Mediatization of armed conflicts. From Discourse to Narratives

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Abstract

In this paper, we will present how academic research in media studies deals with mainstream media coverage of armed conflicts. We will mainly focus on news through a discursive approach perspective in order to understand the way in which media discourse can virtually shape public opinion. This discursive approach to the media’s construction of information on war events refutes the accepted but false idea that journalism is an impartial and neutral reporting activity whose sole purpose is to present facts to citizens. Before focusing on this specific approach, let us briefly look at the specificity of both the sociological and discursive approaches.

Reference


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In this paper, we will present how academic research in medias studies deals with mainstream media coverage of armed conflicts. We will mainly focus on news through a discursive approach perspective in order to understand the way in which media discourse can virtually shape public opinion. This discursive approach to the media’s construction of information on war events refutes the accepted but false idea that journalism is an impartial and neutral reporting activity whose sole purpose is to present facts to citizens. Before focusing on this specific approach, let us briefly look at the specificity of both the sociological and discursive approaches.

- In the sociology of journalism approach, scholars have focused on the way journalists interact with the key actors involved in armed conflict, and the main focus here is to understand how news is manufactured. The sociology of journalism, which is mainly based on ethnographic methodology, allows researchers to understand how journalists obtain information and manufacture news when dealing with State war or civilian armed conflict. Some of the research questions that might be examined are the following: what is the autonomy vs. heteronomy of journalists facing government and military information sources? What type of change in views generates a new embedding of reporters in military units? What are the ethical and normative constraints related to daily journalism’s routines, in a context where patriotism, affects or national interest play a major role and refute the neutral attitude usually claimed by journalists. This sort of sociological approach distinguishes “peace journalism” vs. “war journalism” (Mc Goldrick and Lynch 2000) and illustrates the role journalists play in influencing or forming opinion during armed conflicts, especially when patriotism or national interests are a major part of the armed conflict background. Last but not least, the sociological approach may also consider the role of journalists regarding their professional values, norms and beliefs (reflexivity) towards what they often consider as their civic mission (to raise citizens’ awareness).

- In a discursive and content analysis approach, scholars tend to focus less on the media information manufacturing process (reporting, breaking news and access to official sources) and more on the semiotic content of news, seen as discursive products submitted to audience consumption. Taking into account the fact that discourse information offers a portrayal of war events, actors (civilian, government and military) and the consequences of armed conflict that requires a specific theoretical background and methodological tools, this textual-oriented approach is a useful entry point for scholars to indicate more generally how media and, especially, television news—seen as a plurisemiotic media combining sounds (vector for emotion and authenticity), the presenter’s voice in the studio and on voice-over (relevant for narratives and explanations) and images—cover armed conflicts using the twin aspects of an informative and narrative perspective.

The main theoretical assumptions of this discursive approach will be proposed in the following pages with a focus on:

- agenda-setting theory
- framing analysis
- narrative structure

Media discursive approach to armed conflicts

Since the Vietnam War, mainstream media have been playing an increasing role in influencing public opinion on perceptions of issues, consequences and the motivations of military actors. We cannot deny the fact that the peace movement that arose during the crisis, consisting of veterans of the 1960s antiwar movement, members of the antinuclear, environmental, feminist and social movements opposed to war, and members of a younger generation who

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refused to be involved in war, was certainly influenced by the media’s critical discourse and the aesthetic and emotional impact of images and photography which were seen throughout American media during the late 1960s. In fact, as Livingstone suggests: “at the heart of Vietnam syndrome was the concern that media coverage had the potential to undermine public support for an operation and erode troop morale on the ground”4. Nowadays, in spite of the rise of new media (Internet and blogging), newspapers and, especially, television5 still play a crucial role in shaping and directing public opinion, even though mainstream media’s discourse information in Western countries is facing strong criticism. However, we claim that television’s influence on public opinion is mostly related to the way journalists construct agenda and frame issues of war. In this way, discourse information on armed conflicts is not just based on objective facts, since we assert that the media are not a mirror of reality but interact with actors (journalists and sources) who are able to build and redefine this reality through frames.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Kellner6, for example, shows in a study of ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN that media discourse information (news) did not adopt a neutral attitude but more often an ‘us-against-them’ attitude, promoting the American administration’s cause to varying degrees. Kellner draws the conclusion that news coverage of the Gulf War was obviously influenced by ideology, specifically, national interest. Evidently, we do not deny that analysing discourse information is only relevant if we consider the mass media legacy, especially in the context of the rise of mass propaganda and military strategy of disinformation during World War I and II (e.g.: faked documentaries, the distorted information and propaganda conveyed by cinema news).

