(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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PROCEEDINGS ON THE STAKEHOLDER SEMINARS

MIDDLE EAST

Cyprus, 22to 24 July 2016

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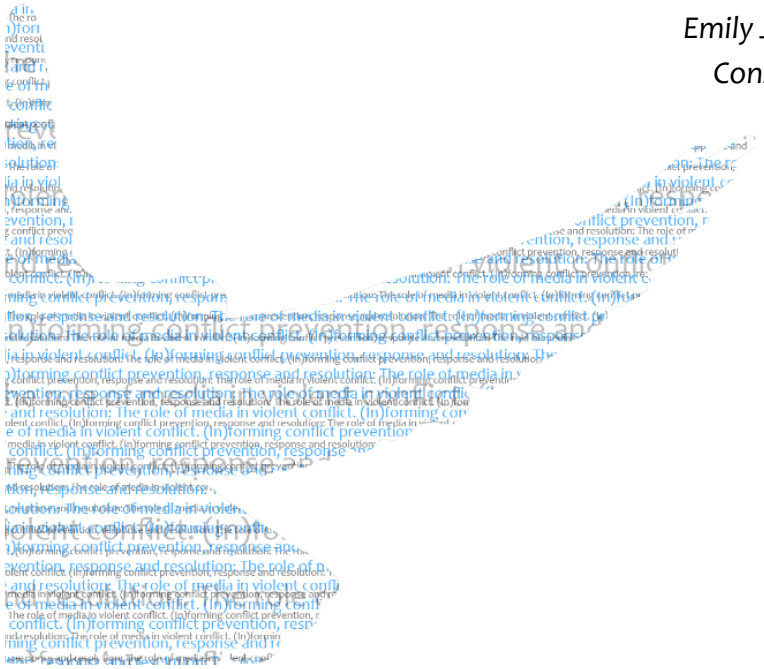

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PROCEEDINGS ON THE STAKEHOLDER SEMINARS

MIDDLE EAST

(EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

On July 24-25, 2016 the INFOCORE team met in Cyprus with a groups of diverse participants ranging from Human Rights Activists, representatives of NGOs or Think tank as well as political actors.

During two days, the INFOCORE team shared the results and the findings of more than two years of research analyzing the role(s) that media play in the emergence or prevention, the escalation or de-escalation, the management, resolution, and reconciliation of violent conflict. Through presentations and follow-up discussions they debated on the findings of their comparative assessment of media dynamics they analyzed in the Middle East, the West Balkans, and the African Great Lakes area.

The workshop focused mainly on the Syrian and Israel-Palestine conflict and the stakeholders came from the Middle-East region. The eight presentations led to very fruitful debates and will hopefully enable the researchers to fine-tune their further investigation to better meet the needs of practitioners on the ground.

This report captures the main outcomes of the presentations as well as the core of the followed-up discussions. The last part provides with practical recommendations for the researchers.

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Introduction

Informing conflict prevention response and resolution.

The INFOCORE project is a collaboration between 9 institutions scattered across 7 countries researching on conflict related contents and dissemination to understand the dynamics between media and conflict in 3 regions. Through a cooperative approach, researchers in communication and political science developed a comparative approach between the Middle-East (Israel-Palestine and Syria), the Balkans (Macedonia and Kosovo) and Central Africa (DRC and Burundi). The specificity of the approach lies in its long-term perspective, up to 10 years in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and since 2011 in the case of the Syrian conflict. By studying both traditional and digital media within and outside the countries in conflict, as well as in major European countries the researches offer not only a unique understanding of the external and contextual factors that shape media discourse but also a in-depth grasp of media's influence on conflict development.

The researches focus on two main processes:

1) The social process behind media narrative. In other words how the interaction between different actors such as journalists, politicians, NGOs and lay public, not only using the media but also producing content, inform and frame media content.
2) The meaning creation or the different interpretation of conflict within the news discourse in traditional and social media as well as strategic and political communication including the identification of escalating and de-escalating discourse dynamics

The main objective of the stakeholders workshop held in Cyprus was to bring together stakeholders across the board (media practitioners, journalists, media development NGOs, think tank, parliamentarians etc.) to discuss the findings and collaboratively turn theory into practice with a particular highlight on both the Israeli-Palestinian and the Syrian conflicts. Each session comprised of 2 presentations that were followed by discussion that brought inputs from the participants.

The last session served to explicitly turn the researches findings into practice and/or further investigation to inform work on practitioners on the ground.

Theme I: THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS: Identities, Gender, & Professional Practices

Presentation 1. Does Gender Make a Difference in Conflict Coverage?

Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The first session focused on gender role in the news production process in Israel-Palestine and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While in time of conflict women are commonly portrayed as victims or caregivers, there is a widespread assumption that female journalists are naturally inclined to cover peacebuilding and conflict resolution issues. However, there is only little and mostly inconclusive research on the role played by female journalists in conflicts in peace journalism. The Infocore research analyzed the conflict media coverage of Israel-Palestine and the DRC within 10 local media outlets for

each case, combining local (in the former case, Israeli; Palestinian media remain to be included in the future, as was emphasized by the participants) and international media outlets.

The study found out that only 15% of the conflict-related content is written by female journalists while they represent 40% of the journalist population. In DRC, it did not exceed 6%. As far as foreign correspondents are concerned female journalists put they byline on 24% of the Israel-Palestine content and 33% of them on the DRC conflict. This difference might be explained by the less "prestigious" nature of the DRC conflict. Indeed the male dominated media might reserve the coverage of the high profile Israeli-Palestinian conflict to their fellow male counterpart.

