

(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



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THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

INFOCORE Working paper (03/2014)
Mission Statement WP2
“Political Actors and Officials”

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Mission Statement WP2 “Political Actors and Officials”

The mission of WP2 is to provide a better understanding of how political leaders and officials interact with different types of media in times of both intensive conflict and attempts at conflict resolution. This work package sees these political actors in their double role as sources/advocates and audiences/users. The underlying assumption is that during the different stages and types of conflicts being studied these ongoing interactions have an impact on both how media cover conflicts and on at least some of the decisions and strategies adopted by leaders.

The relationship between political leaders and the media in the course of conflict has always been a central concern in the field of political communication. If one were forced to pick just one question that has received more attention than any other, it would almost certainly have to do with the varying ability of the news media to achieve a degree of independence from governments and the military during times of conflict (Aday, Livingston, & Hebert, 2005; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006, 2007; Hallin, 1998; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Hoskins & Ben O’Loughlin, 2010; Knightly, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). The vast majority if this work has been carried out in Western democracies (especially the United States and the U.K.) and almost all of these studies agree that journalists find it difficult to become critical of the authorities, especially in the early stages of violent conflicts. Nevertheless, as wars grind on, the level of political consensus among elites often tends to decline the media in these countries often become more critical of such conflicts. At that point they can play the opposite role of intensifying or even accelerating the level of dissent (Althaus, 2003; Bennett, 1990; Mermin, 1999; Wolfsfeld, 1997). In addition, there are critics who argue that previous research on this topic may have underreported the amount of dissent appearing in the news media by failing to include international foreign sources who are often critical of war polities (Balmas, Sheafer, & Wolfsfeld, in press; Hayes & Guardino, 2010).

Another extremely relevant question has to do with the ability of political leaders to exploit the media in order to promote a peace process (Hackett, 2006; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010; Wolfsfeld, 2004). In this area, it has been found that

political leaders find it much more difficult to mobilize the media for peace than for war. The major reason is that there is an inherent contradiction between media norms and routines and the “needs” of a peace process (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Interestingly, very few scholars have attempted to find any serious integration between what is known about the role of the media in conflicts with what was found with regard to their role in conflict resolution.

The INFOCORE project represents a unique opportunity to provide more nuanced answers to these traditional questions and, perhaps more importantly, attempt to provide initial answers to other important questions that have received far less attention. Some important examples of such questions are:

1. What changes have taken place in the ongoing interactions between political leaders/officials and different types of media that can be attributed to the dramatic changes in communication technology?
2. What similarities and differences characterize the interactions among politicians/officials with regard to conflicts that erupt among countries with varying levels of economic development and democratic traditions?
3. How do the ongoing interactions between bureaucrats (officials) and the different types of media during a conflict resemble and differ from those of elected and non-elected leaders?
4. What are the major factors that lead to political leaders to attribute varying levels of importance to media concerns?
5. How do political leaders and officials react and respond to different types of media in different stages of a conflict and peace processes?

It is important to also say something about how the research carried out in WP2 relates to all of the work being carried out by the other work packages in INFOCORE. In general it can be said that the WP2 work package takes an “actors’ perspective” on all of the research questions that are being raised by the INFOCORE research team. Nevertheless, this is not meant to suggest that journalists are seen as mere messengers for government proclamations. The assumption, which becomes clear from the other work packages, is that the media can often play an independent and significant role in all conflicts. Indeed, main objective ❶ of the INFOCORE project is devoted to *developing strategies for targeted media assistance and safeguarding independent media*. While many political leaders have a vested interest in lowering the level of media independence, the findings from this work package should help us better understand the circumstances in which this level of official control declines.

Main objective ② is devoted to “building capacities for security policies through an informed interaction with media actors”. The importance of WP2 becomes especially clear with regard to this objective. Only through an in-depth understanding the perspective of political leaders and officials will it be possible to put forth recommendations for developing more constructive interactions between politicians, officials and the media for preventing the outbreak and escalation of conflicts and for increasingly the probability that attempts at conflict resolution will succeed.

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