

2007

Beyond the Assumptions: News Reporting and Its Impact on Conflict

Richard C. Reuben

University of Missouri School of Law, reubenr@missouri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/jdr>



Part of the [Dispute Resolution and Arbitration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard C. Reuben, *Beyond the Assumptions: News Reporting and Its Impact on Conflict*, 2007 J. Disp. Resol. (2007)

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/jdr/vol2007/iss1/7>

This Conference is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dispute Resolution by an authorized editor of University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact bassettcw@missouri.edu.

SYMPOSIUM

Beyond the Assumptions: News Reporting and Its Impact on Conflict

*Richard C. Reuben**

At the height of the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon's then-vice president, Spiro Agnew, suddenly was caught up in a brouhaha of his own, urging the public not to pay any attention to the news media—calling them “nattering nabobs of negativism” who insisted on fanning the flames of conflict, ostensibly to sell newspapers and increase viewership.¹

Sad to say, perhaps, but this is hardly an isolated perception, even today. Indeed, many people share Agnew's jaundiced view of the media and their capacity to whip up a furor over the conflict of the day. While Nixon had his break-in, Bill Clinton had his extra-marital affair, and the media had its “all Monica, all the time.”

Conflict, of course, is an important value in weighing the newsworthiness of different issues that compete for the public's attention,² and speaks to the foundational roles that the news media play in a democratic society. Through their coverage of conflict, the media keep government officials, like Agnew, Nixon, and Clinton, accountable to the public.³ This “watchdog” function is a familiar justification for media coverage of conflict, but certainly is not the only one. Coverage of conflict also helps to define and disseminate norms that guide social behavior. It also helps inform the public about issues that affect it,⁴ thus contributing to democratic dialogue on issues of importance. Coverage of conflict also demonstrates to the public the many social institutions that exist to facilitate societal management of conflict,⁵ from police and the courts to neighborhood town hall meetings and study circles.⁶ All of these different functions of conflict coverage

* Richard C. Reuben is an associate professor of law at the University of Missouri – Columbia School of Law, and co-director of the Center for the Study of Conflict, Law & the Media. I'd like to thank Damian Kostiuk for his excellent research assistance.

1. William Safire, a speechwriter for Richard Nixon on loan to Agnew in the fall of 1970 (and later a political columnist for *The New York Times*), takes credit for coining the phrase. WILLIAM SAFIRE, POLITICAL DICTIONARY 444-45 (3d ed. 1978).

2. BRIAN S. BROOKS ET. AL, THE MISSOURI GROUP, NEWS REPORTING AND WRITING 5-6 (8th ed. 2005).

3. W. Lance Bennett & William Serrin, *The Watchdog Role*, in THE PRESS AS AN INSTITUTION OF DEMOCRACY 169-88 (Geneva Overholser & Kathleen Hall Jamieson eds., 2005).

4. Thomas Patterson & Philip Seib, *Informing the Public*, in THE PRESS AS AN INSTITUTION OF DEMOCRACY 189-202 (Geneva Overholser & Kathleen Hall Jamieson eds., 2005).

5. DEAN G. PRUITT & SUNG HEE KIM, SOCIAL CONFLICT, ESCALATION, STALEMATE, AND SETTLEMENT 138-39 (3d ed. 2004) (discussing conflict-limiting institutions generally).

6. Study circles are structured community conversations about particular topics, such as race relations. See Catherine Flavin-McDonald & Martha L. McCoy, *What's So Bad About Conflict? Study Circles Move Public Discourse from Acrimony to Democracy Building*, DISP. RESOL. MAG, Summer 1998, at 14.

are necessary for effective democratic governance that is bolstered by a strong rule of law.⁷

Given the prevalence of news coverage of conflict, it is remarkable how little is known about the impact that such coverage has on the conflict being covered.⁸ To be sure, we do intuit that sometimes the media escalates conflict, often unhelpfully. We can also intuit that the news media can actually help stabilize, and even de-escalate conflict, preventing it from intensifying unnecessarily and destructively. But to date, there has been little empirical research to verify, much less analyze and understand, those intuitions. We do not know, for example, the conditions under which news coverage escalates or stabilizes conflict, when escalation is socially beneficial, or when coverage leads to constructive or destructive outcomes. Such questions have simply fallen through the cracks between media and conflict scholarship.