Through a qualitative and quantitative approach the researchers singled out recurrent patterns at both macro and micro level. At the macro level, in terms of content analysis the comparison between male and female-authored media coverage since 2006 did not show significant differences. Yet, while there is no significant differences in the way female and male journalists cover the Israel-Palestine conflict, in DRC one can notice differences within the conflict-related media coverage between male and female that might be explained by a stronger influence of socialized roles and socially accepted gender biases given a less strongly developed, unifying professional journalism culture.

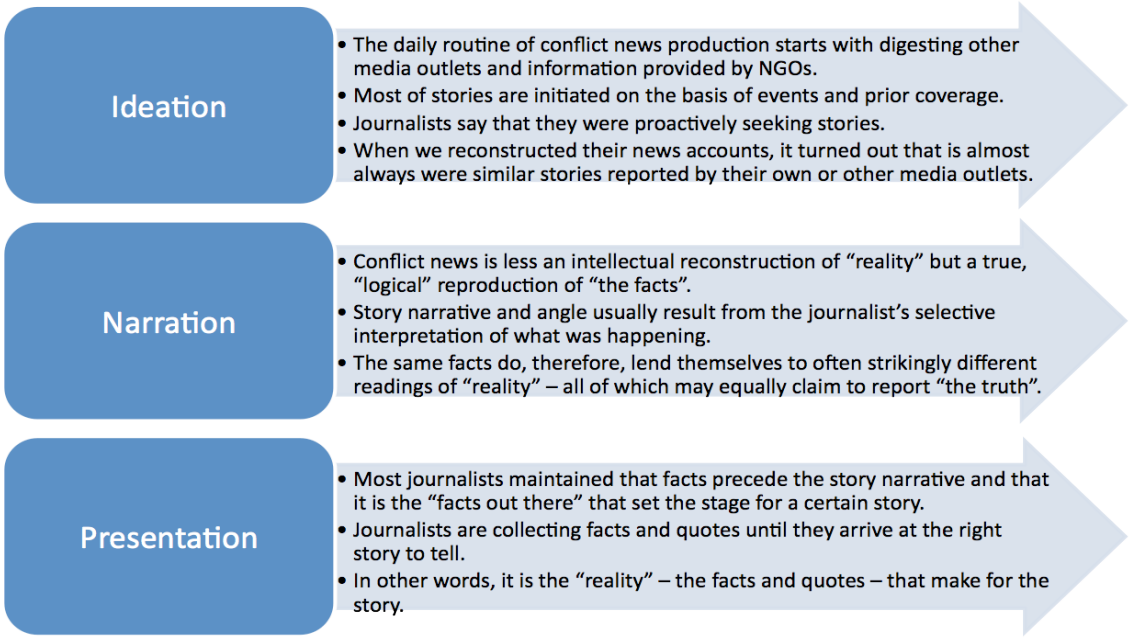
Interestingly, the research stressed differences at the micro level. The research shows female journalists tend to take some distance with their source of information and are more cautious to claim assertion. They rather make sure to link statement with sources whereas men coverage tends to be more factual and more assertive. Overall, while the study did not identify significant discrepancies between male and female conflict related coverage it nonetheless showed that women are more people-oriented and less assertive, two qualities essential for peacebuilding.

Presentation 2: Researching Conflict News: Interactions between Journalists across Conflict Lines

Abit Hoxha, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Yonatan Gonen, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

In this presentation, researchers focused on the inter-personal relationships between journalists covering conflict-zones. What journalists' values/routine and what contextual factors influence the conflict news production? Through a threefold approach, the research capitalizes on the journalists' general responses to the interviews, the content they have produced in the past, and the forensic reconstruction of these stories (understanding of the background information process of the journalist's article). This way, the editorial decisions by which the journalists have contributed to the "biography" of their articles become accessible to the researcher.

Through a comprehensive international and national media sampling, journalist's interviews and article reconstruction, the research focused on a 3 step-process:



While journalists said they were pro-actively seeking for news to cover they clearly overlooked the influence of other media coverage. The researchers started from the assumption that journalists frame the truth even before collecting the facts by simply deciding whom to interview or not. According to them, reporters will produce their papers only once they are able to portray what they pre-set before collecting the information.

Another important aspect of the research is about the self-perception of journalists on the role they play or should play in the conflict such as mediating the conflict, remaining neutral, giving voice to their people etc. Few journalists, for instance, would be able to report on conflict without having in mind a particular perspective that primes their interpretation toward a specific key narrative.

In the process of rendering news accessible to their audiences, journalists take subjective decisions about which facts to use, what to emphasize and how. Therefore this research highlights that journalists' war related coverage is not just "factual" but rather tell stories about conflicts that depend on key narratives journalists chose in order to tell a meaningful story to the audience.

Findings also highlight a striking difference within the Israel-Palestine conflict. While Israeli journalists state that they cooperate on a daily basis with their Palestinian counterparts to crosscheck information, the latter assert that they do not collaborate with Israeli journalists. The latter affirm that they build personal relationship sometime personal friendships somewhat "interested ones" with Palestinians journalists. Yet, following the official boycott from the Palestinians journalists' syndicate that prevents them to collaborate with Israelis, it might have been difficult for Palestinian journalists to confirm such a statement. Interactions with journalists from the other side of the conflict are a central and necessary practice in the journalists' daily work. Such interactions enable journalists to get new information and sources, crosscheck and evaluate news material and even send messages to people from the "other side". Such interactions can give the audience a unique and more complex look into the "enemy's" society. That

being said this mutual dependency can limit the information published, as journalists might be scared to "hurt" the other side or his/her personal source.

