

Introduction

The news media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. They can emphasize the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. The media, however, can also serve as destructive agents in the process. They can emphasize the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy. This work will attempt to explain how, why, and when the media take on each of these roles.

This work can be seen as an expansion of previous efforts of mine to explain the role of the news media in political conflicts (Wolfsfeld, 1997a). The theoretical approach developed in that work was referred to as the political contest model. One of the central themes of that theory was that the best way to understand the role of the media in politics is to view the competition over the news media as part of a larger and more significant contest among political antagonists for political control. Thus, when political leaders are able to exert control over the political environment – say in the level of support they mobilize – they find it much easier to promote their policies to the news media. A lack of political control, on the other hand, leads to a more independent press that is reluctant to accept official dictates.

This basic approach remains intact within this study. The research examines the ongoing competition over the news media among antagonists with different attitudes towards a given peace process. This assumes that there is a genuine process in place and that government leaders are attempting to promote it to the public. In addition to the government there are two other major actors that compete over the news media: those opposed to the peace process and the other side in the conflict

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(the “enemy”). Understanding the rules of competition between these various antagonists brings us closer to understanding the actual role the media will play in any peace process.

Despite the clear link between the two studies, there are also some important differences. The shift in focus from conflict to peace leads one down a somewhat different theoretical path. Many of these differences are rooted in the problematic relationship between news and peace. Simply put, it is a hell of a lot easier to promote conflict to the media than peace. While conflict can be considered the *sine qua non* of news, peace and news make for awkward bedfellows. A successful peace process requires patience, and the news media demand immediacy. Peace is most likely to develop within a calm environment and the media have an obsessive interest in threats and violence. Peace building is a complex process and the news media deal with simple events. Progress towards peace requires at least a minimal understanding of the needs of the other side, but the news media reinforce ethnocentrism and hostility towards adversaries. The reasons and ramifications of these difficulties are detailed throughout this study. For now, it will suffice to say that what might seem like a small change in the research question has led to a relatively large change in the rules of the game.

This work is also seen as an expansion of the previous book in that it attempts to flesh out a number of concepts that were missing from that previous study. Two ideas are especially worthy of note. While the first study emphasized the importance of the political environment, this work also examines the effects of varying *media* environments on the role of the media. The norms and routines that journalists adopt for covering politics vary and this also has an important influence on the role the news media will play in a given political process. Journalists working in a more sensationalist media environment, for example, will construct very different stories about conflict and peace than those operating in a more reserved milieu.

A second area of innovation has to do with the ways in which the news media and the political environment interact with one another. It will be argued that the best way to understand this relationship is to think of it in terms of a cycle in which changes in the political environment lead to changes in media performance that lead to further changes in the political environment. This dynamic will be referred to as the politics-media-politics cycle. I also attempt to develop some ideas about this interaction by examining “political waves.” Political waves take place when critical events (e.g. the Rabin assassination) lead to a dramatic

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increase in the amount of public attention focused on a particular issue or event. The news media play an important role in such waves, and examining this dynamic also provides some helpful insights concerning the role of the news media in political processes.

The initial spark for this research project can be traced to the inauguration of the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in the fall of 1993.¹ It continued through the many years of negotiations and partial agreements, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and a number of changes in government in Israel. These many variations in the Israeli political environment provided important insights into just how the role of the news media varies over time and circumstance. The fact that Oslo also enabled Israel and Jordan to negotiate and sign a peace agreement allowed for an additional avenue of research. As detailed later, the political environment surrounding this process was very different than the one associated with Oslo. The inauguration of peace between the two countries also created a unique opportunity to collaborate with a Jordanian counterpart and to collect comparative data from that country.

More comparative data was collected when I was able to travel to Northern Ireland in the spring of 1999. The Good Friday agreement had been signed about a year before, but the two sides were still having serious problems moving forward. The case of Northern Ireland provided a critical piece of the puzzle for it not only constituted a dissimilar political environment, but also a very different media environment.

The final part of the research deals with what many saw as the end of the Oslo peace process: the failure of the Camp David summit between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat and the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the fall of 2000. The return to violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians afforded a graphic demonstration of the significant differences between promoting war to the news media and promoting peace.

