

(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

30 October 2014

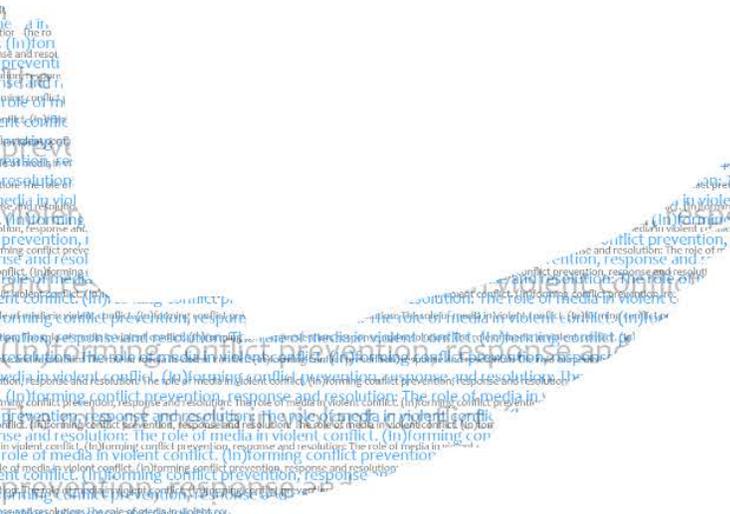


INFOCORE Working Paper 2014/02

POLITICAL LEADERS, MEDIA, AND CONFLICT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR WP2

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How to cite this paper: Wolfsfeld, G. (2014). Political leaders, media, and conflict. Conceptual framework for Work Package 2: “Political actors and officials”. INFOCORE Working Paper 2014/02. Online available at http://www.infocore.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Methodological-Framework-WP2_final.pdf



Introduction

Political leaders involved in conflict constantly attempt to exploit the domestic and international news media as a tool to promote their arguments to a variety of audiences (Aday, Livingston, & Hebert 2005; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007, 2006; Entman, 2004; Hallin, 1989; Knightly, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). They also find themselves reacting to media coverage of the conflict, and while many such responses tend to be more rhetorical and symbolic in nature, some can amount to significant changes in tactics, strategy, and/or policy (Gilboa, 2005; Kepplinger, 2007; Robinson, 2011). Consistent with the original INFOCORE proposal, “WP2 focusses on political actors in their double roles as sources/advocates and audience/users.”

This conceptual framework is divided into three parts. The first part will provide a theoretical background explaining those factors that appear to have an impact on the ability of political leaders to influence media coverage during a conflict. The second section will examine the more complex questions about the various ways political leaders can react to coverage of a conflict. The third and final section will present an initial list of research questions that we intend to ask about these issues within the framework of the INFOCORE project.

Political Leaders Attempt to Mobilize the News Media in Conflicts

The discussion begins with a general approach for understanding the role of the media in any political process, including conflicts. This approach, known as the “Politics-Media-Politics” (PMP) principle (Wolfsfeld, 2004, 2011, 2013) is based on two central propositions.

1) The role of the media in politics can best be understood as one in which variations in political environments have an impact on media practices, which can have a subsequent and significant effect on political processes.

2) The media can also have a subsequent and independent impact on political processes, due to the ways in which it selects and transforms political events into stories.

The first proposition emphasizes the importance of beginning any analysis of the role of the media in a political process by considering the surrounding political environment within which the news media operate. Thus, as further detailed below, the higher the level of elite consensus in support of a war, the more likely the news media are to both reflect

and reinforce that consensus. The same applies to attempts by political leaders to promote a peace process (Wolfsfeld, 2004). The notion that “politics comes first” is also meant to remind us that journalists tend to *react* to what happens in the political world. They rarely *initiate* political processes, and this is especially true with regard to violent conflicts (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

The second proposition refers to the fact that the media *can* have a subsequent and independent effect on political processes through their ability to transform political events into stories. Williams and Delli Carpini (2012) emphasize the importance of considering this added dimension. The authors suggest that in the current media “regime” in the United States, the nation has entered a world of “hyperreality” in which it is increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between an event (or series of events) and the stories people are told about them. The best way to conceptualize this part of the argument is to think about the nature of the *media environment*. Thus, while events in the political world (the political environment) provide the vast majority of the “inputs” to the mainstream news stories, the news media have their own routines and professional interests (such as increasing audience size) that can also significantly impact conflicts and attempts at conflict resolution.

