Handbook of Peace Psychology

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The importance of media communication in wars and conflicts

Christian von Sikorski & Pascal Merz

Abstract

The way wars and conflicts are reported in media communication is of great importance, as certain forms of communication can contribute to (de)escalation in war and conflict situations and influence opinion-forming processes. This article deals with the framing of media content in conflicts, examines the role of news differentiation (illustrated by the example of terrorism reporting), and highlights the influences on communication processes in modern media environments (high choice media environments; social media). From a peace psychology perspective, this chapter focuses on how certain forms of media communication can contribute to the escalation and de-escalation of conflicts. It also examines the increasing importance of misinformation and disinformation in wars and conflicts. What role do misinformation and disinformation play in modern media environments and how should they be countered? This chapter provides initial answers to these questions.

Keywords: Mass media, social media, framing, news differentiation, misinformation, disinformation

The significance of media communication in wars and conflicts

Media communication is of central importance for our perception and appraisal of wars and conflicts (Carruthers, 2011). Traditional media coverage, but also increasingly information in social media and wide-reaching alternative news on the internet, can shape attitudes towards conflicts and different conflict parties. To put it simply in the words of Philip Seib (2021): In our digital age, the course of wars and conflicts is not only decided by bombs and bullets, but by the greatly increased circulation of media information. Representations of war and conflict evoke different emotional reactions and thoughts in individuals – as do information about terrorist attacks. On the one hand, they can contribute to the escalation of conflicts and influence opinions on political actions (e.g., Gadarian, 2010). On the other, they can have a de-escalating effect, which can be considered particularly significant from a peace psychology perspective (e.g., López & Sabucedo, 2007; Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes & Binder, 2017; see chapter "Peace journalism" by Kempf).

Whether we learn about conflicts, initially often depends on whether the media report them. Members of the media and journalists in particular select topics in their so-called "gatekeeper function", and, thus, decide whether a topic will be covered and become part of the media agenda (McCombs, 2004). Over the past four decades, it has been robustly demonstrated that media can set issues and hence influence with which conflicts we engage or occupy ourselves and how important we consider those issues to be (Luo, Burley, Moe & Sui 2018).

When communicating about conflicts, the type of communication is significant; therefore, the present article focuses precisely on research in this area. First of all, it is relevant which aspects of a conflict are communicatively emphasised and highlighted and which perspectives are neglected or left unmentioned. The framing or media framing (Entman, 1993) of communication is thus of central importance. Frames, as a large body of scientific literature shows (Matthes, 2009; Sikorski & Matthes, 2020; overview in Matthes, 2014), can systematically influence the perception and appraisal of topics and certain conflicts. The "image" we have of contested issues and conflicts as well as conflict parties and social groups is coloured by the use of certain frames (de Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001; Iyengar, 1991; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997) and in some cases sustainably influenced (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011). Frames differ from narratives in this respect (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Hanitzsch & Nagar, 2016). Although there are intersections between frames and narratives, narratives can be conceptualised as a superordinate category, whereby narratives allow for a variety of perspectives and events as well as a greater diversity of voices than frames. In addition, narratives, unlike frames, include temporally ordered sequences of events (Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016).

From a peace psychology perspective, it is further relevant whether forms of message differentiation are utilized in communication. That is, for example, does one explicitly make a distinction in communication about a foiled terrorist attack between an Islamist terrorist

who identifies himself as a Muslim and the entire group of Muslims? Current research in this area shows that message differentiation has a de-escalating effect on intergroup relations between non-Muslims and Muslims and is thus significant from a peace psychology perspective (Sikorski et al., 2017).

However, the age of the internet and the spread of new media formats have changed media communication in a fundamental way (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Social media allow virtually anyone with an internet connection and a corresponding terminal device to participate, i.e., to gauge, comment on and (further) disseminate information. In modern media environments, so-called high-choice media environments (Van Aelst et al., 2017), media users have a drastically increased range of media at their disposal through new online formats, from which they can choose deliberately and according to individual preference (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Users also increasingly access news online, directly via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) (Newman et al., 2021). Politicians and representatives of certain conflict parties can also contact the public (or followers on social media) directly, bypassing traditional journalistic channels (see also van Niekerk & Maharaj, 2013). Additionally, it is possible for people to evaluate ("like"), comment on and redistribute news (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos & Ladwig, 2014; Lee & Yang, 2010). Besides the positive aspects of these participation opportunities (e.g., freedom of expression), it has been discovered that misinformation and disinformation at times spread more quickly within social media and reach more people than true news (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018; see also Bennett & Livingston, 2018). This can intensify conflicts and polarisation processes between different social and political groups (Dan et al., 2021; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