The overall research strategy combined inductive and deductive components. Based on what I know about communication and conflict I began to ask questions about the role of the media in the various peace processes. Two major methods were used to collect data (for details see the methodological appendix). The first consisted of in-depth interviews with a wide variety of individuals who were responsible for promoting

¹ The actual research began in the summer of 1994. There is a certain amount of temporal overlap between the previous study and this one. This explains why one of the case studies presented in the previous book investigated the attempts of the anti-Oslo political movements to mobilize the news media against the government.

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messages and events to the news media and the journalists who covered the different peace processes. Those interviewed include political and military leaders, their advisors and spokespeople, and reporters and editors from both the print and electronic media. Such interviews provide a wealth of information and insights about the norms, routines, perceptions, and strategies that explain how these various actors interact with one another. In addition, interviews with functionaries who are involved in each peace process provided first-hand knowledge about the impact the resulting coverage had on the process itself.

The second method consists of content analysis of news stories about peace. These stories are seen as the final cultural product that result from the ongoing interactions between sources and journalists. While many of these content analyses are quantitative, I also attempt to carry out a more qualitative and critical reading of these materials in order to better understand the underlying story lines. The stories journalists tell about peace vary tremendously and examining the reasons for such differences provides important pieces of the puzzle.

The theoretical principles that emerged from this research are all rooted in the comparisons between the different peace processes that were studied. Nevertheless, despite the fact that all of the studies adopted the same research strategy, there are methodological differences that prevent a full and ideal comparison. These variations have to do with both logistics (e.g. the relative difficulty in obtaining certain news materials) and the fact that some of the newer ideas emerged at a later stage in the research. At the same time, there are also certain advantages to this circumstance. It allows us to look at the role of the news media in peace from multiple angles, each of which provides somewhat different insights and perspectives.

There is another flaw in this research that is best dealt with at the outset. Although an important part of the study focuses on the role of the media in the Oslo peace process, there is virtually nothing written about the Palestinian press. The reasons for this omission are both theoretical and practical. The theoretical rationale is that the ideas that are presented here refer to situations in which the press enjoys a certain amount of freedom to make decisions. When the news media almost always reflect the official line, one needs to adopt an entirely different set of principles to explain the role the press will play in the political process. The practical problem is that I do not consider myself sufficiently knowledgeable about the Palestinian press to analyze it. One can only hope that Palestinian scholars will carry out research on this important topic.

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I should also say something at the outset about my political views. Researchers writing about peace face some of the same dilemmas as journalists. It is almost impossible to take a neutral stand towards the issue. The very fact that the relevant fields are entitled “peace studies” and “conflict resolution” tells us that the implicit goal of such work is to promote peace and prevent violent conflict. This type of bias can threaten the integrity of the research. When the news media make it more difficult to promote peace, for example, this will be considered a “problem” that needs to be solved. Yet those opposed to a particular peace process would argue that such media are demonstrating their independence and protecting national interests.

Although there is no solution to this problem, it is helpful to state one’s biases in order to allow readers to look for any faults that are rooted in such prejudices. My own bias is that I supported the peace processes discussed in this work. I believe that the Rabin government took an important step forward at Oslo and like most Israelis I hoped it would succeed. I also supported the peace accords that were signed between Jordan and Israel. Although I have no personal involvement in the Northern Ireland conflict, my position is the same. I believe the Good Friday agreement was a major achievement and that it offers a real possibility for bringing peace to the area.

I also believe that journalists have an ethical obligation to encourage reconciliation between hostile populations. This does not mean that they should blindly accept every peace proposal that calls for compromise. Nor should they serve as propaganda organs for a pro-peace government. Policies intended to bring peace should be scrutinized as carefully as any other government initiative. Everyone wants peace and prosperity; the important question is how to achieve it. The goals of journalism working in conflict-ridden areas should be to provide as much information as possible about the roots of the problem and to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending it. At the very least, journalists should do no harm. They should refrain from practices that raise the level of hate, distrust, and violence between communities. These issues will be discussed more fully in the conclusion of this work.

