

CONFLICTS IN THE NEWS

Publicity interests, public images and political impacts

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Conflict pervades society, and the news gravitates to conflict. News coverage of conflicts commonly generates its own contentiousness, with partisans typically accusing the media of bias against their side. Despite the frequency with which the topic arises, the relationship between news reporting and socio-political conflicts has received surprisingly little systematic analysis either in media studies or in conflict studies.

In the most comprehensive, although now somewhat dated, review of conflict research, Gurr (1980) listed over 1,250 works, and not one of their titles mentioned the media. Several referred to communication or perception as factors in conflicts, but there seemed no attempt to include media institutions and practices as integral to those problems. It is perhaps sobering for media scholars to learn how rarely researchers in other fields include the media as a serious part of their analysis.

The common-sense and dominant mode of analysis within media studies, even more dominant in critical commentaries on the media, has been a simple 'bias' model, which concentrates on exposing media content. These studies of course vary in quality and value. Some – in the line of defence most commonly adopted by media practitioners – simply betray the biases of their authors rather than exposing those of the media. Some impose unreal expectations in their harsh evaluations of media performance, not paying sufficient attention to audience considerations and the influence of news values, to questions of cost, or giving due regard to the limited knowledge which journalists possessed at the time of publication and the difficulties they were confronting. But, as often as not, studies in this tradition mount telling and persuasive critiques of media coverage, exposing distortions, lack of proportion and double standards. The criticisms directed against the studies can often be addressed – the points of substance debated, fairer tests of media performance agreed upon, and the methods and standards of the studies hopefully thus progressed.

The more basic problem with simple bias studies lies not in their critiques of content but in their (usually implicit) models of cause and effect. Explanation is in terms of editorial attitudes. The most immediate problem is how rarely they take seriously the news media as institutions with their own routines, constraints, incentives, and traditions. Even in the more ideological critiques, while the analytical trappings typically stress structure (the role of capitalism, etc.), the accompanying morality play is pure agency. The implication is that the news media could and should behave differently simply by an act of will, a change in editorial attitude, and that if they wanted to they would.

If the bias approach fails to adopt a properly institutional perspective, it is not surprising that it also fails to pay serious attention to environmental factors. Each conflict has different types of relationship between the contenders, different stakes and different modes of resolution for allocating the outcomes. Consequently the media figure differently as arenas, more central in some conflicts than in others, and the contenders have differing publicity interests and strategies. The evidence and analysis in bias studies are neither internalist nor externalist, in Schlesinger and Turner's terms (1994: 26–7), but rather are limited to disembodied textual critiques.

Equally, the implicit model of media effects in these studies has had a 'democratic bias', casting the media's role in terms of its impact upon public opinion. This has been true even in left-wing analyses stressing the media's role in maintaining hegemony. This has had some unfortunate side-effects. It creates a methodological problem, because there is a vacuum of unobservable data at the centre of any consideration of media impacts. It also tends to equate effects with content, but it is not necessarily the case that news coverage has most impact when it is most biased. The fundamental substantive point, however, is that only in elections and referenda is public opinion directly decisive: while it is not necessarily irrelevant to the outcome of other conflicts, neither is it necessarily 'determining'.

In this chapter I explore in turn six types of conflict in the news, grouped according to their participants and the stakes involved. The formulations presented here result primarily from reflections on Australian media and politics, but an attempt has been made to state the key relationships so that their relevance to other liberal democracies will be apparent. Naturally the conflicts considered are not exhaustive of types, but they include some of the most consequential and common. The procedure is simply to state the central characteristics of each of the six types of conflict, and then to consider the publicity interests and strategies of the contenders, the characteristics of each conflict which are likely to affect its coverage in the news, and how that coverage may impact upon its pursuit and outcome. The usefulness of this procedure is always threatened because the idiosyncrasies of examples within each type seem too numerous to allow meaningful comparisons between generic classes of conflict. Although the danger of generalisation is

ever-present, the types of conflict considered here provide sufficient contrasts to illustrate how important it is to include the nature of the conflict and the varying roles of the media as an arena when analysing news coverage.

