

(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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News Production: Theory and Conceptual Framework *Generic and conflict influences on the news production process*

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Journalistic Production Theoretical Framework

Defining news is the first step to decoding the process of news production. According to Nossek (2008), “news is a genre of mass media content resulting from journalists' information gathering and editors' decisions and following professional practices and norms.” News, argues Harrison (2006: 16), is “is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organizations within which they operate.”

Defining news production as a process is a difficult task, as there is no generic definition of news, but it all depends on the context and the need for such news. However, news production begins as a process of editing “as soon as a journalist sees and hears of something newsworthy” (Wilson 1996: 29) and is most commonly produced by “journalism professionals (of which there are different types with different journalistic subcultures, for example, reporters, producers, technical staff and managerial staff) working in a routine day to-day manner within a news organization” (Harrison 2006: 99). One might argue, however, that with the growing relevance of interactive features in the Internet, with increasing optimization of newsroom structures, and with a profound transformation of journalistic labor, a substantial part of journalism is taking place outside the news organization.

Domingo (2008) refers to news production as a generic process that includes five stages – (1) access and observation; (2) selection and filtering; (3) processing and editing; (4) distribution; and (5) interpretation. This definition serves as a good starting point to analyzing news production in general, but to the production of news on conflicts in particular.

Inspired by Domingo's model, and considering the stages in the sequence of news production the INFOCORE project is interested in, we suggest a three-step circular model (see Figure 1). The three elements in the model are story ideation, story narration, and story presentation.

- **Story ideation** is the key process in story suggestion. Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) have termed this process of story idea generation “story ideation.” There are essentially four ways how a story can come into being: Story ideation can be

proactive when journalists initiate research or observation on a particular story idea. In this case, the impulse to research a story comes from the journalists themselves, most of the times out of curiosity about something they became aware of. Perhaps more common is the *reactive* mode in which the story is initiated through a person or institution outside journalism. Journalists might attend a press conference and write about it, newsrooms might get press releases and turn them into articles, or some kind of sensitive information is pitched (or leaked) to an investigative reporter. In the *follow-up* mode of story ideation, journalists follow up on their own or other reports' coverage. The story is therefore initiated simply by the fact that the issue already receives media coverage and journalists simply continue their reporting or join the crowd. Finally, story ideation can be *event-driven*, for there are event that don't leave journalists and the media a choice but to report on them. In this mode, journalists routinely respond to occurrences "on the ground" that hit the established criteria of newsworthiness in a way that newsrooms feel that they "must" report on these events because everyone else will do.

- **Story narration** refers to the process of the development of a story narrative as well as its narrative context. While in the stage of story ideation, the emphasis is on "What story to tell?", story narration provides an answer to the question of "How to tell the story." In this regard, story narration takes account of the story-telling function of journalism – that is, every news account has a story to tell. There are three important aspects of story narration that play out in the production of news: the *central narrative* (the "story"), the *story angle* (the perspective from which to tell the story), and the *story framing* (the embedding of a story within an established interpretative framework). Berger (1997) called these functions *narratemes*, while the sociological approach holds that the analysis of media is done both in "content and form as a result of cultural conventions of one society at a specific time" (Becker 2004: 7). In line with the news production narration process, Gans (1979) and Schudson (1995) make a distinction between "important" and "interesting" news in terms of judgements by journalists when deciding about framing the story of angle they will take to cover the news. Two fundamental questions that are asked are "how the story is

