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Acceptance and impact of de-escalation-oriented conflict coverage[2]

Abstract: War coverage has a strong bias towards promoting conflict escalation, and – though less pronounced – this bias often survives in post-war coverage as well. Even after wars end, only a few journalists frame conflict in a strongly de-escalation-oriented way. Do they have a chance to reach the public? Will their audience regard their reports as more or less balanced and unbiased? Will their reports influence their audience's mental models of the conflict? Or will the audience cling to its prejudices and reject news articles that are not consistent with the enemy images spread by the mainstream media?

The present paper investigates these questions in the context of a series of experimental studies which measure audience responses to escalation- and de-escalation-oriented news articles on (1) the Yugoslavian conflict after the fall of Milošević and (2) the War on Terror. The results of the studies show that de-escalation-oriented news articles were accepted by audiences and resulted in less polarized mental models of the events.

1.   Introduction

War coverage has a strong bias towards the promotion of conflict escalation and – though less pronounced – this bias often persists in post-war coverage as well. Even after a war ends, only a small share of journalists frames the conflict in a strongly de-escalation-oriented way.

The concepts of peace journalism developed by Galtung and others are intended to counteract this bias at each stage of conflict: pre-war, war and post-war. Whether or not these concepts are realistic depends on – besides other factors – audience responses to peace journalism. Does peace journalism have a chance to reach the public? Will its audience respect it as more balanced and less biased? Will it have an impact on the mental models according to which the audience interprets a conflict? Or will the audience cling to its prejudices and reject news articles inconsistent with the enemy images promulgated by mainstream media?

There are several constraints that may have an effect on audience responses to peace journalism (cf. Table 1).

1	The level of conflict escalation
2	The cognitive framework
3	The audience's entanglement in the conflict
4	Societal beliefs
5	Journalists' assumptions about audience preferences
6	The text genre
7	The format of the media
8	The audience itself

Table 1: Possible constraints on the acceptance and impact of peace journalism

The first of these constraints is *the level of conflict escalation*, which progresses from a self-centered divergence of perspectives via competition to struggle and climaxes in open warfare. Inter-group conflict reinforces in-group solidarity. Group members who gain a reputation for vigorously opposing the enemy can thereby increase their social status. Group members identify more strongly with their own group and its positions, and the more escalated the conflict, the more likely they are to do this (Deutsch, 1973).

	De-escalation-oriented coverage	Solution-oriented coverage
Conceptualization of conflict	Exploration of conflict formation with a win-win orientation; questioning violence as a means of resolving conflict and questioning military values	Peace orientation (peace = nonviolence + creativity); proactive (prevention before violence occurs); people-oriented (focus on civil society)
Evaluation of rights and aims	Respect for the rights of the opponent and undistorted representation of his aims; realistic and self-critical evaluation of one's own rights and aims; fair coverage of peace initiatives and attempts at mediation	Focus on common rights, aims, and interests and on the benefits all sides can get from ending war/violence; gives the anti-war opposition a say; focuses on peace initiatives, signals of readiness for peace and mediation attempts
Evaluation of actions	Realistic and self-critical evaluation of one's own actions and undistorted evaluation of opponent's actions; critical distance from the bellicose on all sides	Focuses on the suffering of all sides, focuses on the invisible effects of war: trauma and loss of reputation, structural and cultural damage; humanizes all sides and identifies all those who act unjustly; focuses on reconciliation perspectives
Emotional involvement	Recognition of the threat to the opponent and reduction of one's own feelings of threat	Recognition of the price of war, even in the case of victory, and transformation of outrage at the enemy into outrage at war
Identification offers	Neutral and distanced	Universal

Table 2: De-escalation-oriented and solution-oriented conflict coverage

The second constraint is *the cognitive framework* which corresponds to these levels of conflict escalation and which interprets conflict by means of increasingly radicalized mental models that can be described along the dimensions of (a) the

conceptualization of the conflict as a win-win, win-lose or lose-lose process, (b) the uneven assessment of the parties' rights and aims, (c) the double standard used in the evaluation of their actions and behavior and (d) the emotional consequences of these interpretations, which ultimately transform outrage at war into outrage at the enemy (Kempf, 2002) and disengage group members from moral control of violence (Bandura, 1999).

According to Kempf, this cognitive framework also produces the bias of traditional war reporting and therefore ought to be counteracted by peace journalism. In order to achieve this aim, Kempf (2003) has suggested a two-step strategy (cf. Table 2).

The first step is called *de-escalation-oriented coverage* and broadly coincides with what is usually called quality journalism. It is characterized by neutrality and critical distance from all parties to a conflict and goes beyond the professional norms of journalism only to the extent that journalists' competence in conflict theory bears fruit and conflict remains open to peaceful settlement (win-win orientation as an option, questioning violence as an appropriate means of resolving conflict, questioning military values, and examination of conflict formation processes).

Although de-escalation-oriented coverage clearly goes beyond conventional war reporting, it is still a long way from peace journalism in Galtung's sense, which is fully unfolded only in a second step that Kempf calls *solution-oriented coverage*. Guided by the intention of peace-making and reconciliation, this second step of peace journalism can only become capable of winning a majority when an armistice or a peace treaty is already in place.