INTER-PARTY CONFLICT

In a two-sided party system, as exists (with important qualifications) in Australia, the UK and USA, the electoral contest to form the next government is a zero-sum winner-take-all game, decided by public opinion.

There is a recurring institutionalised dynamic to inter-party conflict based on the inevitable and constantly replayed competition for the indivisible prize of control of government. There cannot be a win-win solution. It cannot be that both sides' prospects are improving simultaneously. One prospers electorally only at the expense of the other. This irreconcilable conflict exists irrespective of what other differences (e.g. over policies and ideologies, or as representatives of competing social groups) the contest may embody at some particular moment. Resolutions – the electoral defeat of one side by the other – are landmarks in an ongoing conflict that will always be renewed as long as the party system continues.

A zero-sum winner-take-all game is conducive to the most ruthless of tactics, where winning by whatever means is preferable to losing nobly. Over recent decades the major parties have pursued the essential logic of the game with a spiralling cynicism and toughness. Both parties have increasingly viewed policy debates primarily through the prism of gaining partisan advantage. Each has adopted the view that it is easier to persuade swinging voters of the other's defects rather than its own virtues, and that such voters' decisions are guided more by who they want to vote against rather than who they want to vote for. The result is the production of constantly negative claims by each about the other.

More than in almost any other conflict, inter-party politics encourages the exaggeration of difference. The constant search for publicity and for partisan point's scoring lends itself to posturing and shadow play. Pursuing the conflict in this way generates a peculiar picture of public policy and social causality. The opposition seeks to portray the government as the primary cause for whatever problems currently confront the electorate. In turn, the government seeks to claim credit for all positive developments while deflecting the responsibility for all negative ones.

The competition for publicity is most dynamic when the news organisations' audiences are of mixed partisanship. Depending upon media structures, an open embrace of one party against the other is commercially hazardous if a significant segment of the audience would be offended. Because the audience tends to be evenly split, and because figures from both parties are valued as good sources (although government much more than opposition), there is

commonly an emphasis on balance in reporting inter-party conflicts, especially during election campaigns.

Inter-party conflicts are the most intensively covered in the news. The constant and heavy news attention is produced by a strong concentration of elite reporters, centered upon an institution – parliament – which is the most prolific generator of newsworthy information in society. But the reporting of inter-party conflicts has many unique features, which makes it impossible to extrapolate to other kinds of conflict. In almost no other conflicts is the logic always and inevitably zero-sum, negating the possibility of reconciliation or compromise. They are the only conflicts where public opinion is directly the arbiter, so that securing publicity through news is prerequisite to success. The incentive towards public posturing, and the magnification of differences, the wish to cast their opponents in a negative light, are ever-present features.

INTRAPARTY CONFLICT

In contrast to inter-party politics, intraparty conflicts are between ostensible allies. 'Conflicts tend to interfere with each other' (Schattschneider 1960: 67), and electoral strategists certainly believe that internal 'disunity is death' is the external party competition. So intraparty conflict threatens to undermine the party's larger purpose. Its public appearance must therefore be controlled and subordinated to the inter-party electoral competition. The immediate forum for the resolution of intraparty conflict is not the public but the party's internal organs. Even though in electorally pragmatic parties, internal operations must be carried through in ways acceptable to the public, the weight of opinion within the party is often distributed very differently from the weight of opinion outside.

The resulting publicity interests and strategies are obviously very different from those of inter-party conflicts. Rather than generating public perceptions that magnify the contrasts, there is an incentive to minimise them. However, the optimal strategy is not always simply to avoid all coverage. Because news surveillance of party politics is so intense, some coverage, whether wanted or not, is likely, so participants must have strategies for dealing with it. But beyond coping with inescapable coverage, publicity may serve a positive purpose for contenders in their internal aims. Faction leaders may seek publicity to signal to their own constituencies that they are indeed pursuing the course that their followers would want, or to signal more publicly their dominance over factional rivals. Or they may try to use publicity to convince wavering by shaping in a self-fulfilling manner the perceptions of the balance of forces within the party. Or challengers may seek to shift support by using publicity, provoking incidents to de-stabilise existing patterns. As always, the use of publicity by one side tends to escalate, inviting further responses from the other side.

