



seit 1558

Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

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## **Proactive Crisis Communication?**

*News Coverage on International Crises  
in German Print and Broadcasting Media*

International Conference “Journalism Research in the Public Interest”  
November 21, 2009, Winterthur (CH)

## Outline

1. Introduction
2. Crisis Communication
3. Methodological Approach
4. Results
5. Conclusion

## Introduction

### International Crises

- issues of highest public interest (Kempf & Luostarinen, 2002)
- events with a high news value (Eilders & Hagen, 2005)
- media themselves are considered as a “risk factor” (Ruhrmann, 2008)
  
- ▶ media can fuel a conflict and contribute to its escalation
- ▶ dynamics of individual crisis perception by journalists and experts remain unclear

## Crisis Communication

### Peace Journalism

- crisis coverage that can contribute to the process of de-escalation, peace building and reconciliation (Bläsi, 2004)
- Peace Journalism (Galtung, 2002; Kempf 2002, 2003; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005)
  - explores the origins of a conflict
  - gives voice to all involved parties
  - common goals and benefits of peaceful solution are stressed
  - might prevent conflicts from breaking out
- ▶ Peace Journalism attributes political and military responsibility to the media (Hanitzsch, 2004)

## Crisis Communication

### News factors and international crises

- News factors are relevant indicators that serve as selection criteria in journalism (Eilders, 2006; Maier & Ruhrmann, 2008; Schulz, 2009)
- Most significant news factors in coverage on international crises (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Eilders & Hagen, 2005; Fretwurst, 2008):
  - *aggression & damage*: international crises are often destructive and threatening
  - *relevance*: highly relevant to the people concerned
  - *status of event nation*: elite nations are mainly covered
  - *visualization*: coverage on crises contains highly visible actions
- ▶ News factors as a viable concept to investigate the demands of peace journalism

## Crisis Communication

### Phases of international crises

- **prevention**
  - surfacing of the conflict, growth of verbal & behavioral hostile exchanges
  - media can direct public attention to the conflict
- **escalation & management**
  - use of force & violence
  - CNN effect, real-time coverage shortens time for considerate actions
- **resolution**
  - negotiation of formal agreements
  - media may function as a “diplomat” or “mediator”
- **reconciliation**
  - attempts to transform the relations to amicability
  - media can contribute to change the audience’s stereotypes & prejudices

## Methodological approach

### Research questions

- RQ 1: Do international crises exhibit different news factors in their particular phases?
- RQ 2: How does the media portray the different positions in an international crisis?
- RQ 3: How do journalists, political and military decision makers assess the media's potential to prevent or fuel a conflict?

## Methodological approach

Research project funded by the **German Foundation for Peace Research**

“Threats on the (Media) Agenda. Crisis Communication in the Process of News Selection”

### Design of the study

- Content analysis of German TV and press coverage on international conflicts and crises
- Semi-structured interviews with German journalists and political and military decision makers on the media's role in international conflicts and crises



## Results

### Content analysis: design and sample

- unit of analysis: reports on international conflicts and crises
- unit of sampling: 4 German television news programs, 3 German newspapers
- period of investigation: February – April 2009
- codebook: 18 news factors; topical, formal and content variables
- sample: 2,260 reports; table shows absolute numbers

		February	March	April	Total
<b>TV- Newscasts</b>	Public stations	69	58	102	229
	Private stations	43	29	44	116
<b>Newspapers</b>	Quality newspapers	542	617	630	1789
	Tabloid newspaper	48	32	46	126
<b>Total</b>		<b>702</b>	<b>736</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>2260</b>

## Results

### Classification of news reports to phases (% of news reports)

- Every reported crisis was assigned to one conflict phase.
- Every news report was classified accordingly.
- The majority of the news reports from all media types refers to crises in the *escalation* phase.

		N	Prevention	Escalation	Resolution	Reconciliation
TV- Newscasts	Public stations	229	7	84	7	2
	Private stations	116	8	81	10	1
Newspapers	Quality newspapers	1789	15	69	15	2
	Tabloid newspaper	126	14	79	5	2
Total		2260	14	72	13	2

## Results

### RQ 1: Relevant news factors in different conflict phases

- In different phases of a conflict different news factors are relevant:
    - prevention: *status of the nation, reach (85-100%)*
    - escalation: *status of the nation, reach (72-98%), damage (31-39%), aggression (34-60%)*
    - resolution: *reach (67-100%)*
    - reconciliation: *reach (82-100%), damage (33-100%)*
  - *Benefit* does not play any role in any of the phases or media outlets.
- Events by which many people are affected (reach) obtain high journalistic attention in all phases.
- A certain degree of distortion in favour of nations with high formal status can be stated.