A third constraint is the *audience's entanglement in the conflict*, which will be greater the more reprehensible the atrocities and the closer a society feels itself tied to one of the parties in historical, political and cultural terms. The more it is entangled, the more an audience will tend to identify with one of the parties, and the more it will tend to interpret the conflict according to the same mental model adopted by the party it favors. According to Taylor (2000), however, media cannot deviate too much from the perspective of their audience if they want their reports to continue to be read, listened to or watched.

It is particularly in long-lasting, intractable conflicts that such mental models solidify into *societal beliefs*. Intractable conflicts are demanding, stressful, painful, exhausting and costly, both in human and in material terms. This requires that societal members develop psychological conditions that will enable them to cope successfully. Societal beliefs fulfill an important role in the creation of these psychological conditions. Since they are both part of society's ethos and a crucial factor for enduring the burdens of war, they will tend to persist even after the war is over (Bar-Tal, 1998).

A fifth constraint results from *journalists' assumptions about audience preferences*. Journalists' assumptions about audience preferences and traditional news factors like simplification, negativism, personalization and elite orientation suggest that traditional escalation-oriented conflict coverage has a higher news value than de-escalation-oriented peace journalism: Simplification supports the division of the world into "us" and "them" and produces a bias towards interpreting conflict as a win-lose process (ASPR, 2003), and the preference for negativism, personalization, elite nations and elite persons produces a structural frame which divides the world into "rich" and "poor" and at the same time into "good" and "evil" (Galtung & Vincent, 1992).

A sixth constraint is the *text genre*. Features or reportages offer more space for the assessment of the conflict context, both in escalation- and in de-escalation-oriented terms, than do short commentaries or news articles with a stronger focus on day-to-day events. The 90-second rhythm of TV news items promotes simplification and offers almost no space for background information, etc.

A seventh constraint is the *media format*. National quality papers have a stronger focus on international affairs and more possibilities for journalistic investigation than regional papers that base their articles mainly on the reports of news agencies. Because articles can be re-read, print media are more open to critical assessment than TV, etc.

An eighth constraint is *the audience* itself. The typical readership of provincial papers is less interested in and feels less involved in international affairs than the readership of the quality press. Taking the format of the provincial press into account, they can also be expected to be less well-informed about international affairs, etc.

2.   Experimental design

In order to investigate audience responses to escalation vs. de-escalation-oriented conflict coverage, we designed a series of experimental studies which measured (1) the acceptance and (2) the impact of news, editorial and background articles, both in a post-war and in a war scenario.

Experimenting with German and Austrian audiences and with conflicts that did not directly affect either German or Austrian society, the experimental conditions were quite favorable to the acceptance of de-escalation-oriented coverage with respect to two of the constraints discussed above: It can be assmed that both the audiences' entanglement in the conflicts (constraint No. 3) and the solidification of the dominant mental models into societal beliefs (constraint No. 4) were rather moderate.

In the first experiment, designed by Annabring & Spohrs (2004), news articles on three events in former Yugoslavia after the fall of Milošević were presented to a total of n = 128 subjects, representative of the readership of the German quality press (cf. Table 3): violent conflicts in Southern Serbia (December 2000), the extradition of Milošević to The Hague (June, 2001) and the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (March 2003).

For each of the events, four different types of articles were used: moderately escalation-oriented articles from prestigious German newspapers (*Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and three variants of these articles, (a) with increased escalation-oriented framing, (b) with moderate de-escalation-oriented framing and (c) with more strongly de-escalation-oriented framing of the events.

Each participant was instructed to read one article on each of the three events in chronological order and after each article fill out a text-assessment questionnaire and narrate the reported events in their own words.

	1st Experiment	2nd Experiment
Sample	Readership of the German quality press (n=128)	Readership of an Austrian provincial paper (n=126)
Issues	Violent conflicts in Southern Serbia (December 2000)	
	The extradition of Milošević to The Hague (June, 2001)	
	The treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (March 2003)	Kostunica's reaction to Rugova's victory in the Kosovo elections (November, 2000)
Text genre	News articles from the quality press	News articles from the regional press
Original articles from	*Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*	*Vorarlberger Nachrichten*
Text versions	Original articles with moderate escalation-oriented framing	
	Increased escalation-oriented framing	
	Moderate de-escalation-oriented framing	
	More strongly de-escalation-oriented framing	Escalation-oriented framing with reversed partiality
Average text length	Approx. 453 words	Approx. 230 words

Table 3: The post-war scenario experimental designs

The second experiment (Sparr, 2004) used a similar design and the same instruments, but with some modifications (cf. Table 3): The original articles stemmed from an Austrian regional paper (*Vorarlberger Nachrichten*), and the sample of subjects (n = 126) was recruited from its readership.

The reports about the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro were replaced by reports about Kostunica's reaction to Rugova's victory in the Kosovo elections (November, 2000), and the more strongly de-escalation-oriented text versions were replaced by escalation-oriented ones with reversed partiality (pro-Serbia).

The Ss responded to the questionnaires, but did not have to re-narrate the reported events.