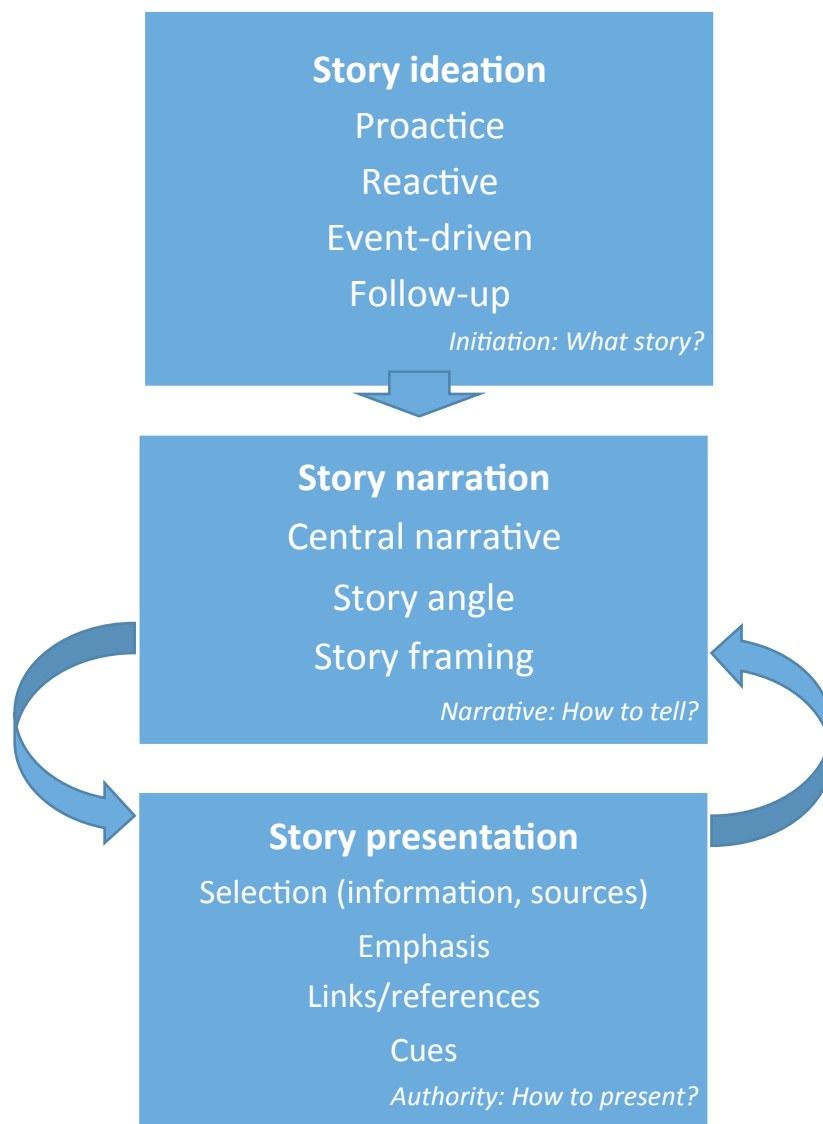
told and why it is told that way;” Becker (2004:9) argues that journalists first make decisions about the design and intention of the narrative and then use narrative techniques to create a news account. Looking at the central narrative, story angle and story framing, we can further explore patterns, structures and roles of journalists in conflict news production.

- **Story presentation** is the third in the (partly iterative) sequence of news production because it is only after a central narrative (the “story”) has been identified, the producers of news build their coverage in a way that is consistent with the story line. In so doing, they establish discursive authority over the material they present as to be a “true” account of what happened. Four elements are central for the process of story presentation: *Selection* refers to the choice of information (or “facts”), sources, sound bites and any other substantive aspect that gets covered in the news account. *Emphasis*, on the other hand, reflects the fact that not all of these elements are presented as equally important or relevant in the news account. Certain aspects, notably those that speak best to the central story narrative, are given more emphasis than others. One reason is that common occupational standards require journalists to give voice to all sides in a story, but it does not violate any professional codex to emphasize certain “facts” over others to get the story in line with the narrative. *Links and references* are important because news accounts do not exist within a narrative vacuum. In their reporting journalists consistently make reference to previous coverage – of their own, or of other colleagues/news media – thereby linking their accounts to other news pieces. It is for this reason that individual news accounts have to be understood within a complex discursive nexus of news coverage. *Cues*, finally, link a news account to real-world occurrences and establish an intuitive relationship between the story narrative and an established interpretative framework.