Participants' feedback

While participants found the focus of the research interesting, they raised some concerns about the lack of inclusion of Palestinian media/journalist in the sample that could seriously discredit the outcomes of the research. The challenges of access could have been overcome by resorting to Palestinian researchers or by conducting interviews with Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Other comments highlighted the limited contextualization of the research. While it uses a content analysis methodology to analyze *which* words are being used that does not necessarily shows *how* the words have been used and within which framework. One participant also noted that the research should have also focused on digital media but as the researcher mentioned they agreed to focus on mainstream media while another's work package tackles the social media aspect.

One interesting discussion point raised the issue about whether people might feel more comfortable "opening-up" when interviewed by female journalists. Finally, participants commonly agreed that the research should pay particular attention to the influence of editors. Indeed, they are the decision makers and in Israel there are almost no female editors. According to the stakeholders, to be more accurate and to enable a better grasp on socio-political biased the research should focus more on the media per say rather than journalists as individuals.

These presentations led to a vivid conversation and were of particular interest for the Palestinians and Israeli journalist around the table. The participants confirmed that the official boycott has indeed certainly biased the findings. Ongoing relationships between both actors are still relevant but under the radar. There is a mutual contribution and support especially to circumvent censorship from the Palestinian side (ie Palestinian journalists will share sensitive information about corrupt political leaders that they could hardly display in their news outlet for fear of being accused of treason so that they could be published in Israeli media). For Israeli journalists who do not have access to Gaza strip, interdependence with Palestinian journalists is obvious. Despite the rising role of digital information, journalists need first hand testimonies and different sources to crosscheck information. Same goes for Palestinian journalists who are forbidden to access Israeli territories. Indeed, there are no Palestinian reporters in Israel while they represent 20% of the population. Another interesting debate focused on the journalists' self-perception and seeing themselves as ambassadors. According to the research while journalists see their job as being objective (80% in the case of Palestinian) only a few see the necessity to remain neutral. As stated by a few participants there is little journalist solidarity that goes beyond patriotism and few objectivity when journalists cover their own conflict unless the enemy is a third party.

The main concerns raised by the participants were twofold. Firstly, the lack of Palestinian representation in the sample is according to some participants reflecting the power asymmetry of the conflict. Again, if access to Palestinian territory was an issue, researchers should have interviewed

Palestinian citizens of Israel and NGOs stakeholders were surprised to hear that the latter were reluctant to participate in the research. While the researchers underlined that the interviewer was a Palestinian national, some believed that it would help participants to feel more comfortable, other argued that they would feel ill-at ease to share with a fellow citizen that they collaborate with Israeli journalists. Secondly, one of the main critics of this research is that it focused on journalists as individuals rather than taking into consideration the political agenda of the media outlets they inevitably represent. As mentioned a few times, contextualization and individuals matter equally.

Theme II: THE CONTRIBUTION OF NGOS & POLITICAL ADVOCATES: Inputs, Strategies, & Coverage

Presentation 1: Understanding NGO Communication Strategies and their Impact on the Mediated Coverage of Conflict: The Contexts of Israel/Palestine and Syria

Eric Sangar, University of Namur & King's College London

In this presentation researchers analyze the influence NGOs have on media discourses during armed conflict. Are NGOs able to drive media coverage or are they rather used as a supplementary source without an independent influence on the intensity and the framing of conflict coverage?

In a context of decreasing financial means combined with security constraints that goes concurrently with increasing voices of NGOs operating on the ground as well as their professionalization in communication, the conflict coverage landscape is changing.

This research analyzes 3 types of discourse that are produced by NGOs in conflict:

Type of evidential claim	***Relevance for specific communication strategies***
1) Factual reporting: What has happened, when and to whom by who?	Informing and influencing the general public, advocacy with policy-makers, access to funding, reputation building
2) Analytical judgement: Why did something happen? Which consequences are likely to result from this?	Advocacy with policy-makers, informing and shaping policy response
3) Problem-solving: What kind of action is needed to improve the current and future situation?	Calls for action to mobilize the general public, advocacy with policy-makers, advocacy to shape policy response

In the case of the Syrian context, traditional media are seen as propaganda tool thus not trustworthy. Therefore, NGOs rely on social media such as Facebook or Youtube to overcome the perceived bias, unprofessionalism, and lack of dissemination and access of 'traditional' media (including international ones). Some NGOs, however, admit that through exclusive reliance on social media the activist society has been transformed into an isolated class from the other social sections.

The research looked at the discursive impact of three main Human Rights (HR) NGOs namely, Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Crisis Group (ICG) and Amnesty international (AI). Among the three, HRW is the only one quoted not only for factual analysis of the conflict but also for analysis and agenda for action. So, one could assume that they are the most influential.

From the media side as far as the Israel-Palestine conflict is concerned, media will resort to NGOs information during specific incidents where the latter benefit from a privileged access. On the other hand, NGOs will use this punctual platform to pass their message and to share information about their mission and perspective. More commonly, they will rather use the digital space that is more open and accessible to interact with the audience. That being said, as confirmed by some participants traditional media are still the most important tool for NGOs to communicate.