The present article illuminates these briefly mentioned aspects of media communication from the perspective of peace and conflict research. First, the area of news framing is examined in more detail. Then, the article focuses on the approach of message differentiation (Sikorski et al., 2021). It goes on to analyse how communication processes change in modern media environments (Van Aelst et al., 2017) and how it affects peace and conflict research. Moreover, it focuses on the challenges and dangers posed by the rising spread of misinformation and disinformation (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Framing in the media representation of conflicts

The term framing is commonly understood to mean that different players (members of the media, political players, NGOs, think tanks) use so-called frames to communicate certain topics, viewpoints and perspectives. Following the conceptual understanding of communication science, selected information is highlighted whereas other information is hidden or neglected (Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2009; Sikorski & Matthes, 2020). However, there are different forms of framing.

Equivalence framing has been increasingly studied in psychological research. This means that equivalent but differently framed case descriptions (e.g., this beef consists of

10% fat vs. this beef is 90% fat-free) can influence appraisals (e.g., of beef) as well as decisions of people in risk situations (Tversky & Kahnemann, 1981). Such frames, which are relatively easy to change, can influence people's decisions and have, for example, been extensively researched in health communication (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012).

The communicative complexity of wars and conflicts, however, is usually much higher than a simple comparison of statements with the same content (Matthes, 2014). In the communication of wars and conflicts, it is primarily a matter of emphasising and highlighting certain aspects (emphasis framing) "to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). An example of this is the study by Nelson and colleagues (1997), who confronted people with information about speeches or rallies of the Ku Klux Klan, which were either framed as 'freedom of expression' or 'disturbance of public order'. Framing the topic as 'freedom of expression' led to greater tolerance towards the Ku Klux Klan. These findings are also relevant for the media portrayal of conflicts, as social norms can be purposefully emphasised in order to influence the evaluation of a conflict party. The Russian framing of the war of aggression against Ukraine, which has been framed and termed by the aggressor as a "special operation" with the alleged aim of "denazification", can be named as an example of this.

Frame types

Frames can be differentiated according to their level of abstraction. De Vreese (2005) differentiates between topic-specific and generic frames, whereby the former are only suitable for certain topics (e.g., the framing of the G8 summit protests in Hamburg as 'rioting by a left-wing mob' vs. 'prime example of German police violence'). The latter are, in contrast, superordinate and can therefore be applied to a variety of topics, such as so-called conflict frames, which can be used for very different topics and conflicts (de Vreese et al., 2001; see also d'Haenens & de Lange, 2001). According to Bartholomé, Lecheler and de Vreese (2018), such conflict framings are constituted within political news by highlighting criticism (e.g., of political players) and generally divergent political views in the media (e.g., dissent between opposition and ruling parties regarding a foreign assignment).

Generic frames can further be divided into episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991). *Episodic frames* present topics in a personalised manner based on an exemplary individual case. This can lead to an individual attribution of responsibility among recipients. *Thematic frames*, in contrast, focus on background information and structural conditions of a topic, whereby, usually, a more differentiated point of view is presented, which can, in turn, lead recipients to attribute responsibility to society as a whole. Iyengar and Simon (1993) showed with regard to US media coverage of the second Gulf War that individuals were more likely to support a military rather than a diplomatic solution to the crisis due to the predominantly episodic framing of the news.

Frames, however, cannot only be analysed according to their level of abstraction but

also in terms of their emergence, dissemination, and impact. Players such as parties, associations, think tanks as well as activists and (political) lobby groups pursue strategic goals through their communication, whereby a frame should ideally find its way into media coverage unchanged (e.g., Hallahan, 1999). The aim is to gain interpretive authority (in German 'Deutungshoheit') in competition with different interpretations of a topic. On the part of the recipients, the dissemination of certain media framings can, in turn, lead to specific emotional reactions, attitudes, or cognitive processes. This framing process – from emergence to effect – will be explained and exemplified in the following.

