

Introduction

Imagine, if you would, a not-so-mythical world in which conflicts are fought within a magnificent arena. The arena was built with the latest technology and allows millions to hear stories about the battles that take place throughout the day without even coming to the event. The crowd who actually views the battles is surprisingly small. It is composed of professional storytellers (sometimes called journalists) who are responsible for turning even the most monotonous of contests into exciting drama. Sometimes managers send spies to scout the land looking for new talent, but for the most part gladiators come from miles around hoping to fight in a major event, or at least a side show. For those who are lucky enough to be chosen the benefits seem almost too good to be true: fame, fortune, and the chance to appear again. While winning the battle is always preferable to losing, everyone knows that it is better to have appeared and lost than never to have appeared at all.

The rules of entry have been handed down for generations. The soldiers of the emperor, of course, need no special permission to enter. They enter through the Royal Gate, they have an elaborate dressing room, and the management treats them with the respect they deserve. The soldiers of the noble class enter through a similar door and while their entry is not as routine as that of the rulers, they appear within the arena regularly. Finally, there is a very small door, known as Deviants' Gate, which is located in the back section of the arena, the darkest part of the stadium. The gate contains a small peephole and a particularly nasty gatekeeper whose major responsibility is to pick out the freaks and loonies who add spice to the show. Those who come through this gate usually come from the poorer classes of society and while many realize the enormous risks they face in the arena they also know that it represents their only chance for fame. To gain entry they must prove to the gatekeeper that their act will be more entertaining than their competitors'. In their desperate attempt to catch the gatekeeper's eye they dress themselves in ornate costumes and carry out bizarre, even frightening, feats. They are expected to remain in costume and character

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throughout the performance, a requirement that makes the road to honor even more difficult.

Occasionally, however, a challenger comes along who inspires the crowd with his or her bravery or cunning. Then the arena lights up with excitement as word begins to spread that a David has been found who is worthy to fight Goliath. The enthusiasm of the journalist crowd at such moments is a joy to see as they cheer for the victory of justice over evil. They dance, they prance, they pat each other on the back, tell ancient tales about a land called Watergate, and only reluctantly return to business as usual.

The news media have become the central arena for political conflicts. It is not surprising then that the role of the news media in political conflicts is an issue that has received a good deal of public attention in recent years. Policy-makers, journalists, and social scientists all point to the important role of the press in events such as the war in Bosnia, the conflict in Somalia, the Gulf war, the Palestinian *intifada*, the events at Tiananmen Square, and the massive protests throughout Eastern Europe and Russia in the dying days of the Communist regimes. Yet, when compared with other issues studied, this topic has been severely neglected by researchers.

The competition over the news media is a major element in modern political conflicts. The Pro-Choice and Pro-Life movements in America, the Serbians and the Muslims in Bosnia, Amnesty International, Russia, Chechnya, and the American government all compete for media attention as a means to achieve political influence. Each antagonist attempts to promote its own frames of the conflict to the news media in an attempt to mobilize political support for its cause. If we can understand the rules of combat and the factors that lead to success and failure in the arena, we will be one step closer to understanding the role the news media play in such conflicts.

The focus in this book will be on the role of the news media in *unequal political conflicts*. These include all public confrontations between a government and at least one other antagonist in which the state (or one state) has a significantly superior amount of coercive resources at its disposal. As detailed below, the news media are most likely to have an impact on just these types of conflicts and this is the reason for this choice. Nevertheless, many conflicts fall under this category: protests, terrorist acts, riots, rebellions, revolutions, and all-out wars between powerful countries and weaker ones.

The term “antagonist” refers to any group, institution, or state involved in an ongoing conflict with another group, institution, or state

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over a political issue. I shall refer to the more powerful antagonists as the “authorities” and to the weaker ones as “challengers”. I adopt the term “challenger” from Tilly (1978) who makes a distinction between two types of “contenders”: those who have low-cost access to resources controlled by the government (members) and those who do not (challengers). The present discussion does not therefore deal directly with the competition between political parties which takes place during and between elections. While many ideas developed here can be applied to that realm, the number of studies about the media and elections far exceeds those that look at the more intensive conflicts.

The book is designed not as a research report, but as a theoretical work that uses several case studies to illustrate the model. It is intended to put forth an approach, a way of looking at the role of the news media in political conflicts. It is also hoped that the ideas presented here can serve as a useful contribution to efforts being made to build a comprehensive model of political communication.

