponent Zyuganov. In closing there are data on analogous studies of news coverage of elections in Australia, Canada, Ghana, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, to compare features of the media content in Russia and aforementioned countries was not the main goal of this study. Rather, these data are quite useful in estimating results obtained by this research against a backdrop of other countries.

Key words: news coverage; president; Russia; election campaign; tone; “Rossijskaya Gazeta”.

Статья посвящена анализу публикаций «Российской газеты» (официального печатного органа Правительства РФ) о президентских выборах 2012 года в России. В целом, чаще всего темой посвященных этому статей была информация о выборах (62%), мнениях и настроениях избирателей (24%) и позициях кандидатов (4%). Кандидат Путин и его сторонники получили примерно столько же внимания (49% от всех высказываний, в которых упоминались кандидаты и их команды), сколько и все остальные кандидаты вместе взятые (51%). Общая тональность материалов «Российской газеты» о президентских выборах была преимущественно нейтральной (63%) с ярко выраженной тенденцией использования позитивного тона в отношении В. Путина и негативного — в отношении его основного оппонента Г. Зюга-

нова. В заключительной части статьи содержатся данные аналогичных исследований применительно к Австралии, Великобритании, Гане, Канаде и США. При этом сравнение особенностей освещения избирательных кампаний в России и названных государствах не являлось целью данного исследования: приведенные показатели призваны помочь оценить характер медийной представленности выборной тематики в России на фоне других стран.

Ключевые слова: *освещение в СМИ, президент; Россия; избирательная кампания; тональность; «Российская газета».*

Introduction

Newspapers are an important source of information about political campaigns, such as those for presidents, chancellors, and prime ministers. For example, Hollihan noted that “for national political news coverage, the most thorough, comprehensive, and substantive information regarding political campaigns, political issues, and public policies is available to readers of comprehensive large city daily papers” (Hollihan, 2001: 79). NES data from 1960-2000 revealed that use of newspapers was associated with higher levels of knowledge in each of these campaigns (Hansen, 2004). Newspapers can be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters. This is particularly important in countries such as the United Kingdom where candidates are prohibited from running television spots; “major parties are allocated rationed blocks of free time for party election broadcasts (PEBs) during official campaign periods” (Scammell, Langer, 2006: 65).

This is important in Russia too. In April 2012, The All-Russia Center of Public Opinion Research conducted a survey concerning

the usage of different types of mass media in Russia. According to its results, television remains the most popular medium in Russia, followed by print media. Russians trust national and regional TV stations most of all. In terms of popularity, TV is followed by the federal and local press. This means the news, as a source of information about candidates and their policies is particularly important for democracy.

Another reason for the importance of news about election campaigns lies in the theory of agenda-setting. Cohen explained that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963: 13). In other words, news media may not create attitudes (tell people what to think about an issue), but they can tell people that an issue is something they should be thinking about (tell people it is an important issue). McCombs and Shaw coined the phrase “agenda-setting” to refer to this phenomenon: The frequency with which an issue was discussed in the news was positively related to the public’s perceived importance of that issue (McCombs, Shaw, 1972). Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw concluded that research “tends to support a positive correlation—and often a causal relationship—between media agendas and public agendas” (Weaver, McCombs, Shaw, 2004: 258). So, not only can the news inform the public, it also has the potential to influence public perceptions of which issues are most important.

Furthermore, newspaper readers are an especially important group of citizens. NES data from 2000 establishes that Americans who read newspapers are significantly more likely to vote than those who do not ($\chi^2[df = 1] = 101.93, p < .0001, V = .26$). This means that newspaper readers have a disproportionate impact at the polls. Thus, research on the content of newspaper coverage of political campaigns is clearly justified.