Strategic framing

From a strategic perspective, players usually use framings to illuminate topics from a specific angle. Hence, the aim is to spread and establish a certain view of a topic in public discourse over time in order to gain interpretative authority of the topic. By using such purposeful communication, individuals and the general public are meant to be mobilised in order to generate support for a specific topic (Benford & Snow, 2000; see also Iyengar & Simon, 1993). However, these frames are generally 'countered' by competing players (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005).

Journalistic frames

Dunwoody (1992) describes journalistic frames as "schema or heuristic, a knowledge structure that is activated by some stimulus and is then employed by a journalist throughout story construction" (p. 78). Journalistic frames can thus be distinguished from frames in media texts, whereby such "mental" journalistic frames can exert significant influence on the process of news selection. Journalistic frames determine whether a topic is covered at all, and if so, which specific aspects are emphasised in media coverage. Strategic frames can therefore be adopted by members of the media either unchanged, modified, or even contrasted by means of a counter-frame. The interpretive frameworks, ideas, interpretations or even reservations of journalists can subsequently be reflected in the use of concrete media frames but this does not have to be the case. It should be emphasised here that corresponding influences can also (in part) take place unconsciously (Hackett, 1984; Gamson, 1989), especially when media professionals creating content work under time pressure. Frames can further always be seen within a given cultural context (Van Gorp, 2007). Cultural influences are important for the entire communication process, since, among other things, the choice of certain frames in news production by journalists can be characterised by culturally determined connotations. Likewise does the interpretation of news by recipients always take place through a "cultural lens" (Entman, 1993).

Journalists in the field of quality journalism ordinarily try to use different framings when portraying conflicts. Unlike strategic players, framing in news is not usually intended to influence the audience one-sidedly or even manipulate it. However, especially in times of

crisis, members of the media are dependent on information from strategic players (e.g., from certain warring parties or journalistic laypeople who are on the ground during a conflict and provide visual material). Herein lies the danger that one-sided depictions desired by strategic players will prevail or that there will be distortions in the portrayal (Hanitzsch, 2004; for a critical discussion of the role of leading media, see Krüger, 2013). A good example for this is so-called *embedded journalism*, whose conceptual origin lies in the cooperation of journalists with US military troops in the 2003 Iraq War. According to Esser (2009), the US Pentagon hoped for a feeling of solidarity and camaraderie between the media professionals involved and the military. This, according to Pfau and colleagues (2004), worked and led to 'embedded' reporters producing reports more favourably framed for the military than non-embedded ones.

Frame contents

Another important aspect of the framing research field is the identification and description of frames in media content. The majority of studies in this area is dedicated to frames that are available in text form. As an example, the study by Reese and Lewis (2009) can be mentioned, which deals thematically with the so-called 'war on terror'. In reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001, this frame was used by the Bush administration for the US international security policy so as to prepare for the military mission in Iraq in public communication. In fact, this frame was very deeply internalised by US media and only critically questioned following the failure of the mission (Reese & Lewis, 2009) – and the associated consequences such as the large number of dead, injured and long-term damaged individuals (Levy & Sidel, 2013).

Although visual frames are studied far less frequently, visual framing can be described as relevant and influential (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Schwalbe, Silcock and Keith (2008) examined the visual representation of the beginnings of the Iraq war. Initially, conflict frames (depicting war machinery) and, later, frames of human well-being (through the depiction of single troops and individuals) dominated. In this field of research, it is criticized that textual and visual framing are often studied separately, even though, in the reality of news reporting, both elements are almost always jointly present (Sikorski & Knoll, 2019).

Framing effects

According to Price and Tewksbury (1997), a basic distinction can be made between the effects of accessibility and applicability of information. Frames can make certain concepts both more accessible and more applicable, as experimental studies have shown. For example, visual framing influenced the appraisal of the 2009 Gaza conflict in so far as visual *human-interest* frames (e.g., depiction of victims or civilians) triggered stronger emotional reactions such as empathy than visual *political* frames did (e.g., depiction of a politician giving a speech) (Brantner, Lobinger & Wetzstein, 2011). The study by Powell and colleagues (2015) also showed, based on a violent conflict in the Central African Republic, that the combination

of visual and textual framing can have very different consequences. For example, the combination of a textual frame about the conflict and a visual representation of victims resulted in a higher willingness to donate among study participants (Powell et al., 2015).