The other two experiments changed the text genre from daily-newspaper-style news articles to weekly-newspaper-style editorial and background articles.

In the third experiment (Schaefer, 2006), editorials on the appropriate reaction to three cases of terrorist attacks were presented to a total of n = 96 students from the University of Konstanz (cf. Table 4). The attacks by Al-Qaida in New York and Madrid, a massacre committed by the Indonesian army in East Timor, and the poison gas attack by the Aum sect on the Tokyo subway.

	3rd Experiment	4th Experiment
Sample	University students (n=96)	University students (n=132)
Issues	Appropriate reaction to terrorist attacks by – Al-Qaida in New York and Madrid – Indonesian army in East Timor – Aum sect in Tokyo	History of the conflict between Russia and Chechnya
Text genre	Editorial from a weekly quality paper	Background article from a weekly quality paper.
Sources	Text elements from *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel*, *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, a speech to Congress by G.W. Bush and various books on the War on Terror	Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
Text versions	Extremely escalation-oriented framing and explicit arguments in favor of military measures	Mainly neutral but sometimes including elements of moral disengagement
		Neutral without escalation- or de-escalation-oriented framing
	Massive de-escalation-oriented-framing and explicit arguments against military measures	Mainly neutral, but sometimes warning against moral disengagement
Average text length	Approx. 1155 words	Approx. 781 (neutral text: 522) words

Table 4: The war scenario experimental designs

Using text elements from *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel* and *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, from a Congressional speech given by G.W. Bush and from various books on the War on Terror, two different types of editorial were constructed on each of these issues: One with extremely escalation-oriented framing and explicit arguments *in favor* of military measures, and one with extremely de-escalation-oriented framing and explicit arguments *against* employing military measures.

Each participant was instructed to read one article on one of the three issues and then fill out three questionnaires.

The fourth experiment (Eckstein Jackson, 2005) presented background articles on the history of the Russian-Chechen conflict to a total of n = 132 students from a university of applied science in Berlin (cf. Table 4). Based on a publication by the *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (National Center for Political Education)*, three different types of article were constructed: a neutral, detached and balanced article with no escalation-oriented framing. The same neutral article, but enriched with elements of moral disengagement, legitimizing the use of violence, and the neutral article once again, but enriched with some warnings against legitimizing the use of violence by means of moral disengagement.

Each participant was instructed to read one of these articles and then fill out a questionnaire.

3.   Measurement instruments

While the acceptance of the texts was measured in all four experiments, the impact of the texts was measured only in three of them (cf. Table 5).

	Acceptance of the texts	**Impact of the texts**
1st experiment	Typical evaluation patterns based on 16 Items	Reconstruction of Ss' mental models
2nd experiment	Typical evaluation patterns based on 16 + 1 Items	No measurement
3rd experiment	Score based on three items	Moral disengagement scale + evaluation of concrete military measures
4th experiment	Four separate items	Moral disengagement scale

Table 5: Measurement instruments

3.1 Measurement of the articles' acceptance

In the first two experiments, the acceptance of the articles was assessed by means of a text assessment questionnaire, to which Latent Class Analysis was applied in order to identify typical evaluation patterns (Bläsi, Jaeger, Kempf & Spohrs, 2005; Kempf, 2005).

Four of the items dealt with the entertainment value of the articles, asking the participants to assess how boring (I1), how

interesting (I2), how sensational (I3) and how informative (I4) the articles appeared to them. Next the participants were asked to indicate how familiar they had previously been with the reported events (I5) and to evaluate whether the events were accurately depicted (I6), whether the text included impartial information about all the parties involved (I7) or whether it favored one of the parties (I8), whether the text was understandable (I9) and whether it brought up new aspects (I10), whether they could agree with the article's content (I11), whether it stimulated their interest in further information (I12), whether it was hard to read the text to the end (I13) and whether the reported facts were depicted truthfully or in a distorted way (I14). Finally, the participants were asked to estimate the journalist's expertise (I15) and his stylistic competence (I16).

In the second experiment an additional question was added, asking the participants whether they would choose to read the article if its title appeared as a headline on the front page of their paper (I17).

In the third experiment, the participants' agreement with the texts was measured using a test score (Cronbach-Alpha = 0.87) based on three items which asked them to rate their personal agreement with the argumentation (similar to I11), the extent to which the facts were described accurately or were distorted (similar to I14), and the overall text quality (I18).

In the fourth experiment, finally, four items were used which asked the participants to rate whether the text was comprehensible (similar to I9), whether it was convincing (I19), whether it was partial (similar to I8) and, if so, which side the text favored (I20).

3.2 Measurement of the articles' impacts

While the first of the experiments measured the texts' impact by reconstructing the mental models according to which the participants interpreted the depicted events after reading the articles, experiments No. 3 and 4 measured the impact of the articles on the participants' moral disengagement from the War on Terror. In addition to this, the 3rd experiment also asked them to rate their approval of employing concrete military measures in the respective conflicts.

3.2.1 Mental models

The participants' mental models of the reported events were inferred from their narratives by means of quantitative content analysis, and a two-step procedure was used which first coded the narratives according to a number of content analytical variables and then applied Latent Class Analysis in order to identify the mental models upon which the narratives were based (Annabring, Ditlmann & Kempf, 2005; Kempf, 2005).