Research has shown that the amount of coverage received by candidates, the tone of the coverage, and the amount of horse race coverage focusing on a candidate can influence voters' perceptions of candidates (Ross, 1992). Furthermore, as Farnsworth and Lichter observed, "Polls have repeatedly shown that voters have a very good idea which candidate is likely to win the presidency, but voters are less able to demonstrate their knowledge of issue stands" (Farnsworth, Lichter, 2003: 53). However, issue knowledge is arguably what voters need most: Patterson and McClure (1976) note that "Of all the information voters obtain through the mass media during a presidential campaign, knowledge about where the candidates stand is most vital" (Patterson, McClure, 1976: 49; see also Hofstetter, 1976). Therefore, the nature and content of newspaper coverage of political campaigns merit scholarly attention.

Literature review

Studies have investigated coverage of elections in one country by newspapers in another country (Christensen, 2005; Husselbee, Stempel, 1997; Khineyko, 2005). Other research has explored television news coverage of election campaigns, including Comrie (2012), Dmitrova and Stromback (2011), Kohn (1984), Mendelsohn (1993), Peter, Lauf, and Semetko (2004), Schultz and Zeh (2005), Semetko (1991), De Vreese, Canducci, Semetko, and Goomgaarden (2006), and Young (2008). This review will focus on the most pertinent studies, those on newspaper coverage of political campaigns.

Benoit, Stein, and Hansen reviewed the literature on news coverage of political campaigns, finding that most studies report horse races as the most common topic, that character was discussed

more than policy, and that the tone of news coverage tended to be negative. They also content analyzed the “*New York Times*” coverage of American presidential campaigns from 1952–2000. The three main topics covered were “horse race” (40%), character (31%), and policy (25%). The three most common forms of “horse races” in these data were strategy (34%), events (24%), and polls (22%). The tone of coverage was more negative (57%) than positive (39%) with a few reports of defenses (4%). Reporters (statements without any other source indicated) were the most common source (44%), followed by candidates (35%), supporters (35%), and others (5%) (Benoit, Stein, Hansen, 2005).

One of the earliest studies of newspaper coverage of election campaigns was completed by Sinclair, who investigated coverage of the 1979 British election: 55% of coverage concerned issues, 34% “horse race”, and 15% character (Sinclair, 1982). Stromback and Aalberg looked at newspaper coverage of elections in Sweden (2002) and Norway (2005). The “horse race” and issues received equal attention in Swedish newspapers; “horse race” was a more common topic than issues in Norway (64% to 36%) (Stromback, Aalberg, 2008). Hansen and Pederson studied the 2005 Danish election: 9% of newspaper ads were mostly or entirely negative, 7% of party election broadcasts were negative, 29% of debates, and 22% of newspaper articles that quoted candidates were negative (Hansen, Pederson, 2008). Walter and Vliegthart investigated newspaper coverage of the 2006 Dutch parliamentary campaign. Most statements were positive (63% to 37%) and discussed policy more than character (58% to 42%; “trait” and “value” were combined in the character category) (Walter, Vliegthart, 2010). Amponsah, following the approach taken in Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), looked at presidential campaigns in Ghana, 1992-2004. The “horse race” comprised 41% of newspaper articles, policy was 30%, and

character was 18%. The top three forms of horse race coverage were strategy (40%), events (29%), and endorsements (19%). Coverage was more positive than negative (74% to 19%) with few defenses (7%). Most statements were attributed to candidates (40%) or had no source (reporters, 36%); supporters (19%) and others (5%) were less common (Amponsah, 2012). Carstea analyzed opinion articles on the 2009 Romanian presidential campaign; around 90% of articles were negative. However, results on topics are mixed: policy was more common than horse race in two campaigns whereas horse race was more frequently discussed than policy in two campaigns (Carstea, 2012). Benoit, Compton, and Phillips studied news coverage of prime minister elections in Australia, Canada, and the U.K. In each country the most common topic of newspaper coverage was the “horse race”; in Canada and the U.K. (but not Australia) character was discussed more often than policy. In Australia, the most common topic of news coverage was strategy; in Canada and the U.K. it was polls. Coverage contained more negative than positive themes. Most themes had no source (were simply statements by the reporter) (Benoit, Compton, Phillips, 2013).