Summary

Frames, regardless of the concrete conceptualisation (e.g., thematic vs. episodic, visual vs. textual), play a significant role in the media representation of wars and conflicts. The emphasis or omission of information influences individuals' judgements and behaviour (Powell et al., 2015). Besides textual frames, effects also emanate from visual framing. In particular, multimodal effects (combination of visual and textual frames) should be investigated more intensively in the future.

Intergroup conflicts: The role of differentiated media representations

The media regularly report on conflicts between different social groups as well as on forms of violence, such as terrorism. The specific form of reporting is of great importance here. This is especially the case when there are no direct contacts and overlaps between different social groups in everyday life situations. For example, non-Muslims often have little or no direct contact with Muslims. The media thus have an important mediating function in two ways. In the first place, media reporting shapes the image of "the others", of the out-group (e.g., for the non-Muslim population in Germany, the perception of Muslims in Germany). In addition, media portrayals can influence the perception of one's own group (e.g., the self-perception of Muslims in respect of the public depiction of their own group). Particularly in conflicts, media coverage therefore holds great responsibility. Regardless of the respective framing of communication or the frames used, a differentiated portrayal of different social groups is of central importance, as current research results show. For example, it was examined how Muslims are depicted in the context of reporting on Islamist terrorism. A content-analytical study (N = 1071) investigated how a total of twelve newspapers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland represented individuals of the Muslim faith in the context of reporting on terrorism (Sikorski et al., 2021; see also Matthes et al., 2020). Specifically, it was analysed whether journalists differentiated between Muslims in Germany and terrorists who self-identify as Muslims (e.g., through statements such as: "A clear distinction must be made between Muslims and Islamist terrorists"). Moreover, it was examined whether reports were undifferentiated or whether, for example, experts had their say postulating that "Islam has a violence problem" or calling Islamist terrorists "Muslim extremists", thus linguistically associating Muslims in Germany with extremism or terrorism. The results showed that forms of undifferentiated reporting could be detected in almost every second article. In this respect, no differences could be found between quality and tabloid newspapers on a superordinate level. In contrast, forms of differentiated reporting were found much less frequently, only in a total of 26% of all articles examined (Sikorski et al., 2021; see also Matthes et al., 2020). From a peace psychology perspective, this raises the question of how

people react to undifferentiated forms of terrorism reporting and whether a differentiated representation has a beneficial effect on intergroup relations between non-Muslims and Muslims. This has been investigated in a series of experimental studies (Sikorski, Matthes & Schmuck, 2021; Sikorski et al., 2017). These showed that undifferentiated reporting indeed heightened fear of terrorism, activated negative stereotypes about Muslims and as a result increased Islamophobic attitudes among non-Muslims. In contrast, when terrorism reporting differentiated between Muslims and Islamist terrorists, this did not lead to an increase in Islamophobic attitudes.

These findings exemplify that the type of reporting on terrorist attacks can have relevant effects on intergroup relations. This is extremely significant from the perspective of peace psychology, since tensions and conflicts, for example between non-Muslims and Muslims, can be caused by certain forms of reporting. At the same time, however, it turns out that a clear differentiation can avoid negative and unintentional transmission effects. Future studies should further investigate the concept of news differentiation and ascertain, for example, whether differentiated forms of reporting have a peace-building and conflict-reducing effect, also in the context of other topics and conflicts.

Modern media environments: Social media and *high-choice media environments*

While the aspects of framing and a differentiated representation of conflict reporting played an important – albeit far less recognised and researched – role in the 'heyday' of traditional mass media, modern media environments entail their very own phenomena and effect mechanisms. According to Holbert (2005), the central question for media communication in terms of modern media environments is how citizens inform themselves about current issues (e.g., wars, conflicts) and what role the media play in this. The transition of the media environment from low to high choice can be described as one of the most important challenges regarding information procurement (Van Aelst et al., 2017; see also Castro et al., 2021). Traditional mass media such as radio, newspapers and linear television have been increasingly extended by new (digital) offerings as a result of technical developments, which has led to a strong differentiation of the supply and demand sides (Newman et al., 2021). The steadily growing use of online platforms such as social media, video sites and search engines mostly function on an algorithm-based presentation of selected content. This means that people are increasingly shown content (without being informed about it in detail), which is, for example, geared towards individual preferences as well as past media usage behaviour. Overall, this leads to a strong increase in complexity in modern media landscapes. In such digital media environments, journalists are (in part) relinquishing their previously largely exclusive control over access to information, as users can write blog posts, commentaries, tweets, etc. themselves.