Nevertheless, by adopting a social constructivist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann7, Gamson8), we claim that the mass media suggest specific frames to their audience in the way they portray reality, but that the success of these frames depends on their relevance and compliance with the audience’s cultural knowledge and background. In other words, we contend that the media rarely succeed in modifying perceptions of reality, if the frames contained in the discourse information are dissonant with the initial audience’s cognitive predisposition (ideology, values) and attitudes.

**Agenda-setting and scenes of armed conflict**

In the 1970s, McCombs and Shaw9 introduced the agenda-setting theory to explore how media, politicians and public opinion are bound together when trying to influence each other, in order to impose their agenda upon each other. Agenda may then be defined as a thematic or issue priority which leads journalists to transfer a topical hierarchy of specific events or issues towards public opinion. In other words, newspaper readers and media broadcasting audiences may be influenced less by the content than by the saliency of a topic. Through this perspective, media influence is not a matter of knowing how the audience’s thinks about an issue, but rather of asking the following question: which topic will the audience be led to think about after exposure to mainstream media?

Applied to media coverage of armed conflict, the agenda-setting theory has gained a strong heuristic value. In fact, in accordance with their professional norms, journalists prefer facts dealing with geographically-close information, involving high collateral damage (“bad news”), cultural proximity and ideological polarisation that are easy to define in terms of easily understood frames10. If wars are not equal in terms of mediatisation, it is because some are extensively covered (e.g.: Iraq and the Gulf War) and draw the journalists’ attention, whilst other conflicts are rarely or never mentioned by newspapers or television breaking news (e.g.: the poor coverage of war in Cabinda).

Secondly, most media depend on official sources and adopt “low-cost journalism”, especially in a context where the written press is tending to lose its audience and investigative journalism requires time and extensive monetary resources. Certain armed conflicts are covered more largely (more intense and longer lasting coverage). Nevertheless, by adopting a social constructivist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann, Gamson), we claim that the mass media suggest specific frames to their audience in the way they portray reality, but that the success of these frames depends on their relevance and compliance with the audience’s cultural knowledge and background. In other words, we contend that the media rarely succeed in modifying perceptions of reality, if the frames contained in the discourse information are dissonant with the initial audience’s cognitive predisposition (ideology, values) and attitudes.

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Secondly, most media depend on official sources and adopt “low-cost journalism”, especially in a context where the written press is tending to lose its audience and investigative journalism requires time and extensive monetary resources. Certain armed conflicts are covered more largely (more intense and longer lasting coverage). This unequal coverage is not only a matter of choice: it may also be the consequence of poor information access. In fact, military headquarters and governments act as filters, since they serve as actors with information resources which enable them to enhance and give a positive slant to their troop actions or army success.

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5 On average, according to 2002 Nielsen data, US citizens, for example, watch television more than four hours per day (Media InfoCenter, 2004).
Thirdly, the variation in armed conflict media coverage or armed conflict agenda-setting is not only the consequence of journalistic constraints and dependency on information sources, but may also be rooted in journalists’ professional norms and routines. The issue is related to the following question: what is a journalist’s anticipation of the audience in terms of news preferences or content consumption? Private television broadcasters and daily press are equally tied to their audience “needs”: they may thus decide to select news from press agencies and to invest or not in investigative journalism. At this point, it is worth noting that agenda-setting is an interesting value-added theory that explains why public opinion and attention may change over time, when coverage increases or decreases. The agenda-setting theory also enables us to focus on the characteristics of specific war events and discover the newsworthiness (value of information) related to different types of events.