In public statements, there is often the attempt to achieve differentiation without disloyalty or open dissent. Disagreement is normally expressed obliquely, with a difference of emphasis rather than direct rebuttal, and without personal criticism. Even more importantly, however, intraparty publicity strategies are more likely to use covert manoeuvres, leaks and background briefings, where the name of the source is not publicly revealed. These allow much greater latitude than do the constraints of party loyalty in public statements. In one — typically less than subtle — example, a challenger to Victorian Labor leader John Cain gave a series of 'correct' answers during an interview with a press reporter. As she was leaving he called out after her: 'It's funny the things you're prepared to say on the record, and those you're willing to say off the record.'

The prevalence of covert manoeuvres, especially in a leadership struggle, where clear evidence of the state of party sentiment typically does not exist, has important consequences for the quality of media reporting. It allows more scope for competitive 'scoops', but also carries more risks of public disavowals. Often, however, it means that unsourced news reports have a more substantial basis than the public, especially the partisans of the affected party, realise.

The pressure to maintain the appearance of unity is strong and, in a disciplined party, is likely to prevail in all but the most extreme conflicts. In terms of policy difference or the allocation of internal positions and patronage, the benefits of unity produce strong incentives towards finding and publicly displaying common ground. In the face of persistent policy differences, there is often a studied ambiguity, or even a willingness to bow to the leader for the sake of unity. However, in some areas, such as party leadership contests, given the unshakable ambitions of each contender, such compromise is not possible.

Media coverage has frequently been centrally implicated in the development of leadership challenges. One reason why such challenges have been so frequent in Australia in recent decades (Tiffen 1989 lists twenty-three challenges between 1968 and 1989; since then there have been around another fifteen) is the perceived importance of media coverage of leaders in affecting a party's electoral fortunes. Moreover, the process by which leaders are challenged mid-term is not institutionalised and regular but rather is problematic, and relatively uncharted. As a result news reports have often become flash-points, major steps of escalation, sometimes even catalysts in forcing a showdown.

The impact of publicity in intraparty conflicts is often explosive because, more than in any of the other conflicts considered, the contenders have a complex relationship through which they are allies as well as antagonists. They have a direct personal relationship, but one that is also refracted through the news media. News reports are biased to highlight the most dramatic aspects, in this case the degree of conflict between the leaders. This is often

expressed with a hardness and sharpness quite different from the rhythms and fluidity of actual personal encounters. The participants frequently accord more political currency to the public news reports than to their actual private interactions. Especially when there are unfavourable news reports based on covert sources, they can directly affect issues of trust and workable personal relations.

BUREAUCRATIC CONFLICT

Conflict within the bureaucracy is a vital aspect of the exercise of power and the direction of government policy. Yet this type is the least newsworthy of the six here considered, and the media are typically of least relevance in its pursuit and resolution.

Sometimes bureaucratic conflict is intense, sometimes enduring because of the clashing orientations of the departments involved. Sometimes the conflict is overlaid by, and gains extra force from, strong personal rivalries and antipathies. However, the essential characteristics of bureaucratic conflict are that it is highly rule-governed, instrumental and concerned with well-defined finite stakes. The contenders inhabit the same social world, sharing many career goals and social understandings, and have a direct and continuing relationship with one another. Especially in a Westminster-style career public service, most contenders have an incentive to adopt a longer term perspective, in which the immediate conflict is not allowed to escalate to become something more disruptive and threatening.

In terms of observability and newsworthiness bureaucratic conflicts do not lend themselves to coverage. They are conducted in closed forums, by publicly anonymous personalities who do not seek to publicise their activities. The stakes are often subject to disaggregation, to incremental resolution and compromise, where any threat of dramatic show-down is deliberately defused and delayed. Although the stakes are very often tangible ones concerning resources and administrative power, they are typically couched in technical language, remote from the experience of the public, and buried in sub-clauses which only the most determined can penetrate. Moreover, the outcome may become clear only after implementation, at which stage the evidence is dispersed in time and space.