Preselection

Information is increasingly pre-selected by algorithm-based internet services such as Facebook, Google or Twitter: At times when traditional mass media were predominant, people saw the same front page of the daily newspaper, whereas pre-selected content on the internet can differ and convey very different viewpoints, topics and opinions (Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros & Pak, 2021). These trends and technologies have sparked some discussion in the scientific community. For example, Pariser (2011) introduced the term *filter bubble*, which is commonly understood to mean that ideological divisions within societies are fuelled by algorithms automatically recommending content that a person is likely to agree with. However, it is unclear (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman, Goel & Rao, 2016) or even doubted (Bruns, 2019) whether such a tendency can actually be postulated for the masses and not only for individuals with extreme preconceptions. In new media environments, however, there is not only a pronounced preselection of content and news but also a characteristic self-selection, whereby both aspects can be reciprocally contingent on one another due to the algorithms' functioning.

Self-selection

The choice between different media and content in modern media environments is nearly infinite, which has significantly expanded individual possibilities and access to different information channels. This differentiation of the media landscape can lead to only receiving content in line with individual preferences. This phenomenon is called *selective exposure*, i.e., the selective reception of specific content. Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009), for example, were able to show in their experimental study that people spent significantly more reading time when receiving information that was consistent as opposed to inconsistent with their attitudes. The mechanism at work here is called *confirmation bias*, according to which people tend to consume content that corresponds to or confirms their own opinion in order to minimise so-called cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In connection with the Iraq conflict, for example, it could be demonstrated that the greatest opponents of the Bush administration were most likely to consume foreign online sources in addition to domestic sources (Best, Chmielewski & Krueger, 2005), in order to satisfy their own desire for attitude-consistent news.

Accompanying social information from other users

In the world of the internet, journalistic content is rarely found in its pure form. Online, content is usually enriched with accompanying social information, such as the number of 'likes', 'retweets' or 'shares', i.e., information on how frequently an article has been (positively) evaluated or disseminated by other people. Users can also (anonymously) leave their own comments below news articles and read other people's corresponding comments. According to Ziegele, Breiner and Quiring (2014), writing online comments is one of the most

popular forms of participation, although by no means all users contribute comments equally (Springer, Engelmann & Pfaffinger, 2015). The reception of such social information and comments that accompany the actual news content can have an impact on the appraisal of certain topics, conflict parties and individuals. On the one hand, such comments can contain important additions, new perspectives, and personal experiences of users. On the other hand, journalistic content, which has usually passed through various quality control mechanisms, is often accompanied by unchecked, one-sided and factually incorrect contributions from (anonymous) laypeople. In the best case, this combination allows people to inform themselves in a more multi-faceted way, to interact with other people and to discuss a topic. However, studies illustrate the numerous negative influences of the availability of certain accompanying information. For example, comments can influence the perceived public opinion on a topic (Lee, 2012; Lee & Yang, 2010; Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016). Insulting and hurtful remarks found in user forums can also lead to polarisation effects among individuals, regardless of controversially discussed media content in an article itself (Anderson et al., 2014). Furthermore, research illustrates that prejudice against social minorities can be reinforced (Hsueh, Yogeeswaren & Malinen, 2015): People who are exposed to one-sided and biased comments from other people more frequently endorse negative prejudice against minorities in their own commenting behaviour. This intensifies intergroup conflicts (Uhlmann, Korniychuk & Obloj, 2018), people are encouraged to think negatively and behave more aggressively in their own posts online (Rösner, Winter & Krämer, 2016). At the same time, however, it has been shown that under certain conditions online contributions by individuals can have de-escalating effects and facilitate dialogue between different conflict parties. In the context of the Middle East conflict, for example, it has been found that moderate and peacemaking comments by Palestinians on Facebook ("Tweeting Arabs") fostered sympathy and acceptance among Israeli Jews towards the other side and positively promoted dialogue between the two conflict parties (Mor, Ron & Maoz, 2016).