With the goal of looking at what types of war events are highlighted by mass media, Charaudeau et al. applied the concept of “scene” (similar to agenda) to Bosnian War coverage by French television. Taking into account the content of dominant images and topics favoured in news reporting and comments, these scholars pointed out the following fact: journalists mainly focused their attention on the diplomatic scene, civilian collateral damage scene, humanitarian scene and, when accessible, war battle scene. It appears evident to these authors that underscoring a diplomatic scene with mediation actions (conference, round table talks) implied a less emotional investment from the audience as compared to focusing on victims or civilian deaths. Specific attributes from armed conflicts scenes are in fact a selection of reality, and salient events depend on journalists’ access to battlefield, the type of journalism involved during armed conflict coverage (embedded journalism) and the preference given by journalists to highly valued and spectacular events such as images or narratives of destruction and damage. More recently, it has been shown that during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, mediatisation and pictures of military coffins by the US mainstream television channels (CNN, Fox and CBS) has a potentially tremendous impact on public opinion. Since the Gulf War, US military headquarters have understood the gain in terms of prestige and positive image that can be obtained by showing military troop operations and attacks with abstractive images: thus, lack of US military or civilian deaths during the Gulf War added to images of surgical strikes from American air troops produced an unrealistic perception of this war, leading Baudrillard to write provocatively that, in the end, “the Gulf War didn’t occur.”

War and media frames

Since the end of the 1980s, a new paradigm called framing analysis has spread through the political communication and media studies field. Most scholars agree that a frame can be seen as the central organising idea for making sense of relevant events. In other words, framing is the process of describing and interpreting an event (for example, relating to an armed conflict) by selecting and emphasising some aspects, facts or issues and by excluding others. According to this definition, we consider that news and discourse information has no intrinsic value, unless embedded in a meaningful context which allows readers or audiences to organise its coherence. We also share Reese’s assumption when he claims that frames are “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world”. Frames are a guide to understanding emerging events and collective experiences, which can be linked to past events, in order to make unexpected reality become more familiar. Seen as a general interpretive schema of reality, frames give sense to events by appealing to a collective memory. The role played by this collective memory is vital, because the historical background and previous existing interpretations of these facts and issues help people understand the actual issue of an armed conflict.

Recent wars involving the USA—especially the Iraq War, whose legitimacy has stirred up much controversy—have generated a great deal of research among scholars. Without mentioning all the findings, it is worth noting an interesting observation made by Dimitrova et al. relating to the variability of journalists’ frames depending on their cultural background. Comparing Iraq War coverage by the US and Swedish press, previous authors showed that what they called “the military conflict frame” was more common to US journalists’ war coverage, while responsibility and “anti-war protest” frames appeared to be dominant for Swedish war journalists. Moreover, journalists from both Sweden and the USA proposed human interest stories and media self-references, with US newspapers relying more heavily on official government and military sources. This research demonstrates that frames are in competition and not necessarily shared by two different cultural approaches to journalism. In order to highlight the heuristic added-value of the concept

of frames when considering armed conflict media coverage, let us try to define more precisely the processes involved in framing major and complex events such as war. According to Entman’s popular definition of media framing, to frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”16.

This definition can be discussed in terms of these four types of cognitive and discursive processes:

- **definition of reality**: a frame may be expressed through a cognitive categorisation process, which consists of a journalist giving his or her own definition of armed conflict realities. To promote a definition is then equivalent to a journalist choosing and selecting a specific substantive or syntagm to nominate a reality. Sometimes this nomination act is surrounded by a qualification act. Defining an armed conflict as a *civilian war*, an *ethnic war*, a *war against terrorism* or a *preventive war*17 is meaningful if we consider each of these syntagms as the journalist’s resource for providing information about actors and their intentions. As we all know, each word has its own meaning and collective emotional impact. Defining an issue or an event is thus always the consequence of a point of view on reality and nominating or categorising reality is always ideology- or value-oriented;