The theoretical model presented here is called the *political contest model*. The thrust of this model is that the best way to understand the role of the news 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. I want to put the politics back into political communication. Many of those who have studied this issue have made the same mistake as novice protest leaders. They have been so blinded by the radiance of the news media that they have lost sight of the more powerful political forces that lay beyond them.

The model rests on five major arguments. First, that *the political process is more likely to have an influence on the news media than the news media are on the political process*. The political process has a major impact on the press because political power can usually be translated into power over the news media, because the political culture of a society has a major influence on how the news media cover conflicts, because the news media are much more likely to react to political events than to initiate them, because political realities often determine how antagonists use the news media to achieve political goals, and because political decisions have a major influence on who owns the media and how they operate.

This does not mean that news media do not also influence the political process. They help set the political agenda, they can accelerate and magnify political success and failure, they can serve as independent advocates for victims of oppression, they can mobilize third parties into a conflict, and they are central agents in the construction of social frames about politics. The press serves as a powerful catalyst for political processes and it is therefore essential to understand better how this

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catalyst operates. This cycle of influence, however, usually begins within the world of politics.

The second argument is that *the authorities' level of control over the political environment is one of the key variables that determine the role of the news media in political conflicts*. Political conflicts are characterized by moves and counter-moves as each antagonist tries to initiate and control political events, to dominate political discourse about the conflict, and to mobilize as many supporters as possible to their side. Those who have success in these areas also enjoy a good deal of success in the news media.

The news media's role in these conflicts is directly affected by the outcomes of such struggles. When authorities succeed in dominating the political environment, the news media find it difficult to play an independent role. When, on the other hand, the authorities lack or lose control it provides the news media with a much greater array of sources and perspectives from which to choose. This offers important opportunities for challengers to promote their own frames to the press.

The third major argument is that *the role of the news media in political conflicts varies over time and circumstance*. This contention emphasizes the need to develop a dynamic approach to the study of this issue. Those who attempt to find a single unified role for the news media in political conflicts are wasting their time. When covering political violence and terrorism in wars such as Vietnam and the Israeli war in Lebanon, the press were accused of being virtual saboteurs who undermined military effort through biased anti-government reporting. Social movements, on the other hand, often accuse the press of being an instrument of government propaganda. Similar accusations were leveled at the press during the Gulf war and to a certain extent in the Falklands, Grenada, and Panama.

The role of the news media in conflicts varies along with such factors as the political context of the conflict, the resources, skills, and political power of the players involved, the relationship between the press and each antagonist, the state of public opinion, the ability of the journalists to gain access to the conflict events, and last but certainly not least what is happening in the field. All of this is beyond variations in the antagonists' control over the political environment mentioned above. Thus, not only does the role of the news media vary across conflicts, it can also change within the course of a single conflict.

The fourth argument is that *those who hope to understand variations in the role of the news media must look at the competition among antagonists along two dimensions: one structural and the other cultural*. The best way to learn about the rules of combat is to watch the battle. Antagonists

compete over the news media along two major dimensions. They compete over *access* to the news media and they compete over *media frames*. The model will use two dimensions of analysis, each of which contributes an important perspective on these struggles. The *structural dimension* looks at the extent of mutual dependence between the antagonists and each news medium to explain the power of each side in the transaction. This offers important insights about which political actors are most likely to gain access to the arena. The *cultural dimension* of analysis focuses on how norms, beliefs, and routines all have an influence on the construction of media frames of conflict. This second dimension serves to remind us that political contests are also struggles over meaning in which success within the news media can lead to higher levels of political support.

The fifth and final argument is that *while authorities have tremendous advantages over challengers in the quantity and quality of media coverage they receive, many challengers can overcome these obstacles and use the news media as a tool for political influence*. The literature on this topic presents mostly one side of this picture. It is a story of gloom and doom in which powerful governments can exploit the dependence of the news media to drown out alternative frames and agendas. Authorities have routine access to the news media and the staff, skills, and resources to take full advantage of that access.

There is, however, another part of the story that is just as important to tell. Challengers can and do compete with the authorities in the news media. Some of these opportunities emerge from the political blunders of the powerful while others can be attributed to outside events. The news media keep a large stock of anti-authority frames for those antagonists who have the resources and skills to use them. Researchers should focus their attention on the exceptions as well as the rules.

