

EUROPEAN

POLICYBRIEF

INFORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION: THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND VIOLENT CONFLICT (INFOCORE)

Political Leaders and the Media: Evidence, Analysis, and Policy Suggestions for Improving the Role of the Media in Violent Conflict (Work Package 2) Gadi Wolfsfeld



The overall objective of WP2 is to analyze how political actors' strategies for influencing and using media, their interactions with journalists and other media actors, and various contextual factors, shape the production of conflict-related news. The ultimate goal is to better understand the factors that can lead various forms of media to play a more constructive role in violent conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

The media can play a critical role in the course of violent conflicts. They can serve as dangerous catalysts for increasing the intensity of such confrontations, but also have the potential to calm potentially explosive situations. The most important policy question addressed in the INFOCORE research project relates to actions that national and international political leaders, journalists, NGOs, and active members of the public can take to reduce the likelihood that the many different types of media will inflame conflicts and make it more likely that they will play a constructive role in attempts at resolution.

This particular work package focuses on the ongoing interactions between political leaders and the media. Political leaders have a major impact on the ultimate role the media play in such conflicts. Although the media can also play an independent role, political leaders in both democratic and non-democratic countries have a powerful influence on the content and tone of media coverage.¹

¹ The word "countries" is used here for the sake of linguistic simplicity, despite the fact that in many violent conflicts one or more of the antagonists are not considered countries.

In addition, both domestic and international leaders can initiate and execute policies that can either limit the damage caused by the media or create incentives for local leaders and journalists to play a more constructive role in conflicts. The major obstacle for leaders involved in violent conflicts to initiate such policies is that such actions can run counter to their political and policy goals.

The interviews with political leaders from the various conflict areas revealed five major areas in which policies can have an impact on the role of the media. The first has to do with the chances for escalation and de-escalation of the conflict. The second is the extent to which citizens are exposed to exclusively ethnocentric coverage of the conflict. The third area is whether the existing media environment allows for a wide range of political voices to be heard. The fourth and fifth areas, which have important policy ramifications, are related to the advent of the digital age. The fourth area tells us that the Internet, and especially social media, have become powerful instruments for spreading hate and violence. The fifth and final set of findings has to do with the increasing loss of control that authorities face in controlling the flow of conflict-related information and images.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The evidence and analysis for this study can be best understood by looking at two major sets of variables that have a critical impact on the ongoing interactions among political leaders and journalists. The first set concerns the political environments within each country and those that characterizes the relations among antagonists. The second set are those variables associated with the national and international media environment in a particular conflict area.

The political environment can be defined as: *“the aggregate of private and public beliefs, attitudes, rules, behaviors and events concerning political matters within a particular setting and time”* (Wolfsfeld, Sheafer, and Althaus, 2016). This is an intentionally broad definition that includes both long-term structural factors, such as the level of democracy and more short-term factors, such as the intensity of the conflict at a particular point in time. These factors are critical because they have a significant impact on the way the media operate within a conflict setting.

Two telling examples of this dynamic will suffice. The first is rooted in the *internal* political environment within a country and the second in the *external* political environment, which is concerned with the international arena. The relative level of democracy within a country is perhaps the most obvious internal factor that must be considered in any attempt to formulate policies regarding the role of the media in conflicts. A lack of democratic institutions and culture will mean that the ultimate role of the media will be almost entirely dependent on how leaders choose to exploit the press to achieve their political goals. Whether such leaders wish to escalate or deescalate a conflict, most media channels will serve as important tools for accomplishing these goals. The second example is an external characteristic of the political environment: the extent to which the international community is actively involved in attempts to either resolve the conflict and/or in support efforts to create a free press within a particular country. Among the many reasons why this can be important is that it provides a new set of actors whose very presence in media discourse provides citizens with an alternative perspective on the nature and course of the confrontation.