Wolfsfeld (2004), for example, found that one of the major reasons why the news media played such different roles in the peace process in Northern Ireland when compared to the Oslo peace process was the very different media environments surrounding the two processes. The Israeli press was extremely sensationalist and thus gave extensive coverage to the more extremist actors and rhetoric among both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Not only was the press in Northern Ireland much less sensationalist, much of the media was “shared” between Protestants and Catholics, giving journalists significant incentive to adopt language and frames that were acceptable to both sides of the conflict. Revealingly, this was one of the only examples of the media’s commercial interests leading it to play a more constructive role in a peace process.

When doing comparative work, it is also important to consider the technological differences of the various media environments. In less economically developed countries, one would expect the radio to be a much more significant element in the spread of conflict news than in wealthier countries. There are also technological changes in the media environment that take place over time (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2012). As social media

becomes more prevalent, for example, insurgents find it easier to get their messages out to the international community (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Howard & Parks, 2012; Kwak, 2006; Livingston, 2005; Schectman, 2009; Tufekci and Wilson, 2002). We will have more to say about the possible roles of social media below.

Political Leaders and the Media – Some Basic Principles

For those who study media and violent conflict, one of the most important questions to consider concerns the ability of the media to achieve independence from the authorities. A recurring theme in this area of study is that the domestic news media has both ideological and commercial reasons for promoting the government line during such conflicts, especially in the early stages (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2008, 2006; Hallin, 1989; Knightly, 2004, Wolfsfeld, 1997). This effect is often referred to in the literature as the “rally round the flag” phenomenon (Baker & Oneal 2001; Groeling & Baum, 2008). From a commercial standpoint, journalists who oppose war efforts are likely to be seen as disloyal or even traitors. Ideologically, journalists are just as likely as other citizens to be swept up in the war fever that becomes so prevalent during such crises.

The more interesting question concerns those situations in which political leaders begin to *lose* control over how the news media frames the conflict. As suggested earlier, one of the factors contributing to this loss of control is a decline in the level of elite consensus in support of leaders’ policies (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2006; Hallin, 1989; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Hallin (1989) was one of the first to talk about this phenomenon in reference to the role of the media in the Vietnam War. While many believed that growing dissatisfaction with that war was because it was the first televised conflict, Hallin provided substantial evidence that the early coverage of that war was extremely supportive of the U.S. policy. Only after there was a *political change* among the elites did media coverage move from what Hallin referred to as the “sphere of consensus” to the “sphere of legitimate controversy.” This shift is a perfect example of the PMP principle. Changes in the political environment (declining consensus among elites) led to changing media coverage (more negative coverage), which probably led to further changes in the political environment (more opposition to the war).

Even when the news media do begin to provide some negative views of war efforts, such criticism rarely focuses on moral issues or the overall justification of the conflict (Knightly, 2004; Neiger, Zandberg, & Meyers, 2010). Criticism is much more likely to focus

on either the tremendous “cost” of the conflict (in terms of “our” troops being killed) or on the chances for success. It is helpful to keep in mind that the news media is dependent on its political sources. Even those in the political opposition who are willing to come out against the war effort have little to gain from suggesting that their own country is morally deficient. Enemies remain enemies and any suggestion of reconciliation or conducting a genuine peace process appears foolish at best and traitorous at worst.

Another way that governments can lose control over the news media is by losing control over the “flow of information” (Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2012). The authorities involved in a conflict often strive to remain the mainstream media’s major sources of information and images. As the authorities lose control over information, journalists gain greater access to events and images that contradict the official line being promoted by political and military leaders. Studies of the role of the news media in the 1991 Gulf War (Bennett & Paletz, 1994; Entman & Page, 1994; Wolfsfeld, 1997), for example, tell us that this was a rather exceptional case in which the allies had a virtual monopoly over the flow of information. When combined with the unusual level of international consensus surrounding the military effort against Iraq, this monopoly enabled U.S. allies to exercise an enormous amount of control over the news stories about that conflict (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

This level of informational control has become almost impossible in the digital age. Two of the best known examples of this phenomena are the “Wikileaks” incident (Benkler, 2011; Leigh & Harding, 2011; Sifry, 2011) and the “Snowden Affair” (Shafer, 2014). In each of these cases, dissidents were able to publicize massive amounts of top-secret documents that the United States and other governments desperately wanted to protect. The technological changes that have taken place allow people from some of the most remote areas on the planet to send messages and images around the world. Regina Lawrence (2000) suggested that in many places we are moving away from “institutionally driven news” toward “event driven” news. As every citizen becomes a potential “journalist,” the normal “top-down” flow of information is being replaced by more “bottom-up” types of news. On the other hand, an important article by Bennet, Lawrence, and Livingston (2006) suggests that even when news stories begin in the field, the authorities still play a major role in framing the events in ways that help promote official positions.