## Results

### RQ 2: How does the media portray the different positions in an international crisis?

- imbalanced reporting: one position towards the conflict is described
- uncritical reporting: no journalistic interpretation or questioning of the reported event
- ▶ *prevention, escalation and resolution* phase: across all types of media outlets the majority of the news reports is imbalanced (59-100%) and uncritical (62-100%).
- ▶ *reconciliation* phase: highest shares of simultaneously balanced and critical reports in public TV newscasts (67%) and quality newspapers (30%).

## Results

### **Semi-structured interviews: design and sample**

- unit of sampling: 6 German TV & newspaper journalists and 6 decision-makers from German politics & the military
- period of investigation: January – May 2009
- sample: 12 interviews

## Results

### RQ3: Potential of the media to prevent or fuel conflicts?

- High awareness of journalists' potential to foster peaceful resolutions
- Agreement on the need for steady coverage on different phases of crises
- Conflicts usually attract the media's attention *after* their break-out ...
- ... and often depend on dramatic images in order to be broadcast on TV
- Rare coverage of crises in the phase of reconciliation
- Ability of the media to both inhibit and fuel the development of a conflict

*“The media can play with it, of course. They can fuel it or they can bring it down, depending on what they want.”*

**Klaus Naumann**, retired General of the German Army,  
former chairman of the NATO military committee

### Conclusion

**Does the German media coverage on international conflicts and crises comply with the demands of peace journalism?**

- German media focus on conflicts mainly during their escalation phase.
- In different conflict phases specific news factors prevail.
- Some news factors, e.g. reach, are relevant throughout all phases.
- The majority of news reports is imbalanced and uncritical.
- ▶ The premises of peace journalism remain unaccomplished.

### Conclusion

**How do journalists, political and military decision makers assess the media's potential to prevent or fuel a conflict?**

- Journalistic coverage can speed up diplomatic actions or public protest.
  - The demand to cover a crisis continually and over its course is supported.
  - Due to daily routines and the assumed interests of the audience, they mainly cover international conflicts and crises in the phase of escalation.
- The normative demands of peace journalism are hardly fulfilled.



**Thank you for your attention!**



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## Appendix: Tables

## Content analysis

### Relevant news factors (% of news reports): Prevention and Escalation

News factors							
Phase... ...media outlets	N	Status 1 <sup>st</sup> nation (high)	Status 2 <sup>nd</sup> nation (high)	Reach (min. partly national)	Benefit (high)	Damage (high)	Aggression (high)
<b>Prevention</b>							
Public TV	17	13	80	93	6	6	6
Private TV	9	0	0	100	0	0	0
Quality NP	267	17	42	97	2	5	6
Tabloid NP	18	0	100	85	0	6	6
<b>Escalation</b>							
Public TV	192	13	30	98	7	31	34
Private TV	94	9	27	98	4	32	60
Quality NP	1232	14	28	95	3	33	34
Tabloid NP	100	13	75	72	6	39	57

## Content analysis

### Relevant news factors (% of news reports): Resolution and Reconciliation

News factors							
Phase... ...media outlets	N	Status 1 <sup>st</sup> nation (high)	Status 2 <sup>nd</sup> nation (high)	Reach (min. partly national)	Benefit (high)	Damage (high)	Aggression (high)
Resolution							
Public TV	16	44	0	100	0	31	13
Private TV	12	58	50	92	8	42	33
Quality NP	260	18	14	98	3	20	18
Tabloid NP	6	50	-	67	0	83	83
Reconciliation							
Public TV	4	0	-	100	25	75	25
Private TV	1	0	-	100	0	100	0
Quality NP	30	10	0	82	3	33	33
Tabloid NP	2	0	0	0	0	50	50

## Content analysis

### Balanced and critical reporting (% of news reports): Prevention and Escalation

Phase... ...media outlets	Max. N	Balanced Reporting	Imbalanced Reporting	Critical Reporting	Uncritical Reporting	Balanced and Critical Reporting
<b>Prevention</b>						
Public TV	15	60	40	33	67	27
Private TV	9	11	89	33	67	11
Quality NP	264	41	59	37	63	23
Tabloid NP	17	20	80	0	100	-
<b>Escalation</b>						
Public TV	177	41	59	26	74	15
Private TV	86	22	78	15	85	9
Quality NP	1204	43	57	36	64	23
Tabloid NP	83	0	100	0	100	-



## Content analysis

### Balanced and critical reporting (% of news reports): Resolution and Reconciliation

Phase... ...media outlets	Max. N	Balanced Reporting	Imbalanced Reporting	Critical Reporting	Uncritical Reporting	Balanced and Critical Reporting
<b>Resolution</b>						
Public TV	15	13	87	20	80	7
Private TV	11	0	100	0	100	-
Quality NP	254	41	59	38	62	22
Tabloid NP	6	0	100	0	100	-
<b>Reconciliation</b>						
Public TV	3	100	0	67	33	67
Private TV	1	0	100	0	100	-
Quality NP	30	53	47	40	60	30
Tabloid NP	2	0	100	0	100	-

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