Spread of misinformation and disinformation

Modern digital media environments favour a fast and efficient dissemination of information. In addition, there are changes in media use behaviour. For example, the number of people who receive political news predominantly or even exclusively online via social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc.; Newman et al., 2021) is rising. The network structure and media logic of social media differs fundamentally from the structure of classic mass media (TV, radio, newspaper etc.). Key differences can be seen in the production of content, the dissemination and use of information (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Very different players such as politicians, activists, bloggers, citizens and members of institutions as well as certain interest groups (e.g., think tanks) can produce content at any time and without major access barriers and disseminate it directly, digitally. In terms of democratic theory, this can promote political participation processes as well as freedom of speech and opinion in a positive way (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018). At the same time, however, new challenges arise since information disseminated on social media or alternative blogs and news sites has usually not undergone

quality assurance processes before publication, as is usually the case with quality media. This increases the likelihood of disseminating not only one-sided, extreme views but also misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation and disinformation can influence the perception of wars and conflicts in a negative way as, for example, Khaldarova and Panetti (2016) demonstrated in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns are not new phenomena but have been gaining entirely new dynamics in digital online environments: virtually anyone can contribute to the spread of so-called fake news online, as became evident in the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. Relating thereto, Lamberty, Heuer and Holnburer (2022) showed that approval ratings for pro-Russian disinformation and conspiracy narratives have increased over time in Germany's population. For example, in April 2022, 9 % of respondents agreed with the statement that the war had been necessary to eliminate the allegedly fascist government in Ukraine.

"Fake news" often refers to false or misleading information taken out of context (Lazer et al., 2018; Tsfati et al., 2020; for a critical discussion of the term, see Wardle, 2018; Egelhofer & Lechler, 2019). Conceptually, two different forms of fake news can be distinguished: (a) fake news as a genre (for example, the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation) and (b) fake news as a label in political communication to delegitimise news media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Furthermore, a distinction is made between disinformation and misinformation, whereby disinformation can be understood as a subcategory of misinformation. Disinformation is disseminated intentionally and usually for propaganda purposes by various players, whereby the players know that the information they disseminate is false (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer & Krueger, 2013; see also Dan et al., 2021). In contrast, when disseminating misinformation, players mistakenly assume that the given information is factually correct even though this is not the case (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

From a strategic perspective, the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation is used in wars and conflicts for very different reasons. First of all, two groups of addressees can be roughly distinguished. Misinformation and disinformation can be directed outwards in order to create confusion (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) and uncertainty (Oreskes & Conway, 2012) among an opposing party to the conflict and to thereby achieve one's own strategic goals. Examples include the Russian attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential election via social media (Lazer et al., 2018; Senate Judiciary Committee, 2017) and the dissemination of disinformation and conspiracy theories by the international Russian television channel *Russia Today* or RT (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Yablokov, 2015). However, disinformation can also be directed inwards, for example, to generate approval and support in one's own camp or to legitimise and justify one's own warlike actions (campaigns can also simultaneously be directed inwards and outwards). Russia's extensive media campaign in the Ukraine conflict can be named as an example of an inwardly directed misinformation and disinformation campaign (Lamberty et. al, 2022; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; see also Elswah & Howard, 2020). Another example is the US attack (together with allies) on Iraq in 2003, which was

based, among other things, on (via classical media) widespread misinformation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and was seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, thus posing a direct threat to other countries (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Misinformation and disinformation campaigns can further promote affective polarisation, that is, contribute to supporters of different political parties judging each other in an increasingly hostile manner (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Kubin & Sikorski, 2021). An example is the misinformation spread in the USA (by Donald Trump and his supporters, in particular) that there had been electoral fraud in the 2020 US presidential election so that the election had been decided in favour of Joe Biden. In the summer of 2021, one third of US citizens were still convinced of this (Monmouth University, 2021).

