

(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



INFO
CORE

THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

INFOCORE Working paper (03/2014) Mission Statement WP3 “Media and Publics”

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Mission Statement WP3 “Media and Publics”

The overall objective of INFOCORE is to provide a thorough understanding of: (1) the **social processes underlying the production of conflict news**, and (2) the **inherent dynamics of conflict news contents**.

The main role of the WP3 within this overall framework is to contribute dominantly in studying the first part of the communication process – *production of conflict news*. Here, the main focus is to identify the role lay publics (individuals and groups) play in conflict news production process. This will be achieved by investigating interaction between lay publics and (a) different types of media in (b) different types of conflicts and (c) at different stages of conflict. Lay publics are understood as one of the key “[...] actors that play an active role in shaping media coverage.”¹

WP 3 will also make an extensive contribution to the analysis of the *inherent dynamics of conflict news content* by identifying the dominant interpretative frames the lay publics use to draw meaning from the conflict news content. The focus on studying interpretative frames is based on the presumption that they further shape ideas of lay publics and motivate them toward interaction with the media or toward a broader engagement in the community.

In the Work Package Description this general role of the WP3 is operationalized as follows: “to analyze how different media publics use and interpret conflict related information, as well as how this information affects the perceptions and evidential beliefs of media publics about the specific conflict.” Therefore the emphasis of WP3 is put on the *interactions* and the *interpretations* lay publics have on conflict related news. This demands an application of dominantly qualitative research strategies (focus groups).

In its final stage, the WP3 will determine what are the perceptions of the general public about the conflict and to what extent the dominant interpretative frames identified from the analyzed content and reconstructed in the focused groups with lay publics are spread across different audiences. This part of the study entails an application of a quantitative research strategy (surveys in two conflict zones).

It has to be emphasized that the WP3 does not have an objective to comprehensively study the effects of conflict related coverage on media audiences due to the following reasons: (1) within the context of the overall project the publics are investigated dominantly as one of the key actors that participate in the *news production and dissemination*; and (2) due to the fact that it is impossible to investigate the media effects by using only qualitative methods, i.e. a complex and longitudinal study is needed for that.

Brief theoretical overview

¹ More on the concepts of the “lay publics”, “audience/user” see the attached document.

Various traditions in audience research have conceptualized audiences as either passive recipients of media messages or as active agents capable of producing their own meanings - it was a debate over "...liberal versus critical accounts of the autonomy of the individual (or, conversely, over the power of social institutions in influencing behavior)" (Livingstone, 2006: 234).

Already in the 1940s, studies on "limited effects" challenged the one-way flow of the message (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), and implied that audience is not a mindless, homogeneous mass. The valuable thesis of the researchers on limited effects was that opinion leaders, especially in times of uncertainty, play crucial role in mediating the communication process in primary social groups. In the 1970s, Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch developed the "uses and gratification theory" (UGT), emphasizing on the fact that the audience is active and its media use is goal oriented. Even though it was Stuart Hall (1980) who was predominantly cited for bringing together different traditions on active audiences, these researchers had stressed the active aspect of the audience three decades before and examined "various permutations of the relations among three different domains: media (primarily institutional contexts, though also texts), public opinion (and its role in democratic processes), and conversation (as embedded in interpersonal or peer networks)" (Livingstone, 2006: 236).

Hall became famous with his idea that audiences play an active role in drawing different meanings from the media messages which are inherently polysemous (Hall 1980) and Morley empirically evidenced that audiences differently interpret the news on the basis of "cultural differences embedded within the structure of society..." (Morley 1992, p.118). One of the major studies supporting that approach is the investigation undertaken by Katz and Liebes about cross-cultural differences in the reception of the American soap opera Dallas. Motivated by the reluctance of the "limited effects" analysts to recognize the ideological power of mass media, Hall introduced his critical encoding/decoding model and the idea of the audience that plays an active role in the mass communication process as a circuit of interconnected practices of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of the meaning of media texts. (Hall, 1980). Numerous studies within this tradition offered evidence that different interpretative frames are related to different factors: degree of exposure to news media, direct personal experience of audience members, ideological climate shaping the media texts, comprehension and the educational capital, pre-existing beliefs and tastes, social class and other demographic determinants (Madianou, 2009). While the entire tradition of cultural studies have stressed the active role of the audience in interpreting TV news, it has also acknowledged that the media text itself is a vehicle of dominant ideology and that it hegemonically strives to get readers to accept the existing social order.