The media environment can be defined as “historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes and actors that shape the expectations and practices of political actors, media producers, and consumers” (Wolfsfeld, 2016).² While political leaders are among the most important sources and initiators of conflict-related news, it is the nature of the media environment that determines how information and events are turned into news and/or stories that are distributed through the Internet. Three examples come to mind; the first two come from previous work on the topic and the third is one of the more important findings from the current project. Wolfsfeld (2004) compared the role of the media in the Northern Ireland peace process with their role in the Oslo peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians and pointed to two features of the different media environments that proved important. The first was the level of sensationalism in news coverage. The fact that the Israeli media environment was considerably more sensationalist than that in Northern Ireland contributed to the Israeli media playing a much more destructive role in that peace process. The second feature of the media environment was the extent of “shared media” in each context. The fact that both Protestants and Catholics were involved in both producing and consuming the news in Northern Ireland led journalists to construct news frames that tended to bridge the gap between the two sets of antagonists.

² This definition is a somewhat revised version of what Williams and Delli-Carpini (2011) have called media “regimes”.

The media environment in Israel and Palestine, on the other hand, was much more typical of what is found in most violent conflicts. The Israeli press produced extremely ethnocentric stories in Hebrew to their audiences, and the Arab media provided their audiences with the opposite narratives about who were the true victims.

A third feature of the media environment that has become especially important in the digital age is the technological infrastructure available to both journalists and citizens for the collection and distribution of information and images associated with the conflict. Thus, the ability of political leaders to take control over the flow of information is very different in a media environment where the citizens do or do not have easy access to the Internet or even television. This difference was especially notable in the present study when talking to officials and oppositional leaders in the African conflicts in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In these conflicts, radio (and, to a certain extent, mobile phones) take on a much more central role in how people's access and ability to distribute conflict-related news.

Policy-Related Findings from Interviews

As noted in the introduction, five major findings from this study that are especially relevant to policy makers. The first has to do with the intensity of the conflict at a particular point in time. Many of the interviewed political leaders talked about how different the role the media is when a major crisis breaks out, as opposed to times when the tension between antagonists subsides. It is no surprise that when the conflict intensity rises, especially if it is accompanied by violence, both the traditional and digital news media become more nationalistic and hostile towards the enemy. The media are much more likely to inflame an already dangerous situation than defuse it.

This point is important because it reminds policy makers that it is *impossible to separate what is happening on the ground from how the media cover the conflict*. National and international efforts devoted to having the media play a more constructive role in violent conflicts must ensure that efforts to reduce the level of hostility among the antagonists are fully integrated with attempts to improve media performance. It is a common and extremely problematic assumption that one set of policies centers on media issues while another set (or team) focuses on the conflict itself.

The second finding relates to the dangers associated with *ethnocentric coverage* of the conflict within each country. As noted earlier, this finding has been discussed in a previous study that examined the role of the media in the Oslo and Northern Ireland peace processes (Wolfsfeld, 2004). The interviews conducted in the present study provided strong support for the argument that this dynamic is also important in other violent conflicts. When populations are continually exposed to only "their" side of the story, attempts at conflict resolution become difficult or even impossible. Perhaps the most apt allusion would be to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave". Socrates talked about a group of people who have been chained up while watching shadows appearing on the wall and eventually come to believe that those shadows represent reality. Anyone who leaves the cave is faced with a very different reality and finds it difficult to accept that everything they have known is wrong. In most conflicts, members of the public spend most of their time inside their "national" cave and it is the media that are held responsible for projecting the shadows they see. Of course, there are some citizens who venture out and are exposed to more international media, but these are the exception rather than the rule.

Some people may have hoped that, in the digital age, the ability of information and images to travel seamlessly across national borders might have improved the situation. The findings from this study are not encouraging in that regard. While the Internet certainly allows those with the necessary language skills to look outside their caves, there is little evidence that many actually do this. In addition, as further elaborated below, the interviews with the political leaders indicate that the Internet in general and the social media in particular are much more likely to be tools for spreading hate and violence than peace.

The third major finding is that in order for the media to play a constructive role in violent conflicts, opportunities must be made available for a wide range of domestic political voices to be heard. Many of the opposition leaders we spoke to were extremely frustrated at their inability to break into the mainstream media. This frustration was expressed among the Arab citizens in Israel, the oppositional parties in Macedonia, and those representing the oppositions in both Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Having a non-democratic press not only hinders the chances for internal peace and reconciliation, but can also impact the chances of resolving the external conflict.

