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Media and International Conflict: A Multidisciplinary Approach

Eytan Gilboa*

I. INTRODUCTION

The media play increasingly more significant roles in contemporary international conflicts. Scholars have argued that global television networks now determine policy towards conflict, and even foreign policy of great powers. They call this phenomenon the “CNN Effect.”¹ The media and international conflicts have dramatically changed, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Yet politicians, government officials, editors, journalists, and ordinary citizens have not yet adjusted to the new landscape. Scholars have also lagged behind and have produced little insight into the effects and roles of the media in international conflicts. Reasons for this state of affairs include difficulties in multidisciplinary research and the lack of adequate models and tools for analysis. International relations scholars often ignore the media, while communications scholars often ignore the relevant and useful literature produced by international relations experts. This deficiency can be easily seen in many books, articles, and conference papers written recently on issues such as the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.; the United States-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the violent confrontations between Israel, the Palestinians, and Hezbollah; and the diplomatic struggle over nuclear weapons programs between the international community and states such as North Korea and Iran.

This study suggests a new framework for analysis of media coverage and its role in international conflict. The framework is based on integration of theories and models from both international studies and communication. The work begins with a brief analysis of major changes that have occurred in last two decades in the nature and evolution of international conflicts. The analysis offers significant distinctions among types, levels, and phases of conflict. Next, the study presents major changes that have occurred in the media and offers significant distinctions among levels, types, and functions of media. Based on all these concepts and ideas, the last part presents a new multidisciplinary and multidimensional framework for analysis.

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1. Eytan Gilboa, *The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations*, POL. COMM., Jan.-Mar. 2005, at 27.

II. INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

A. *Types of Conflict*

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature and level of international conflicts have considerably changed.² Until the end of the Cold War, most international conflicts occurred between and among states, but afterward they mostly occurred at the intrastate or global levels. Ethnic and civil wars erupted in Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union; they also exploded in Africa, in places such as Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Liberia. Civil wars in the Balkans and Africa created severe humanitarian disasters that only external military intervention could have stopped. At the other end of the spectrum, the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington by Islamic fundamentalists, and similar subsequent attacks in Great Britain, Spain, Kenya, Indonesia, Bali, Turkey, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as well as the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, represent international conflict at the global level. The “clash of civilizations” theory and debates about the economic and social consequences of globalization also deal with international conflict at the global level.³

Contemporary international conflicts generated analytical distinctions among different kinds and levels of violence. Even during the Cold war, protracted, limited violence, exemplified primarily in terrorism and guerilla warfare, and not large-scale, conventional wars, have dominated international relations. Consequently, scholars have distinguished between high intensity conflict (HIC), where violence is characterized by major wars, and low intensity conflict (LIC), where violence is characterized by much more limited and irregular uses of force. In the past, scholars called the latter “small wars,” or “limited wars.”⁴ More recently, Luttwak coined a post-modern term, “post-heroic war,” to describe the essence of LIC.⁵

Uses of force in LIC are applied selectively and with restraint; the forces are asymmetrical; the battlefield is amorphous and constantly changing; the lines between the battlefields and the home front and between civilians and combatants are blurred, and the confrontation is long and fluid.⁶ Media coverage of LIC is extremely crucial because the main goal of the sides engaged in this type of conflict is to alter the enemy’s perception. Authoritarian states and radical movements effectively exploit the sensitivity of liberal democracies to death and destruction displayed on television, and therefore are better situated to win LIC. It should be noted that a conflict in a particular region may be moving across time from one type of conflict to another. For example, in 2003, the U.S. fought a full-scale war in Iraq, but since then has been engaged in LIC.

2. *TURBULENT PEACE: THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT* (Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson & Pamela R. Aall eds., 2001); JOSEPH S. NYE, JR., *UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS* (6th ed. 2006).

3. SAMUEL HUNTINGTON, *THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AND THE REMAKING OF WORLD ORDER* (1996); BENJAMIN BARBER, *JIHAD VS. MCWORLD* (1995); JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ, *GLOBALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTED* (2003).

4. Roger Beaumont, *Small Wars: Definitions and Dimensions*, 541 *ANNALS*, A.A.P.S.S. 20 (1995).

5. EDWARD N. LUTTWAK, *STRATEGY: THE LOGIC OF WAR AND PEACE* (2002).

6. STEPHEN BLANK, DENNIS M. DREW & BYNUM E. WEATHERS, *RESPONDING TO LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT CHALLENGES* (2002).