In order to do so, the depiction of the parties involved in the reported conflicts was coded with a total of 20 variables, the first set of which described whether the following features were attributed to the parties: confrontational (V1) and/or co-operative behavior (V2), insight into the price to be paid for a confrontational (V3) and/or for a cooperative conflict strategy (V4), insight into the gains to be had from a confrontational (V5) and/or from a cooperative conflict strategy (V6), confrontational logic and readiness for confrontation (V7) and/or cooperative logic and readiness for cooperation (V8), questioning (V9) and/or approval of common goals and needs (V10), pursuit of egoistical goals (V11), demands for flexibility and/or (V12) unyieldingness (V13), questioning or violation (V14) and/or readiness for or support for democracy and human rights (V15). The second set of variables described whether the parties' behavior was approved of or (at least) evaluated in an unbiased way (V16) and/or whether it was condemned or criticized (V17), whether the narrative referred to victims on the side of the respective party (V18) and whether it dissociated from the party's political elites or society members (V19), and/or whether it identified with them (V20).

3.2.2 Approval of concrete military measures

Approval of concrete military measures was assessed using traditional scoring procedures (Cronbach-Alpha = 0.78) based on four items, asking the participants to rate their approval of air strikes on terrorist training camps, their approval of risking civilian deaths during "police action" against terrorist organizations, their approval of deadly air strikes on enemies and their approval of trying to destroy terrorist organizations (Al-Qaida, Aum sect) or to end human rights abuses (East Timor) using military measures.

3.2.3 Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement from the War on Terror was measured using the participants' score (Cronbach-Alpha = 0.83) on the eight items of the so-called *Terrorism Scale* (Eckstein Jackson & Sparr, 2005). Each of the items represents one of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms described by Bandura (1999), translated into the context of counter-terrorism: Euphemistic labeling of violence, moral justification of violence, dehumanization of the opponent, diffusion of responsibility, minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences of violence, displacement of responsibility, extenuating comparisons and attribution of blame to the opponent.

4. Results

The results of the experiments are quite favorable to peace journalism, but show some limitations as well.

4.1 Acceptance of escalation- vs. de-escalation-oriented coverage

1. De-escalation-oriented coverage is accepted by the audience *no less* than traditional reporting.

    De-escalation-oriented articles were *never*, and with respect to all 16 items on the text assessment questionnaire, accepted to a lesser degree than the other text versions, neither in the first nor in the second experiment.

    In the third experiment, where the escalation-/de-escalation-oriented framing was quite pronounced, the de-escalation-oriented texts were even clearly preferred ($F_{(1.84)}$ = 15.5, $p < 0.001$; cf. Figure 1).
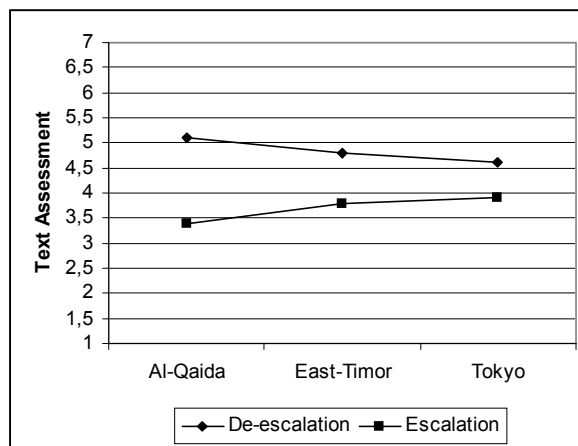
Figure 1: Third experiment: Effects of the various text versions and conflict scenarios on the acceptance of the texts

2. With respect to the perceived partiality/impartiality of the texts, explicit arguments rejecting the escalation-oriented bias of mainstream coverage may produce a boomerang effect, however.

    The participants in the fourth experiment perceived the text version that warned against moral disengagement to be even more partial than the moral disengagement text that followed the mainstream (χ^2 = 22.31, df = 2, $p < 0.001$; cf. Figure 2).
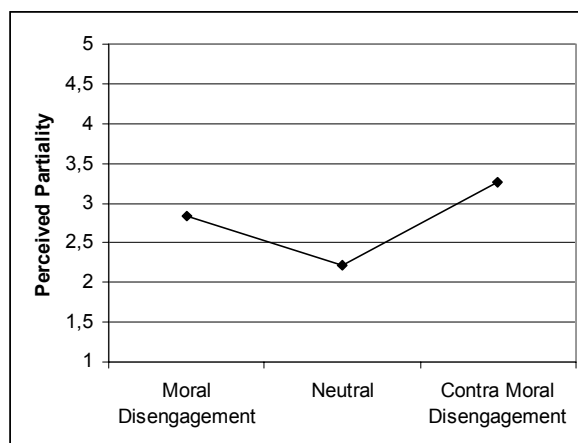

Figure 2: Fourth experiment: Perceived partiality of the various texts versions

3. The regional press generally arouses less interest in further information and less specific responsiveness to escalation- or de-escalation-oriented coverage.