In order to counteract such misinformation and disinformation, so-called fact checkers or organisations and departments in media organisations have emerged in recent years, uncovering disinformation campaigns and trying to correct misinformation, partly with considerable effort. Classical news media also play a central role in this. Although misinformation and disinformation campaigns often spread rapidly and virally via social media (current data show, for example, that misinformation on Facebook during the 2020 US election was clicked on six times more often than factually correct news, Dwoskin, 2021), people often only find out about disinformation campaigns once classical media report on corresponding social media campaigns (Tsfati et al., 2020). Thereby, classical quality media usually pursue the goal of correcting misinformation, while simultaneously (albeit unintentionally) contribute to its spread. Corrections can generally be seen as an important and effective strategy in the battle against misinformation and disinformation, as overview studies (meta-analyses) show (Chan et al., 2017; Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). However, corrections of misinformation are not always successful and can lead to so-called *continued influence effects*, i.e., people continue to be influenced in their thinking by misinformation despite correction and rectification (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). As a matter of fact, "back-fire effects" can ensue under certain circumstances. This means that the attempted correction leads certain people to judge misinformation as more credible after compared to before the correction (see also Nyhan, 2021).

In general, the question arises, especially in wars and conflicts, under which conditions classical media should take up misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Such reporting should be well-considered (Tsfati et al., 2020) and use empirically tested, effective forms of correction (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). Additionally, social media platforms should be more systematic and resolute in combating the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Dan et al., 2021). However, individuals' media literacy also plays a key role here. Based on considerations of inoculation theory, various studies have, for example, found that typical users can be trained to more strongly or more critically question information (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). It has been shown that certain interventions – such as playing computer games specifically designed for this purpose – are very successful in helping people recognise misinformation or disinformation with a high

degree of accuracy and distinguish it from factually correct information (overview in Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Future research should develop additional intervention forms, especially those easy-to-implement or with a low threshold, in order to enhance people's media competence accordingly (see also Meßmer, Sängerlaub & Schulz, 2021).

Conclusion

Our perception of wars and conflicts is influenced by media communication as our knowledge based on opinion-forming processes is directly or indirectly coloured by the media. The media and journalists select conflicts and conflict information and thus shape the media agenda. When reporting on wars and conflicts, the framing of communication is of central importance since certain aspects get emphasised through framing whereas others are neglected or left out entirely. Frames therefore influence opinion-forming processes, the understanding of issues and (political) attitudes. The aspect of news differentiation is also central in war and conflict reporting. In contrast to differentiated portrayals, undifferentiated reporting – which, for example, in the context of terrorism reporting does not explicitly distinguish between Islamist terrorists and the German population of Muslim faith – can contribute to conflict escalation. This entails the possible deterioration of inter-group relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. From the perspective of peace and conflict research, differentiated forms of reporting appear to be an important means of avoiding negative stereotypes and undesirable transmission effects in this context. Journalists should therefore strive to report on conflicts and terrorism in a differentiated manner. Major challenges arise from so-called high-choice media environments. In such modern media environments, people increasingly select content based on pre-existing attitudes and preferences, which can accelerate polarisation processes, especially related to conflicts (overview in Kubin & Sikorski, 2021). Future research should investigate which communication-based intervention strategies can be used to, for example, counteract further polarisation in conflicts. From a democratic theoretical perspective, modern media environments nowadays enable significantly more people to exercise basic democratic rights and principles, such as freedom of expression, activism and protest (e.g., in the context of wars and conflicts). At the same time, these very opportunities are also changing our information environments, as any person with an internet connection or smartphone can gauge, forward and comment on news via news platforms and social media. Extreme, negative and factually incorrect information is thus becoming increasingly widespread. Disinformation campaigns and the dissemination of scandalising political messages can be purposefully used as a "weapon" against political opponents and dissidents (Allern & Sikorski, 2018; Dan et al., 2021), even by political players themselves. Messages with a high news value are then again often included in classic media coverage (Heiss, Sikorski & Matthes, 2019; Sikorski, 2022; Tsfati et al., 2020). These processes should be taken into account when assessing and dealing with conflicts. Mass media, but also other wide-reach media channels

(e.g., blogs, podcasts) as well as players such as politicians or influencers in social media, should carefully consider which misinformation and disinformation will be picked up and corrected. Unnecessary disclosure of misinformation should be avoided in wars and conflicts (but also in general). Social media platforms should further take action against misinformation and disinformation, and the media literacy of users should be enhanced. This can reduce misinterpretations and polarisation tendencies and promote responsible handling of war and conflict information in modern media environments.

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