B. Phases of Conflict

International conflict is a dynamic process. It begins and ends at a particular period of time. It is not always easy to pinpoint the exact beginning and ending of conflict, but scholars and practitioners have identified life cycles of conflicts and have analyzed them in chronological terms.⁷ Many scholars and practitioners distinguished among three highly simplistic phases: pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict⁸ (or pre-violence, violence and post-violence⁹). Much more meaningful concepts are needed and not just time frames to describe the pre- and post-conflict phases. This article suggests distinguishing among four stages of international conflict based on a critical condition and a principal intervention goal: onset-prevention, escalation-management, de-escalation-resolution, and termination-reconciliation.¹⁰ Each phase has distinctive characteristics and ends in specific outcomes.

Prevention is characterized by the surfacing of conflict, the beginning of disagreements, and growth in verbal and behavioral hostile exchanges. At this stage, only effective prevention measures can stop the conflict from deteriorating into violence.¹¹ If prevention fails, parties may escalate the conflict believing they can impose a solution via violence. Uses of force include full-scale wars, military interventions, terrorism and guerrilla warfare, firing across borders, and deployment of forces. Conflict management—limiting and halting violence to relatively tolerable levels—applies to the escalation-violence phase, which typically ends in a formal or informal ceasefire or an armistice.

7. JOHAN GALTUNG, *PEACE BY PEACEFUL MEANS: PEACE AND CONFLICT, DEVELOPMENT AND CIVILIZATION* (1996); JOHN P. LEDERACH, *PREPARING FOR PEACE: CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION ACROSS CULTURES* (1995); MICHAEL LUND, *PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICTS: STRATEGY FOR PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY* (1996).

8. ROSS HOWARD, *AN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEDIA AND PEACEBUILDING* (2002); CHRISTOPHER SPURK, *MEDIA AND PEACEBUILDING: CONCEPTS, ACTORS, AND CHALLENGES* (2002).

9. Peter V. Jakobsen, *National Interest, Humanitarianism or CNN: What Triggers UN Peace Enforcement After the Cold War?*, 33 J. OF PEACE RES. 205 (1996).

10. Eytan Gilboa, *Media and International Conflict*, in *THE SAGE HANDBOOK OF CONFLICT COMMUNICATION: INTEGRATING THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE* 595 (John Oetzel & Stella Ting Toomey eds., 2006).

11. Alice Ackermann, *The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention*, 40 J. OF PEACE RES. 339 (2003).

Phases of International Conflict

Stage	Pre-Conflict	Conflict	Post-Conflict		
Revised Stage	Onset	Escalation	De-escalation	Termination	
Goal	Prevention	Management	Resolution	Reconciliation	
Outcome	Violence		Ceasefire	Negative Peace	Positive Peace

Figure 1

The post-conflict or post-violence phase should be divided into two clearly defined and separate stages: resolution and reconciliation. The difference between the two stems from the significant distinction Galtung made between “negative peace” and “positive peace.”¹² Negative peace refers only to the absence of violence, while positive peace refers to transformation of psychological barriers to peace and to the building of new relations in relevant areas including open borders, trade, tourism, and cultural ties. Similarly, Boulding distinguished between unstable and stable peace defining the latter as “a situation in which the probability of war is so small that it does not really enter into the calculations of any of the people involved.”¹³ The distinction between resolution and reconciliation is based on the assumption that even if parties to a conflict reach a peace agreement, it is only an agreement between leaders, not between peoples, and that to be effective it must be fully implemented and respected over time. Successful conflict resolution ends with a formal peace agreement (negative peace), while successful reconciliation ends with a positive or stable peace.¹⁴ Figure 1 describes the four suggested phases of conflict by existing stage, revised stage, goal, and outcome. An international conflict may not necessarily move linearly from one phase to another. A conflict may erratically move forward and backward—for example, from management to resolution and back to management. Even when parties decide to seek resolution through negotiation, they may still use force to improve their bargaining power. Failure to reach or implement an agreement may motivate parties to renew hostilities.

12. Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, 6 J. OF PEACE RES. 167 (1969).

13. KENNETH BOULDING, *STABLE PEACE* 13 (1978).

14. FROM CONFLICT RESOLUTION TO RECONCILIATION (Yacov Bar-Siman-Tov ed., 2004); ROADS TO RECONCILIATION: CONFLICT AND DIALOGUE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (Amy B. Brown, & Karen M. Poremski eds., 2004).

III. MEDIA

A. *Types of Media*

A revolution in communication and information technologies has altered media coverage and intervention in international conflict.¹⁵ The revolution created a global capability to broadcast—often live—almost every significant development in world events, and it created and expanded the Internet. These changes have led to the globalization of electronic communication and to substantial growth in networks, stations, and communication consumers worldwide. Websites and web logs provide state and non-state actors, as well as individuals, with endless opportunities to exchange and debate events and processes.¹⁶ Any analysis of the media's roles in international conflict must address both the traditional media (newspapers, television, and radio) and the new media. Very little research has been conducted on the functions of the new media.