Additionally, the increasing polarization of Israeli society and the perceived bias of human rights NGOs negatively affect their ability to reach policy-makers and the general public as many Human Rights NGOS are perceived as "leftist" actors. The growing ideological cleavage in Israeli society results in NGO activities to become very politicized and leads media to select the ones to interview according to their political preference and receptiveness of NGO issues.

Ultimately, the research found out that if we recently witnessed a growing influence of NGO's into conflict discourse it remains largely at the factual level except for the HRW exception. NGOs main added value for media is to provide reliable and verified factual information in extremely polarized and politicized local conflict discourses.

Presentation 2: Political Actors' and NGOs' (strategic) Communication Activities during Conflicts

Marc Jungblut & Romy Fröhlich, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

Considering the high level of escalation combined with high international attention to the conflict in Syria, one might have thought that the quantitative amount of output of strategic communication which includes material produced by NGOs, political actors, PR agencies, etc. related to the Syrian conflict coverage would have taken over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, the amount of strategic content distributed on Syria (15.326 texts) is surprisingly much lower than in the Israeli-Palestinian case (42,947 texts). This research identified three possible explanations:

Firstly, strategic communication might be more difficult in a conflict with a high level of escalation than in a latent status of crisis with lengthy phases of limited violence in which for instance

diplomatic and political discourses take place regularly as in the Israel/Palestine protracted conflict. Secondly, due to the ongoing war situation linked with security issues there are less strategic communicators such as NGOs and social movement stakeholders on the ground in Syria. Thirdly a conflict in the escalation phase is a much more complicated communicative field whereas Israel-Palestine is an established issue with fixed conflict lines and more journalistic routine even in times of relative escalation.

Throughout the study, the researchers looked at how transnational NGOs' (TNGO) and local NGOs' as well as local and international political actors' strategic communication conforms to normative approaches and concepts of best practice in strategic communication/PR. In particular, it has been analyzed, if and how these four groups of actors communicate the *epistemological status* of information (reference to "certainty/uncertainty") and how transparently they communicate the *sources* of their claims. The researchers found a high number of references to *epistemology* from TNGOs and local political actors in both conflict cases with local political actors in Syria having by far the highest share of reference to epistemology. In the case of TNGOs, that could be explained by their high amount of resources to investigate the certainty of information. And local political actors might have better direct access when gathering information on certainty while it is too difficult/dangerous for local NGOs to do the same. Concerning references to *sources* of evidence, researchers observed very high number of those references in texts from TNGOs about the Israel/Palestine conflict while in the case of Syria their texts contained very few references to *sources* of evidence. This might be due to the complicated, violent, and dangerous situation. Practical implications: The researchers advise would be to increase epistemology and source evidence in strategic texts. This applies in particular to *local* NGOs and to *international* political actors in both conflicts.

Participants' feedback

The main critics rose by the stakeholders for the presentation "Understanding NGO Communication Strategies and their Impact on the Mediated Coverage of Conflict: The Contexts of Israel/Palestine and Syria" is the narrowly defined concept of impact. In that case impact is assessed in terms of media coverage. Yet, the participants agreed that impact should be measured in light of the media coverage influence on policy-makers hence over the course of the conflict. One participant took the example of the video produced by B'tselem a few month ago, showing a soldier killing an unarmed Palestinian, which resulted in a widespread debate within the Israeli society and might have changed the settlers behaviours. The researcher acknowledged the limitation of the study and reminded the participants that determining the growing influence of NGOs in the conflict discourse was the first step; the second step will address the type and the level of influence. In regard to the NGO/politician relationships, the recent public attacks and the (anti-leftist) NGO legislation put into place by the Israeli government only confirms that pro-occupation politicians feel increasingly threatened by NGO campaigns. On the one hand, their violent critics give NGOs large publicity. On the other hand, their hostile language does increase the

already significant polarization. Generally, NGOs have become the target of political struggle "against their will", because of politicians' electoral interests and need to construct an internal enemy to mobilize their electorate.

To a larger extent, Israeli NGOs today seem to be more and more interested in collecting and disseminating evidence (e.g. on HR abuses by Israeli authorities), while decreasingly trying to formulate policy recommendations. In Iraq, it is interesting to note that media outlets tend to imitate advocacy work of NGOs by collecting and disseminating citizens' views. This raises the issue of re-thinking the role of media assistance that can play a huge role in reshaping the media narrative toward peace through tailor-made training.

A crosscutting remark also highlighted the lack of contextualization (as for the previous ones) and the need for more defined concepts.

Another comment was recurrent throughout the workshop and questioned the rational behind the broad scope of the research. While the participants understood the concept of comparative approach they questioned its feasibility considering the huge differences in terms of context and political landscape. As for the other presentations they regretted the weakness of contextual analysis.

A very interesting point related to the first presentation was raised by the Human Rights Watch representative who insisted on not conflating the frequency of media references to NGOs with actual (political) impact. For instance, HRW currently receives more media coverage than ever but at the same time has less policy impact than it used to have. Although HRW does have direct access to political actors, this does not necessarily translate in decision-making impact. Actually, they are having an internal debate questioning if they should keep sharing 'free' conflict intelligence to Western governments, such as the US state department, in the absence of any tangible "return" in terms of change in the foreign policy decision-making process. They feel they are offering policy-makers public accountability "for the record" with no actual change on the ground.

