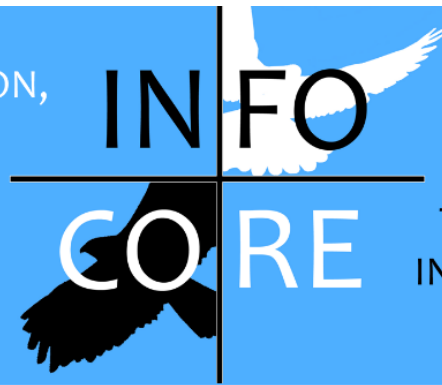


(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

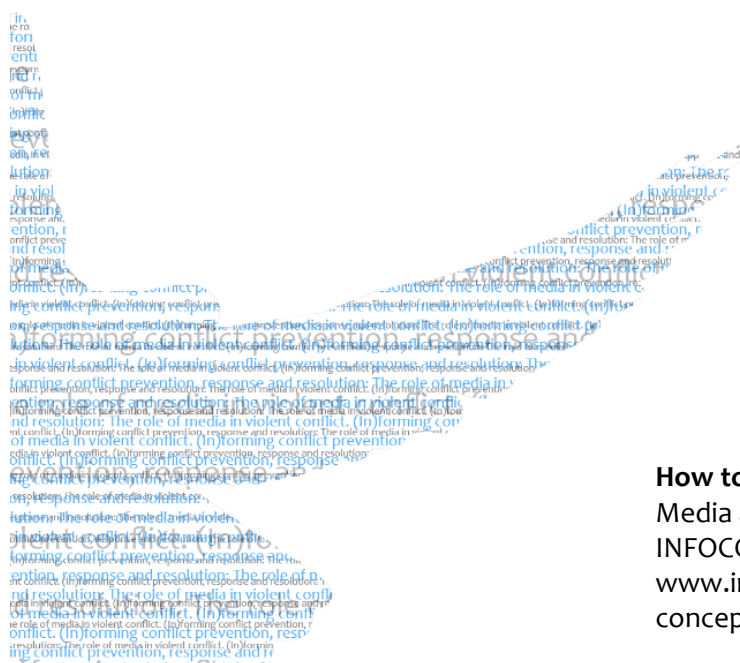
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NGOs, MEDIA AND CONFLICT Conceptual Framework for WP4

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a definition and as well as a typology of NGOs working “around”, “on” and “in conflict”. It conceptualises NGOs not just as principled actors with benign influence on conflict prevention and peace-building, but also as self-interested and bounded actors that can under some conditions negatively affect these objectives. We expect that NGOs - for better or worse - are playing an (increasingly) important role in shaping conflict discourses amongst various actors and citizens as a result of technological, economic and organisational changes affecting news production. Following on from this conceptual and theoretical part, the paper formulates three basic lines of inquiries concerning NGOs as sources of media coverage, as media-like actors and as intelligence providers. We explain how these three lines of inquiry intersect with the overall project’s analytical dimensions of evidential beliefs, frames and agendas for action.

Key words: *NGO, intelligence, public relations, foreign correspondents, conflict*

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NGOs, MEDIA AND CONFLICT (WP4)¹

Conceptual Framework

Introduction

INFOCORE aims at improving the understanding how mediated discourses on armed conflicts are constructed, how such constructions are shaped by perceptions and communication practices of relevant actors, and which potential policy-related conclusions can be drawn from such analysis for the improvement of conflict analysis, resolution, and prevention. One of INFOCORE's main analytical but also policy relevant questions is: which actors shape the understanding of media discourses on armed conflict? And how do their action strategies and communication practices shape specific conflict discourses and related prevention and resolution efforts?

Work Package 4 (WP4) aims at analysing the influence of one particular group of actors relevant for this question, namely Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). NGOs have been widely positively interpreted as an increasingly intrinsic and vital part of the evolving system of global governance after the end of the Cold War – a period associated with rising investment in development, humanitarian relief and the launch of peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building missions in a range of countries. But which role do NGOs play in mediated communication of violent conflict and peace-building? This question has received surprisingly little attention among a rich and varied literature on how NGOs influence and shape global politics (for exceptions, see Bob, 2005; Fenton, 2009). Existing studies focus mainly on advocacy strategies and media impact analysis of large, Western-based advocacy NGOs. The media impact of NGOs that specifically work on conflict analysis and resolution is largely unexplored, and so is the question if local NGOs are confronted with different challenges and opportunities than the ‘usual suspects’, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Work Package 4 aims to analyse NGOs’ strategies for influencing media, their interactions with journalists and other media actors, and the ways NGOs can inform efforts of public actors towards conflict analysis and resolution. In doing so, WP4 tries to account for the empirical diversity of NGOs working in the context of organized violence, including potential differences between large transnational and local NGOs, NGO objectives and communication strategies, as well as activity profiles. Grounded in the larger literature on NGOs and related areas, we develop three complementary lines of inquiry whose theoretical assumptions have in common that they conceive NGOs as influential actors in terms of the three central concepts of INFOCORE analysis, that is the discursive construction of ‘evidential beliefs’, ‘frames’ and ‘agendas for action’.