Researchers are only beginning to understand some of ways in which massive technological changes have influenced the role of the media in conflicts. There has been an

especially lively debate about the ability of dissidents to use social media for both rapid and extensive mobilization and to get their messages and images to the international community. The events that came to be known as the “Arab Spring” appeared, at first glance, to confirm the theory that changes in communication technology had made it more difficult for even the most brutal dictators to maintain control over the flow of information (Anderson, 2011, Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Howard & Hussein, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Robertson, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Here too, however, politics comes first. An article by Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheaffer (2013) examined the amount of Internet penetration and social media use in 22 Arab countries. In contrast to the many claims about the power of the Internet and the social media to bring about revolutions, the study found a strong *negative* correlation between the level of digital development and protest. The higher the proportion of people with access to the Internet and social media, the *lower* the amount of protest. The reason was the level of access to the Internet and social media was directly related to the economic prosperity of the countries. People living in the more prosperous and less oppressive societies had more digital access but less motivation to protest. The authors also found that the increase in signing up for social media was more likely to *follow* the outbreak of protests than to precede them. Political events came first in this case, too.

It is also important to bear in mind three more points that provide a less optimistic perspective on the some of the ramifications of the new technologies on “press-government” relations. The first is that getting one’s message out to the world in no way guarantees that other nations will intervene into the conflict. The case of Syria, where so many people continue to die despite global awareness of the conflict, demonstrates this point. Second, the advent of the Internet and social media has also made it easier for democratic and authoritarian regimes to monitor the activities of those in the opposition. As Morozov (2011) has argued provocatively, “In the past, the KGB resorted to torture to learn of connections between activists; today, they simply need to get on Facebook.” Finally, those who are overly optimistic about the benefits brought about by advances in technology should remember that the Internet has also brought tremendous advantages to terrorist organizations. As Weiman (2006) pointed out, these groups are able to exploit the Internet for recruitment, gathering intelligence for attacks, raising funds, and even sharing information on building more deadly weapons.

Political Leaders, Media and Peace

At first glance, it may seem surprising that such a vast literature exists on the media and conflict, but very little on the role of the media in conflict resolution. However, a close look at the issue reveals that one of the major reasons for this lack of scholarly attention tells us something important about the phenomenon itself: peace is boring.

Political leaders who decide to actively engage in a peace process may be surprised to learn that it is far more difficult to mobilize the news media for peace than it is to mobilize for war. Generally speaking, there is an inherent contradiction between the needs of a peace process and the needs of news (Gavilán & Teresa, 2011; Hackett, 2006; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; 2006; Saleem & Hanan, 2014; Sheaffer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010; Wolfsfeld, Alimi, & Kailani, 2008; Wolfsfeld, 2004). A successful peace process requires patience, and the news media demands immediacy. Peace is most likely to develop within a calm environment, and the media has an obsessive interest in threats and violence. Peace building is a complex process, and the news media deals with simple events. Progress towards peace requires at least a minimum understanding of the needs of the other side, but the news media reinforces ethnocentrism and hatred for the other side (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

To make matters worse, leaders have an inherent interest in maintaining a certain amount of secrecy concerning negotiations. The tone and type of communication required in negotiations is exactly the opposite of what is demanded when speaking to the outside world. Inside the room, negotiators need to express willingness to compromise. When leaders speak to the public, the goal is usually to demonstrate steadfastness or even “victory.” In fact, unless a peace agreement is about to be signed, leaders are most likely to start talking to the press when negotiations are failing. At that point, it is politically important to ensure that the blame for the failure is placed squarely on the enemy.

As discussed earlier, the case of Northern Ireland provides the exception to this general rule (Wolfsfeld, 2004). In that case, the political and the media environments both contributed to the media playing a more constructive role in the process, by providing leaders from both sides of the fence with opportunities to successfully leverage the media in order to promote peace. While it is hard to imagine a similar situation occurring in other conflict scenarios, some of the lessons from Northern Ireland might prove useful for

political leaders who hope to use the media to promote peace and reconciliation to their publics.