Another participant believed that NGOs do have an impact on conflict decision-making since their increased production of evidence of HR violations [in the Israeli context] has resulted in "effects of anticipation", especially from military leaders on the ground who try to limit the lethality of their action knowing that some evidence will always get public. According to another participant the research should focus on the actual impact of NGOs on political and military decision-making. In the Israeli context, the advocacy role of international NGOs has subsequently encouraged and empowered local NGO to become effective political and extra-parliamentary opposition force – given that the government has a stable majority in the parliament and opposition parties are relatively weak. NGOs are therefore to be seen as an essential part of a larger civil society coalition that is in opposition to the government, a coalition which includes also some media and political parties.

Theme III: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: Uses, Interactions, & Discussions

Presentation 1: Uses and Interactions of Social Media During Violent Conflicts

Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, ELIAMEP Athens / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

In this study, the researchers examined how social media transform the global media landscape by redistributing information and communication power among political actors, journalists and citizens. They also looked at their influence on political participation and civic engagement (especially after the Arab Spring) in the contemporary complex geopolitical context. As an analysis of social media texts has to be linked to people, discourses and contexts, they decided to proceed with both a quantitative (twitter) and qualitative (Facebook) approach which analyses the social media accounts of the most popular online media since 2014 following the Arab spring. In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, they tracked hash tags during the operation Protective edge and followed the Twitter and Facebook debate. They focused on what was discussed online in light of what was happening on the ground and witnessed a decrease in online attention while they were not seeing any de-escalation of tensions on the ground. They underwent a thorough analysis of Netanayu discourse over the course of the conflict and observed a discursive dichotomy between "us" and "them" to legitimize the attack a one of defense against an international threat.

Presentation 2: Media and Violent Conflicts in the Digital Age

Gadi Wolfsfeld, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya

This research aimed at addressing two questions: The first concerned whether the new media provided new opportunities for weaker challengers and the second whether the media were more likely be force for conflict and hate or for peace and reconciliation.

While there is a large set of literature about the role of traditional media in violent conflicts much less is known about the digital media. Media coverage and peace processes may be at odds as the latter require patience, objectivity and a stable environment while the news media are inherently ethnocentric and tend to rely on immediacy and violence. This research aimed at understanding to what extent digital media can play a significant role in unequal conflict by bringing in third parties and transform conflicts into more equal dynamics. In other words, "has the advent of the digital age had any impact on the ability of the weaker antagonist to compete politically with the more powerful side in asymmetrical conflicts?"

Through in-depth interviews with 15 Palestinian and 15 Israeli political leaders this research also attempts to assess to what extent the digital age has in any way decreased the mostly negative role media can play in attempts at peace and reconciliation. In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli military is especially concerned with *loss of control* over narrative during war that could be illustrated by the change in policies observed during the "Cast Lead" Operation that strictly controlled the use of digital tools by military officers. The instantaneousness of images conveyed by the digital media inevitably shortens the time available to political and military leaders for military actions. Yet, if the digital age may have brought

more equal competition over media it may not have a significant impact on the course of a conflict when we look at the lack of shift in Israeli political attitudes or the lack of willingness for international community to intervene.

Ultimately, one can assert that digital media in conflicts provide advantages to weaker challengers because of the increasing difficulties the stronger antagonist has in controlling the flow of information. Yet if the digital age did provide new opportunities for weaker challengers to be heard it according to this research that is not clear that this could lead to a major change in asymmetrical conflicts.

There is no definitive evidence that, at least in the short and medium term media has an effect on the conflict itself. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed that the new media were much more likely to be effective for the spread of hate than messages of peace and reconciliation. According to the research, the new media, like the traditional media is much more likely to serve as an obstacle to peace and reconciliation.

Participants' feedback

The first comment raised by one participant was about the importance to differentiate between popularity and virality. While participants highly appreciated the combined qualitative and quantitative approach they wish the research could assess the impact of social media in conflict resolution through a more bottom-up approach that would analyze and provide recommendations on how to stimulate the participation of citizens in time of conflicts in addition to focusing on the use of social media by politicians. The researcher acknowledged the participants interests and recognize the need to address the two tendencies: On the one hand, social media as propaganda tool used by politician and leaders for hate speech or political agenda. On the other hand, social media as a tool to foster mobilization and fasten community gathering.

Another participants questioned the selection criteria of the hash tags for the research on "Uses and Interactions of Social Media During Violent Conflicts" and wondered to what extent it would not be more accurate to analyze more in depth information and comments. This issue of identity and anonymity has also been raised yet as the researcher reminded the participants there is no focus on demographic statistics so this is not necessarily relevant in this context. Same goes with trolling that could limit the research in identifying source of information.

The participants recommended the research to fine tune its approach by analyzing how the non-state actors use the social media and how social media content is used and reshaped by offline traditional media. Finally they would be interested on focusing less on hash tags and more on key words

The findings of the Media and Violent Conflicts in the Digital Age research triggered a very fruitful conversation about the role of digital media in time of conflict. The use of digital media of ISIS recruitment and propaganda indeed shows how social media might be an obstacle to peace that can strengthen armed group agenda and impact positively their operations on the ground. As pointed out

during the presentation, it is unlikely that the Oslo peace agreement could have been pursued during the digital age as it significantly constraints the negotiation "behind closed door" that are crucial during any peace processes. Most of participants agreed with the findings of the research that digital media tends to strengthen the negative effect of media on conflict thanks to the anonymity it offers for hate speech and its lack of or blurred legal framework. Unless it is used through a bottom-up approach that could generate a popular demand for peace, it is indeed likely that digital media like their traditional counterpart remain a strong obstacle for peace.