This symposium seeks to bridge this important gap in our social understanding of conflict by stimulating a sustained discussion among scholars about its contours. The task is important and timely, worthy of effort on both the media and the conflict sides of the equation.

With respect to the media, a key question for media researchers today is over the credibility of the news media.⁹ This is in part a function of how well the media cover that which they choose to cover. Too often the media are criticized for their shallow coverage of conflict, with “ping pong” quotes and little discussion of the underlying issues that are what the dispute is really about—and which, as noted above, society needs to have covered if democracy is going to function in a deliberative way. Too often the critics are right, and while there is certainly some good reporting out there, we can, should, and need to do a better job of covering conflict in a way that is useful for society, engaging for readers, viewers, and listeners, and profitable for publishers.

On the conflict side, we need to look no further than the morning paper or evening news to see how much conflict is a part of our lives and news coverage. To be sure, conflict has always been pervasive, and many a generation can lay claim to being the most conflict-challenged. However, I would suggest at least three conditions that distinguish what we see today from what we have always seen:

First, it is an untested perception, but my impression is that the attenuation of conflict today seems remarkably high. Whether we are talking about the religious

7. The relationship between the media and the rule of law has not been extensively considered by the legal, journalism, or rule-of-law literatures. See Stephen Golub, *The Legal Empowerment Alternative*, in *PROMOTING THE RULE OF LAW ABROAD: IN SEARCH OF KNOWLEDGE* 161, 164 (Thomas Carrothers ed., 2006). See generally CHAPPELL H. LAWSON, *BUILDING THE FOURTH ESTATE: DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE RISE OF A FREE PRESS IN MEXICO* (2002).

8. See EYTAN GILBOA, *MEDIA AND CONFLICT: FRAMING ISSUES, MAKING POLICY, SHAPING OPINIONS* (2002) (a collection of early thinking).

9. See, e.g., Patrick D. Healy, *Believe It: The Media's Credibility Headache Gets Worse*, N.Y. TIMES, WEEK IN REVIEW, May 22, 2005, at 4-4; Mark Gillespie, *Media Credibility Reaches Lowest Point in Three Decades: CBS News incident latest in long history of media mistakes*. (Gallup 2004) available at <http://poll.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?CI=13132>; Kenneth R. Blake & Robert O. Wyatt, *Has Newspaper Credibility Mattered? A Perspective on Media Credibility Debate*, 23 NEWSPAPER RES. J. 73 (2002); Philip Meyer, *Defining and Measuring Credibility of Newspapers: Developing an Index*, 65 JOURNALISM Q. 567 (1988).

wars in the Middle East, cultural wars between Islam and the West, political wars between Republicans and Democrats in the United States, turf wars between gangs in Los Angeles, or disputes within and between businesses and even families, the edge seems sharper now, with less middle ground and more extreme tactics. Humankind has not always flown planes into buildings and impeached political figures to make a point.

Second, the world is smaller—and Thomas Friedman would say flatter¹⁰—than it has ever been before. International economies and cultures are linked as they never have been before, thanks in part to the pervasiveness of the news media.¹¹ Dissemination is instantaneous—and with the rise of new media like the blogosphere and wikis, often unfiltered.¹² As a result, conflict in one part of the world can have an almost instantaneous ripple effect throughout the world, vastly increasing conflict's destructive potential.