This paper will present the conceptual guidelines that is at the base of WP4's methodological framework. The research design and the applied methods will be presented in the separate document “Methodological Framework”. This paper proceeds as follows: First, drawing on work developed in

¹ This paper has benefited from research assistance by Radostina Schivatcheva, which is gratefully acknowledged. The authors can be contacted via christoph.meyer@kcl.ac.uk and eric.sangar@kcl.ac.uk

WP4's original conceptual framework, we present some definitions and typologies that will help us to structure our empirical work. Second, we recapitulate some essential theoretical background considerations regarding the evolving roles of NGOs in armed conflict. These enable us, third, to formulate three basic lines of inquiries and a number of guiding assumptions related to these.

NGOs and media in the existing literature: definitions and typologies

The number of NGOs has expanded exponentially during the last two decades, with NGOs attracting ever greater resources for their work, but also becoming considerably more varied in their goals, internal structures and geographic presence. This does not necessarily mean that NGOs also differ radically in the way in which they communicate with and relate to the media, especially the traditional news media (see below), but it does mean that any analysis has to understand the main differences between NGOs and why these may matter theoretically. Building on Fenton's (2009) conceptualization, we define NGOs as organizations that are formally and legally independent from government, with goals rooted in moral values and universal principles – in our case predominantly peace, security and fundamental human rights – and with a strong drive to reinvest all or most of any financial surpluses into the pursuit of these objectives².

This definition does not preclude cases when NGOs are de-facto dependent on governments and other public authorities for funding, are attributing considerable importance to their own prestige or when they pursue aggressive strategies for increasing their income. While some studies include ethnic, religious or diaspora pressure groups amongst NGOs, in the context of WP4 we shall exclude organizations so closely linked to parties with intense interest in a particular outcome of the conflict from the perspective of one particular group (Goodhand, 2006). Such groups are better covered by WP6 (strategic communication) given their distinct role in political communication surrounding a potential or actual violent conflict. Beyond this basic definition, the literature distinguishes between NGOs according to different criteria, partly depending on the questions that are being asked of them.

Virtually all scholars distinguish NGOs in terms of their *resources*. To be sure, in most cases, large resources will correlate closely with external awareness and reputation, but there are some cases of organizations that are well-resourced, but relatively invisible to the general public. Vice versa, there are examples of relatively 'poor' NGOs that can nevertheless achieve, at least for a limited period of time, a huge public impact³. In any case, we think that the amount of resources available to an NGO cannot

² This definition can be empirically operationalized by looking at the objectives fixed by the organizational statute. This excludes organizations whose primary purpose is the promotion of material benefits of their members, such as trade unions or business associations. Such actors are commonly analysed as interest groups in the political science literature. We would include interest groups only if there is an overwhelming, commonly shared perception in a local context according to which a given interest group is working in the general public interest of society (as in the case of the Polish trade unions during the Solidarnosc movement).

³ A preliminary survey of references to specific international NGOs in major media produced surprising results in that respect. While a 'rich' and well-known NGO such as Human Rights Watch indeed achieved a high number of quotations (26,474 during the last five years), the single-issue NGO *Invisible Children* (known for its campaign "Stop Kony") scored 2,413 quotations over the same period, well above the number of quotations of high-

allow predictions about its role and impact in the public coverage and decision-making analysis of armed conflict.

Secondly, we can distinguish between NGOs according to their *presence and main areas of operation*, i.e. whether they locally focussed or have a transnationally spread activities. By local we mean here all NGOs that focus on only one country or region particularly affected by instability. We will count only those organisations as truly transnational that conduct activities in geographically separated zones of conflict, rather than those who simply claim to have global aspirations.

The third indicator for distinguishing NGOs is more complicated and could be described as the predominant modality of working, or *activity profile*, as suggested by the former President of the International Crisis Group, Gareth Evans. This is closely related to their goals and purpose, but not quite identical. Evans distinguishes between ‘thinking’, ‘talking’, and ‘doing’ NGOs (Evans, 2011). The ‘thinking’ NGOs are research institutes and think tanks that ‘engage in data gathering, idea generating, network building, paper publishing and conference organising. Their rationale tends to be contributing to the ideas pool and general debate, though some are more sharply focused.’ (Evans, 2011) They tend to influence policy-making not only by providing information and analysis concerning regions and countries at risk, but also by recommending or even designing alternative ways to respond early. Such NGOs would naturally be of most relevance for policy-communities and expert-publics insofar as they can provide knowledge that would not otherwise be available to these actors or can provide independent verification. The ‘talking’ or advocacy NGOs often also engage in research and analysis, but this is only instrumental to spotlight governmental abuses and ‘engaging in tom-tom beating advocacy accordingly.’ (De Franco, under review) These NGOs could be expected to invest most in media-focused activities to increase overall awareness and gain traction with relevant expert and lay-publics. Such NGOs would be most relevant from the perspective of establishing dominant frames and shaping agendas for action in conflict, helping to orchestrate campaigns of moral outrage and mobilize support for perceived victims of aggression, bullying or oppression by other actors. While a small number of such NGOs try to combine credible research with effective advocacy and outreach, many of such NGOs will probably focus less on reaching expert-publics but more on influencing news media coverage and thus mobilize the mass public. From the decision-maker view, ‘talking NGOs’ can be prone to exaggeration and simplification in so far as they seek attention from and support from the mainstream news media.