Theme IV: THE INTERPRETATION OF CONFLICT: News narratives & audience perceptions

Presentation 1: Conflict News Narratives in the Middle East

Christian Baden, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

In this study the researchers analyzed the journalists' construction of news narratives through the transformation of collected information collection into news. Indeed, during violent conflicts journalists' role as information providers cannot be reduced to their role as conveyor of contents offered by other sources. Rather, journalism subjects source information to a sequence of transformative practices to transform information into news. They render information relevant culturally to their audiences while providing political-ideological orientation. Through a comparative study with local and international media, the researchers found a high level of similarities in synchronization that within each media community meaning that they mostly cover the same issue at the same time. This is especially true for foreign media. Interestingly at the time of escalation, they found an ongoing process of increasing narrative disalignment between Israeli and Palestinian, while increasing alignment follows after times of rapprochement and peace talks. This pattern could be explained by journalists' varying ability to gain access to the "other" side and the perspectives and narratives promoted there. By contrast, there is little alignment in time of Peace talk in foreign media, which realign in time of escalation.
Another interesting finding of this survey is the correlation between casualties and the quantity media coverage. While there is a strong correlation in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict in both the foreign and local media, this is not necessarily the case in the conflicts in DRC or in Burundi. In Syria though, they observed that media focus was inevitably linked to violence and physical victims.

Presentation 2: Publics' Interpretations and Perceptions of Ethnocentric Conflict Coverage: Does polarized news content mean polarized news audiences?

Igor Micevski, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje

This research started form the assumption that news coverage tends to reduce a complex issue or dispute to two competing sides by marginalizing other voices or aspects. Firstly, media coverage has a

potential to encourage conflict escalation by reinforcing opposing interpretations of polarized news audiences - the more divergent their interpretations of the conflict are the greater the possibility of escalation. Secondly it may conceal aspects of the dispute that might be significant to the conflict de-escalation or resolution. Thirdly, it might contribute to the disempowerment of moderate actors who given the chance to participate in the public discourse might push for resolution. The research aims at understanding audiences' and Media Active Lay Publics' views (MALPs) and interpretations of conflict dynamics and conflict news content in Macedonia, Kosovo, DRC and Burundi as well as Israel/Palestine and Syria. The findings highlight how *ethnocentric framing* of the coverage has a potential to encourage destructive escalation as it justifies and promotes the values, beliefs, attitudes and actions of one's own group and de-legitimise those of the out-group, leading to potential violent mobilisation. This subjective framing can also contribute to the reinforcement of interpretations and attitudes about in-group superiority and out-group decline by fostering narratives of 'victimisation'. In conflict, audiences will expect from their media to defend their ethnic group. They observed that the greater the experienced personal trauma the greater the possibility that this is so. Finally they can assert that resistance by a small but an important minority of Media Active Lay Publics may not de-escalate conflict but it may vector it in another direction.

Participants' feedback

One participant highlighted the difference between synchronization and similar coverage. While media outlets pick up the same stories or news releases they frame it differently depending on the context. Another participants questioned the rational behind the research on conflict news narrative that focused more on content analysis rather than analyzing the terminology. As the researchers argued there is no alternative to content analysis that enables comparison over time and between conflicts. In the next step of the research though, the INFOCORE team will focus on the polarization factors in the media to inform policy-makers with practical recommendations. In the Syrian case the content analysis is indeed very valuable to identify moderate voices and to understand from the international community perspective who to support. A particular focus should be made on local media and direct players on the ground such as a comparison between both the opposition and government media proponents or ISIS and Al Nusra group. A few participants wished the study could have dug deeper into the impact of media discourse on the conflict on the ground especially before during and after peace processes. The researchers replied that this will be addressed when the content and the interviewing data are integrated.

The participants expressed concerns that this tendency will probably increase as social media tend to bring together groups from the same communities sharing the same values. That will inevitably contribute to polarization. On a more positive note, some participants argued that in time of conflict as witnessed in Syria, people tend to consult media from both side to understand the conflict dynamics from different perspectives. This pattern could contribute to media literacy that is not necessary true in time of peace. Indeed, one of the main strategies to polarization is to ignore the "other". The media diversification

observed in Iraq for instance might create hope for de-polarization. Participants indeed agreed that media literacy increases with media pluralism and conflict escalation. This is even truer in context of dictatorship where people have lost trust in media and look at multiple sources of information to get informed. It is also important to note that in every conflict media are often used to demonize the other and antagonize side of the conflicts.

Recommendations by the participants

During the last session of the workshop, researchers and participants collaboratively discussed how they could take the most out of the information collected by the INFOCORE team. What are the useful directions the researchers could take to fine-tune their studies and make it more relevant to stakeholders on the ground?

Partnerships

Stakeholders agreed that there is a need for a structured cooperation and partnerships between the INFOCORE project and institutions on the ground. These strategic partnerships would enable the INFOCORE team to better define the impact of media in conflict with the expertise and the access of practitioners on the ground. Some stakeholders expressed the willingness to establish institutional cooperation that could be fully operative before the end of the project.

Clarifying the project's terminology

There was a general opinion that the terminology should be better defined while the research could resort to more concrete examples. This could be done by analyzing one specific conflict as one single case study that would examine how each media community covers the conflict phases and in what terms. Participants expressed the need to clarify the definition of impact and broaden it from the qualitative media coverage to the influence of media on the various phases of the conflict. This could be done with a strong collaboration with the local academics and media practitioners as well as the Diaspora to collaboratively define common indicators.