When analyzing the media's roles, it is also necessary to distinguish among different types and levels of media. In many studies authors write about "the media," but they primarily intend the Western media. This author suggests distinguishing among five levels of media by geopolitical criteria: local, national, regional, international, and global. Local media include newspapers, television, and radio stations operating in a town, a city, or a district. National media include newspapers and electronic media operating within the boundaries of nation-states. Regional media operate in a region defined by history, culture, tradition, values, language, or religion. Examples of regional media include the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera and the Dubai-based Al-Arabia that broadcast primarily to the Middle-East, and the South African Broadcasting Corporation that serves Africa. International media include broadcast and print media used by states and public or private organizations to operate across international borders. International media include, for example, the government owned Voice of America or Radio Beijing, and the privately owned *International Herald Tribune* or *The Economist*. The global media include essentially television networks such as CNN International and BBC World.

While the international media primarily presents news and commentary from the perspectives of a particular state, the global media claim to represent no particular national viewpoint. Both CNN and BBC, for example, operate two separate broadcasting systems: CNN International is a global network while CNN-US is national, and BBC World is global while BBC-UK is national. Al-Jazeera is also establishing a global network in English: Al-Jazeera International. There are significant differences in approach and content between the national and the global broadcasting of the same network, but very little research has been conducted to explore how wide the differences are and their significance. It is extremely impor-

15. MEDIA AND CONFLICT: FRAMING ISSUES, MAKING POLICY, SHAPING OPINIONS (Eytan Gilboa ed., 2002); Eytan Gilboa, *Global Communication and Foreign Policy*, 52 J. OF COMM. 731 (2002); Eytan Gilboa, *Television News and U.S. Foreign Policy: Constraints of Real-time Coverage*, 8 HARV. INT'L J. OF PRESS/POL. 97 (2003); Eytan Gilboa, *The Effects of Global Television News on U.S. Policy in International Conflict*, in MEDIA AND CONFLICT IN THE 21ST CENTURY 1 (Philip Seib ed., 2005).

16. JAMES F. LARSON, THE INTERNET AND FOREIGN POLICY (2005); Daniel W. Drezner & Henry Farrwell, *Web of Influence*, FOREIGN POL'Y, Nov.-Dec. 2004, at 32.

tant to distinguish between the local and the national media in conflict regions and media that operate outside these regions. The local and national media are much more significant because they directly affect the evolution and development of conflicts.

B. Media Functions

The functional theory is a classic communication theory anchored in sociological system theory, which views institutions, including the media, as performing roles designed to meet the needs of individuals and societies. The functional theory paved the way to several approaches and techniques in modern communication research including media effects, uses and gratifications, agenda-setting, framing, priming, cultivation theory, and the spiral of silence theory.¹⁷ Several scholars have even described the functional theory as a paradigm—a master theory in control of most research in mass communication.¹⁸

Application of functionalism to mass communication developed over time through several stages. Lasswell first suggested three media functions: surveillance of the environment (news coverage); correlation of the parts of society (interpretation of news and information, commentary, and editorial opinion); and transmission of culture (history, values, religion, language, etc.).¹⁹ Wright added a fourth function: entertainment. He also distinguished between manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions, and constructed a framework for functional analysis.²⁰ McQuail added a fifth function, mobilization: the “campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work, and sometimes religion.”²¹ Figure 2 describes the functional analysis formula.

Wright’s important distinction between functions and dysfunctions is very pertinent to this study. Most approaches to media intervention in international conflict have ignored unintended consequences, both positive and negative. The media may provide useful information to citizens who could be motivated to act against their own interests and the interests of their community. For example, the purpose of reporting on financial difficulties of a bank is positive, or functional—warning bank customers of a threat to their accounts—but the result could be dysfunctional if all of them went to the bank, liquidated their assets, and drove the bank to bankruptcy.

17. OLIVER BOYD-BARRETT & CHRIS NEWBOLD, *APPROACHES TO MEDIA* (1995); Douglas McLeod, & Phillip Tichenor, *The Logic of Social and Behavioral Science*, in *MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND THEORY* 91 (Guido H. Stempel III, David H. Weaver & G. Cleveland Wilhoit eds., 2003).

18. DENIS MCQUAIL, *MCQUAIL’S MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY* (2000).

19. Harold D. Lasswell, *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, in *THE COMMUNICATION OF IDEAS* 51 (Lyman Bryson ed., 1948).