It should be noted that the cycle of news production does not necessarily end with the story presentation but rather continues its life cycle into distribution and delivery of such news to the audience, reactions to the news and feedback to the original idea of news production in the story idea and as influence on shaping the conflict. Furthermore, the two stages of story narration and story presentation should not be placed in a linear sequence. Oftentimes, the central narrative, angle and framing of a

story may change as the substantive facts, article emphasis or cues do not support it. Narrative may also change in response to the coverage of other, notably competing, news media.

The three elements above – story ideation, story narration, and story presentation – serve as a heuristic interpretative framework to take account of the essential stages in the production of (conflict) news. In the retrospective reconstruction interviews, journalists will be asked to recall their decisions with regard to these three domains.

Figure 1. News production process

Influences on news production and conflict

Early studies of news production tended to overestimate the autonomy of journalists and newsrooms. Recent work has demonstrated that potential limits of professional autonomy stem from various sources that operate at multiple levels. Early models tended to distinguish between three basic layers of influence, mostly the individual, organizational and institutional level (Ettema, Whitney & Wackman 1987; Whitney, Sumpter & McQuail 2004), while current work generally theorizes a complex array of fields of influence. Focusing on journalists' decision making in ethical situations, Voakes (1997: 21) identified seven social influences: individual, small group, organizational, competition, occupational, extramedia, and legal. Preston (2009: 7) most recently proposed a typology consisting of five levels of influence, including the domains of individual and organizational forces, media routines and norms, political-economic factors, as well as the level of cultural and ideological power. However, the known theorists on news influences Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) came up with the levels-of-influences approach that organizes the several sources of influence into five hierarchically grouped levels: the levels of the individual, media routines, organization, the extra-media level and the ideological level.

However there is no consensus on the importance of these levels of influence. Early gatekeeping research proposed that individual factors reign supreme in the process of news production (White 1950; Flegel & Chaffee 1971), while more recent evidence points to a rather modest influence of individual predispositions on journalists' news decisions (Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab 1991; Patterson & Donsbach 1996). Organizational factors are also believed to have a substantial impact on the production of news (Cook 1996; Gans 2003; Weaver & Löffelholz 2008), but the extent to which their effects compare to other sources of influences is largely unknown. The newsroom environment was found to be a dominant source of influence by German and American journalists and a strong predictor of journalists' professional views in Germany, Indonesia and the United States (Hanitzsch 2005; Scholl & Weischenberg 1998; Shoemaker et al. 2001; Weaver & Wilhoit 1996; Weischenberg, Löffelholz & Scholl 1998).

Meanwhile, journalism and mass communication research appears to show a growing awareness of the importance of systemic and economic influences (Berkowitz, Limor & Singer 2004; Hallin & Mancini 2004; Preston & Metykova 2009; Weaver 1998; Zhu et al. 1997). The systemic level of influence combines the relevant social, cultural and ideological contexts within which journalists work, including the political and legal conditions of news making, as well as the nature of professional self-organization and national conventions within the profession. The power of economic imperatives and media structures has long been recognized by researchers, and journalists seem to be acutely aware of their importance (Bagdikian 1983; Benson & Hallin 2007; Preston & Metykova 2009; Whitney, Sumpter & McQuail 2004).

It should be noted the multilevel nature of influences on news production also reflects an epistemological distinction that is often ignored – the difference between objective influences and perceived influences. Objective limits have empirical correlates in the “real world”. Perceived influences, on the other hand, reside solely in the perceptions of the individual journalist. They depend on the mental faculties of the journalists and the way objective influences play out on the ground. Many objective influences are not adequately accounted for when interviewing journalists simply because journalists are not aware of them. A study by Hanitzsch et al. (2010) demonstrated that across a wide range of countries, journalists rated the importance of political and economic influences on the news as fairly low, despite the fact that research has demonstrated that especially economic imperatives play out in the newsroom in important ways. The authors of the study reason that many of these influences are masked and translated into organizational imperatives. Budget cuttings and staff reduction, for instance, may not appear as economic influence to the journalists but as organizational issue of inadequate allocation of resources to news gathering.