Contextualization and local realities

According to some stakeholders, the broad scope of work embraced through this comparative study might have diluted the contextualization of the studied conflicts. Participants felt that the actual impact of media on the different phases of the conflict have been overlooked while the researches rather focused on media coverage only. For most of the stakeholders operating on the ground, the analysis of foreign media coverage is less useful than an in-depth analysis of local media dynamics. While the INFOCORE project gives a very good understanding of media patterns that are useful for proposal writings it would be interesting to investigate more deeply on the local work environment in which media operate, as well as their political agendas and their interconnectedness with political or civil society actors. This could be

done with an emphasis on institutional relations. More specifically, if INFOCORE wishes to focus on foreign media coverage then Syria should be placed into its geo-political context. Therefore, this protracted conflict should be apprehended as a proxy-war including not only radical groups but also international players. It would be essential to appreciate the coverage of Russian media for instance.

Stakeholders analysis

In addition to the comparative approach, looking at the contexts in a structural way would enable a better understanding of the different actors on the ground and how they influence the public discourse while marginalizing the moderate voices. Embracing media outlets with their political agenda rather than journalists as individuals could be one approach to assess the media dynamics in time of conflicts. As the INFOCORE project has the power to influence policy-makers it is paramount for the team to provide a strong stakeholder analysis. In the case of the Syrian conflict, this could be done with an increased cooperation with NGOs operating on the ground that could undertake a peer-review before the publishing of findings.

INFOCORE as an open source

Stakeholders unanimously agreed that the impressive database collected through the INFOCORE project should become an open-source that other researchers across the globe could access to. This would enable further investigation that could for instance explore the role of media in engaging or antagonizing the public. This broad data-sharing would lead to practical recommendations directed to media practitioners especially media development NGOs.

More balanced interviews samples

While there is a strong focus on the inter-relationship between political actors, media and the public, some groups are missing in the interviews samples despite the very important role they play in conflicts. In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Palestinian citizens of Israel are absent of the research and Palestinians out of Israel need to receive stronger attention in a few work packages. As for the Syrian conflict radical groups such as the Islamic state or Al Nusra should also be part of the research as they are key players using media to strengthen their actions on the ground.

Recommendations by the consultant

Cooperation with stakeholders on the ground

Overall, there is a clear need to increase cooperation between the INFOCORE team and practitioners to ensure findings could be used in a more practical way by practitioners operating on the ground. More importantly this collaboration would enable an expertise sharing by bringing in a field expertise. This approach would help recognizing power structures in conflict contexts (e.g. role of state-controlled

media, freedom of media access for NGOs, security of journalists etc.) that enable media to influence policy-making processes and perceptions of lay audiences.

Focus on the Countering Violent Extremism agenda

At the time of increased polarization and significant focus by donors and NGOs on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) the INFOCORE scope of work is crucial. Indeed media development NGOs are increasingly pressured by donors to promote moderate voices and provide audiences with alternative narrative. In such project, analysis of digital and traditional media's roles are paramount in order to implement activities that will efficiently address the negative role of media in the polarization process. In the case of radicalization and violent extremism for instance, it would be very useful for INFOCORE to provide NGOs with audience-disaggregated data. Indeed project design are mainly structured around target groups and aims at promoting the emergence of agents of change. Better grasping how youth are using social media or how armed groups are resorting to the latter for intensive online recruitment are only a couple of examples of content analysis that would enable INFOCORE to strengthen NGOs capacities to implement need based media projects with a wider impact.

Context analysis

Efficient project implementations require a strong context and stakeholders analysis that is often weak. Whether in emergency or development contexts, NGOs often lack the financial and human resources as well as the time necessary to step back and undertake thorough stakeholders and context analysis. Too often, context analysis remains at the level of desk review coupled with a few interviews with stakeholders on the ground. Should the INFOCORE better coordinate with NGOs, this could result in a very fruitful collaboration that could inform contextually relevant projects with wider and stronger impact on beneficiaries.

Contextualization

More broadly, the recurring critic that often came up throughout the workshop on the weak contextualization should be taken very seriously by the INFOCORE team should it wishes to better meet the practical needs of practitioners on the ground. INFOCORE should indeed make sure it identifies some key variables (such as degree of freedom of press, ownership structures and business models in the media systems, cultures of news consumption, types of political regimes) and link those to the results of the individual work packages.

Another way to better grasp the multi-layers context dynamics could be to integrate a model that would enable researchers to understand under what conditions media discourse can actually have an independent influence on conflict dynamics.