Finally, the ‘doing’ NGOs tend to focus on field operations that bring people together, build trust, and address grievances; these could be short-term interventions such local or regional early warning and response systems or more long-term in character such as support for security sector reform, training, media assistance and other kinds of general capacity building programs. Given the nature of this work package, we are most interested in the ‘thinking and ‘talking’ NGOs, but cannot exclude ‘doing’ NGOs on the ground such as the global NGOs *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) or the *International Committee of the*

reputation NGOs such as the *International Crisis Group* (509 quotations) or *Search For Common Ground* (560 quotations).

Red Cross (ICRC). Depending on the country, there are local NGO engaged in reliefs, peace-building and conflict prevention such as the *Afghan Development Association* (Afghanistan) or the *Foundation for Tolerance International* (Kyrgistan). They can provide independent, trustworthy and often specific information about events and dynamics on the ground, often in cases where governments have no-one on the ground for either budgetary or security reasons or indeed where government and news media are not trusted by the population given high-levels of corruption.

NGOs and their relationship with the media in contexts of armed conflict

Which kind of influence do NGOs have on media within the context of armed conflict? The Constructivist literature of the 1990s and 2000s interprets NGOs often as influential and at least potentially beneficial actors. Authors such as Finnemore & Sikkink (1998), Keck & Sikkink (1999), or Price (1998) interpret NGOs as essential members of transnational action networks that help to raise global awareness for moral causes and diffuse transnational norms even against the resistance of nation-states and their established political and military elites. NGOs have also been recognized as essential gatekeepers for insurgency movements striving to gain international recognition for their cause and thus access to legitimacy and external support (Bob, 2005). Quantitative studies have found evidence that, for example, amnesty international's reports on human rights have resulted in increased coverage of those issues in Northern news media, thus "suggesting that global advocacy NGOs can shape the agenda." (Ramos, Ron, & Thoms, 2007, p. 401) Furthermore, NGOs have been found to be increasingly important to efforts of conflict prevention, management and resolution on the ground (Goodhand, 2006). NGOs are often considered by international donors as sometimes having superior insights into the conditions and grievances that give rise to violence on the ground, and as better able to respond swiftly and through different means than external state agencies. This enabled NGOs to gain substantial material resources as they have been beneficiaries of the considerable increases in Western funding for development, aid and conflict resolution (DeMars, 1995; Jentleson, 1996).

By contrast, a number of theoretical and empirical contributions have challenged this interpretation of NGOs as increasingly influential actors in international conflict. Some scholars criticize that NGOs are insufficiently flexible and not geared towards effective long-term pursuit of their causes due to internal organizational pathologies such as high staff turn-over, bias towards action, insufficient learning, weak links to local practice as well as too much emphasis on pleasing their donors (Goodhand, 2006). Other authors have highlighted the increasingly fierce competition among NGOs for funding which might result in an increasing importance of the instrumentalist pursuit of material objectives to the detriment of the ideational cause (Cooley & Ron, 2002). This has led some scholars to characterize NGOs as rationalist interest groups rather than as altruistic social movements (Bloodgood, 2010). Other studies have highlighted the structural constraints on effective NGO action that result from the necessity to gain access to the attention of the public: While international news media can rely on a variety of actors as providers of evidential frames and normative frames when covering conflicts, NGOs can be interpreted

as social movements with respect to the fact that both actors are used to be dependent on media coverage as almost only channel to reach decision-makers and the lay public (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). As a result, recent research have found that NGOs have to adapt their advocacy strategies to factors determined by their external environment, including “funding, relationship to state, organizational dynamics, and desired audiences and impacts” (Powers, 2014, p. 103).

Given these sometimes contradicting interpretations of NGOs’ organizational potential to effectively promote moral principles in international conflict, recent contributions have tended to characterize NGOs as actors driven by ‘bounded altruism’ or ‘principled instrumentalism’ (Haltermann & Irvine, 2014; Mitchell & Schmitz, 2013). The existing ambiguities in the literature make it, therefore, difficult to postulate, *ex ante*, empirical hypotheses regarding the role of NGOs in contemporary media coverage of armed conflicts. However, we can identify some trends that suggest, compared to the previous decades, a changing relationship between the media and NGOs in the context of armed conflict. These changes seem to take place in three domains, which will structure the further argumentation of this paper.

Three lines of inquiry: NGOs as media sources, as media alternatives and as intelligence providers in conflict

NGOs as increasingly influential media sources

According to Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993, p. 116), one of the reasons for the asymmetrical power relationship between media and civil society movements is the fact that the latter used to be dependent on the former to reach and mobilize the general public. The uneven access to the public has been confirmed by later studies which have demonstrated that “international news coverage, including international aid coverage, is dominated by authoritative sources and especially government sources.” (Van Leuven & Joye, 2014, p. 162) Until the 1990s, the ‘traditional’ mass media can therefore be seen as gatekeepers who have the power to decide to what extent civil society actors are granted access to the public sphere.