For the purpose of the INFOCORE study we identified two general domains of influences on news production – *generic influences* and *conflict-related influences*. Generic influences apply to all kinds of journalism regardless of beat and medium, while conflict-related influences specifically apply to news about conflicts. Furthermore, in line with the literature on the multilevel nature of news influences, we distinguish between three

levels of influences depending on where the influences emanate from: the level of society/community, the level of organization, and the individual level (see Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of influences

<i>Domain of origin</i>	<i>Level of analysis</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generic (journalism-related) • Specific (conflict-related) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of society/community • Level of organization • Level of individual

1.1 Generic influences on news production

Drawing on the above literature review we distinguish between seven sub-domains of influence – that is, the areas the influences originate from: Socio-cultural identity, political influences, economic imperatives, reference groups, professional ideology, professional practice, and professional routines.

- **Socio-cultural identity** takes account of the fact that journalism operates within an existing set of social-cultural values systems. These value systems find expression in all three levels of analysis – at the level of society/community in the form of normative expectations for instance on proper behavior, at the level of organization in the shape of “organizational culture” in the newsroom, and the individual level in the form of the social values and cultural beliefs journalists hold on to.
- **Political influences** and the degree of their pervasiveness depend on the political system. Political intervention can take place in the shape censorship or press bans or, more indirectly, by means of intimidation of journalists. Other means of political intervention at the societal/community level are, among others, media laws, press subsidies and broadcasting regulation. On the organizational level political influence becomes manifest as several news media subscribe to a specific editorial policy, e.g. by showing a liberal or conservative slant in their reporting. Journalists, finally, also have a political stance that may or may not play out in the news production process.

- **Economic imperatives** are especially relevant at the organizational and individual levels. However, concentration of ownership in a specific media market may have enormous consequences for the overall reporting. At the level of organization, economic imperatives are strongly related to business models of news media companies and the allocation of editorial resources to news gathering. At the individual level, economic factor play out with regards to salaries and pay, most notably with the precarization of journalistic labor in many fields.
- **Reference groups** relate to the “stakeholders” of news media and the actors in the field journalists have in mind when reporting news. At the societal/community level, it is the audiences to which journalists and the news media turn to as a reference, often in defending their presented news diet. However, journalism is a highly competitive field. News media compete with other news organizations for attention and audience shares, and journalists compete with other journalists for recognition and reputation. As a result, journalism is a highly self-referential enterprise, for what constitutes excellence in journalism is less dependent on what the audience thinks but on how a journalists and a news organizations is recognized by other actors in the field.
- **Professional structures** accounts for the measures implemented by newsrooms and journalists in order to cope with the need to process a fairly massive amount of data. To this end, news organizations usually apply routines of labor division either along the various news beats (politics, economy, sports etc.) or along a functional division of roles (reporter, editor, commentator etc.). Furthermore, newsroom hierarchies serve as a tool to ease the process of decision making and allocate the necessary authority in this process to specific positions.
- **Professional ideology** refers to the values, attitudes and beliefs of societies/communities, news organizations and journalists regarding the position of journalism in society, and the professional roles journalists subscribe to. At the societal level, these perceptions appear as normative orientations as to the generalized and aggregate expectations of journalism that are deemed desirable. On the subjective level, they incorporate the occupational values individual journalists embrace as a result of their professional socialization and the internalization of normative expectations.

- **Professional practices** relate to the proper enactment of these values and the execution of journalism “on the ground.” At the societal level, there are shared professional standards of proper journalism in almost every national community of journalists, usually inscribed into professional codes of conduct. In addition to these standards, some news rooms have their own explicit editorial guidelines. At the implicit level, however, all news rooms have – to some degree – a shared understanding of “How we do things here.” Finally, journalists as individuals have their personal views on ethical issues.