Finally, our own sophistication is greater than it ever has been. Research methods and technologies today allow for extraordinary insight into studied phenomena. At the Missouri School of Journalism's PRIME Lab, for example, researchers are able to monitor physiological reactions to news stories and advertisements, which sheds some new and important light on the impact of those stimuli.¹³ As discussed further below, technologies used in other scientific research, such as geographic mapping technology, can also be used to facilitate greater understanding of the relationship between the news media and conflict.¹⁴ We have the tools with which to reach deeper, more nuanced understandings.

As such technologies give way to new understandings, it also obligates us to rethink what we are doing. Journalism has long relied on the self-protecting, and self-perpetuated, myth that news coverage simply mirrors what is going on out there, with no bias or agenda.¹⁵ Today, however, behavioral psychology and related disciplines have made it abundantly clear that all of us have many biases and heuristics that affect the way we process information and make decisions based on that information.¹⁶ Reporters, editors, producers, and others involved in the dissemination of news are all in the information processing business, and what that tells us is that even the most "objective" journalists bring many biases—often hidden and unintentional—to their coverage. This is not all bad. Sometimes these

10. THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE WORLD IS FLAT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (2005).

11. See Philip Seib, *News Coverage, the Expansion of Discourse, and Conflict*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 237, 242-43; see also Craig Chappelow, *Dividends & Interest: Blog Jam Ahead*, LEADERSHIP IN ACTION, July/Aug. 2005, at 23-24 (describing lack of reliability of blog information).

12. See Andrew J. Flanagin & Miriam J. Metzger, *Perceptions of Internet Information Credibility*, 77 JOURNALISM & MASS COMM. Q., 515-40 (2000) (finding internet information not perceived to be as credible as information published in newspapers).

13. PRIME stands for Psychological Research on Information and Media Effects. See Prime Lab, <http://primelab.missouri.edu> (last visited Apr. 13, 2007) (for more information on the PRIME Lab).

14. Sorin A. Matei, Sandra Ball-Rokeach & Ștefan Ungurean, *Communication Channels, Spatial Steriotyping, and Urban Conflict: A Cross-scale and Spatio-temporal Perspective*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 193.

15. See JOHN C. MERRILL, *THE IMPERATIVE OF FREEDOM: A PHILOSOPHY OF JOURNALISM AUTONOMY* (1974) (for a seminal elaboration on this view).

16. See SCOTT F. PLOUS, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF JUDGMENT AND DECISION MAKING* (1993) (for an older but still valuable and accessible scholarly treatment of such psychological phenomena); see also Richard C. Reuben, *Impartiality in Arbitration: Accounting for Arbitrator Self-Interest*, 4 J. AM. ARB. 293 (2005) (applying this critique to the claim of impartiality by arbitrators).

biases reflect the very experience that we have come to know, expect, and indeed rely upon as news judgment. Other times, however, they reflect the kind of closed minds, predispositions of judgment, and arbitrary preferences that objective journalism by any standard should properly abhor.¹⁷ Especially in an age of consolidated and converged news outlets, our awareness of such biases and heuristics ethically compels us to a greater understanding of what we are doing, so that what we do is somehow beneficial rather than destructive.¹⁸

Developing a more scientific understanding of the impact of news coverage on conflict is not an insignificant task, and one that should be undertaken with great respect for the different perspectives that can inform our inquiry. As with so many other questions, it is an integrated understanding that provides the greatest potential for comprehensive meaning. We therefore have brought together leading scholars from a variety of disciplines who have begun to consider the nexus between media and conflict, and to share notes, observations, and insights from their disciplines, which include journalism, law, dispute resolution, psychology, communication, and strategic communication. By pooling our knowledge, interests, and skills, we can help to create a community of scholars pursuing a common research agenda far beyond the limitations of this symposium.

The list of scholars who agreed to participate in what we called a “gathering of scholars” is remarkable, all stellar in their fields and each bringing a different perspective to the problem. The papers published in this symposium underscore the importance of addressing our query from both empirical and theoretical perspectives.