At the 21st century, in the countries where the new technologies have significantly penetrated, they have changed the notion of audiences but also the character of the news production and news dissemination process which has become a permanent flow from social to traditional media and vice versa. Audiences are participating in newsgathering especially in times of crises and conflicts and can therefore act as one of the significant agencies of change. Although emphasizing the dynamic nature of the communication process, the reception researchers failed to show how audiences' interpretations are returned into the process of communication. Other researchers, concerned with the news reception context suggested usage of ethnography of news consumption, but however neglected the issues of power. Silverstone proposed the theory of mediation as a holistic approach to capture the "circulation of meaning" (Silverstone, 1999: 13). Audiences need to be investigated as one of the constitutional elements of the mediation process, in parallel with media production, media texts and social and cultural contexts.

Civic engagement is an issue that has been researched extensively with respect to mass media in times of peace. Robert Putnam (2000) has claimed that mass media have 'contributed to the decline of civic

engagement and to the disintegration of community bonds', and Pippa Noris has claimed the opposite – that "news media are positively associated with increased levels of political knowledge, trust and mobilization" (2000). Other studies also put emphasis on audiences' emotions in interpreting news and on the relationship between media and political engagement and disengagement (Madianou, 2005).

In the last decade, with the tremendous transformations of the communication environment, the media theorists and researchers have been reconceiving all the analytical frameworks developed in the age of mass media. Livingston argued that audience researchers must "analyze the *artifacts or devices* used to communicate or convey information ..., the *activities and practices* in which people engage to communicate or share information...and the *social arrangements or organizational forms* that develop around those devices and practices..." (Livingstone, 2006: 244). She also warned that the study of people's engagement with the new media environment is a developing field and suggested to draw on the multiple intellectual traditions and to converge epistemologies (Livingstone, 2006). The current research focus is on the modes of participation and engagement of audiences with the particular media and on the new ways of connecting with each other through and around media (Livingstone, 2013).

Conflicts bring a different contextual framework and a different dynamic between media and publics. On the one hand, news are the main means for the mediation of conflict and war, as well as for the mediation of otherness (Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). On the other hand, in post-conflict situations, the media have been used and supported (by the international community as well as INGOs) in order to promote reconciliation, help to connect again divided communities. The audiences have therefore been sometimes massively confronted with programs and news narratives specifically devoted to impact the perception they had of the conflict and its stakeholders.

Conflicts most frequently destroy or monopolize media systems - rarely are they diverse (Bratic, 2006). We can suspect that in such conditions just few dominant / hegemonic super narratives will emerge from the content of conflict coverage. However it will be interesting to see if and how audiences' interpretations will be submerged into the dominant interpretative frames. On the other hand it would be interesting to see the same thing in media systems which remain relatively stable and diverse in conflicts (Georgievski & Trpevska, 2008).

From the point of view of the methodological approach this theoretical framework inherently implies the application of the mixed method approach in order to capture the dynamic links and interdependencies among processes of both social shaping and social consequences which are embedded within the routinized and institutionalized communications infrastructures of everyday life (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). Actually, the overall INFOCORE project is envisaged as a mixed method multistrand research design (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009), in which the study of the interaction "Lay Publics - Media" presents one of the elements also mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Implementation Stage

In order to achieve the described sub-objectives the WP 3 will follow these research stages:

- (1) Will investigate and describe the transformations of the media system in each conflict case, at different stages of conflict development (diachronic cross-section of the media models) from the point of view of the access of the general public to different media (key media audiences).