It is also worth mentioning that there are very few if any studies at all that investigate coverage of the 2012 Russian presidential election. Russian scholars prefer to research any aspects of the electoral process other than those pertinent to newspaper coverage of the 2012 presidential campaign. To date, only Osipova has made an attempt to analyze the correlation between mass communication content and election outcomes. She found that, on the one hand, the more often people watch TV the more likely they were to vote for Putin, and, on the other hand, the more often people use the Internet, the more likely they were to vote for Putin’s main opponent Zyuganov (Osipova , 2013: 118).

Purpose

This study investigates the nature of the newspaper coverage of the 2012 Russian presidential election. We ask the following questions:

RQ1: What is the most common topic of “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta’s*” coverage of the 2012 Russian presidential campaign?

RQ2: What is the relative proportion of comments from different sources (reporters, candidates, supporters, others)?

RQ3: Is there any difference in the amount of coverage devoted to individual candidates?

RQ4: What is the relative proportion of positive, negative, and neutral tone concerning different candidates in newspaper coverage of the 2012 campaign?

Method

We sampled a single newspaper, “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*”. On the one hand, “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*” enjoys official status, because acts of state effect their publication , but on the other hand, “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*” is intended for the general reader, embracing everything from daily news, special reports, and interviews of government officials to expert commentaries on documents of state. Its daily circulation is about 180,000 copies. “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*” has several news offices abroad: Great Britain, Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium, Germany, Spain, the USA, Ukraine, France, South Korea, China, Turkey. During the first six months of 2010 “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*” has topped the ratings of the most quoted socio-political editions according to TNS Media Intelligence. Taking into account “*Rossiiskaya Gazeta’s*” official

status, it is safe to say that its coverage is typical of all mass media loyal to the Kremlin. It is arguably one of the most important and influential newspapers in Russia and well worth scholarly attention.

Our sample includes all 104 articles published in 19 issues of “*Rossijskaya Gazeta*” over the course of one month before the Election Day – March, 4. The selection of articles was carried out by a keyword search using the term “election.”

Categorical content analysis was employed to describe the content of these news stories. Benoit’s Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) serves as the theoretical starting point as extended for analysis of campaign news (Amponsah, 2012; Benoit, Compton, Phillips, 2013; Benoit, Hemmer, Stein, 2010; Benoit, Stein, Hansen, 2005). This theory posits that candidate discourse has only three functions (acclaims or positive statements; attacks or negative statements, and defenses or refutations of attacks). It also holds that candidate messages will address two topics, policy (issues) and character (image). News coverage of campaigns can address five basic topics: policy and character (from Functional Theory) as well as what is known as the “horse race”, voters, scandal, and election information. Horse race coverage is comprised of seven sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, fund raising, and spending. Taking into consideration that such horse race types such as endorsements, fund raising, and spending are very uncommon for Russian political practice, (there were no mentions of these sub-categories in our sample) thus we decided not to include them in final results. Tone is another variable for understanding newspaper coverage. The three functions of candidate discourse from Functional Theory (acclaims/positive statements, attacks/negative statements, and defenses/refutations of attacks) can describe the tone of both candidate and news statements. Finally, statements in a news story

can be unattributed (from the reporter), from the candidate, from a supporter, or from another source.

We used the codebook developed in earlier research (Benoit, Stein, Hansen, 2005), which contained definitions of these categories with an example of each category from newspaper stories. Coders divided the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Berelson defined a theme as “an assertion about a subject” (Berelson, 1952: 18). Holsti explained that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject” (Holsti, 1969: 116). Then each theme was coded for source, topic, tone, and subject.

