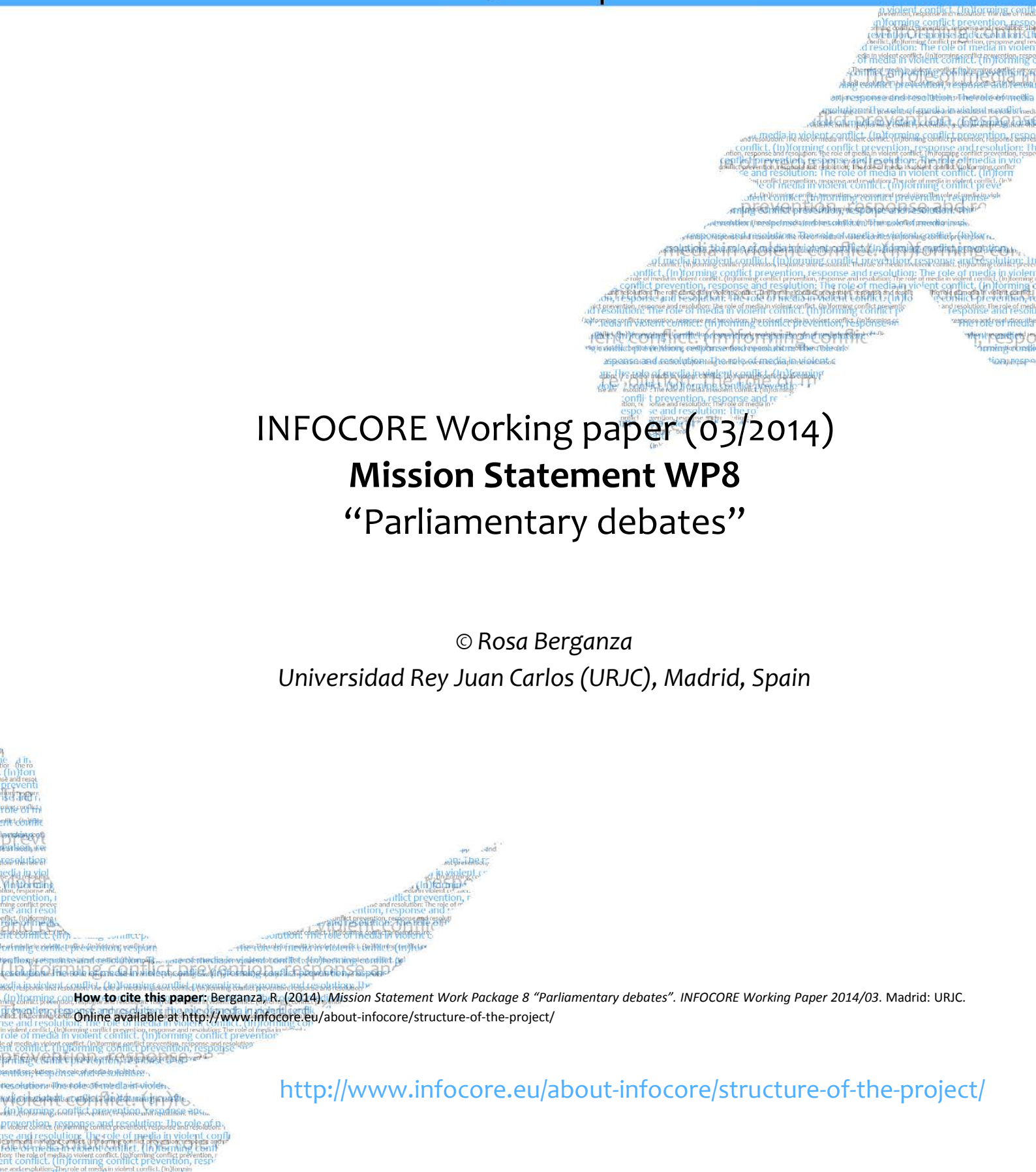
(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICT



INFOCORE Working paper (03/2014)

Mission Statement WP8

"Parliamentary debates"

© Rosa Berganza

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC), Madrid, Spain

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Mission Statement WP8 "Parliamentary debates"

Attention is a crucial resource in politics. If issues and problems do not attract political attention, they do not gain agenda status, and policies regarding these issues and problems are not affected. WP8 tackles the question of political attention and its consequences in political decisions by focusing not on individual political actors (WP2 "Political media strategies") but on aggregate institutional attention: the content of parliamentary debates in the selected countries of INFOCORE study. This is the reason why we propose the title "Parliamentary debates" to identify our Work Package (WP8) from now on.