Until recently, and even now within strict limits, most public servants have lacked the right to an independent public voice. So the most frequent source of important publicity about bureaucratic conflict is from covert manoeuvres. Leaks are primarily a weapon of disaffection, a tactic for vetoing rather than advancing bureaucratic moves. They are most likely to occur when official actions are running against proclaimed policy with at least some insiders thus aggrieved. As always, the mystery surrounding the identity of the leaker can itself be part of the impact.

Publicity can impact upon bureaucratic conflicts by elevating the political temperature, and bringing the involvement of other groups. However, the weight of power inside the bureaucracy may be very different from public opinion or the volume of voices outside. Sometimes the altered political equations that publicity brings can change the outcome. On other occasions it only produces the appearance of a revision, influencing the timing or presentation rather than the substance of what's done. A review is called, public attention fades and, after a delay, the original plan is substantially achieved.

The traditional situation affecting coverage of bureaucratic politics in the news is clear. In contrast to the regular and intense news coverage of party politics, bureaucratic politics, despite its importance in policy making, receives the least news coverage of the various conflicts considered. Official regulations, media considerations of observability and newsworthiness, and bureaucratic tradition and prudence have all conspired in the same direction.

Nevertheless many straws of change are in the wind. Not only has freedom of information legislation been introduced and official regulations about secrecy substantially liberalised, but these have induced a more far-reaching cultural change with greater official dissemination of information about departmental activities and achievements and more pro-active attitudes to publicity. Several political factors have led in the same direction. It is probably not coincidental that the *Yes, Minister* humour of bureaucratic mandarins, immune from the power of mere elected politicians, gained currency in popular culture just as it was in fact becoming less true. The greater intensity of party conflicts has been accompanied by an increasing ascendancy of politicians over bureaucrats and an orientation towards achieving results over the traditional pre-eminence of due process. Increasingly, the idea of bureaucratic impartiality has been diminished, as senior appointments have been influenced by changes in the party in power and the growth in number of ministerial advisers has offered an alternative, and more politically attuned, source of advice. Moreover, the notion of a long-term career service has been eroded not only by the increasing partisanship of senior appointments and the emphasis upon outcomes over process, but by the variety of routes towards accelerated promotion. All these factors mean that the traditional long-term perspective may give way more to short-term considerations, making victory in immediate conflicts more important. A more politicised, *win/loss*-oriented, bureaucracy, with *market*-influenced career patterns, is likely to further break down conventional constraints. In turn, these changes will increase the visibility of bureaucratic conflicts in the news.

INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT

The most recurrent of industrial conflicts, over wages and conditions for a particular union's members, are typically focused on well-defined material stakes. They are decided by bargaining strength and by the calculation by the contenders of their interests and possibilities. Negotiations between the groups are highly institutionalised, and although the representatives of the employers and the unions typically belong to rather different social worlds, the crucial arenas in the conflict's resolution involve direct, if limited and stylised, interactions between them. The news media are clearly a secondary battlefield.

Presentation of industrial conflict has been one of the most criticised areas of news coverage (perhaps most famously by the Glasgow University Media Group 1976 and 1980, cf Tunstall 1977 and 1981). The most common critical themes are that it is the consequences of strikes rather than the causes that are reported, that unions are only newsworthy when they are undertaking publicly disruptive activities, and that disputes are described in a language that always conveys greater legitimacy to the employers' views. It is also the area where complaints by reporters were most common about the editorial treatment of their work (e.g. Tiffen 1989: 46-9). Industrial relations reporters' criticism of the editorial treatment of their coverage partly reflects that this is the area of greatest conflict between news values and the outlook of major sources. Their most common sources are trades union leaders, but editorial judgements of newsworthiness and audience interest commonly run in an anti-union direction (cf Tunstall 1971: 124, 268).