One fascinating research question that has been mostly ignored is whether anything has changed in the digital age. Has the emergence of the new media in any way altered the mostly negative influence of the media on attempts to bring about peace? Theoretically, one could envision some potential for peace makers in this area, but more pessimistic directions seem just as likely. On the more optimistic side, for example, would be suggestions that perhaps leaders could bypass the cynical and violent nature of the mainstream media and send more reconciliatory messages to the public. One might also hope that pro-peace movements would have new ways to mobilize the public to move towards peace. Nevertheless, in order for such messages and images to go “viral,” they need to resonate with significant elements in the public. Given that peace is boring, and that most citizens have developed a strong hatred for enemies, leaders might face obstacles similar to those they experienced with the traditional media. As for enabling pro-peace movements to more effectively send their messages, it is very possible that hate groups will find it even easier to quickly and massively circulate to their venom to the public.

In sum, the relations between political leaders and all forms of media are clearly going through some significant changes in recent years. Nevertheless, the nature, extent, and ramifications of these changes are far from uniform. If there is just one development that has become clear, it is that leaders everywhere have increasingly lost their ability to take control over the flow of information to their own publics and the world. How this will affect the ultimate role of the news media in various types of conflicts remains an open question. The same can be said about questions related to the role of the new media in attempts at conflict resolution. Perhaps the ambitious research agenda of the INFOCORE project will successfully shed some light on these issues.

The Other Side of the Coin – Media Influences on Political Leaders

The discussion now turns to the “other side of the coin” – the ways in which the various types of media have an impact on political leaders. Despite its obvious importance, this topic is far more theoretically and methodologically challenging than the impact of political leaders on the media, and as such, it has received far less theoretical and empirical attention.

One of the theories that received a good deal of attention in the past was called the “CNN” effect (Gilboa, 2005; Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2011; Seib, 2002). The central underlying idea, which remains popular in some less academic circles, was that when the international news media focuses a tremendous amount of attention on a particular conflict, it “forces” political leaders in more powerful countries to intervene. The implicit criticism is that these leaders are making critical decisions about military intervention based on headlines. As Seib (2002) argues, the CNN effect is “presumed to illustrate the dynamic tension that exists between real-time television news and policymaking with the news having the upper hand in terms of influence” (p. 27).

Researchers who have studied the phenomenon in depth have come to the conclusion that while such a dynamic does take place in some cases, it is rare. The decision to intervene militarily into a conflict is far more conditional and complex than proponents of this theory suggest. Consider again the example of Syria, which is part of the INFOCORE research plan. While estimates vary, it is assumed that at least 100,000 people have died in that conflict.¹ There was certainly a massive amount of media coverage in the early stages of that conflict, and people around the world were shocked by some of the images being widely distributed on the Internet. While the major powers have given some military support to oppositional forces, they are understandably reluctant to provide either air or ground support. This was a very different outcome from what took place in Libya in 2011, when a decision by the U.N. Security council to intervene in the conflict certainly contributed to the downfall of Muammar Gadhafi. Once again, the best explanations for decisions about intervening are rooted in the surrounding political environment rather than the nature of media coverage.

This argument is not meant to suggest that the international news media coverage does not have some effect on policy makers involved in conflicts. It would appear that the amount of elite consensus also has an impact. Fitzsimmons (2006) examined the extent to which the news media reporting on U.S. military operations in Somalia and the Iraq War influenced the course of American military strategy during these conflicts. Fitzsimmons concluded that, given a general consensus about such conflicts, strategic realities were more important than media coverage. As consensus dropped, the impact of the media rose. Bloch-Elkon (2007) came to a similar conclusion about the conflict in Bosnia, arguing that the impact of the media is greatest when the overall policy is unclear and there is no

government consensus. Examining the surrounding political environment is also critical in these instances.

Another stream of research relevant to this discussion is that of mediatization (Altheide, 2013; Hepp, 2010; Landerer, 2013; Schulz, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). As the name implies, mediatization refers to the increasing dominance of the media (especially the traditional media) over politics. While there are many different definitions and approaches, the present paper focuses on the work of Strömbäck & Esser (2014) who many would consider the leading theoreticians within this school of thought. The authors talk about four “phases” of the mediatization process: (1) Media becomes the most important source of information; (2) Media is highly independent of political institutions; (3) Media content is highly governed by media logic; and (4) Political actors are highly governed by media logic.

The most serious challenge to the PMP principle, and the one that is most relevant to the present discussion, is the fourth phase. Strömbäck and Esser (2014) describe this stage as follows: “political and other social actors not only adapt to media logic and the predominant news values, but also internalize these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in process” (p. 239–240). The implication of this idea is that by adapting themselves to the needs of the media, political actors are no longer the driving force behind how political processes play out.