This may be the one area where the advent of the digital age has brought some good news. In some of the conflict areas, the social media serve as a critical tool for enabling those with limited access to the mainstream media to have their messages distributed among various publics. Although these communication channels are probably not as effective as getting coverage in the mainstream media, they do

provide an important outlet for being heard. However, it is important to note that the Internet is not readily available in some media environments (such as certain parts of Africa), and in these cases those who want to challenge the authorities find it more difficult to get their message out.

The fourth finding provides us with a much more negative view of the digital age. As noted, most of the political leaders we spoke to believed that the Internet and social media were much more effective at spreading hate and violence than for encouraging peace and reconciliation. Here too, some “digital enthusiasts” were hoping the new technology could be harnessed to bring people together. Such a development would have been especially welcome given previous findings that have found an “inherent contradiction between the news of a peace process and the needs of news” (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

However, it turns out that the saying “if it bleeds it leads” is just as true in the new media as in the traditional media. This point can be easily demonstrated by thinking about which of these two types of events is likely to go viral: terrorists decapitating prisoners or diplomats sitting around a table negotiating a peace settlement. The scientific literature in this field also supports this proposition and terrorist groups seem to be among the primary beneficiaries of these developments (Weimann, 2015).

Two dimension of Internet discourse contribute to some of the most dangerous outcomes related to the new age. The first is that, unlike the more responsible producers of traditional news, it is often difficult for users to distinguish between fact and fiction. The inability to verify the information and images that go viral means that false stories about enemies can easily become widely accepted as true. The second is that users who generate content almost always have the option of remaining anonymous. This encourages many users to be especially aggressive and abusive and to write things they would never post if they had to identify themselves.

The fifth and final finding has to do with the major difficulties that political authorities have in maintaining any control over the flow of conflict-related information. The well-known cases of WikiLeaks (Sifry, 2011) and the Snowden affair (Gurnow, 2014) demonstrate how much things have changed in recent years. One should add to this the enormous spread of video-enabled cellphones that allow citizens to instantly record and upload events that can, among other things, place the authorities and especially security forces on the defensive.

Many people will undoubtedly view such changes in a positive light. The need for more government transparency and the ability to prevent abuses by security forces is certainly a positive development. Nevertheless, as some of the leaders pointed out, it would be a mistake not to also relate to some of the more negative aspects of this development. Governments and security forces do need a certain amount of secrecy in order to function properly. One of the most significant examples has to do with peace negotiations between antagonists. Any leaks from such talks can cause irreparable damage and significantly lower the chances for a positive outcome. Another example would be governments attempting to battle terrorist organizations. Assuming one sees such efforts as worthwhile, then, the inability to keep such plans secret could jeopardize such campaigns.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy implications and recommendations are rooted in the five sets of findings detailed in the previous section. There are no simple ways to significantly alter some of the more dangerous and damaging roles the media can play in violent conflicts or to enhance the circumstances in which they can play more constructive roles. It is also important that this particular part of the INFOCORE project examines the issue by interviewing political leaders and not journalists or other relevant actors or citizens. We will be in a better position to suggest more policy recommendations when the different aspects of the project are more fully integrated.

1) **The Media and the Intensity of the Conflict** – This finding tells us that the greater the intensity of a conflict in a particular time and place, the more likely it is that all forms of media will play a destructive role. From a policy perspective, this means that any efforts to improve the role of the media in such conflicts must be fully integrated with the more political efforts to reduce the intensity of conflicts. This does not mean that planning how to improve media performance in such incidents should be given a lower priority than what is being done in international arenas or on the ground. The point is that efforts in both of these areas need to complement each other and decision making groups should also include experts in the field of communication. Consideration should also be given to what actions international and local political actors

can take during periods of crisis. As the outbreak of such crises is often almost inevitable, it makes sense to develop specific protocols for actions related to the media that need to be initiated during such periods. In fact, just as professional public relation companies often run crisis simulations in order to be prepared for dealing with such events, national and international groups should consider carrying out similar rehearsals. Similarly, when the situation on the ground improves, and especially when the chances for a ceasefire or a peace process become more probable, policy makers should also have systematic plans in place for exploiting the various types of media to support such efforts.