However, problems in news coverage of industrial conflict reflect not only editorial weakness, willful or inadvertent, but stem from genuine difficulties of reporting occasioned partly by the publicity strategies of the contenders. Both sides are comprised of professional negotiators and experienced deal makers. They generally seek to maximise their flexibility, which too much accountability in process can inhibit. The public statements of both are marked by a high degree of bluff. Typically between ambit claims for far more and a refusal to countenance anything different from what exists, there is incremental movement toward a mutually acceptable compromise. Equally typically, the straight reporting of the antagonists' public statements en route would have conveyed a very misleading impression of the actual state of negotiations and the eventual outcome. The situation is ripe for public rhetoric to give the appearance of intransigence while hiding strategic suppleness in practice.

The impact of news coverage on the outcome of industrial conflicts, especially those focused on salary demands of a specific group of workers, is rarely substantial. To the extent that such reporting affects the evolution of a conflict, overwhelmingly it is through a hardening of attitudes, and so a prolongation of the dispute. As in intraparty conflicts, the contenders are often

dealing with each other both directly and as refracted through the media, and if what they see in the news contradicts understandings reached in private those understandings can be destroyed. Nevertheless, the two sides are in search not of spiritual harmony but simply a mutually workable material outcome. Nor is the outcome dependent upon some amorphous public opinion. So, between professional negotiators focused upon well-defined stakes, publicity may have less of an impact here than in many other conflicts.

The other important way in which publicity can inflame an industrial conflict is to provoke intervention by third parties, most often the government. Political parties and other pressure groups, business and union, may seek to use particular industrial conflicts for their own broader purposes. The involvement of other parties will typically widen and deepen the original conflict, raising and re-defining the stakes.

As with bureaucratic politics, the nature of industrial conflict has been changing radically in the last two decades. The frequency of strikes has (in several countries, perhaps for contrasting reasons) declined sharply. When industrial conflict is conducted under a centralised wage-fixing system, with industry-wide occupational trades unions, as traditionally it has been in Australia, it is more visible in the news, especially insofar as it was conducted and resolved via public hearings in the Industrial Commission. When the emphasis moves towards a more decentralised company-based system of enterprise bargaining, there is much less visibility in the news, unless one side wants to publicly highlight a dispute, normally by making it a 'test case'. As the pattern of industrial conflict has changed, so has the nature of news coverage.

PRESSURE GROUP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT CONFLICTS

The range of conflicts included under this rubric is even more diverse than elsewhere. Both pressure groups and social movements vary in their aims, their resources, their sophistication and their ideological trappings, even more than do the organisations already considered. Despite this almost infinite variety, three main publicity interests are generally applicable:

- to maintain, mobilise and extend their constituency;
- to influence the public agenda; and
- to affect government policy.

The last of these aims is the most finite and focused. The crucial consideration here is that a group's inclination to seek publicity is in inverse proportion to the likelihood of its achieving its aims. Especially with sectional interest groups seeking resource advantages for their own constituencies, insofar as a

pressure group is likely to gain what it wants from government without a vocal public stance, it is likely to remain quiet. If the government is receptive to the group's viewpoint, it is more likely to negotiate quietly with the bureaucracy and the ministers than to voice its demands in public. Moreover, as with all conflict participants, public stances are marked by special pleading and selective emphasis, highlighting their handicaps and omitting their privileges, proclaiming their unfulfilled demands while keeping silent on the concessions and benefits they have already achieved.

In the larger, more diffuse, battles to influence the public agenda and increase their support, pressure groups and social movements often perceive themselves as in conflict with those of opposing views. But their relationship is quite different from most other conflicts. Often there is little or no direct contact between them, and there is no reason why they need to reach any reconciliation or accommodation. In this typically remote and unfocused conflict, the media can play a peculiar role, because the contending pressure groups often gain their knowledge of each other to a considerable degree from news coverage. The reported actions of one group trigger responses from its opponents, and so the media themselves are often catalysts in how controversies develop. Indeed one side is often energised by what it sees as the outrageous demands and claims of the other, resulting in a greater intensity of activity and a greater prominence of the issue in the news agenda.