K1.3	Strong interest in further information, but some uncertainty regarding truthfulness and accuracy
K1.1	Relatively strong interest in further information
K1.2	Relatively strong interest in further information, but doubts regarding impartiality and truthfulness
K1.4	Lack of interest in further information
K1.6	Lack of interest in further information and rather negative evaluation

Table 6: First experiment: Evaluation patterns

In the first experiment, Latent Class Analysis of the text assessment questionnaire identified six typical evaluation patterns, five of which expressed different degrees of interest in further information and different degrees of confidence concerning whether the reported facts were depicted truthfully (cf. Table 6) The remaining pattern was characterized by missing data.

K6.1	Some interest in further information
K6.2	Little interest in further information
K6.3	No interest in further information

Table 7: Second experiment: Evaluation patterns

In the second experiment, only five evaluation patterns could be identified, two of which were characterized by missing data. While the remaining three patterns once again expressed different degrees of interest in further information, they were characterized by a generally lower degree of aroused interest and a generally less positive evaluation of the articles than in the first experiment (cf. Table 7).
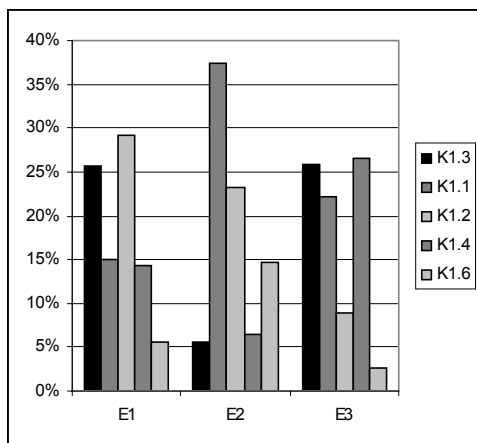

Figure 3: Frequency of the evaluation patterns in the first experiment as a function of the reported events χ^2=75.74, df=10, p<0.001.

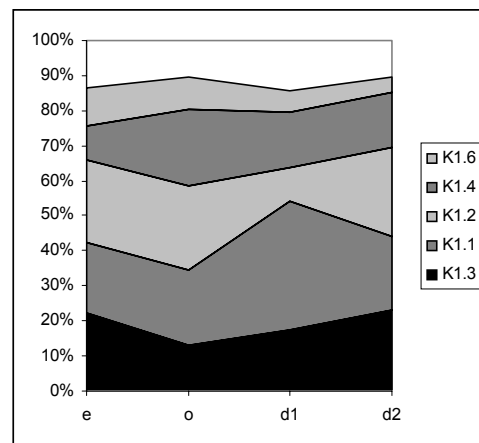E1 = Conflict in Southern Serbia; E2 = Extradition of Milošević; E3 = Treaty between Serbia and Montenegro

Figure 4: Frequency of the evaluation patterns in the first experiment as a function of the various text-versions χ^2=26.87, df=15, p<0.05.

e = escalation-oriented; o = original article; d1 = moderately de-escalation-oriented; d2 = more strongly de-escalation-oriented

While the evaluation patterns found in the first experiment indicated differentiated responses to reports about different events (cf. Figure 3), as well as differentiated responses to different text versions (cf. Figure 4), this was not the case in the second experiment, where the evaluation patterns were not correlated with the text versions (cf. Figure 6).
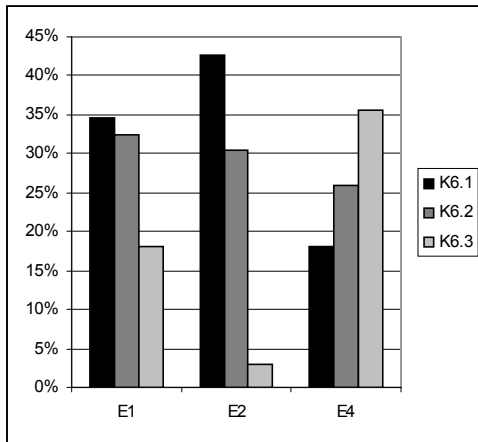
Figure 5: Frequency of the evaluation patterns in the second experiment as a function of the various text versions χ^2=56.46, df=8, p<0.001

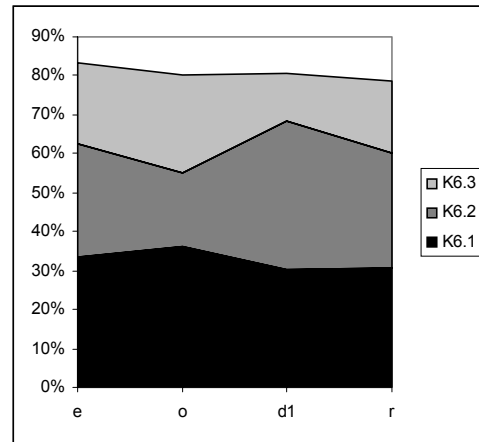E1 = Conflict in Southern Serbia; E2 = Extradition of Milošević; E4 = Kostunica's offer of dialogue

Figure 6: Frequency of the evaluation patterns in the second experiment as a function of the reported events χ^2=16.18, df=12, n.s.

e = escalation-oriented; o = original article; d1 = moderately de-escalation-oriented; r = escalation-oriented with reversed partiality

4. The audience of the provincial press is less interested in international politics and less responsive to its nuances.

    Interest in further information was generally lower in the audience of the provincial paper, and the various text versions did not make a difference with respect to the acceptance of the articles. Even the escalation-oriented text versions with reversed partiality (r) were not accepted to a lesser degree than the other ones (cf. Figure 6).