Table 2. Generic influences on news production

Sub-domain	Level of society/community	Level of organization	Individual level
Socio-cultural identity	Social/cultural values	Organizational culture	Personal values and beliefs
Political influences	Government intervention	Editorial policy	Political stance
Economic imperatives	Concentration of ownership	Business models/ editorial resources	Salaries, pay
Reference groups	Audience	Competing media	Colleagues, sources
Professional structures	National conventions	Editorial structures (beats, desks etc.)	Position in hierarchy
Professional ideology	Professional norms		Professional roles
Professional practice	Professional standards	Editorial guidelines	Ethical views

Conflict-related influences on news production

Generic influences on conflict news describe only one part of the story. In addition to the constraints faced by all journalists, more or less so but regardless of the object of coverage, there is a set of influences on news production and limitations of journalists’ work that specifically pertain to the conflict itself. It is often said that ‘media coverage may contribute to constructive or destructive outcomes of [those] disputes’ (Reuben 2009: 47) and thus has the capacity to escalate and deescalate conflicts. However, it is not only the news media, their professional routines and the journalists who drive coverage toward escalation or de-escalation, it is also the conflicts themselves that we assume to have a decisive influence on conflict coverage. In the following, we will discuss

three domains that we believe are essential to this effect: the nature of conflict, salience of conflict, and access to conflict.

Nature of conflict

The INFOCORE project deliberately choose different types of conflict for its case studies. The selection of conflicts acknowledges the well-established fact that the development and consequences of conflicts depend, among others, on the parties involved, the issues disputed, and the intensity and scale of a conflict. Most notably, many conflicts tend to have a rather short shelf-life, but some of the conflicts are enduring – protracted and intractable – with traumatic consequences for both civilians and journalists. These conflicts are often related to ethnic, religious and regional identities (Coleman, 2003; Kriesberg, 1993).

- *Parties involved:* Conflicts can involve different kinds of actors. The conflict research literature traditionally distinguishes between interstate conflicts that involve two or more states, extra-state conflicts between a state and a non-state group outside its boundaries, internationalized internal conflicts between a state and internal opposition groups with intervention from other states, and internal conflicts between a state and internal opposition groups (Small & Singer, 1982). The news media cover conflicts differently depending on the parties involved. We believe that conflicts involving state actors tend to attract more and more intense coverage than internal conflicts that, depending where they are taking place (e.g., in Central Africa), often escape from international media attention. Corresponding with the parties involved is another approach that distinguishes between symmetric and asymmetric conflicts depending on power relations between involved parties. Especially intra-national conflicts have a tendency to become protracted and, hence, resist efforts at resolution (Mitchell, 1991).
- *Issues of dispute:* The question of what the conflict is about is another important marker of differences regarding the onset and escalation of conflict (Diehl, 1992). The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (2011) famously distinguishes nine substantive “conflict items,” defined as material or non-material goods which are claimed by the conflict parties. Two of these represent exclusively interstate items (Territory, International Power), while five are

subjects of internal conflicts (National Power, Secession, Autonomy, Subnational Predominance, and Decolonization). The remaining two items (System/Ideology, Resources) may be part of both intra- and interstate conflicts. Each conflict can have several conflict items. Research has shown that disputes in which territorial issues are at stake tend to be much more escalatory than disputes over less salient issues (Hensel, 1996), by which they in turn have a higher potential to generate news coverage. This can be seen from recent conflicts, such as the Russian annexation of the Crimea. Other conflicts that are about natural resources, for instance, are often ignored by the news media with fewer journalists deployed to them.