2) The Ethnocentrism of News – This finding reinforces earlier research about the problems associated with citizens being continually exposed to news and images that reflect their own country's views of the conflict. This serves to create very distinct realities, as each set of publics comes to believe that they are the victim and the other side is the aggressor. Such beliefs make it difficult for either domestic or international actors to promote reconciliation among antagonists. In most conflicts it will be impossible to aspire to the adopt the "Northern Ireland" model, whereby much of the news media is "shared" in terms of both those who produce and those who consume the news. This is especially unlikely to occur because of language differences among antagonists. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to allow more voices from the "other side" to be heard by local populations. Most of the traditional media have little incentive to take any actions along these lines, as they assume their audiences would find such coverage offensive. In addition, efforts to create more "peace-oriented" news channels have rarely been successful. Some thought should be given to ways in which the social media might allow such voices to cross ethnic and national borders. As is often the case, the problem is that the types of citizens who would be interested in either producing or consuming such types of content would normally be those who already have more dovish views about the conflict. It is worth mentioning here the efforts of groups such as "Search for Common Ground" that, among other things, try to have journalists from different sides of a conflict meet and establish a dialogue. It makes sense for international organizations to encourage such efforts and think about creative ways to alter the existing structures and incentives in order to make a dent in the steady stream of ethnocentric information.

3) Ensuring a that a Wide Range of Voices are Heard – This finding reminds national and international policy makers that they must make every attempt to create media institutions that allow for a oppositional voices to be heard. It could certainly be argued that the need for maintaining a truly democratic press is hardly a novel idea. Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that allowing oppositional voices to be heard is important not only in order to reduce the risks of domestic violence, but also to increase the chances of creating the conditions for a peace process among antagonists. It is extremely difficult to move towards peace if significant elements within the population feel they have been excluded from public debates about this issue. It is up to the international community to think about mechanisms that will work against the natural tendencies of many governments to maintain control over both the mainstream media and, where relevant, the social media.

4) The Internet as a Major Boon for Spreading Hate and Violence – As noted, this was one of the most worrisome findings from this study. It is clear to all of the leaders who were interviewed that although the Internet provides new opportunities for movements interested in conflict resolution. However, it would appear that, as with the mainstream media, the new media are much more effective tools for spreading hate than hope. We will make two policy recommendations and realize that both will be controversial and extremely difficult to implement. The first is that the dangers of allowing users to remain anonymous far outweigh the advantages of having a completely open system. These dangers range from cyber-bullying of teenagers (some of whom commit suicide) to spreading plans and information of terrorist attacks. At the very least, those who are in charge of the more popular social media sites need to consider initiating policies that force users to stand behind their words. The second recommendation is that the major social media platforms invest far more resources into preventing the spread of hate speech and incitement of violence. There is a certain amount of control already, and many will no doubt object to any restrictions on free speech, but even the most liberal of democratic thinkers understand the need to defend themselves from those who seek to spread hate and violence.

5) The Authorities' Lack of Control over the Flow of Information – The problem here regards the inability of the authorities to keep secrets in the digital age. We argue that, unlike the previous recommendation, the advantages of this new development far outweigh the risks. One of the major advantages that emerged from this study is that it is much more difficult for security forces to physically abuse or kill dissidents without the events being caught on camera and uploaded to the web. This change has also led many security forces around the world to exhibit more restraint, lest their actions be recorded and widely distributed. The digital age has also made it more difficult for governments to keep secrets about activities that the public has the right to know about. More government transparency is generally a positive development. Nevertheless, as noted, it would be a mistake to suggest that the inability of governments to maintain secrecy does not also include dangers. The most obvious example in the area of conflict resolution was mentioned earlier: the need to maintain secrecy during peace negotiations. Leaks from such talks can derail the process. In