However, we start from the hypothesis that NGOs have become a more influential source of journalistic coverage at least for Western news media, giving them greater power to shape evidential beliefs, framing of conflict situations and indeed advocacy for specific forms of action in mediated discourse. Driving this change are three interlocking factors: technological, economic and organisational. One important dimension is the emergence of new ICT that enables considerably more user-friendly, accessible, mobile, instantaneous, and much better tailored and more dialogical communication with dispersed audiences. Whereas in earlier days it was only states or large media organizations who could afford the necessary infrastructure for transnational as well as mass communication, these new technologies have empowered less-well-resourced organizations to produce material that can be directly used by news outlets.

An even more important factor appears to be the challenges to the business model of “Northern” quality news media as advertising revenues shift in response to changing audience habits attention to other “content providers”, subscription rates decline and news is filtered and pre-selected in various ways

according to individual consumer's preferences, rather than diverse news packaged into a single product. As the economic basis of traditional journalism shrinks, communication professionals are now more likely to find stable employment in public relations broadly defined and where many journalists are no longer employees of one media company, but are self-employed and "deliver content" for multiple media. Foreign affairs coverage has arguably been hit particularly hard by these trends as its relevance to local audiences is more difficult to explain, whilst its costs per output are higher. As a result, many media organizations, particularly those in the US, decided to close their offices abroad, shift from high-status permanent foreign correspondents towards junior free-lancers or local contractors, or indeed buy-in content from news agencies (Meyer & Otto, 2011).

Finally, it has been argued that NGOs are increasingly well-equipped to fill the gap and act as ersatz journalists. Given the growing diversity and resourcefulness of local but particularly transnational NGOs, they have been able to hire communication professionals at all levels, including former journalists, to professionalise their external communication activities. Even if, as Fenton argues, the effectiveness of access to the public sphere still largely depends on an NGO's financial and administrative resources (Fenton, 2010), it is plausible to argue that on average, NGOs have a growing importance as sources of information and framing in the news coverage of armed conflicts. Particularly the well-resourced and respected Northern NGOs have increased chances for their products not only to be mentioned in mainstream media coverage, but also to be used increasingly verbatim and with little editorial change (Fenton, 2009). Some international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as MSF adapt to the increased demand for information by the media: MSF "distributes background reports about the settlement of international aid projects in different countries and regions throughout the year. From this authoritative position as an expert source on the ground, MSF is able to lever news attention to long-term disasters" (Van Leuven & Joye, 2014, p. 175). The extent to which non-Western NGOs are benefiting from this easier access to media has not been systematically researched so far: One might argue that the influence of local NGOs is strengthened because of their increasing ability to 'bypass' the often strictly regulated national and local media environment in zones of conflict; on the other hand, because they are confronted with the scrutiny of increasingly diverse – local and transnational – audiences, local NGOs might find it increasingly difficult to reconcile external liberal-interventionist and domestic expectations articulated on the different levels of conflict resolution (Walton, 2012).

These changes are arguably changing the nature of NGOs through "*feedback effects*", for better or worse depending on normative perspective. It has been argued that these seismic shifts have contributed to "the incorporation of a 'media logic' or, more specifically, a 'journalistic logic' in NGOs' communication efforts to gain news access" (Van Leuven & Joye, 2014, p. 163). Transnational NGOs have reacted to the increased demand by the media for quasi-journalistic information by *strengthening connections with media organizations* through various formal and informal techniques, such as institutional partnerships such as providing content for issue-focused online pages, media training offerings, and the creation of in-house journalistic capacities. This includes also increased efforts by NGOs to engage with local media in the

pursuit of conflict resolution and reconciliation “with an eye toward improving the media’s ability to serve as information providers and political and social watchdogs.” (Arsenault, Himelfarb, & Abbott, 2011, p. 5) Depending on the local media context and audience expectations, we expect local NGOs to adapt their media strategies accordingly, although we cannot provide further generalizable assumption across conflicts.

This rapprochement may be seen critically if it results in changing NGO culture and critical engagement. Traditionally, “NGO officials accuse reporters of being bound to the logic of professional journalism instead of covering issues they are relevant to public life.” (Waisbord, 2011, p. 154) Are such attitudes changing? Do efforts towards more continuous collaboration with journalists have an impact on NGOs’ organizational culture to the extent that NGOs see media rather as close ‘partners’ than as distant ‘gatekeepers’? Might there even be effects of socialization or of corruption that could make NGOs perceive less of a need to challenge dominant, non-emancipatory mechanisms of covering conflict? In other words, rather than transforming the existing media culture driven by the search for sensational stories, might NGOs’ very own nature as principled actors be transformed by the need to conform to the demands of the media market? Indeed, Fenton empirically observed that “the NGOs in this study clearly recognized the need to focus on the personalization of issues and celebrity endorsement. As NGOs place more and more relevance on mediation [...] they run the very real risk of pandering to the market and encouraging, albeit implicitly, the demise of autonomous investigative journalism.” (Fenton, 2010, p. 158)