Annex I: Programme

Friday, 22 July 2016

Arrival & Check-in
19:00-21:00 *Dinner (Free Buffet)*
HELIOS REST/LOBBY AREA

Saturday, 23 July 2016

Conference room: BALLROOM

09:00 **GREETINGS**

Moderator Emily Jacquard, ex-director, Search for Common Ground, Lebanon

Introduction: The INFOCORE Project
Romy Fröhlich, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

09:45 *Coffee break*

10:00 **THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS: Identities, Gender, & Professional Practices**

Does Gender Make a Difference in Conflict Coverage?
Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Researching Conflict News: Interactions between Journalists across Conflict Lines
Abit Hoxha, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich
Yonatan Gonen, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

12:15 *Lunch HELIOS REST/ LOBBY AREA*

13:30 **THE CONTRIBUTION OF NGOS & POLITICAL ADVOCATES: Inputs, Strategies, & Coverage**

Understanding NGO Communication Strategies and their Impact on the Mediated Coverage of Conflict: The Contexts of Israel/Palestine and Syria
Eric Sangar, University of Namur

Political Actors' and NGOs' (strategic) Communication Activities during Conflicts
Marc Jungblut & Romy Fröhlich, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

15:45 *Coffee break*

16:00 **THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: Uses, Interactions, & Discussions**

Uses and Interactions of Social Media During Violent Conflicts
Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, ELIAMEP Athens / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Media and Violent Conflicts in the Digital Age

Gadi Wolfsfeld, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya

18:15 *Break*

19:45 Welcome drink - Outside terrace at the Café-

20:00 *Dinner HELIOS REST/ LOBBY AREA*

22:00 *Music & Drinks at STEKI TIS PAREAS (16 A, Archbishop Makarios Av.)*

Sunday, 24 July 2016

Conference room: BALLROOM

09:30 **THE INTERPRETATION OF CONFLICT: News narratives & audience perceptions**

Conflict News Narratives in the Middle East

Christian Baden, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Public Perceptions and Interpretations of Ethnocentric Conflict Coverage
Igor Micevski, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje

11:45 *Lunch HELIOS REST/ LOBBY AREA*

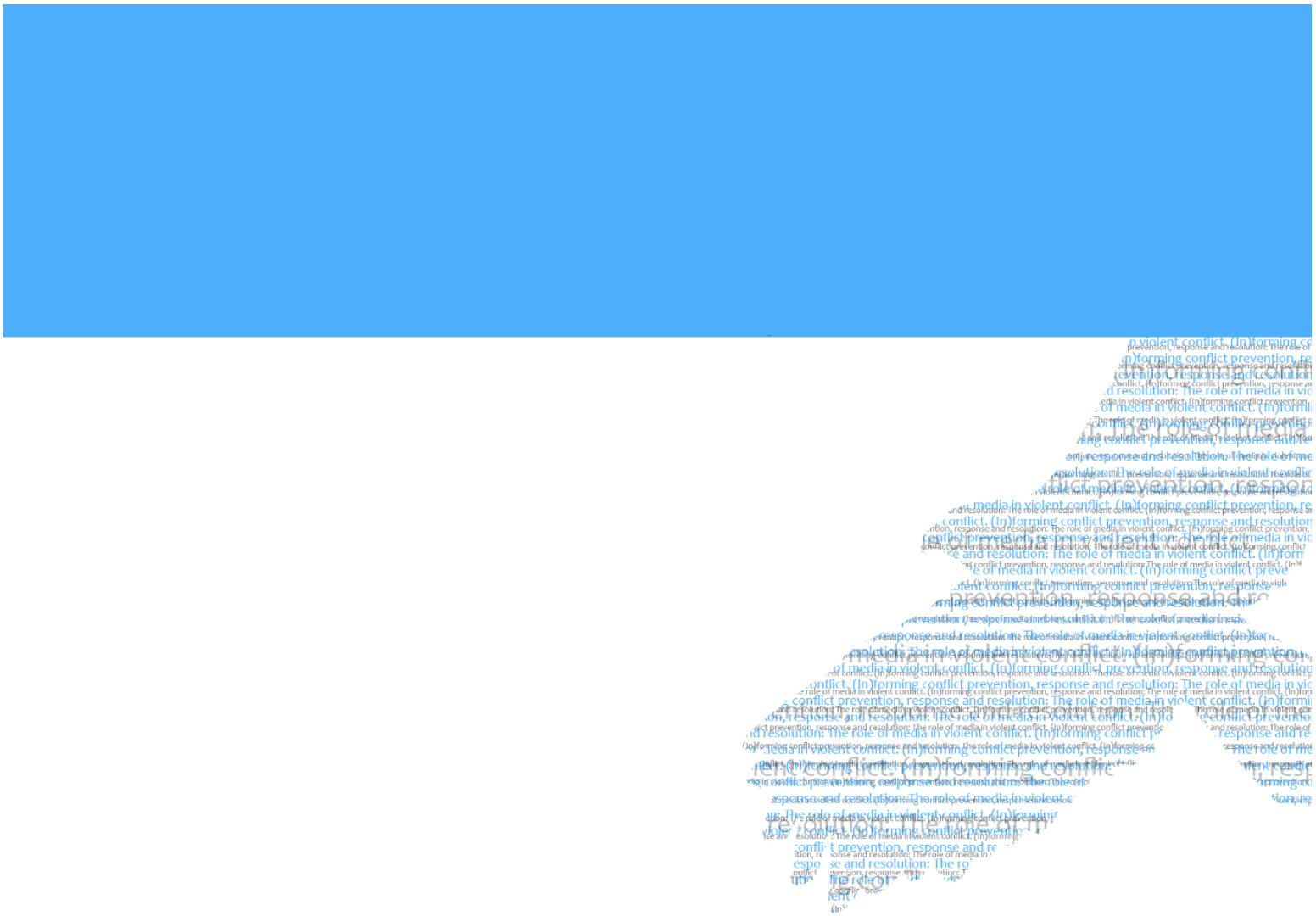
13:00 **STEPS FORWARD: Lessons for practice & Further needs for research**

Discussion

Romy Fröhlich, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

15:00 *End*

Transfer to the Airport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