addition, efforts to combat terrorist organizations also demand a certain amount of secrecy, and here too leaks can undermine efforts of security forces to conduct successful campaigns. Thus, policy makers need to think of ways that allow for as much transparency as possible while maintaining secrecy over those areas where it is critical for success. Here again, it may be up to the international community to find ways to encourage reluctant governments to strike a balance between those areas in which secrecy is warranted and those domains where shedding more light can lead to less abuse by those in power.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Within INFOCORE, our work package (No. 2) was concerned with the ongoing attempts of leaders to exploit the media in order to achieve political goals. The working assumption was that there is a two-way flow of influence between leaders and the various forms of media. Political leaders involved in political conflicts have a major influence on media content, but they also find themselves *reacting* to media coverage. The overall goal of this work package was to better understand how these ongoing interactions between leaders and journalists tended to vary over time and circumstances. Given the relatively large set of existing research on this topic, two elements were designed to ensure that the research would be able to cover new ground. The first was to focus on changes in the role of the media that could be attributed to the dawn of the digital age. While quite a lot of research has been conducted on the role of the traditional media in violent conflicts, studies about the role of the “new” media are only now beginning to emerge. The second major innovation in this research was our ability to do truly comparative research on the topic. The fact that we were able to interview leaders from Israel, Palestine, Syria, Macedonia, Kosovo, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, as well as European countries, provided us with more comprehensive understanding of how much variations in the political and media environments can alter the role the media play in each of these conflicts. As is always the case in comparative research, the ultimate goal is to better understand those insights and conclusions that can be generalized and those where the specifics of each case proves the most valuable.

A total of 120 interviews were conducted with political leaders from various conflict zones and Europe. The methodology involved “semi-structured” interviews in which the interviewers were given a core set of questions, but were also encouraged to follow in any directions that they felt would prove productive. There were three major sets of questions.

The first set dealt with leaders’ perceptions about the influence of the media on both them and the conflict. Thus, we asked the leaders about the extent to which the media had an influence on Parliamentary debates and asked them to give examples where the media led to changes in any policies connected to the conflict. In this set of questions we were also interested in asking about the impact of international media coverage. Finally, in keeping with what was said earlier, we asked a number of specific questions about perceptions about the influence of the new media on them, their colleagues, and the conflict.

The second set of questions examined the opposite perspective by asking about the leaders’ attempts to influence media content. One of the more interesting avenues of inquiry concerned the extent to which the various leaders had developed a detailed strategy for dealing with the media. We also talked about the extent to which international leaders were using the media to send each other “messages”. Finally, we talked quite a bit with the leaders about their attempts to exploit the social media to achieve their goals.

The third set of questions dealt with the leaders’ ongoing interactions with journalists. The questions were designed to better understand how these interactions tended to vary over time and circumstances. It was especially important to talk about how the varying level of intensity had an impact on their relations with the media. This was also the area where the interviews were able to explore the leaders’ perceptions of media “bias,” which is a topic that always comes up when leaders talk about the role of the media in conflicts. Here again, we were interested in whether the advent of the digital age lead to a significant change in the relations between journalists and political leaders involved in violent conflicts.

These interviews produced an extremely rich set data for analysis. There is every reason to believe that the results of this study will make a significant contribution to the field.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Informing Conflict Prevention Response And Resolution (INFOCORE)
COORDINATOR	Prof. Dr. Romy Fröhlich
CONSORTIUM	Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität – LMU – Munich, Germany King’s College London – KCL – London, United Kingdom Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (IDC) – Herzliya, Israel The Hebrew University of Jerusalem – Jerusalem, Israel Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy – ELIAMEP – Athens, Greece Global Governance Institute ASBL – GGI – Brussels, Belgium School of Journalism and Public Relation – SJPR – Skopje, Macedonia Universidad Rey Juan Carlos – URJC – Madrid, Spain Université Libre de Bruxelles – ULB – Brussels, Belgium
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FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Gadi Wolfsfeld, IDC, Herzliya, msgadi1@gmail.com
FURTHER READING	Forthcoming Publication From the Project Wolfsfeld, G. (forthcoming). The PMP Principle and the Role of the Media in Political Change: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement, <i>Media, Conflict, and War</i> . Other Readings Cited Above Gurnow, M. (2014). The Edward Snowden affair: Exposing the politics and media behind the NSA scandal. Indianapolis, IN: Blue River Press. Sifry, M. L. (2011). <i>WikiLeaks and the age of transparency</i> . New York: OR Books Weimann, G. (2015). <i>Terrorism in cyberspace: the next generation</i> . New York: Columbia University Press. Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. (2011). <i>After broadcast news: Media regimes, democracy, and the new information environment</i> . NY: Cambridge University Press Wolfsfeld, G., Sheafer, T. & Althaus, S. (2016). The PMP Principle and the Role of the Media in Political Change: The Case of the

Civil Rights Movement, Paper presented at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Wolfsfeld, G. (2004). *Media and the Path to Peace*. New York: Cambridge University Press.