- **causal relation and attribution of responsibility**: during armed conflicts, discourse information tends to portray events in a binomial and schematic manner, since one of the main issues for journalists is to define which actor (States, groups, minority groups) is the direct or collateral victim of the war and which is the perpetrator or aggressor. Broadcasters and leader writers, in particular, when commenting on factual events, are seeking to offer an answer to the following question: who is responsible and what are the actor’s intentions? Furthermore, media frames often reduce the complexity of the process and multiple causal relations by emphasising one simple explanation. This is particularly evident when media are constrained by the logic of abundance and instantaneity that governs information;

- **moral evaluation of reality and issues**: media discourse, in spite of what is claimed by most journalists, is rarely just based on factual information. Separation between fact and comments may be an effective norm, but journalists are also involved in sharing their assessments and moral judgement of actors (or actions) which are constitutive of war “events” and episodes. Promoting these types of moral judgement is considered part of the journalist’s work. Focusing on armed conflict coverage, we may understand that this moral evaluation is a crucial dimension for journalists who wish to offer a specific interpretation of war facts;

- **recommendation**: one last process involved in media framing is the recommendation and advice that journalists may offer to politicians or citizens. The idea is to answer the following question: “what should we do?” In the context of “peace journalism”, for example, journalists may seek a solution for ending war and bringing about reconciliation between warring parties. Promoting recommendations is always a way for journalists to consider themselves as social actors, based on the assumption that discourse information may influence State policies or public opinion.

At this stage of our discussion, we should recognize that armed conflicts are always part of a complex process and that frames are revealed by words, catchphrases, arguments and rhetorical figures (metaphors, for example), but also by emblematic and/or prototypic images. One recent example that illustrates the power of emblematic pictures or images in television war coverage is the remains of Sadam Hussein’s statue being pulled down in Baghdad during the first days of the Iraq War. This emblematic event covered extensively by most of the world’s television channels is an illustration of the symbolic meaning contained in specific emblematic actions, underlining the idea that images are a fast way to widely circulate a frame or an idea (in this case, the idea of US army success).

The question now is to understand how scholars have managed to measure this volatile concept of the “media frame” in the last three decades. In our opinion, one of the most relevant patterns and discursive tools was proposed by Gamson. This author considers that media discourse can be seen as a “set of interpretative packages that give meaning to an issue”18 and whose central idea is the frame. Among these packages, Gamson suggests that two major types of devices may be identified: *reasoning devices* and *framing devices*. While *reasoning devices* can be understood as a more argument-based and interpretative process which allow media and public to justify or give reasons on what should be done about reality or events (explanation, assessment of the consequence of an event), *framing devices* such as metaphors, historical examples, visual images or catchphrases are proposals helping audience to know how to think about an issue vs. reality. This distinction between what appears to be a more argument-oriented activity and an essentially more symbolic expression of reality is relevant: it allows us to understand how the media try to combine dramatization and spectacular coverage of armed conflict (exploiting images or catchphrases) in order to draw on the audience’s aesthetic sensibilities and provide more cognitive and rationalistic type arguments to convince the audience.

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17 “Preventive war” was the qualification chosen by US administration after the suicide terrorist attack of September 11th to provide legitimacy to this armed conflict.
At this stage, it is important to understand that media coverage is not just a matter of producing discourse information with symbols or metaphors helping to illustrate the meaning of these discourses. In fact, what appears obvious nowadays is that journalists are not only responsible for their discourse, but also assume a storytellers’ role which may attract the audience, by using narrative structure to cover armed conflicts events.

The narrative structure: war and storytelling

Previously, we claimed that armed conflicts could be understood through the agenda-setting theory (in order to identify the main topics and information selected by the media) and through the framing analysis which allows us to highlight the interpretation and type of reading that journalists provide on armed conflicts. In this section, we will try to show the influence of media on the audience by considering information as part of a narrative process. Framing is then not only discourse-oriented (submitting opinions) but also narrative-oriented (suggesting a story).