Nevertheless, while media prominence plays a role in mobilising constituencies, it can also escalate internal tensions. It may intensify competition between groups trying to represent the same cause. It may increase jealousies between leadership rivals, if one is accorded the higher status in the media (Girtin 1980: 128-9). Leaders of these organisations do not necessarily have the same authority, and the groups do not necessarily have the same internal discipline, as the groups considered in the preceding conflicts. The tensions between building cadres and pursuing electorally acceptable outcomes may be intense. Nor is there any necessarily compelling reason for them to capture some middle ground of public opinion, because maintaining solidarity and enlarging their constituencies by reiterating ideological certainties may be more internally rewarding.

Pressure groups figure frequently in the news, but not commonly under conditions of their own choosing. They more often appear in a reactive than a pro-active way. Their capacity to achieve publicity may depend on their skill in reacting to stories currently on the news agenda, in acting as sources in running controversies, providing either viewpoints or information in a timely and newsworthy way. This partly explains the apparent paradox that pressure groups are often in the news, but their members often feel frustrated by their inability to achieve coverage.

In terms of initiating news coverage, their campaigns are often ignored. Most often their news-initiating potential is a negative one, either in their ability to make credible threats or to stage events that become spot news, but

typically then framed as disruptions or curiosities rather than dissent. In staging such campaigns their capacity to generate attention may depend not on how mainstream they are but on how deviant and outrageous.

The ability of interest groups to provide reactions to running stories is most basically a matter of resources. The variable capacities of pressure groups for publicity can be extremely pronounced. A professional organisation whose primary purpose is to monitor and react to public debates, to challenge contrary views, to gather and disseminate newsworthy information has a news generating and hence lobbying potential which others lack.

In judging the relevance and newsworthiness of a pressure group, there is often more than the usual room for editorial discretion, for news judgements to be affected by editorial sympathies and partisanship (see e.g. Goldenberg 1975). The ability of pressure groups to make news is more inherently problematic than for political party leaders, who have both the legitimacy of leading representative constituencies and the ability to take indisputably consequential political actions. Such judgements are sometimes simply a matter of individual attitudes, but often they reflect tendencies in the wider political environment to which news coverage is sensitive. Whereas two decades ago, it was almost impossible for environmental groups to achieve prominent coverage, now they are routinely part of the news agenda.

More than in the previously discussed conflicts, the news coverage of pressure groups and social movements generates apparent paradoxes, propositions that run against immediate expectations: Their visibility and 'vocalness' have no relation to their likely immediate impact on government policy; the prominence accorded to their opponents may also benefit themselves by stimulating the issue area; yet success in achieving prominence may increase internal tensions; and pressure groups do figure prominently in the news but largely in a reactive, and only occasionally in an initiating, way.

In conclusion, a final difference can be noted: in some senses, especially for social movements, news coverage may be an end in itself, rather than just a means towards some other political or policy end. The stakes for social movements often have a symbolic as well as a material dimension. Battles over status politics – gaining official endorsement of their world view, or recognition of the importance of their viewpoint, or acceptance of themselves as legitimate representatives – are often a major pre-occupation of social movements. So the nature of news coverage generated, of publicity, of how it is framed, may itself be one measure of success. While this represents significant success of a kind, it often generates rhetoric, which will bear at best an uncertain relationship to any changing allocation of material resources.

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

News coverage of international conflicts differs from all the domestic conflicts considered above in two fundamental ways:

- 1 The news audience falls entirely on one side of the political division.
- 2 The news sources are drawn overwhelmingly, perhaps entirely, from one side of the conflict.

As a result, there has traditionally been much less emphasis on balance, and much more partiality in news reports. As in issues involving social deviance, the political rewards for in-group conformity are pronounced, while questioning orthodoxy can be politically dangerous. As conflict escalates, and the domestic political temperature rises, this tendency becomes even more pronounced.