When taken as a whole, these five arguments suggest a process that is neither linear nor constant. The competition between authorities and challengers over the news media is as fascinating and unpredictable as politics itself. In some ways the central arena resembles the modern sports facility that can be converted into several structures, each designed for a different type of event. Sometimes the arena is used for lavish spectacles in which officials show off their most colorful costumes and weapons. At other times it is a place for fierce contests in which challengers and authorities square off in brutal combat. And at yet other times it becomes a theater-in-the-round putting on tragic morality plays about the plight of the oppressed and the need for social change. The goal of this study is to understand better the political, social, and situational factors that dictate how and when the arena is transformed.

Methods and approaches

There are two major methodological approaches in the social sciences: quantitative and qualitative (Glassner and Morena, 1989; Wimmer and Dominick, 1991). The quantitative approach is based on the natural sciences model of hypothesis-testing through statistical analysis and is best used in studies that look at the relationship between individual level variables. The qualitative approach is especially appropriate for research such as this that attempts to explain social interaction between two or more systems. Qualitative methodologies employ inductive logic by learning as much as possible about a particular social reality and then attempting to build a more general theory based on those findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The ideas presented in this work are based on about ten years of research looking at the interaction between political antagonists and the news media. I started studying the interactions between protesters and the news media (Wolfsfeld, 1984a, 1984b) and then moved on to the issues of insurrections and war (Wolfsfeld, 1993a, 1993b, 1991). In the second part of this book I present three of these studies to demonstrate the varying role of the news media in political conflicts: the Gulf war, the Palestinian *intifada*, and the attempt by the Israeli right wing to derail the Israeli–Palestinian peace accords. Details of the methodology of these three cases can be found in the appendix at the end of this work. The model, however, derives from a much broader set of research.

The process of reasoning was very much an inductive one in which I kept trying to understand how the role of the news media varied over time and circumstance. My goal was to try to develop an understanding of the basic rules. Previous works on this subject have been limited to looking at the role of the news media in either a particular conflict (such as the Gulf war) or a particular *type* of conflict (such as terrorism). This fragmented approach to the topic inhibits our ability to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the role of the news media varies.

There were two central research questions that guided these studies:

1. Which factors best explain how political antagonists and the news media influence one another?
2. When is the news media most likely to play an independent role in political conflicts? The formulation of the first question assumes a two-way flow of influence in which it is just as important to study the impact of antagonists on the news media as it is to look at the influence of the media on political actors. The second research question forces us to look at the issue comparatively to understand better the varying role of the news media.

Thus, the goal of the work is to build theory. One will find very little normative analysis within this work. There is no attempt, for example, to make any value judgments about whether the news media should be given more or less independence in wartime. The assumption is that governments generally prefer a less independent news media during war and that most journalists would like to break away. The model is designed to explain which factors increase the likelihood of each of these scenarios coming true.

I used a similar methodology in all these studies. I interviewed activists, journalists, and officials about the quantity and quality of interactions among them. When possible, I also tried to be present to observe the interactions directly. I then attempted to look at how the media covered the conflict, combining systematic content analysis with a deeper, more qualitative type of reading. My field experience was also supplemented by the work of my students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who carried out many similar studies for seminar papers. I was also very conscious of the work of my colleagues in political communication who had carried out comparable studies in other countries, especially the United States.

A qualitative methodology does have its drawbacks. The model that has emerged can never be completely “tested”: it can only be applied with greater and lesser success. One can demonstrate but not “prove” the validity of one’s conclusions; the goal is to be convincing. Researchers must make a conscious decision to sacrifice precision in hopes of attaining at least some vision. The method is unabashedly subjective. Researchers find themselves constantly moving back and forth between two worlds: one composed of political actors and journalists who are constantly negotiating over news stories, the other of social science that tries to place these interactions within a broader context. Attempting to interpret systematically other people’s interpretations is a risky way to make a living.