NGOs increasingly acting as media-like voices

A second, closely related dimension to the changing relationship between NGOs and media in the context of armed conflict are the attempts by some NGOs to influence the public by circumventing the media as classical gatekeepers altogether, becoming *media alternatives or hybrids*. Increasingly, NGOs have managed to acquire media-like qualities in their external communication, providing relevant information and influencing policy-communities, issue-publics and perhaps even lay-publics without relying on the endorsement of journalists from a variety of media organizations. The new communication techniques have also helped NGOs to reach relevant audiences abroad without the classical media as intermediaries (Jentleson, 1996, p. 13). This is especially the case for large international ‘thinking’ and ‘talking’ NGOs, as a news editor of the British *Channel 4 News* confirms: “Particularly the ICG and Human Rights Watch and, to some extent, Enough do as well, do the in-depth reporting that we don’t do.” (Interview statement by Lindsay Hilsum, Channel 4 News’ International Editor, quoted in: Meyer & Otto, 2011, p. 213)

Although to this date, there is little systematic research on the ways NGOs strive to become media voices on their own, a few assumptions can be deduced from earlier findings. A first assumption about NGOs’ emerging role as media-like voices will be *changing organizational strategies*. We expect NGO to increasingly rely on ‘insider strategies’, that is, to develop advocacy strategies based on direct influence on and interactive exchange with target audiences, such as domestic supporters, diaspora groups, political

decision-makers, donor organizations and other relevant audiences. By contrast, ‘outsider strategies’ based on broad campaigns aiming at mobilizing the general public through spectacular events covered by the mass media may become (relatively) less important (for the differentiation between ‘insider strategies’ and ‘outsider strategies’, see Binderkrantz, 2005).

A second assumption about the emergence of NGOs as media-like voices concerns *changes in the use of communication tools*. NGOs will not stop talking to journalists or producing press declarations but we expect them to develop new forms of communication that are better adapted to the changing information strategies. We expect NGOs – alongside with their increased direct engagement with institutionalised media – to rely more and more on communication techniques and products that help them established direct and interactive exchange with their target audiences, including supporters, decision-makers, donors, conflict actors but also the general public. An interesting related factor to this evolution might be the importance of organizational size and financial resources. While some assume that Internet-based communication techniques enable even the smallest civil society actor to be heard (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009), others argue that the smaller “entry barriers” lead to higher competition between attention-seekers, and this results in an even increased requirement for NGOs to invest heavily in professional communication personnel and equipment (Fenton, 2010). A possible side-effect of this might be an increasing importance of NGOs engaged in the building of media capacity, which might help local NGOs to use tools of interactive communication to better promote their cause among transnational audiences.

A third assumption relates, again, to possible *‘feedback effects’* resulting from NGOs becoming media-like actors. Can we detect changes in institutional cultures of NGOs as they are becoming more closely connected with their target audiences? In turn, to what extent are external perceptions of NGOs evolving as a result of NGOs trying to connect to actors and audiences relevant for their cause more directly? Are, for example, research products by ‘thinking’ NGOs such as ICG increasingly perceived by political leaders as objective and reliable sources and therefore incorporated as legitimate supplies of evidence and analysis in decision-making processes? If so, how, to what extent and with what effect do NGOs influence relevant actors’ understanding of an actual or potential conflict, and their preference for particular courses of action? Do political leaders themselves perceive NGOs as agents that can be used, just like traditional media, to deliver information to the public or to other conflict actors? And does increasing delivery of media products to official decision-makers have an impact on the perception of NGOs by local actors in conflict settings?

NGOs as intelligence providers

The last line of inquiry relates to an aspect that has been left largely unexplored by research on the role of NGOs in armed conflict. We would like to understand the NGOs as deliberate or, more likely, inadvertent providers of knowledge on conflict situations to local, regional or international leaders with the capacity to enhance human security. This line on inquiry aims to lead to evidence-based prescriptions on how NGOs and their public communication can better contribute to what Bruls and Dorn (2014)

have called ‘human security’ intelligence within a complex emergencies scenario: that is intelligence that is oriented to serve policies and actions aimed at enhancing freedom from ‘fear’ and ‘want’. In the context of this project, we are particularly interested in the ‘fear’ dimension by looking at those intelligence processes, practices and products that help to prevent, mitigate or stop violence against individuals or groups of individuals, in particular civilians.