News coverage of international conflicts has typically been marked by ethnocentrism, as is international news generally. The more unfamiliar or remote the country, the more familiar and dramatic tend to be the themes in the stories selected, whether or not these priorities actually capture the orientations and priorities of the participants. There is also a search for 'home town' angles, especially among the more popularly-oriented media: during the pivotal month of August 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* featured the crisis on its front page on twenty-three occasions, and sixteen of these focused on Australia or Australians (Tiffin 1992). International coverage is often an extension of domestic political controversies and agendas, often in ways which allow government interests and outlooks to dominate. This can allow markedly different priorities and themes to dominate in different countries. My favourite example comes from the 1960s when the United Nations used to regularly criticise Australia for its colonial policies in Papua New Guinea, which used to anger (and embarrass) the government and especially its minister for territories, Charles Barnes. On one occasion the pro-government Melbourne *Herald* covered this story under the headline 'Barnes Rebukes United Nations' – although it carried no information as to how stung the rest of the world was by this rebuke.

In terms of its impact on conflicts, news coverage is rarely a factor in their actual international dimensions. One country may have its perceptions of the other fashioned by what is in the former's media, but most of the time governments thankfully have much more substantial sources of information. Any such media influence is probably infrequent and marginal.

In fact, the media's major impact is likely to be in fashioning governments' perceptions of the domestic political possibilities, the costs and benefits of certain actions. It should be remembered that every international conflict has a *domestic* dimension. How a leader is perceived to handle an international conflict will impact upon his or her domestic political standing. Most leaders

CONCLUSION

are acutely aware of this. Even when the world was hovering on the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, still prominent in President Kennedy's thinking were the possible ramifications on the upcoming congressional elections.

In the build-up of tensions, the media is more likely to be a force for escalating than for reducing tensions. In those very intense conflicts that can lead up to war, the news coverage is especially prone to emphasising righteous indignation rather than canvassing precise estimates of the likelihood of success, the costs of conflict and the relative military power of the opposing sides. Although it would be rare for this to be a decisive factor in any outbreak of international violence, in situations of heightened tension it is more common for the news media to give succour to the war party than to the forces for peace.

However, the news media have fewer constraints to enforce consistency of viewpoint than almost any other social institution. While the tenor of their coverage is more likely to favour hawkish viewpoints, there are many tensions between the presence of the media, even an editorially supportive media, and the military conduct of a war. Media's demands for immediate disclosure, their exaggeration of the most recent trends (both positive and negative), their (erratic) focus on the sufferings occasioned by the war, and their highlighting of divisions within allied ranks all make their role more problematic and diverse.

Moreover, the dominant pattern of insularity and ignorance of the other side in international conflicts has been significantly qualified by the rise of globalisation. Especially in the less-intense conflicts, where 'patriotic fundamentalism' is not aroused, there is now more diversity in the views presented, although this is usually far short of parity. National boundaries have become more porous. All types of international exchange — trade, tourism, culture, etc. — have increased enormously. Some parts of the media themselves are now more internationally structured and much more mobile than they used to be — both technologically, where instant communication between most areas of the globe is now possible, and economically. The weight of the markets for international news agencies, for example, has changed enormously, so that emphasis now falls on the breadth of an agency's clientele — to the extent that the mid-1970s' criticisms made by UNESCO and others probably need qualification. The trend has profound implications for the reporting of international conflicts. During the Gulf War, for the first time in history there was instantaneous reporting via satellite from both sides of the military divide. The media's mobility, and its ability to broadcast in real time, make effective censorship far more difficult than ever before, although news management and other control mechanisms are still strong.

News coverage of socio-political conflicts does not conform to a single pattern. Nor do the media play a consistent role in the various conflicts here considered. However, neither are the variations random nor inexplicable. This analysis suggests that the nature of a given conflict influences the publicity interests and strategies of contenders, the capacity and desire of the news media to cover that conflict, and whether and how news coverage impacts upon its conduct and resolution. Table 12.1 outlines what the foregoing discussion has suggested are the central questions about conflicts and their news coverage. From these and other considerations a more extensive discussion

Table 12.1 Central questions about conflicts and their news coverage

Conflict characteristics

- Are the overt stakes in the conflict but one part of a larger relationship, in which both parties have some interest in mutual accommodation and workable relations? Is there a direct personal working relationship between the contenders?
- How amenable is the conflict to compromise? Do the stakes lend themselves to disaggregation and/or incremental resolutions?
- Has either of the participants an ulterior interest in escalating the conflict over and above the overt stakes?
- How rule-governed, institutionalised and instrumental is the pursuit of the conflict?
- In what forum, how and by whom is the immediate conflict resolved?
- How institutionalised are the two sides pursuing the conflict, how internally disciplined and united? How representative and authoritative are the spokespersons?