ORGANIZATION OF THE ARGUMENT

The book is divided into seven chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter presents the major theoretical arguments of the study. After

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introducing some initial principles for thinking about the issues, six central arguments are developed about the role of the news media in peace processes. These propositions attempt to deal with both the fundamental contradiction between news and peace and how different political and media environments can either ameliorate or worsen the situation.

The next three chapters all examine the role of the media in the Oslo peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Thus, the second chapter looks at Oslo from the perspective of the Rabin and Peres governments, who were attempting to promote the process to the Israeli media and the public. The third examines the opposite vantage point by looking at the ongoing interactions between those opposed to Oslo and the Israeli news media. This discussion is important because it helps explain some of the problematic influences the news media can have on political debate about a peace process. The fourth chapter looks at the attempts of Palestinian leadership and opposition to convey their own messages to the Israeli public about Oslo. Among other topics, this chapter deals with the types of influences a changing political environment can have on media images of enemies.

The fifth chapter deals with the role of the media in the peace process between Israel and Jordan. As noted earlier, one of the reasons why this case is so instructive is that while the Oslo agreements were extremely controversial, the accords with Jordan received almost unanimous support within Israel. This section is also important for it also includes empirical evidence about the Jordanian press, which does enjoy a limited amount of autonomy. The news data collected for that particular study extends over a considerable length of time and this also provides a more dynamic understanding of the issue. While the findings from this part of the study do suggest some rays of light, most of these results reinforce the same dismal picture concerning media and peace.

The next chapter deals with the case of Northern Ireland. Those who know something about that conflict may be surprised to learn that this is the one place in which the news media appear to play a more supportive role in a peace process. This has certainly not always been the case. However, the relatively high level of elite consensus surrounding the Good Friday agreement as well as the professional norms journalists have adopted for covering that conflict all contribute to making this case to be the exception that demonstrates the rule.

Chapter 7 deals with the role of the news media in the final stages of the Oslo peace process and the outbreak of the Second Intifada. Despite the high hopes that were raised when Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister

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he was unable to come to any agreement with Yasser Arafat. This chapter provides a tragically appropriate finale to the entire story. For as the situation in the Middle East turned from bad to worse, so did the role of the news media. When one compares the ease with which leaders can promote a violent conflict to the press to the tremendous difficulties they faced in sponsoring a peace process, it serves as a striking demonstration of some of the major themes that are developed throughout this work.

The concluding chapter summarizes the major findings and discusses some of the major implications for researchers and policy makers. Although this study is not intended as a political diatribe, I do believe that researchers working in the area also have certain ethical obligations. Assuming that striving for peace is a valuable objective, then it is also worthwhile to think about how scholars can make at least a modest contribution towards that goal.

CHAPTER 1

Building theory

Much has been written about the role of the news media in conflict and war, but very little about their role in peace. Searching through the hundreds of studies on peace building and conflict resolution, it is difficult to find even a passing reference to the press. There is not a single major study that has looked at the role of the news media in an ongoing peace process.¹

This lack of interest in the topic is even more glaring when one considers the tremendous amount written on media and conflict. There are countless articles and books about the role of the media in protests, terrorism, and war in popular and scholarly publications. Why is there such a gap? Considering possible answers to this question provides some initial insights into the general topic of media and peace. Examining some of the reasons why researchers prefer dealing with conflict also tells us something about similar choices made by the news media.

¹ There are a number of studies that deal with such topics as the role of the media in foreign policy, diplomacy and conflict resolution (R. Cohen, 1987; Y. Cohen, 1986; Davison, 1974; Entman, 2003; Fromm *et al.*, 1992; Gilboa, 1998; Gowing, 1996; Henderson, 1973; Naveh, 2001; O’Heffernan, 1991, 1993; Robinson, 2002; Serfaty, 1991; Strobel, 1997; Weimann, 1994), several that relate to the problems peace movements face in attempting to mobilize the news media (Gitlin, 1980; Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Hackett, 1991; Ryan, 1991; Small, 1987), a few articles that deal with the role of the news media in disarmament and international cooperation (Bruck, 1988, 1989; Dorman, Manoff, and Weeks, 1988; Gamson and Stuart, 1992), and several that have to do with images of the enemy (Ayres, 1997; Becker, 1996; Eckhardt, 1991; Ottosen, 1995). There is also some work on the topic of “peace journalism,” which talks about the need to change journalists’ norms and routines for covering peace and conflict (Adam and Thamootheram, 1996; Bruck and Roach, 1993; Galtung, 1998; Himmelfarb, 1998; Lynch, 1998; Manoff, 1996, 1997, 1998; Roach, 1993; Shinar, 2000).