5. Escalation-oriented coverage is *not* more suitable for arousing audience interest.

    In the first experiment, which was based on the quality press and its audience, more strongly de-escalation-oriented versions of texts evoked the same amount of strong interest in further information (K1.3) as the escalation-oriented ones (cf. Figure 4).

6. At least in the quality press, de-escalation-oriented coverage has the same potential to arouse interest as escalation-oriented framing.

    In the first experiment, lack of interest in further information (K1.4 + K 1.6) was found most frequently in reaction to the original articles and could be reduced to the same extent by the other text versions, regardless of their escalation- or de-escalation-oriented framing (cf. Figure 4).

    Lack of interest in combination with a negative evaluation of the articles (K1.6) decreased linearly, the less escalation-oriented and the more de-escalation-oriented the articles were (cf. Figure 4).

7. De-escalation-oriented coverage has a better chance of achieving positive responses, however, if it does not interpret the situation within a too radically reversed framework.

    In the first experiment, the most doubt about the impartiality and truthfulness of the articles (K1.3 + K1.2 + K1.6) was aroused by reports about violent conflicts in Southern Serbia which did not merge seamlessly with the old enemy images of the "poor Albanians" and the "evil Serbs," and the moderately de-escalation-oriented text versions aroused less doubt than the more strongly de-escalation-oriented ones (cf. Figure 4).[1]

8. Traditional news factors like "negative vs. positive" and "personal vs. structural" *do* have an impact on the responsiveness that a news article elicits in its audience.

    In the first experiment, a *lack of interest* in further information (K1.4 + K1.6) was most frequently aroused by articles about the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (positive/structural) and least frequently by articles about the conflict in Southern Serbia (negative/personal) (cf. Figure 3).

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1. Nonetheless, the de-escalation-oriented framing of the latter ones was still moderate enough to not arouse more doubt than the original articles or the escalation-oriented ones.

In the second experiment, the *lack of interest* in further information (K6.3) was strongest with regard to Kostunica's offer of dialogue (positive/personal) and weakest with regard to Milošević's extradition (negative/personal) (cf. Figure 5).

9. The impact of these news factors is not consistent, however.

    In the first experiment, the articles about the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (positive/structural) not only aroused the greatest *lack of interest* (K1.4 + K1.6), but also aroused the *strongest interest* (K1.3) in further information (cf. Figure 3).

10. In particular, the news factor of "simplification" does not have news value of its own, but on the contrary: more complex reporting can attract audience interest even for (structural) issues that are not so interesting per se.

    In the first experiment, strong interest in further information (K1.3) was particularly aroused by the more strongly de-escalation-oriented text versions, which gave a more complex depiction of the reported conflicts (cf. Figure 4).

4.2 Impact of escalation- vs. de-escalation-oriented coverage
4.2.1 Mental models

In the first experiment, we also measured whether the framing of the reported events had an effect on the Ss' mental models of the conflict. The experimental Ss were asked to narrate the reported events in their own words. Then a content analysis of these narratives was made, and the mental models with which the Ss interpreted the events were inferred from their narratives.

We found that the framing of the events had a clear effect on Ss' mental models. The more de-escalation-oriented the article framing was, the more constructive were the mental models with which the participants interpreted the events.

Serbia/Yugoslavia

With respect to the perception of Serbia / Yugoslavia, six classes of narratives were identified which show that the escalation- vs. de-escalation-oriented framing of the news articles had a definite influence on the mental models with which the participants interpreted events (cf. Table 8).

K2.6	Unbiased assessment of (present) Serbian positions
K2.2	Continuation of old enemy images
K2.3	Appreciation of the new start in Serbia
K2.4	Criticism of the Serbian past
K2.1	Appreciation of democratic change in Serbia
K2.5	Refusal to acknowledge democratic change in Serbia

Table 8: First experiment, patterns of interpretation: Serbia/Yugoslavia

Two of these classes are typical of the narratives about the conflict in Southern Serbia (E1): Continuation of the old enemy image (K2.2), which informed 57.6% of these narratives, and an unbiased assessment of (present) Serbian positions (K2.6, 32.5%) (cf. Figure 7).

A continuation of the old enemy image (K2.2) was found most frequently among participants who read an escalation-oriented article; it was least frequent when the article was de-escalation-oriented, and its frequency decreased steadily the less escalation-oriented the article was.