Fleis’s κ was calculated (on a subset 10% of the texts) to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic was .76, the κ for tone was .74, and κ for identifying the source of statements was .87. Landis and Koch explained that values of κ over .61 represents significant reliability, so these data should be considered quite reliable (Landis and Koch, 1977).

Results

The first research question investigated the topics of “*Rossiyskaya Gazeta’s*” articles on presidential campaign.

Table 1

Topics of election news coverage

Horse Race	Character	Policy	Voters	Scandal	Election Information
54 (5%)	13 (1%)	45 (4%)	246 (24%)	26 (3%)	639 (62%)

Table 2

Topics of horse race in election news coverage

Strategy	Event	Poll	Predict
16 (0.6%)	16 (1.6%)	16 (1.6%)	14 (1.4%)

As can be seen in *Table 1*, the most frequent topic was Election Information, followed by Voters. The smallest four categories (i.e. Character, Policy, Scandal and four types of Horse Race – see *Table 2*) together comprised only around 13% of the utterances in the sample. Among them, Policy was much more frequent than Character (4% vs. 1%, respectively) and only one percent less than all four types of Horse Race (5%). There was a significant difference in the distribution of these topics ($\chi^2 [df = 5] = 1760.71, p < .0001$). No significant difference occurred in the four forms of horse race.

Table 3

Source of election news coverage

Reporter	Candidate	Supporter	Other
480 (47%)	62 (6%)	82 (8%)	399 (39%)

Table 3 provides data to answer RQ2. As expected, Reporters were the most common source of information (47%). Surprisingly, they were followed not by Candidates (6%) or their Supporters (8%), but by Others (39%), i.e. officials, Central Electoral Committee officers, experts, and scholars. Again, there was a significant difference in the distribution of these types of sources ($\chi^2 [df = 3] = 541.69, p < .0001$).

Table 4

**Types of sources of “Rossijskaya Gazeta’s”
coverage of presidential campaign-2012**

Putin and his supporters	Zyuganov and his supporters	Prokhorov and his supporters	Zhirinovskiy and his supporters	Mironov and his supporters	Reporter	Other
71 (7%)	31 (3%)	19 (2%)	11 (1%)	10 (1%)	484 (47%)	397 (39%)

Table 4 shows us proportions of cases when candidates and their supporters were used as sources. Examining all seven possible sources, a significant difference occurred ($\chi^2 [df = 6] = 1703.43, p < .0001$). Focusing just on the five candidates, it is not hard to see that statements made by Putin and members of his “team” were referred to most often, followed by Zyuganov, Prokhorov, Zhirinovskiy, and Mironov ($\chi^2 [df = 4] = 59.83, p < .0001$). Interestingly, this order clearly correlates with the outcome of the 2012 presidential campaign. According to official data from the Central Electoral Committee of the Russian Federation, Putin got 64% of the vote, Zyuganov 18%, Prokhorov 8%, Zhirinovskiy 6%, and Mironov 4%¹.

That is not to say that it was “*Rossijskaya Gazeta*” that predetermined the final results of the election. We just assume that on the one hand, reporters might well anticipate the outcome of a campaign, and that on the other hand they could also have a desire to implicitly favor the likely winner.

¹ URL:http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100031793509&vrn=100100031793509®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100031793509&type=226.

Having analyzed the tone of “*Rossijskaya Gazeta’s*” coverage of the 2012 presidential campaign, we found some evidence for this hypothesis.

Table 5

Tone of election news coverage

Tone with regard to candidates	Putin	Zyuganov	Prokhorov	Zhirinovskiy	Mironov	Neutral tone
positive	154 (15%)	22 (2%)	19 (2%)	13 (2%)	12 (1%)	648 (63%)
negative	14 (1%)	30 (3%)	0 (0%)	4 (0.5%)	5 (0.5%)	
neutral	47 (5%)	13 (1%)	21 (2%)	10 (1%)	11 (1%)	

First of all, we have to clarify here that coders were asked to use a neutral tone when a statement was about election itself and contained no reference to any of the candidates. Further than that, we have come to an agreement to identify tone (e.g. positive, negative, or neutral – say, Putin+, Putin-, or Putin=) with regard to any candidate mentioned.