At least going back to the early 1950s, intelligence practitioners have valued public sources such as news media for informing national security policy (Gibson, 2014). As NGOs have proliferated and become more resourceful, their value as intelligence providers has increased substantially in absolute terms and relative to the resources of governments. Open source intelligence (OSINT) and social media intelligence (SOCMINT) are becoming increasingly valuable to governments, although Gibson argues that they still do not receive the resources and attention commensurate with their importance (Gibson, 2014). We know that NGOs produced content is streamed into databases and analytical systems of states and international organisations such as the EU (Duke, 2014), which offer various ways to distinguish sources according to their reliability and quality and incorporate their content into analytical processes. We also know that intelligence services seek to cultivate contacts and relationships with NGOs as informal sources of intelligence because they may have greater political freedom of manoeuvre in specific countries and with specific groups as well as greater expertise in countries and regions of less significance to national security and material self-interest. NGOs are also being consulted by journalists to triangulate and confirm particular accounts of conflict parties not just because of their potentially superior knowledge, but also because some highly reputable international NGOs are seen by journalists as being free of national policy biases, making them important actors in the transformation of evidential claims into evidential beliefs.

A potentially interesting case in this respect, which we hope to study in more detail, is the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013 which is mentioned by Hobbs, Moran and Salisbury (2014). It shows that published intelligence assessments by Western governments widely referred to OSINT to justify their conclusion that the Assad regime must have been responsible. The US government assessment listed the following sources: “videos; witness accounts; thousands of social media reports from at least twelve different locations in the Damascus area; journalist accounts; and reports from highly credible nongovernmental organizations” (The White House, 2013). We also know that news media referred to some of the NGOs such as MSF as ‘independent’ verification of the use of chemical weapons and circumstantial evidence that may point to the perpetrator. Another interesting case study is the central role the NGO *Institute for Science and International Security* (ISIS) played in 2002 to alert the public to the existence of new nuclear facilities in Iran, drawing on commercial satellite imagery and the expertise of a larger transnational advocacy network (Aday & Livingston, 2009).

While there has been a growing body of work on the strengths and weaknesses of OSINT in general, there has not been an in-depth conceptualisation and theorisation of the role of NGOs as intelligence providers and their relative importance vis-à-vis other institutional sources, such as news agencies and

citizens-facing news organisations or even compared to ordinary citizens sharing information via social media (SOCMINT). While NGOs may share information with government agencies informally and through non-public or strictly clandestine channels, the main focus of this line of inquiry will be on publicly accessible or disseminated products of local or international NGOs within the framework of OSINT. The strengths and weakness of OSINT versus other forms of intelligence have been increasingly discussed in the literature (Gibson, 2014) as the ‘digital era’ has seen a huge increase in volume, accessibility and immediacy of information. Given limited resources and the immature state of research in this area, the project will not be able to investigate systematically the whole spectrum of OSINT within an even wider-spectrum of Human Security Intelligence (HSI). We will focus more narrowly on knowledge generated and disseminated by selected international and local NGOs in particular cases as elaborated in more detail below.

The very notion of NGO as providers of intelligence for human security is not unproblematic. Within peace studies, intelligence has been regarded with suspicion as being state-centric and geared towards narrow and even highly downright harmful national security objectives. Indeed, the action-orientation is cited by Woocher (2011) as one of the distinguishing features of conflict analysis for the purpose of conflict prevention and intelligence for national security, which at least with regard to the case of the United States, is shaped by a strong concern on analytical, but doing so with strict political neutrality. Indeed, the strongly US-influenced intelligence studies literature strongly emphasises the difference between intelligence and policy failures and debates frequently how to resist and manage politicisation pressures (Goldman, 2011; Jervis, 2010; Pillar, 2011; Rovner, 2011). Within peace studies, social science is mobilised in the service of the supposedly normatively pure goals of preserving peace, preventing conflict and protecting fundamental human rights. The reality is of course substantially more complex as we have argued elsewhere (Meyer, Otto, Brante, & De Franco, 2010). Moreover, knowledge whether originally produced as part of ‘Peace PR’ (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 7) or human security intelligence (HSI) will always be ‘dual-use’ goods that can serve various purposes for various actors and can have unintended consequences. Distinguishing intelligence for peace or human security will suffer from similar problems as distinguishing ‘classical journalism’ from ‘peace journalism’ (Hanitzsch, 2004, 2007).

Rather it is important to stress that the differences in the professional standards and practices for conflict analysis done by states and NGOs are smaller than they may appear and have been narrowing since the end of the Cold War. Key performance criteria such as accuracy and timeliness are widely accepted within intelligence studies and so is an understanding that knowledge should aim to be relevant to recipients of knowledge, but not in the sense of pandering to their prejudices, pre-conceptions and mistaken world-views. The most useful knowledge is often inconvenient. Moreover, most Northern states and international organisations have at least at the rhetorical and programmatic level committed themselves to conflict prevention and the protection of fundamental human rights. So while, as Woocher (2011) detailed there are important differences between conventional intelligence analysis for national security and conflict analysis, he is also right that there have been commonalities and convergence

between national security and peace-studies communities: both can learn from each other in the way they analyse conflicts, but also how they relate to relevant decision-makers, whether these are states, international organisations, or indeed non-state actors.