An unbiased assessment of (present) Serbian positions (K2.6) was found most frequently among participants who read a de-escalation-oriented article; it was least frequent when the article was escalation-oriented, and its frequency increased steadily the more de-escalation-oriented the article was (cf. Figure 8).
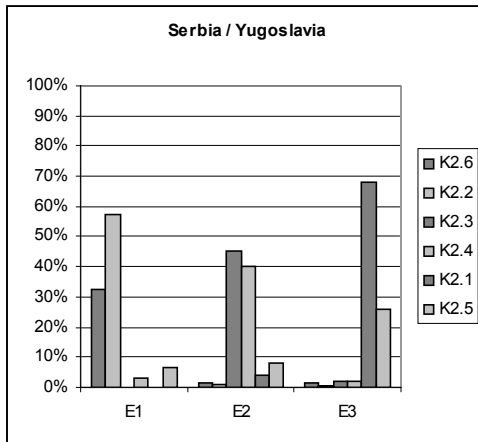
Figure 7: Class size as a function of the reported events
$\chi^2 = 571.200$, df = 10, p < 0.001

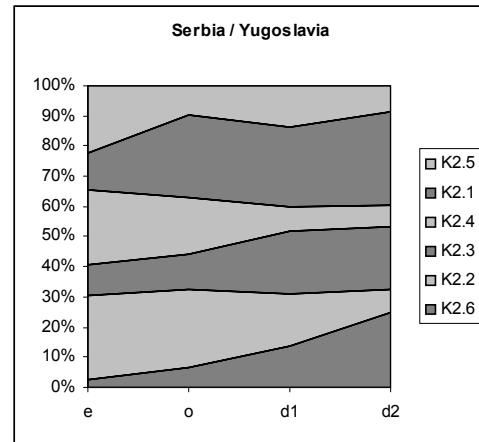E1 = Conflict in Southern Serbia; E2 = Extradition of Mi-lošević; E3 = Treaty between Serbia and Montenegro

Figure 8: Class size as a function of the various text ver-sions
$\chi^2 = 73.800$, df = 15, p < 0.001

e = escalation-oriented; o = original article; d1 = moder-ately de-escalation-oriented; d2 = more strongly de-esca-lation-oriented

Two other classes are typical of the narratives about Milošević's extradition (E2): Appreciation of the new start in Serbia (K2.3), which informed 45.2% of the narratives, and Criticism of the Serbian past (K2.4, 40.2%) (cf. Figure 7).

Appreciation of the new start in Serbia (K2.3) was found most frequently among participants who read a de-escalation-oriented article; it was least frequent when the article was escalation-oriented, and its frequency increased steadily the more de-escalation-oriented the article was.

Criticism of the Serbian past (K2.4) was found most frequently among participants who read an escalation-oriented article; it was least frequent when the article was de-escalation-oriented, and its frequency decreased steadily the less escalation-oriented the article was (cf. Figure 8).

The remaining two classes are typical of the narratives about the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (E3): Appreciation of democratic change in Serbia (K2.1), which informed 67.9% of these narratives, and refusal to acknowledge democratic change (K2.5, 26.1%) (cf. Figure 7).

Appreciation of democratic change in Serbia (K2.1) was found most frequently among participants who read a de-escala-tion-oriented article; it was least frequent when the article was escalation-oriented, and its frequency increased the more de-escalation-oriented the article was.

Refusal to acknowledge democratic change (K2.5) was found most frequently among participants who read an escalation-oriented article (cf. Figure 8).

The international community

With respect to the perception of the international community, three classes of narratives could be identified (cf. Table 9)

K3.1	Cooperative behavior
K3.2	Confrontational behavior (including some criticism)
K3.3	Identification (including some justification of their behavior)

Table 9: First experiment, patterns of interpretation: The international community

The behavior of the international community was most frequently interpreted as cooperative (K3.1) in narratives about the treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (E3) (82.4%) and least frequently interpreted as cooperative in narratives about the conflict in Southern Serbia (E1) (58%) (cf. Figure 9).

This pattern was found most frequently among participants who read a strongly de-escalation-oriented article (d2: 80.6%);

it was found least frequently when the article was escalation-oriented (cf. Figure 10).
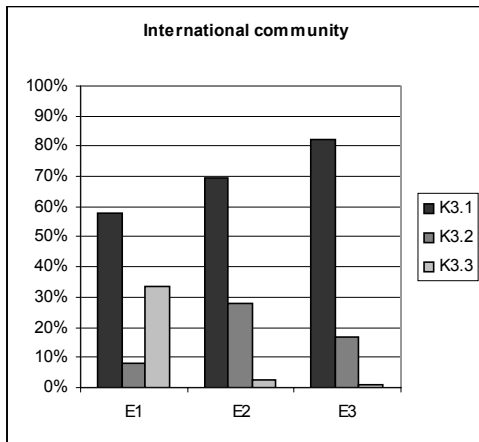

Figure 9: Class size as a function of the reported events
χ^2 = 89.964, df = 4, p < 0.001