This task will be performed on the basis of conflict descriptions, relevant literature, secondary data, official statistics etc. It will be completed during the development of the Methodological Framework. (Sub-objective O3.1)

- (2) During the First Wave of Focus groups – we intend to investigate how lay publics interact with different types of media and how they interpret conflict-related news. This will be done on selected events or a chain of events covered by relevant media in a specific period that will also be analyzed by content-related packages. In this stage, we will search for preliminary “dominant frames” (or super narratives) which are used by lay publics while they draw meaning from the conflict related coverage. Subsequently we will investigate how the interpretations of concrete news coverage submerge in the dominant frames.² (Sub-objectives O3.2, O3.4, O3.5)

Note for other WP's: Prior to the start of the first qualitative wave the content-related packages need to provide WP3 with preliminary data on the emerging frames from the content analysis of specific events in that conflict stage. We would need this to preliminary investigate the “dominant frames”. We would also need from instruction from the Social Media Package about which ‘communities’ from the social networks (created in relation to specific ‘events’) to include in the focus groups in the first wave.

- (3) During the Second Wave of Focus Groups – will focus on the ways the (active) lay publics use/interact with different types of media and how they interpret conflict-related news. However, this focus group will deal with a new set of events or chain of events. The coverage will be selected with the help of the content oriented packages and interpretative frames will be looked for in the focus groups. The aim of the second wave is to establish what kind of civic engagement the interpretative frames would instigate on the new set of events (whether and how these frames are used by lay publics as a basis for further interaction with media and for broader engagement in their community) (Sub-objectives O3.2, O3.4, O3.5)

Notes for other WP's: Before the start of the second wave WP3 would need preliminary information from Tomas' package about what kinds of information do the traditional media journalists get from respective lay publics, and how do they interact with them. From Dimitra's package we would again need an information on which events in the case studies to focus in the focus groups.

- (4) During the Third Wave of Focus Groups- will saturate the information on all of the above. The emerging super-narratives will be looked upon in the view of the interpretations that the participants in the focus groups have on concrete events that happened between the second and the third wave. (Sub-objectives O3.2, O3.4, O3.5)

Notes for other WP's: Before the third wave the content analysis will have shown a clearer picture on the emerging super narratives and interpretative frames. We need this information to construct the thematic guidelines. Dimitra's package will have to help chose what groups from the social media to call upon in the focus groups.

- (5) During the Fourth Stage – surveys in Macedonia, Israel/Palestine are to be conducted. In these conflict cases, the findings from qualitative study will be used to extrapolate the patterns of

² We suggest to conduct focus groups in each conflict case, with the exception of in Syria. We suggest to reallocate the ICH research budget originally aimed for survey in Israel/Egypt case - for conducting focus groups in Israel/Palestine. Also, we suggest to reallocate the SJPR research budget for software – for conducting focus groups in Macedonia as well. Thus we will have Israel/Palestine and Macedonia case covered by both qualitative and quantitative stage and we will also achieve comparability of the data gathered qualitatively in all cases (without Syria).

interaction and civic engagement at the level of entire media audiences in order to see how these patterns are spread across different segments of lay publics and to draw some generalizations. We will also examine the main impact of conflict news production upon lay publics' information about, perceptions of, attitudes toward and actions within a conflict. (Sub-objectives O3.2, O3.4, O3.5).

- (6) Analysis and integration of the findings from all previous stages in order to determine the influences of contextual factors, the conflict environment and actors interactions upon lay publics roles in the news production processes, as well as to define the key roles – both constructive and destructive – that lay publics play, under specific circumstances in the news production and dissemination processes. (Sub-objective O3.6, O3.7)
- (7) Defining suitable access points and strategies for assisting media in the conflict news production process (O3.8)

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