To what extent could we expect NGOs to make a valuable contribution to better intelligence? Drawing on previous research in the context of the FORESIGHT project we are able to formulate a number of hypotheses that will also guide our research for INFOCORE:⁴

First, one might argue that some NGOs may have an *advantage in analytical accuracy* relative other actors because of their increasing resourcefulness as compared to Northern governments as well as media organisations, which have tended to cut back on back on their foreign outposts and reporting services (Otto, 2012). Many NGOs are able to hire and retain country and regional experts, whereas governments may struggle to compete in terms of pay or inadvertently fail to cultivate such expertise because of the rotation principle. Large international NGOs are able to have a presence in different countries and develop their own research units and practices. IT developments such as satellite imagery, recording and communication has given them access to information that used to be limited to the states. At the same time, it is clear from the Snowden revelations and the investment in drone surveillance programme that the arms race for information superiority is ongoing and states are keen to stay ahead. They may also be able to get access to information from potential conflict parties because they are perceived as neutral/benign and because they are more collaborative in working method. NGOs may also be less affected than official analysts from politicisation pressures, fear of retribution and reputational damage that can arise within state bureaucracies and where politicians may have both the motivation and means to mobilise, suppress or cherry-pick intelligence for purposes other than peace-building and conflict promotion (Pillar, 2011; Rovner, 2011). On the other hand, NGOs with a strong normative vocation coupled with a top-down or blame-shifting culture, may themselves struggle to sustain an environment where analysts can reach “inconvenient” conclusions or challenge prevailing thinking.

Secondly, NGOs may be able to provide *more timely intelligence* about conflict situations than foreign government employed agencies or staff because of their strong concern for human security of foreign citizens, whereas foreign actors typically only tune into emergencies when humanitarian suffering or conflict intensity have reached a certain level and other state-interests are being negatively affected. Moreover, ‘doing NGOs’ have often been present for years at the grassroots level in countries, communities and regions that are not high on the list of foreign state governments. This grassroots presence and the expertise that goes with it give them access to information that states may not have as well as the analytical capacity to pick-up ‘weak signals’ of significant new dynamics earlier than states. Because of their local presence and understanding NGOs may also be better at identifying actors, especially domestic and regional, which are willing and able to respond earlier to opportunities for peace or threats of escalation, even if these are based on relatively weak or uncertain intelligence, whereas state

⁴ ‘ Foresight: Warnings and Preventive Policy’ was funded by a Starting Grant of the European Research Council (202022) and involved a research team of Chiara de Franco, John Brante, Florian Otto and Christoph Meyer.

actors, and in particular foreign bodies have less interest, more lead time and require a higher burden of truth. On the other hand, NGOs may be so concerned with their reputation, gaining financial support from donors or gaining media traction that they also wait with the communication of evidential claims until they are claims are likely to be widely accepted and positively responded as has the issue or country is already ‘on the radar’.

Thirdly, NGOs may be able to produce *intelligence of more relevance* to the purpose of conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution because this often one important organisational goals whereas state typically pursue a broader set of goals in their domestic and indeed foreign affairs. It may also be more relevant to the needs of individuals or non-governmental organisations on the ground, rather than state interests, enabling those local organisations or leaders to take action. Well-resourced and internationally connected NGOs may be able to combine the best of both worlds by having a local presence and expertise as well as an understanding of how different types of senior decision-makers tick. This enables them to consider question of relevance already at the ‘tasking’ and ‘collection stages’ of knowledge and effectively communicate their analytical judgements and recommendations for action in a way that resonates with relevant recipients, for instance, highlighting the wider consequences of an escalating conflict in terms of refugees flows, destabilisation of neighbouring countries, terrorism, piracy or environmental damage. NGOs may also be expected to more inclined to use emotional frames and thereby better at getting through to the news media, especially those sympathetic to ‘attachment journalism’ (Bell, 1997) and ‘responsibility to report’ (Thompson, 2007). On the other hand, NGOs may be blinkered by their strong normative commitments to appreciate governments’ interests and worldviews and may be so concerned with keeping their distance from power that they do not know how to “press” the hot buttons of senior decision-makers despite the opportunity of doing so. They may also formulate recommendations for action that are considered completely unrealistic by officials and thus inadvertently undermine the credibility even of their analytical judgements of the conflicts (Meyer, De Franco, Brante, & Otto, in preparation).

Since NGO intelligence can be analysed, as we have argued, with the same tools that are used by the general literature on OSI, we will concentrate on classical and broad criteria of measuring intelligence performance (Johnson, 2011) and pay attention to the process characteristics that help or hinder such performance. In particular, in order to operationalize our theoretical guiding assumptions regarding NGOs as intelligence providers, we are looking at three of the most frequently mentioned criteria: accuracy, timeliness and relevance.

Accuracy is defined as the degree to which the information and analytical judgments communicated at a given moment in time are in accordance with a superior or professionally accepted account of what has happened and why at a later point in time. It is a notoriously difficult to measure given the inexact nature of language and the caveats involved in framing assessments about conflicts, but also because what

exactly happened and underlying reasons remain subject to contestation or uncertainty.⁵ Perfect accuracy is of course impossible and some assessments of mysteries rather than secrets will necessarily go astray or remain probabilistic in nature. However, the performance of policy is strongly conditioned by the quality of the underlying information and analysis and if this is needlessly deficient, intelligence devalued and will lead to avoidable problems in the design and implementation of conflict prevention, mitigation or resolution policies.