We must understand that information provided by mainstream news programmes is not only referring to isolated and localised facts, but also giving meaning to these facts by linking them together, in order to make sense of the “story”. The organisation of news as a story supposes a thematic structure (topic), some stylistic or rhetoric figures and an internal factual arrangement of events. Benveniste\(^{19}\) was one of the first scholars who distinguished between stories (historical enunciation) and discourse (or discursive enunciation). While discursive enunciation is a discourse held in the present by an “I” to a “you”, the main specificity of historical enunciation, which is linked to the journalist’s storytelling role, is that true events are written as a story and occurring with people (actors) who are investing places (where the events are located) during a period of time (generally in the past). In other words, a narrative structure applied to media discourse requires identifying:

- **Narrator or storyteller** (journalist): whose enunciative function is to tell the story (e.g. the news voice-over);
- **Actors**: real individuals or groups, who are assigned to play characters such as victims or aggressors and who are displayed within the narrative with physical or moral attributes and intentions;
- **Actions**: in order to give meaning to the story, there must be a succession of acts, with causes and consequences located in the past. These actions are initiated by a trigger event and usually followed by a succession of events which again give meaning to the story. In the last stage of the story, there is a settlement (e.g. the end of the war with the signature or ratification of a peace treaty).

Generally speaking, the narrative approach is particularly well suited to evoking war episodes, especially since most armed conflicts are linked to multiple actions involving actors on two sides (opponents, politicians and civilians) and are bound to a dramatization process. In fact, armed conflicts are “narrative opportunities”, a tempting opportunity for journalists who want to focus on specific events in order to humanize actions involving anonymous masses (soldiers vs. victims). Iyengar\(^{20}\) calls this type of focus on specific human issues an “episodic frame”: for this author, the episodic frame focuses on individual case studies and discrete events by painting a portrait\(^{21}\). For example, during a recent (2009) Israel bombing in Gaza, a Palestinian doctor screaming his pain and expressing in his own person a human tragedy as he faced the loss of his eight children is a typical case of the media depicting a specific human experience instead of using statistics or factual descriptions. Reporting on such specific human drama is one of the rhetorical techniques used by media to make audiences aware of a dramatic situation. Another example of the potential “trauma effects” on public opinion of the episodic frame is the 1972 media use of the famous Nick Út photograph of a Vietnamese child and her family, crying as they emerged from the village after a US air strike. Moreover, the rise of embedded journalism and adoption of audience-based approaches are expanding the role of narrative and storytelling, especially when journalists are facing a lack of credibility and loss of their role as opinion leader. Thus, powerful symbolic images and, more generally, the coherence of a convincing story certainly become a more efficient way for States or journalists to promote frames and opinions among audience and readers.

**Conclusion**

Finally, armed conflict mediatisation is a complex process involving discourse and narrative, persuasion and the appeal (sometime morbid) of storytelling. In the context of the current globalization of information, relaying information or picturing war and armed conflict events is bound to a major issue in which both Governments and media try to impose their vision of reality and influence audience or reader perception of reality. In the context of the post Cold War era


\(^{21}\) In contrast, thematic news frames are those that apply a wide-angle lens to the coverage of the issue – focusing on trends over time, and highlighting contexts and environments.
(since 1986) and in the light of the current globalisation of terrorism, a new configuration involving media and armed force actors has appeared. In this configuration, the media are not only promoting peace and cooperation or supporting national interests, but also providing, in certain circumstances, a platform for different actors, such as civilians and ethnic dissidents. We may then ask ourselves if mainstream media have not recently contributed to highlighting new types of sporadic and spectacular armed conflict actions, such as highjackings and symbolic acts like suicide bombings and air attacks, which may serve to draw the media’s attention and promote the cause in question. In an ambiguous context of this kind, the media are competing with States and other civilian actors and seeking to impose frames and narratives on audiences and readers.

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An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention

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