Psychologist Dean Pruitt provides a foundational understanding of conflict, addressing the different meanings of conflict and escalation, as well as the significance of back-channel communications as a way of helping parties break through impasse.¹⁹ Similarly, law professor Leonard Riskin provides an introduction to alternative dispute resolution for the media, identifying eleven “big ideas” from dispute resolution that can help the news media cover conflict with greater sophistication.²⁰ These include the distinctions between conflict and disputes, interests and positions, and the different types of dispute resolution processes.

With this baseline of understanding, several communication scholars offered content-analyses that provided insight into just what is going on in the “the real world” of conflict coverage, particularly in terms of framing effects. Communication scholars Linda Putnam and Martha Shoemaker’s analysis of the coverage of an environmental dispute in Texas documents how four key turning points in the dispute engendered shifts in the frames of media coverage from more interest-

17. Journalism in the United States is generally structured according to an objective model. In some other countries, such as Great Britain, particular news outlets are expected to reflect more ideological positions. See BROOKS ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 16-17 (discussing significance of objectivity in American journalism. See generally KEVIN WILLIAMS, GET ME A MURDER A DAY! A HISTORY OF MASS COMMUNICATION IN BRITAIN (1998) (chronicling less-objective orientation of British press).

18. See Richard C. Reuben, *Fear and Risk in 'Times of Crisis': The Media's Challenge*, 69 MO. L. REV. 1123, 1126-28 (2004) (discussing implications of consolidation and convergence of news media).

19. Dean G. Pruitt, *Social Conflict: Some Basic Principles*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 149.

20. Leonard L. Riskin, *Eleven Big Ideas about Conflict: A Superficial Guide for the Thoughtful Journalist*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 155.

based coverage to more negative and positional coverage.²¹ Demonstrating how such frames might make a difference, mass communications scholar Hement Shah compares news media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots by the *Los Angeles Times* and the weekly minority papers serving that community, finding significant differences in the word choices and attributions of blame made by the reporters and editors of these publications in describing the riots and events leading up to it. Among other things, Shah also concludes that the minority publications provided a more meaningful form of coverage that addressed the underlying causes of the riots, while the traditional mainstream news media coverage was more superficial and reflected certain majoritarian biases.²²

Looking more broadly, mass communication scholar Doug McLeod analyzes news media coverage of social protest and identifies several characteristics of what he calls “the protest paradigm,” a template for analyzing the coverage of social protests that includes certain news frames employed by the writers (such as “the riot” and “the carnival”), reliance on official sources, and the delegitimization and demonization of the protesters.²³ The protest paradigm has been identified and tested in other studies,²⁴ but here McLeod applies it to the *Los Angeles Times*’ coverage of the “Day without Immigrants” protests in Los Angeles on May 1, 2006. Interestingly, the paradigm characteristics were not fulfilled, and McLeod offers both reasons to explain this result, as well as advice to news editors and reporters for the future coverage of social protests.

Communication scholars Sorin Matei, Sandra Ball-Rokeach, and Ștefan Ungurean suggest the impact of such frames can be long lasting. Inventively combining communication infrastructure theory with geographical mapping technology, they demonstrate the impact that media have in constructing and reinforcing mental maps of the safety and other characteristics of communities in three cities: Los Angeles, Lexington (Ky.), and Brașov, Romania.²⁵

Journalism scholars Byron Scott, Carolina Escudero, and Anya Litvak compare the news media’s coverage of long-term political conflicts in two nations: South Africa and Argentina.²⁶ Their research documents the tendencies of the media in such situations to be complicit and largely silent partners of government before political transition, both engaging in self-censorship, as well as the reporting of what they knew to be lies. This in turn constrains their credibility and effectiveness during and after transition, Scott and his co-authors suggest.