As can be seen in *Table 5*, tone about Putin was, for the most part, positive. At the same time, the only candidate who suffered from negative tone more often than enjoyed the positive one (3% vs. 2%) was the main opponent of Putin – Zyuganov. We also ran a chi-square test of cross-classification on positive and negative statements about Putin versus Zyuganov ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 60.46, p < .0001, \phi = .52$). Clearly, this effects size, which at *phi* = .52 is very large. Another chi-square goodness of fit test on positive and negative statements about Putin versus Zyuganov: ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 61.16, p < .0001$). So, about three times as many evaluated comments addressed Putin

as Zyuganov (76% to 24%) but most of the comments about Putin (92%) were positive whereas most of the comments on Zyuganov were negative (58%).

It is also worth mentioning that Prokhorov was never discussed with a negative tone. These facts suggest that all this could have been done deliberately – in order to impose a negative slant on Putin’s real adversary Zyuganov and to put a positive spin on a relatively new Russian politician Prokhorov. The latter might well be done for a particular purpose – to divert those people who didn’t like Putin from voting for Zyuganov to voting for Prokhorov. Far be it for us to accuse “*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*” of doing this, but might it be just a coincidence? In any case, even if all this really intended to favor Putin, reporters had a right to do so as they work for an official edition of the Russian Government.

Discussion

It seems appropriate to compare some of the results we have gotten with those concerning presidential campaigns in other countries. By doing so, we do not pretend to draw a fully-fledged comparison. Instead, our aim is just to make specifics of the news coverage of the 2012 Russian election more clear-cut and salient.

Notable about topics is the fact that horse race, policy, and character are not very common in Russia. Benoit’s research on “*The New York Times*’” coverage of presidential campaigns in the United States revealed that the most common topic of news coverage was horse race, followed by character and policy (Benoit, 2005). Having compared this data with the data from Benoit’s (2013) and Amponsah’s (2012) research, we may conclude that almost the same is true for Australia, Canada, Ghana, and Great Britain.

Table 6

Topics of election news coverage

	Election Info	Voters	HR	Policy	Scandal	Character
Russia	62%	24%	5%	4%	3%	1%
Australia	6%	3%	53%	21%	3%	13%
Canada	0.4%	6%	46%	17%	0.6%	30%
Ghana	5%	6%	41%	30%	0.4%	18%
United Kingdom	0	4%	39%	20%	0	37%
United States	0.1%	4%	40%	25%	0.2%	31%
<i>Note:</i> The sources for the non-Russia data are articles of Benoit (2005 and 2013 – for the United States and Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, respectively) and Amponsah (2012 – for Ghana)						

As can be seen in Table 6, the contrast is very sharp here. In Russia, Election Information is the single most common topic while Horse Race was 5%. In the other five countries, Election Information ranges from 0-6% and Horse Race is the most common topic, followed either by Character (in three cases out of five) or by Policy (in two cases out of five).

Such a difference can arguably be explained by the fact that the outcome of the presidential election in Russia was quite obvious from the very beginning. If so, there was no need for reporters to devote much attention to candidates' intentions, beliefs, and characters, as well as different aspects of Horse Race. Instead, they preferred to report on the Central Electoral Committee's activity, the process of voting stations' preparation for the Election Day, and some other kinds of Election Information. Also, a relatively large share of coverage was devoted to voters' reactions, which supposedly

resulted from a number of rallies held in Moscow in February, 2012.

As for sources, there also are some significant differences between “*Rossijskaya Gazeta*” and newspapers of other countries.