To be fair, the authors make it clear that in their view of mediatization, the amount of media influence varies over time and among circumstances. They suggest, for example, that adapting to the demands of the media is more likely to occur in reference to issues related to campaigning (which they call “politics”) than those concerned with policies (Strömbäck & Esser 2014, p. 20). They also emphasize that the dominance of the media will vary both within and between countries, which is why comparative work is so important in this field.

The conceptual question presented can be stated in fairly simple terms: “Should the news media be seen as a tool for leaders to exert their influence, or as an active, independent, and influential actor with a major impact on the course of conflicts?” It is clear that while the question may be fairly straightforward, the answer is far more complicated. As always, the best approach is to think about the relative influence of the media in terms of a continuum. Thus, a better research question would ask: “Under what

circumstances is the media more or less likely to play an active, independent, and influential role in conflicts?” At one end of this continuum would be cases in which the authorities are able to dominate most media, and at the other end would be those cases in which political leaders appear to spend a great deal of time and effort adapting to media demands. The goal of research in this area is to better understand those factors that move the marker in either of these two directions.

One final conceptual point needs to be made here. The effects of the media on political leaders do not always happen in *reaction* to media coverage. In keeping with some of the points made above, politicians often conduct or avoid certain actions in *anticipation* of how the media is likely to react. On this topic, Kepplinger (2007) has an especially helpful article in which he discusses the many “reciprocal effects” between the mass media and decision makers. He makes a distinction between those acts that decision makers conduct to establish favorable coverage, and what he calls “policy cutting,” which is designed to avoid unfavorable coverage. There is little doubt that one can find both types of anticipatory effects during violent conflicts. Thus, if leaders could assume that their actions would not be made public, they would be much more likely to order operations that the world would consider repugnant.

Despite this influence, any decisions to engage in certain actions and to refrain from others should not necessarily be attributed to the media. Taking possible public reactions into account has been an important element in governing long before the age of the mass media. The real difference is that keeping such acts secret has simply become much more difficult. In most cases, taking media reactions into account is simply one element in a leader’s overall political strategy.

Research Questions

It is helpful to present some initial research questions that will help guide the empirical research. Three preliminary clarifications are in order. First, in the interest of succinctness, the questions will not include any direct references to cross-conflict comparisons. Nevertheless, given the conceptual assumptions outlined earlier, such differences will certainly be an important aspect of the research strategy. Secondly, given the obvious connection between this topic and WP7 (Journalistic Transformations) these research questions will need to be theoretically and methodologically integrated with those being developed with regard to journalists. Finally, this list of research questions is far from

exhaustive. It was decided to only list a total of five research questions with regard to each topic area, in order to serve as an initial springboard for developing further directions.

Research Questions about Political Leaders Influencing the Media

- How much of their time and resources do political leaders devote to devising media strategies and/or taking media factors into consideration when dealing with the conflict?
- What framing strategies do political leaders use in their attempts to influence domestic and international news coverage of a conflict?
- Which types of political leaders, and which types of circumstances, appear to increase the amount of success leaders have in promoting their frames to different news media?
- How much are political leaders in various conflict areas adjusting their communication strategies in response to the changes brought about by the advent of the new media?
- In what ways do political leaders develop and implement different media strategies when dealing with the domestic, international, and new media?

Research Questions about the Influence of the Media on Political Leaders

- Under what circumstances are political leaders most likely to react (either symbolically or substantively) to news stories that appear in the domestic, international, and new media?
- Under what circumstances are political leaders most likely to consider media reaction when planning and executing policies related to the conflict (anticipatory effects)?
- To what extent do political leaders carry out systematic attempts to monitor and analyze domestic and international media coverage of the conflict? Does such monitoring have any effects on their policies or actions?
- Under what circumstances do political leaders exploit negative international publicity as a springboard for achieving domestic legitimacy (“chest-banging”)?

Research Questions about the Two-Way Flow of Influence between Political Leaders and the Media.

- How do variations in the political and media environment impact the two-way flow of influence between political leaders and the media with regard to a conflict?

- How much and in what ways has the advent of the new media impacted the two-way flow of influence between political leaders and the various media with regard to a conflict?
- Under what circumstances do political leaders or the media appear to have the “upper hand” in terms of “who influences whom?”
- Under what circumstances do changes occur among the “routine” interactions between journalists and political leaders concerning a conflict, and what are the reasons and consequences of such changes?
- In what ways, if any, does the two-way flow of influence between political leaders and the media impact the ultimate role of the media in a conflict?

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¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Syrian_Civil_War