Several scholars explored more theoretical frameworks. Qi Qiu and Glen Cameron use social conflict theory and contingency strategic communications theory to analyze the SARS crisis of 2002-2003.²⁷ They demonstrate how the

21. Linda L. Putnam & Martha Shoemaker, *Changes in Conflict Framing in the News Coverage of an Environmental Conflict*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 165.

22. Hemant Shah, *Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict: Examples from the Los Angeles Riots of 1992*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 175.

23. Douglas M. McLeod, *News Coverage and Social Protest: How the Media’s Protest Paradigm Exacerbates Social Conflict*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 183.

24. See *id.* at n.1, and source cited therein.

25. Matei, et al., *supra* note 14.

26. Byron T. Scott, Carolina Escudero & Anya Litvak, *Media, Memory, and Forgiveness: Case Studies in South Africa and Argentina’s Conflict Resolution Processes*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 203.

27. Qi Qiu & Glen T. Cameron, *A Public Relations Perspective to Manage Conflict in a Public Health Crisis*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 209.

Chinese government and the World Health Organization each went from accommodative strategies to advocacy strategies for dealing with the sensitive strategic communications problem of how many cases of SARS the Chinese government was aware. Qiu and Cameron indicate China was reluctant to provide this information, but ultimately yielded to the WHO after the organization began to employ advocacy strategies. Drawing upon contingency theory, they also propose a model for the strategic communications management of future public health disputes.

Israeli international communication scholar Eytan Gilboa sets forth a more comprehensive model for analyzing media coverage and roles in international conflicts, which squares what he describes as the primary roles of the news media—news coverage, interpretation, cultural transmission, entertainment, and mobilization—with different stages he identifies for international conflict: prevention, management, resolution, and reconciliation.²⁸ Gilboa suggests this framework can be used to assess the functionality of local, national, and international media news coverage of conflict, and can be applied to different types of media.

Journalism scholar Philip Seib argues that the rise of the internet, blogging, satellite television channels, and other new and “tangential” media expand public discourse about conflict significantly. He urges policymakers, journalists, academics, and the public to recognize the important shift in discourse this represents, and to work with it effectively rather than simply letting it pass them by.²⁹ Finally, journalism scholar Edmund Lambeth adds an important ethical dimension, using a recent book by Harvard scholar Howard Gardner and co-authors, *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*,³⁰ as a framework to consider how Gardner’s “levers, or moves, that encourage good work” have the potential to preserve the economic, social, and professional health in the media, particularly with respect to the coverage of conflict.³¹

All of these works help point toward a scholarly path that has the potential to be of enormous benefit to society if undertaken in a serious, systematic, and sustained way. This is the challenge we undertake with this symposium: to begin the process of taking the theory and practice of media coverage of conflict to a new level by creating new knowledge about the media’s impact on conflict.

Finally, a gathering like this cannot be accomplished without a great deal of support, and on behalf of the Center for the Study of Conflict, Law & the Media, I want to extend our appreciation to our cosponsors: The Missouri School of Journalism and its dean, Dean Mills; the University of Missouri – Columbia School of Law and our dean, R. Lawrence Dessem; the law school’s Center for the Study of Dispute Resolution; and the Office of the University of Missouri – Columbia Vice Provost for International Programs and Strategic Initiatives. I also want to extend a special thanks to the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri

28. Eytan Gilboa, *Media and International Conflict: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 227.

29. Seib, *supra* note 11.

30. HOWARD GARDNER, MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI & WILLIAM DAMON, *GOOD WORK: WHEN EXCELLENCE AND ETHICS MEET* (2001).

31. Edmund B. Lambeth, *Wanted: Leaders, Journalists, Scholars, and Citizens with the Right Stuff!: A Reflection on Conflict, Journalism, and Democracy*, 2007 J. DISP. RESOL. 245.

School of Journalism, for its support of both the scholarship in this program and its broader dissemination in this law journal and other venues. Significant contributions to scholarship require many different types of contributions, and our efforts here would not have been possible without the important financial contributions of these cosponsors.

