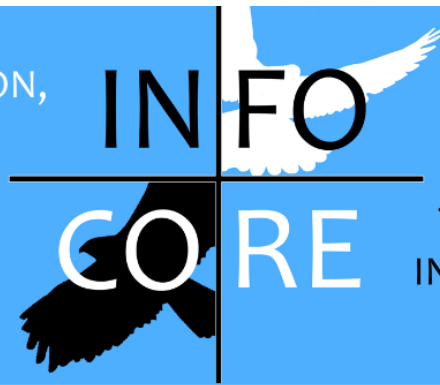


(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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INFOCORE Definitions

Evidential Claims and Beliefs

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INFOCORE DEFINITIONS

Definition

Evidential Claims and Beliefs

INFOCORE operates across three core dimensions of media effects: framing, agenda-setting and shaping evidential beliefs. The concept of evidential beliefs was introduced by Meyer in the INFOCORE project design phase and developed further in publications by Meyer and Sangar (2014, 2015) and Baden & Stalpouskaya (2015). Evidential beliefs and the processes leading to their creation, adaptation, contestation and change through claims made in various media are in principle applicable to any area of the social sciences and particularly those operating within a conventional social constructivist approach (Adler 1997, Adler 2002). Evidential beliefs denote cognitive constructs held by individuals or groups of individuals about what they think they know about a given referent object, problem or dynamic in the social or natural world as well as the limits of their knowledge. Evidential claims aim to create or modify cognitive beliefs about a given referent object, problem or dynamic in the social or natural world as well as conveying the limitations to what is known or knowable. Both claims and the beliefs themselves can relate to particularly important events (a chemical weapons attack), actors (the capabilities and intentions of leaders), as well as dynamics of relevance to understanding the potential for or dynamics of violent conflict in a distinct geographical setting (the capability of a given state to handle social conflict).

One can distinguish evidential beliefs in terms of their substantive manifest content, and the degree of confidence with which they are held. “Facts” for instance could be seen as a particular kind of evidential belief about a continuous aspect of the world (“the earth circles around the sun”) which is beyond questioning. Other epistemic beliefs are expressed in less certain terms because of complexity (“climate change will divert the gulf-stream in 5 years”), because of a lack of reliable information (“North Korea is incapable of building an hydrogen-bomb for another 10 years”), or because credible sources of epistemic claims disagree (“violent computer games are responsible for some shootings in schools”). In addition to varying degrees of certainty or confidence, evidential beliefs can be distinguished in terms of whether they are rooted in some form of direct observation or whether they require some degree of analytical judgement about cause and effect relationships. Examples of directly observable events are an increase in the number and severity of human rights violations in a given country over a 4-week period. Analytically-grounded beliefs might instead take the form of a forecast that links, for instance, the nature and degree of human rights violations with a significantly increased risk of genocide to occur in the next three months in a particular country. An analytical belief could also be that third-party mediation efforts are an effective tool to resolve a particular conflict, but this does not imply per se an evaluative judgement about the moral dilemmas involved or a prescription about what should or should not be done in a given situation.

In contrast to the necessarily more abstract and simplified interpretative frames, evidential beliefs can be highly specific as well as differentiated and nuanced. Their applicability in research is highest in relation to “professionals” engaged in routinely processing large amounts of information, who are trained to pay attention to detail and are less receptive to “framing” devices than the general public. Evidential beliefs can help or hinder the use of particular frames as substantially more abstract ways of making sense of social complexity, such as labelling a conflict as a genocide situation. Yet frames may be advanced successfully with lay publics even if they conflict with evidential beliefs of elite actors. This can be because lay publics are not aware of the underlying theories of, for instance, conflict dynamics and conflict resolution, or because they have neither the time nor the skills to evaluate conflicting, complex or otherwise contested information from different sources. Evidential beliefs are thus similar to “intelligence” in the sense of empirically-based answers to distinct questions about the changing state of the world.

As evidential beliefs matter to the viability of framing and agenda-setting strategies, it can be expected that different types of actors try to shape other actors’ beliefs through evidential claim-making in public for tactical or strategic reasons. This can happen regardless of whether they think these claims are accurate or out of a sense of professional duty to do so as journalists, academics or intelligence professionals. The same categorisation of evidential beliefs can also be applied to claims in terms of their manifest content and the degree of certainty with which they are expressed. Claims can relate to particularly important events (a chemical weapons attack), actors (the capabilities and intentions of leaders), as well as dynamics of relevance to understanding the potential for or dynamics of violent conflict in a distinct geographical setting (the capability of a given state to handle social conflict).

We aim to capture all evidential claims made by different kinds of actors in order to understand actors’ underlying strategies and their impact on other relevant actors and audiences. One can analyse evidential claims through the lens of various **performance criteria such as truthfulness, accuracy, timeliness, utility or relevance**. For instance, military leaders strive for “information superiority” on the basis of highly timely, specific and actionable evidential claims, whereas early warning systems rely on accurate, timely, and relevant reports about human right violations to trigger preventive action (Otto & Meyer, 2012). One could also analyse such claims through the perspective of different normative frameworks, for instance, whether they are “emancipatory” in showing the role of diverse local actors or whether they are helpful for devising conflict resolution or reconciliation strategies. Accuracy can only be known in retrospect. However, one can make assessments of whether evidential claims were well-founded according to standards of professional practice, what was knowable at the time and what specific actors believed to be true in contrast to what they communicated in public. Another useful way of thinking about epistemic claims is how closely they match the target audiences’ existing beliefs or whether there is a large mismatch. The greater the mismatch, the more difficult and arguably time-consuming it will be to

persuade a target actor, but the cognitive and practical gains may be greater. A high or low mismatch does therefore not necessarily imply a normative judgement.

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