- *Intensity of conflict:* Since 2011, the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research classifies conflicts into five categories: dispute, non-violent crisis, violent crisis, limited war, and war. For military conflicts, an alternative taxonomy of minor armed conflicts, intermediate armed conflict and wars was proposed by Gleditsch et al. (2002). It is a truism in journalism research that the intensity of a conflict (measured, among others, by numbers of casualties and the scale of material damage) severely drives the news selection process through its attributed news value (with intense conflicts receiving more coverage than less intense ones; see Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Peace negotiations and other efforts of peaceful settlement of a conflict, on the other hand, are often at odds with the logic of journalism that focuses on conflict, immediacy, simplicity and drama (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Furthermore, conflict intensity has important ramifications for journalists' security (see below).

Salience of conflict

The above mentioned characteristics have direct consequences for the way conflicts are perceived by the involved actors in terms of their salience. When journalists are more or less directly involved in a conflict, we can distinguish between an individual and a social dimension. For non-involved journalists, the major factor is proximity.

- *Social involvement:* We presume that journalists and their news organizations report differently on a given conflict if it directly involves their own country or society. Overly patriotic journalism is a common consequence of their countries

marching to war, or more generally during the escalation process. This is usually the time of war journalists (vs. “peace journalists”), as Lee and Maslog (2006) have demonstrated. Patriotic journalism is not necessarily the journalists’ own choice but often driven by a general public sentiment during which a critical reporter may quickly get stigmatized as “unpatriotic” for providing unbiased coverage.

- *Individual involvement:* In addition to being a citizen of a certain country, journalists in conflict regions often belong to a particular ethnic and/or religious group that is directly affected by the conflict. Journalists may – consciously or subconsciously – sympathize with the corresponding conflict party and their causes. The identity-related predispositions of journalists in conflict regions may therefore profoundly shape the way they cover the conflict.
- *Proximity:* Even when journalists, or societies as a whole, have no business in a given conflict, events may be more or less salient to them. Proximity – with regards to geography, politics, economy, and culture – has been studied in this context both by conflict researchers and journalism scholars. Conflict research has demonstrated that geographical proximity can escalate military conflicts (Senese, 1996), while journalism research has long established proximity as one of the most relevant factors contributing to attributed newsworthiness of international events (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). Journalists are likely to report more, more often and differently about conflicts in world regions that are geographically closer to them and with which they share similarities in terms of history, political systems, cultural values, as well as religious affiliations.

Access to conflict

One of the practical consequences of conflicts is that access to the ground and people, as well as access to information more generally is often restricted for journalists. Two major factor impose limits and constraints on conflict journalists’ access to the conflict: reporter security and strategic communication actors.

- *Reporter security:* According to Reporters without Borders, between 58 and 87 journalists have been killed annually since 2004. Delivering the news from conflict zones often means for war correspondents to work in hostile environments. Not

only can journalists be accidentally hit in a gunfight, they increasingly become military targets themselves. Examples are abundant: the frequent abduction of journalists by terrorists and militias, or the two US missile attacks on Al-Jazeera branches in Kabul (November 2001) and Baghdad (April 2003). Access to the ground is an essential means for journalists to get to the truth of a story, but in many cases this would mean to risk one's life. This is especially true for domestic reporters who report from the conflict zone. In many civil wars, the ethnic or religious affiliation of a journalist may decide over his or her life if caught by the wrong group in the wrong place (Hanitzsch, 2004).

- *Strategic communication actors:* As much as information is a valuable resource in a given conflict, or even weapon at times, political and military actors are increasingly aware of potential effects of conflict coverage. While reporters still had a great deal of freedom during the Crimean War (1853-56), the military has become gradually restrictive – and sophisticated – in their efforts to gain control over communication processes. Excessive censorship is even common in some of the democratic countries (e.g. Israel), but military control over the media has become much more subtle recently, among others through targeted disinformation, psychological warfare and the introduction of innovative techniques such as embedding reporters in military units. Strategic communication has become increasingly professionalized and generously equipped with resources, while the conditions of journalistic labor have substantially deteriorated.

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