A significant part of this work deals with the social construction of political reality, about the construction of frames. I feel compelled, therefore, to say something directly about my own political frames rather than leaving the reader to infer them from my analyses. I was born in the United States and moved to Israel for ideological reasons about twenty years ago. My political affiliations run left of center and I generally support the Labor party. I did reserve duty in the Israeli army during the Lebanese war, the *intifada*, and the Gulf war. During the time of the *intifada*, I believed Israel should recognize the PLO and attempt to achieve a political compromise. My position on the Gulf war ran along the same lines as the vast majority of Israelis: I supported the Allied war

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effort against Iraq. I also support the peace process that began with the Oslo agreement between the Rabin government and the PLO.

Nevertheless, although it may suggest some character flaw, I find myself capable of empathizing with most of the antagonists I have studied over the years. I sympathize with Palestinian attempts to free themselves of Israeli occupation and yet I also understand those who believed that the violence must be put down by force. Despite my support of the peace process, I fully understand the right-wing protesters in Israel who believe that it will bring nothing but death and destruction. I also understand Saddam Hussein's aspirations to defy the West during the Gulf conflict, despite my support for the Allies in that confrontation. The key in qualitative methodology is to develop an empathy with each antagonist while avoiding over-identifying with any of them.

Finally, a note about the ethnocentrism of this study. The fact that so much of my research has been carried out in Israel has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand Israel is a place with a great deal of conflict that gets an enormous amount of attention in the news media and thus provides an especially intriguing site for this research. It can also be argued that the fact that so much previous work has been carried out in the United States makes it essential to look at other cultures for the purposes of comparison.

Critics will nevertheless be justified in being suspicious of any model whose author has spent so much time in such an unusual political milieu. There is a tendency in American political science to label any research conducted outside the United States as "comparative politics." While there is nothing inherently offensive about such a classification, I do believe that the ideas presented here are applicable to other countries. The theoretical discussion in the first part of the book purposely avoids using examples from the Middle East to underscore this point. In the end, however, readers must decide whether the arguments presented here also explain the role of the news media in their own countries.

Organization of the argument

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is devoted to developing the political contest model and Part 2 is dedicated to applying that model to the three case studies mentioned above. The final part of the book consists of a single concluding chapter.

The argument begins in Chapter 1 by looking at the competition among antagonists over access to the news media. The discussion focuses on when political power can and cannot be translated into power over the media. This is the structural level of analysis that looks at the

relationship between antagonists and the news media by considering the relative need each side has for the services of the other. The analytical tools provided should allow researchers a method for monitoring this aspect of the conflict.

The second chapter looks at the contest over media frames that constitutes the cultural level of analysis. This is a competition over the meaning of the conflict as each antagonist attempts to promote its own interpretations to the news media. The factors that determine success and failure in this realm are more subtle and more difficult to discern, but just as important in determining the media's role. Here too one finds that one can only understand the role of the news media by looking to the political and cultural forces that help shape the story.

While the first two chapters are devoted to explaining how antagonists influence the news media, Chapter 3 examines the influence of the news media on the antagonists. A "continuum of influence" is put forth with three ideal points, each representing a different role for the news media in political conflicts. The discussion looks at some of the political outcomes that can be attributed to the press and provides some guidelines for evaluating the extent of media influence on a given conflict.

The second part of the book begins with a discussion of how the model can explain the role the news media can play in attempts by social movements to influence government policy. As noted, the case study chosen to illustrate the dynamics of this process was the protest in Israel against the Declaration of Principles signed between Israel and the PLO in the fall of 1993. This conflict offers many advantages for those interested in understanding how the role of the news media varies over time and political circumstance. Chapter 4 uses the political contest model to explain the competition over access to the news media during this period, while Chapter 5 looks at the struggle over the meaning of the peace process. The analyses focus on how differences among movements, news media, and political control all had significant influences on the ability of challengers to promote alternative frames to the news media.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are devoted to discussing the role of the news media in insurrections and wars. Here the importance of control over the political environment becomes even more important in deciding the role of the news media. The dynamics and consequences of this process are explained in Chapter 6 through a detailed comparison of the struggle over the political environment that characterized the *intifada* and the Gulf war. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to exploring the contest over media frames in those two confrontations. The analytical tools devel-

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oped in the first part of the book are used to explain how both political and journalistic factors combined to produce very different outcomes.

The final part of the book is intended to bring the argument full circle. The news media played a very different role in each of these conflicts and hopefully the model helps explain why. Those who want to capture what is happening in the arena had better be equipped with a wide-angle lens and some high-speed film. While taking the photograph may become more difficult, the added effort should produce a more realistic picture.