Members of Parliament (MP) manage the flood of information from a wide range of sources, the media among them. What information do they select from such an inundation? Which issues do they pay attention to and how do they frame them? The INFOCORE project represents a unique opportunity to provide answers to these questions in some countries to which scholars have devoted less attention and in a context of violent conflicts.

News coverage given to different types of political actors -mainly in election time periods- has been a central concern in the field of political communication (see e.g. Strömback & Kaid (2008) and Berganza (2009)). It is well established for example that news is structurally biased towards official sources, that media stories are often framed as "conflict" (Lengauer, Esser & Berganza, 2012) or that the views of governmental actors dominate the media discourse (Hall et al., 1978, p. 58; Benett, 1996; Lawrence, 2000; Cook, 2005; Van Dalen, 2011, p. 134). Nevertheless, as we will explain later, very few scholars have attempted to study the following questions that there are important for our WP8:

-how MP's agenda of debates is built (the agenda building process; and priming),
-the frame of issues discussed (selection and processing of frames)
-the characteristics of the information selected from the media[1]

[1] Kingdon (1973), in his study about congressmen's voting decisions, underlines the importance of information being 'politically relevant', as to be used by politicians. Similarly, recent political agenda setting studies incorporate perceived applicability as well and find that politicians consciously and strategically use only those bits of media information that fit their political task (see e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2012; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a). Thesen (2012) also showed that negative news generates more political reaction. Politicians tend to focus on what goes wrong. Opposition parties react on news that is bad for the government, because they can use it to attack.

-the degree of adoption in discussion of a media logic versus a political logic[2]

-the salience and frames of gender issues and women rights in parliamentary debates

From the political science field, the majority of the work around these questions has been carried out in the United States (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Baumgartner, Jones & Leech, 1997; Walker, 1977) and the U.K. (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Davis, 2007 & 2009). We can find also a few interesting research related to these subjects in other European countries (for example in Belgium -Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a, 2011b; Walgrave, Soroka & Nuytemans, 2008; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006- and in Germany –see e.g. Eilders, 1997-). Most of the studies have been carried out in non-violent conflicts periods and, in this sense, the INFOCORE project offers a wonderful opportunity for innovation.

Interactions with other WPs

Parliamentary debates can also be influenced by the following actors (the interactions can go in both directions):

-by strategic and advocated communicators (WP6 "Strategic Communication/PR", e.g. Sellers, 2009)
-by national and international public opinion (WP3 "Media and publics" and WP5 "Social media")
-by journalists culture and frames (WP1 "Journalistic production")
-by NGOs (WP4 "NGOs & the Media")
-and, obviously, by traditional media (WP7 "Journalistic transformation") and politicians and political culture (WP2 "Political media strategies")

For WP8 these interactions can be studied, for example, by the following goals: a) to determine the issues of attention in parliamentary debates; b) to establish what agent(s) introduced and framed them; c) to look for the frames associated to every issue; d) and to investigate who disseminated those frames.

[2] In order to attract media attention politicians adopt different kind of strategies. "Political actors have learn to accept that their behaviour to a significant extent in influenced by the rules of the game set by the mass media" (Esser, 2013, p. 155). The audience democracy is in this sense transformed in media democracy, an extension of the model of representative democracy.

Objectives

The overall declared objective of WP8 is to analyse how evidential claims, frames, and agendas in the news coverage are received and re-used by political actors participating in parliamentary debates. These aggregate institutional actors are seen as key media audiences whose conflict perceptions and agendas can be influenced by journalistic discourse, among other agents. Thus, our work will provide useful data to address the knowledge objective A③: Which are the most common patterns of information diffusion regarding institutional political actors? Under what circumstances specific media frames are consolidated in the political debate? How is the constructive or destructive role of news content received reflected in the parliamentary debate?

In addition to responding to this objective, WP8 will also contribute to reach the application-oriented objectives B❸ and B❹. In relation to the objective B❸, our research on how political actors pay attention to the media will improve our understanding of how to be more effective in the implementation of warning and informing policies based on strategic decisions from the analysis of media coverage of violent conflicts (open source intelligence). Thereby, INFOCORE WP8 can benefit the action of actors within the government, revealing conditions and making recommendations to avoid inaccurate, delayed or misdirected policy responses to violent conflicts. Regarding the objective B❹, our study of how journalistic discourse affects the parliamentary debate will offer clues related to what kind of media coverage is more influential, allowing a more strategic message design pursuing the promotion of dialogue and mediation dynamics.

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