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The first reason that comes to mind is that the link between media and conflict is simply more obvious. Conflict and violence are the mainstays of the news industry, whereas stories about peace are few and far between. It is also clear that the media play a significant role in protests and terrorism because the need for publicity is a central component of these strategies. The role of the press in wartime is similarly conspicuous. The massive amount of public discussion concerning the role of the news media in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provide the most recent examples of this phenomenon. There is an enormous amount of publicity associated with wars and such coverage is replete with striking, dramatic images. In addition, when democratic nations go to war the role the media should play often becomes a subject for public debate. The role of the news media in a peace process, on the other hand is usually more hidden and subtle.

Another reason for researchers' preference for studying conflict may be that pundits and scholars simply find conflict more exciting than peace. The drama of terrorism and war is difficult to resist, and it is small wonder that so many people get swept up in the emotion. The numerous studies dealing with the role of the media in the 1991 Gulf War provides an excellent example of this tendency.² The high level of public and media interest in such topics provides an added incentive to write about this topic.

Some might also argue that dealing with the part the media play in conflicts is also less complicated than studying their role in a peace process. Protests, acts of terror, and even wars are often short-lived and the major events associated with these conflicts frequently take place in the open. A peace process on the other hand can go on for years and some of the most important developments take place behind closed doors. While this would be a perfectly suitable topic for historians, social scientists prefer more straightforward and overt case studies.

Yet another reason for the gap might be the fact that most communication scholars are located in the United States. The US has certainly experienced a good deal of political violence and war, but it has not been engaged in a major peace process since the end of Vietnam. The closest example would be the *détente* between the US and the Soviet Union that led to the end of the Cold War, but here too the role of the press was mostly ignored. The President and the State Department have served as both

² See for example Bennett and Paletz, 1994; Gannett Foundation, 1991; Kellner, 1991; Mowlana, Gerbner, and Schiller, 1992.

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mediators and facilitators for peace processes in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland. But given the parochial nature of most American research, it is hardly surprising the US scholars are more concerned with their own problems.

It is often said that it is much more difficult to build peace than to initiate conflict. The same can be said perhaps about communication research concerning peace and war. It is to be hoped that this book will provide some ideas for redressing the imbalance.

INITIAL PRINCIPLES

This study will attempt to examine the role of the news media in situations in which a democratic government is actively attempting to promote a peace process. The authorities in such situations hope to exploit the media as part of a more general struggle to mobilize elites and the public in support of their policies. In such cases one normally finds some type of opposition to that peace process that is attempting to promote its own views to the news media. It is an ongoing competition in which both sides attempt to use information and events to support their positions on the peace process.

The need to focus on democratic countries comes from the fact that the role the media play in a political process is related to how they construct news stories. When governments have complete control over the media, news is simply another form of propaganda. When dictators decide to change policies the press becomes a passive – albeit important – tool for executing those policies. The more intriguing questions concern the impact of a relatively autonomous media on a peace process. For it is in these cases that the media are most likely to have an independent influence on the process. Therefore, while many of the points being made here can be applied more generally, the role the news media play in non-democratic entities will for the most part be left out.³

The major goal of the theory is to explain when the news media are most likely to play either a constructive or destructive role in a particular peace process. We shall look at this issue from the perspective of

³ There are two exceptions to this approach, one major the other minor. The major exception can be found in chapter 5, where we deal with the role of the Jordanian press in the peace process. The second and more minor exception takes place in chapter 7, where I make a number of allusions to the role of the Palestinian press in covering the outbreak of the Second Intifada.