Timeliness can be defined as the extent to which intelligence providers are able to forecast harmful dynamics before they occur or to report with minimum possible delay on events or dynamics after they have occurred. It can be measured in a relatively straight-forward way by looking at the publication date of products or statements in relation to the outbreak of conflict, major dynamics or events that we are aware of today and which in retrospect can be identified as important. From the perspective of HSI or peace studies, it should be stress that timeliness is particularly important for implementing non-violent and home-grown measures of conflict prevention. Warnings that arrive later or after the fact will mean that military intervention has become the last and only option available to prevent worse or, that indeed, mass atrocity have already occurred.

Finally, *relevance* can be defined as the extent to which intelligence providers are able to tailor and enrich their products in a way that makes it useful to ‘consumers’ of intelligence in terms of situational awareness, anticipating threats and exploring suitable options for action. Criteria of relevance can be expected to vary between types of consumers and recipient’s preferences, capabilities as well as his or her pre-existing knowledge and attitudes. For instance, state officials tend to be less receptive to recommendations on how to act. At the same time, practitioners working on peace and conflict do generally share a common understanding of what type of information and analysis is most useful or ‘actionable’. A key criterion for action ability is for instance the specificity of reporting in terms of what has or is likely to happen where, when, at what scale and with what kind of wider consequences as compared to general, vague and ambiguous statements along the lines of ‘something should be done or things may get much worse’.

Two important qualifications are in order here: First, it should be noted that these three performance criteria are not independent from each other, but cannot be achieved simultaneously without some trade-offs between them. Accuracy and timeliness are usually negatively correlated as signals from conflict situation may initially be weak and there is an incentive for actors to wait until more information becomes available and is verified, thus allowing for higher accuracy. Timeliness may be considered as important for enhancing the relevance of intelligence as it gives decision-makers more lead-time for action. On the other hand, timeliness can make it more difficult to achieve high relevance as it often comes to the detriment of being highly specific, which is important for drawing operationally relevant conclusions.

⁵ A problem Philip Tetlock (2005) dealt with extensively when trying to measure the accuracy of expert political judgment.

Secondly, it needs to be pointed out that all the measurement of all three criteria needs to take into account the properties of each individual case. Some countries or regions within countries receive in general more attention from policy-making institutions than others, levels of secrecy and/or misinformation from relevant conflict parties vary substantially and conflicts differ in terms of how quickly they evolve (frozen, slow-burning, sudden eruption, etc). In sum, some developments in international politics are more ‘surprising’ than others and that for good reason.

Research expectations in terms on INFOCORE’s central concepts of analysis

INFOCORE’s common conceptual framework places an emphasis on breaking down the generic term of ‘conflict discourse’ into the three separate but interrelated terms ‘frames’, ‘evidential beliefs’ and ‘agendas for action’. Although it is difficult to specify exact causal relationships on the relationship between these elements and NGO communication activities, we believe that we can contribute important insights into the role of NGOs in their discursive construction. We expect that if NGOs are increasingly influential in the areas of our lines of inquiry this will translate into increased influence in the construction of conflict discourses. The following table shows our preliminary expectations regarding such links along the three lines of inquiry:

<i>(+: positive correlation)</i>	NGOs as media sources	NGOs as media-like actors	NGO as intelligence providers
Evidential beliefs	++ NGOs influence media reporting as they have more valuable and at times more trusted sources of journalistic information	++ NGOs can more directly conflict-related evidential beliefs to audiences that used to rely news media otherwise. This applies particularly to issue (expert)-publics	+ NGO reporting, analysis and forecasting is increasingly valued and used by EU/MS institutions and agencies alongside evidential claims from other sources.
Frames	+ NGOs will try to communicate through frames that correspond to their normative objectives but may find an obstacle in overarching dominating media narratives and/or journalistic professional standards .	++ NGOs have developed new channels to communicate conflict-related evidential beliefs and new frames to both media-attentive and lay-publics to bypass the gatekeeper function of traditional media.	+ NGOs’ normative frames can contribute to shift governmental conflict analysis towards identifying human security needs in competition as well as alongside with conventional national interest & security frames.
Agendas for action	? NGOs will try to communicate their preferred agendas for action but may find an obstacle in overarching dominating media narratives, competing agendas voiced by other actors, and/or journalistic professional standards	+ NGOs can communicate more directly their preferred agendas for action to audiences that would rely on traditional media otherwise; these agendas can emerge and circulate in public debate but may have to be simplified in order to compete with competing agendas	? NGOs’ greater expertise may also give greater credence to their calls for action and specific recommendations, but impact will be largely through informal channels rather than formal OSINT products; officials still have to respond to consumer needs which are often more influenced by self-regarding conventional foreign policy interests.

Conclusion

This conceptual framework paper has outlined the conceptual and theoretical background to WP4 and its constituent three lines of inquiries into the role of NGOs as media sources, media-like voices and as providers of open-source intelligence. We operationalise these three lines of inquiry in a second paper (Deliverable 4.1), which contains the research design and methodology.

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