20. Charles R. Wright, *Functional Analysis and Mass Communication*, 24 *PUB. OPINION Q.* 605 (1960).

21. DENIS MCQUAIL, *MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION* 71 (2d ed. 1987).

The Functional Formula

What are the 1. Surveillance 2. Correlation 3. Cultural Transmission 4. Entertainment 5. Mobilization	Manifest & Latent	Functions & Dysfunctions	of Mass Communicated Society Subgroups Individual
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Figure 2

Application of the Wright formula suggests that even if the media are sincerely interested in positive contribution to prevent, manage, resolve, or reconcile international conflict, the results may backfire. During the onset-prevention phase, for example, it is important to educate the public about the sources of conflict and the potential for violence or conflict prevention. If successful learning occurs, the coverage could be functional, but if preclusion occurs, the coverage could be dysfunctional.

IV. A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Researchers have employed many different theories, methods, and concepts to analyze potential and actual media roles in various phases of international conflict. Future research, however, must be much more systematic and cumulative. An effective approach requires a multidisciplinary and multidimensional framework that could explore the four conflict phases through several identical or similar categories. This article suggests a framework that combines and integrates communication and conflict theories: the life-cycle theory of conflicts and the functional theory of communication.

Several functions and dysfunctions may appear at each of the four conflict phases, while others may be unique for each phase. In addition, functions and dysfunctions may vary for each of the five basic media functions, all of which are relevant to the study of media intervention in international conflict. Even entertainment may include implicit or explicit messages that may either help or hinder efforts to effectively deal with international conflicts. Substantial research is needed to explore functions and dysfunctions at each phase.

Figure 3 describes the proposed framework for analysis. It shows how research can be organized to explore positive and negative contributions of the media by the five media functions and the four phases of international conflict. Other possible dimensions include: (1) the two types of conflict (HIC and LIC); (2) the two types of media, traditional and new (newspaper, television, radio, and the Internet); and (3) the five levels of media (local, national, regional, international, and global).

A Framework for Analysis

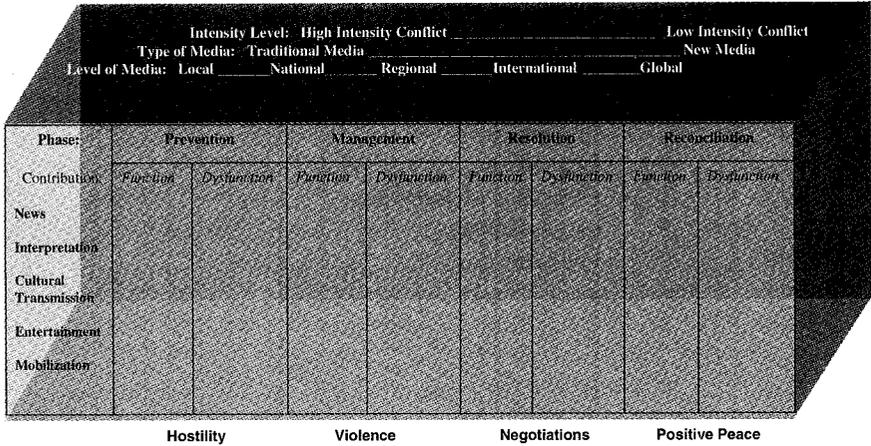


Figure 3

The proposed framework is flexible and allows partial or selective applications. Researchers do not necessarily need to apply the whole framework to all the phases, dimensions, and variables. They may choose to investigate all the five functions in one phase; or one function, such as news, across all the four phases; or they may focus on one function in one phase, such as interpretation in reconciliation. They may apply the basic framework to each of the three other dimensions. For example, one could investigate the functions and dysfunctions of news in the four phases of LIC, in the new media or at the local media level.

V. CONCLUSION

This work briefly presents and analyzes major changes and developments in contemporary international conflict and the media. These simultaneous and inter-related changes have created a new landscape of actors, roles, and patterns of interaction and influence. Thus far, research on the new developments has been limited and dispersed. Scholars have not yet adequately approached the relevant issues and questions emerging from the new landscape, partly because of difficulties and deficiencies in multidisciplinary research and partly because of the lack of suitable tools for analysis. This work attempts to fill the gap through a new framework for analysis based on innovative integration of theories and models from the fields of both international relations and communication.

The proposed multidisciplinary and multidimensional framework is very comprehensive and requires prioritizing of research projects. This author suggests that the first priority is to investigate functions and dysfunctions of the local media; the next is to focus on the prevention and reconciliation phases. Because the new media are becoming more and more influential, the next priority is to examine functions and dysfunctions of the new media in all the four conflict phases. Also,

work to case studies at different levels may help to promote the development of badly needed knowledge and understanding of the various ways the media are influencing the beginning, evolution, and termination of existing and future international conflicts.