New Coverage

- How do media audiences overlap with the political constituencies involved?
- How do regular news sources relate to the lines of conflict?
- What sorts of easily observable and newsworthy occasions does the conflict generate?
- How important is publicity to the successful pursuit of the conflict? Is publicity intrinsic, helpful, irrelevant or counter-productive?
- To what extent does the conflict generate opportunities for shadow play? What bonuses, if any, do the contenders get from public pursuit of the conflict?
- How regular and intense is news coverage?

could be generated of hypotheses about the quality and direction of coverage and the degree of media impact upon its intensity and/or the direction of its outcome.

As an institution, the news media are geared primarily towards their audiences and sources. Where, as in inter-party conflicts these have a rough parity, the reporting is more balanced. Where viewpoints are not strongly represented in either sources or audience, there is more often overt partiality and less cross-testing of views. The dominant pattern of partial and one-sided coverage of international conflicts, for example, should not be surprising, although to remind ourselves of it is still important.

News organisations are geared towards regular output. Conflicts vary in the types of occasion and showdown they generate, and hence in how easily observable they are for news organisations. While some are pursued in public forums and occasionally generate spot news, perhaps the most prolific source is in the public stances and posturings of the contenders. A basic variable is, then, whether the nature of the conflict makes publicity an intrinsic and/or desirable part of its pursuit, and in particular whether the public escalation of differences is politically rewarding? The answer is a clear yes in inter-party conflict, often yes in international and industrial conflicts, and usually no in intraparty and bureaucratic conflicts. It is in these latter, where the political costs of posturing are most substantial, that cover manoeuvres — leaks and briefings — are most likely to be used. In those conflicts where there are ulterior rewards for magnifying the differences news coverage is likely to be both more extensive and more strident in tone than some 'objective' measure of the conflict's intensity would provide, while the converse also holds: in those conflicts where neither side seeks to posture, conflicts can be more intense and important than ever appears in the news.

While the quality of news coverage is to a considerable extent affected by the interplay of publicity interests, typically in nearly all conflicts, the capacities for publicity of the contenders are unequal and asymmetrical. They are most nearly balanced in inter-party conflict, but even here there is always a substantial difference between government and opposition in news generating capacities. The publicity interests of any contender coincides only erratically with complete accuracy and extensive disclosure. Without countervailing mechanisms of accountability from opponents and/or journalists, they are likely to have adverse implications for the reliability and balance of news coverage.

The media's role in affecting the outcome of disputes should not be exaggerated. These conflicts are determined most of the time by the balance of forces surrounding the issue at stake. Nevertheless, given that the frame for most news coverage of conflicts is to accentuate the sharpness of the antagonism it is likely that, to the extent that the antagonists' views of each other are refracted through the media, the impact on their attitudes will be towards rigidification and escalation rather than towards compromise and conciliation. Moreover, when the media act as sources of fresh information

about the intentions and actions of the other side, news coverage can provide the flashpoint or catalyst in the further development of the conflict, sometimes dramatically so.

The time when news coverage is likely to have the most substantial impact on the outcome of a conflict is when publicity changes the political equations by moving the conflict from a closed arena to a more open and public one. This changes the weight of political considerations, e.g. from bureaucratic considerations to more general political and electoral factors. Sometimes the media impact may be in terms of how the coverage changed public attitudes — and sometimes as a result of biased coverage — but this will constitute at best only one small strand in any comprehensive consideration of the media's role in socio-political conflicts.

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