Table 7

Source of coverage

	Reporter	Other	Supporter	Candidate
Russia	47%	39%	8%	6%
Australia	74%	4%	7%	15%
Canada	64%	7%	3%	26%
Ghana	36%	35	19%	40%
United Kingdom	61%	3%	9%	27%
United States	44%	5%	16%	35%
<i>Note:</i> The sources for the non-Russia data are articles of Benoit (2005 and 2013 – for the United States and Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, respectively) and Amponsah (2012 – for Ghana)				

“Reporter” was the most common source in Russia and in four of the other five countries (except Ghana). In Russia, “Candidates” were the least common source at 6%. In other countries the Candidate was the source for between 15% and 40% of statements. At the same time, “Other” was much more common in Russia (39%) and in Ghana (35%) as compared to other countries. In our opinion, the peculiarities of editorial policy of “*Rossijskaya Gazeta*” may account for this, i.e. a so-called “unspoken tenet/principle” to refer to someone else’s opinion rather than to express reporter’s point of view – in order to make a story seem more objective and less biased. The problem is that sometimes (arguably quite often!) positions of “others” clearly corresponded with those of “*Rossijskaya Gazeta’s*” editorial board.

Others have commented on the negative content of news coverage. Hart noted that “political news is reliably negative” (Hart, 2000: 173). Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt observed that “In every presidential general election since 1960 reliance on news reports for information about the campaign would lead one to conclude that it contained a far higher level of attack than was in fact the case” (Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt, 1998: 325). It is fair to say that this sample of stories does not correspond with these conclusions.

Table 8

Tone of coverage

	Positive	Negative	Defense
Russia	22%	5%	0*
Australia	32%	62%	7%
Canada	39%	55%	6%
Ghana	74%	19%	7%
United Kingdom	39%	58%	3%
United States	39%	57%	4%
<i>Note:</i> The sources for the non-Russia data are articles of Benoit (2005 and 2013 – for the United States and Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, respectively) and Amponsah (2012 – for Ghana)			

Clearly, tone was mainly negative in the United States and former countries of the British Empire. As for Russia, presumably, there was no need for “*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*” to use negative tone very often, as the outcome had been pretty evident from the very start of the 2012 presidential campaign. That was more than likely why Russian journalists preferred to make “neutral” statements. The newspaper’s emphasis on election information resulted in a neutral tone. In other words, they just reported on the main events of the

campaign and did not intend to influence people's choice to any great degree.

Conclusion

In America, the media tends to focus more on horse races and scandals rather than on substantive issues. Graber explains that a survey of newspaper and television editors found that the three most important factors in choosing whether to air or print a story are conflict, proximity, and timeliness; "Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story's overall significance" (Graber, 1989: 86). Furthermore, Patterson explains "Policy problems lack the novelty that the journalist seeks. The first time that a candidate takes a position on a key issue, the press is almost certain to report it. Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added" (Patterson, 1994: 61). In Russia, "*Rossijskaya Gazeta*" preferred to focus on election information and – to some degree – on voters' reactions.

In our opinion, this can be explained, in part, by several factors. The first one is the status of "*Rossijskaya Gazeta*". Being an official edition of the Russian Government, it had no choice but to steal the limelight from other candidates and give it to V. Putin. The second factor is closely connected with the specifics of the political regime in Russia. The role V. Putin plays here, in combination with a lack of real competition among candidates, determined the structure of media content with regard to elections. Finally, the third factor is likely tied with Russian journalistic culture. By nature, it may well be quite different from that of Anglo-Saxon nations. But, to be able to say for sure, one has to conduct separate thorough research.

Above all, this study provided a theoretical framework for examining the topics, tone, and source of news coverage of political campaigns. It also provides a framework for understanding the various types (sub-categories) of horse race coverage. It provides a look at one of the most important newspapers in Russia, “*Rossijskaya Gazeta*”. Finally, it compares the content of “*Rossijskaya Gazeta’s*” coverage of the presidential campaign in Russia with the content of coverage of presidential campaigns in Australia, Canada, Ghana, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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