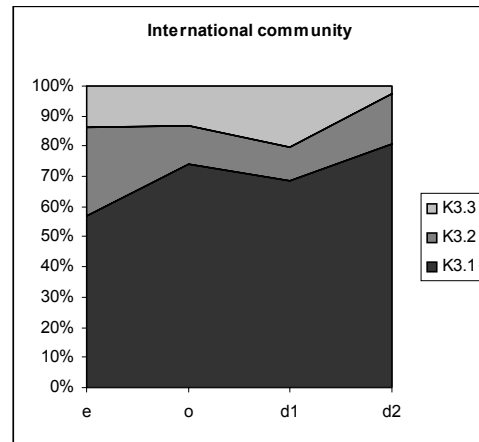E1 = Conflict in Southern Serbia; E2 = Extradition of Mi-lošević; E3 = Treaty between Serbia and Montenegro

Figure 10: Class size as a function of the various text versions
χ^2 = 28.622, df = 6, p < 0.001

e = escalation-oriented; o = original article; d1 = moderately de-escalation-oriented; d2 = more strongly de-escalation-oriented

The behavior of the international community was most frequently interpreted as confrontational (K3.2) in narratives about Milošević's extradition (E2) (27.8%) and least frequently interpreted as confrontational in narratives about the conflict in Southern Serbia (E1) (cf. Figure 9). This pattern was found most frequently among participants who read an escalation-oriented article (29.8%) (cf. Figure 10).

Identification with the international community (K3.3) was almost exclusively found in narratives about the conflict in southern Serbia (E1), where it was characteristic of 33.7% of the narratives (cf. Figure 9).

The conflict in Southern Serbia was the only violent conflict in our sample of events, and violence encourages an audience to identify with its own leadership. Consistent with this, the identification pattern was also found most frequently among participants who read the moderately de-escalation-oriented text version (d1) (cf. Figure 10), which – more than the other texts – discussed the possible risks of sending KFOR troops to Southern Serbia.

4.2.2 Approval of concrete military measures

In the third experiment, the impact of escalation vs. de-escalation-oriented framing and argumentation was measured via the degree to which participants approved of concrete military measures for fighting terrorism.
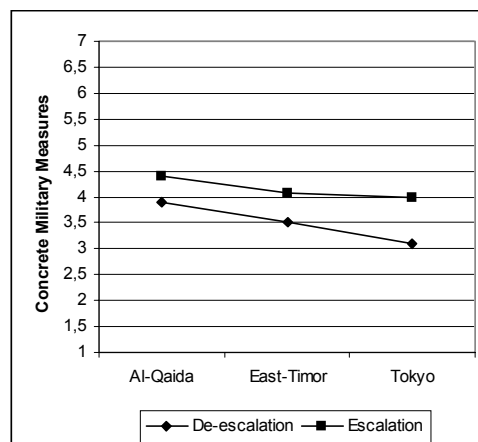

Figure 11: Third experiment: approval of concrete military measures

Irrespectively of the conflict context, the different text versions had a significant effect on the participants' approval of military measures ($F_{(1,84)} = 3.94$, $p = 0.05$): Participants who read an escalation-oriented editorial approved of the use of military measures to a higher degree than those who read a de-escalation-oriented article (cf. Figure 11).

4.2.3 Moral disengagement

An evaluation of the impact of escalation- and de-escalation-oriented editorials via the participants' moral disengagement from the War on Terror showed that the effect of the different texts used in the third experiment was even stronger ($F_{(1,84)} = 6.87$, $p = 0.01$). Reading escalation-oriented texts resulted in a higher degree of moral disengagement than reading de-escalation-oriented ones (cf. Figure 12).
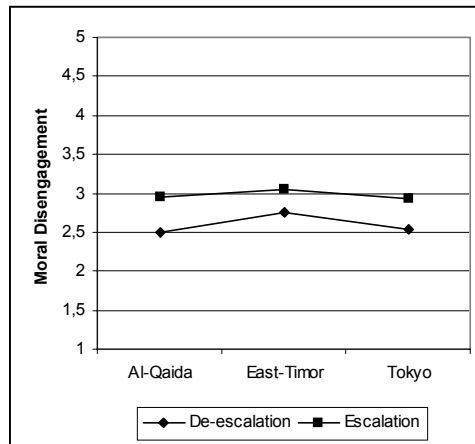

Figure 12: Third experiment: Degree of moral disengagement

Although the *Terrorism Scale* thus proved to be a sensitive instrument for the measurement of moral disengagement in the context of the War on Terror, a similar effect could not be found in the fourth experiment. Measuring the impact of the texts via differences between pre-test and post-test scores, the fourth experiment demonstrated a significant decrease in moral disengagement, regardless of which of the text versions the participants read (cf. Figure 13).
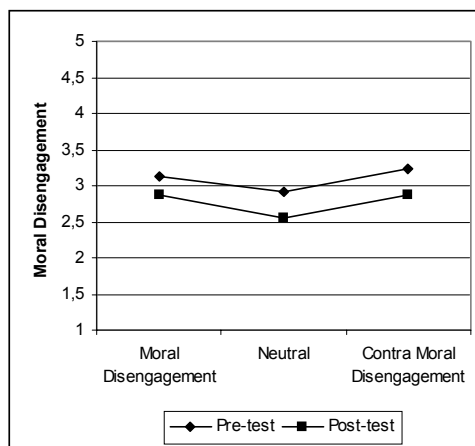

Figure 13: Fourth experiment: Degree of moral disengagement

Moral disengagement text: $t = 2.8$, $df = 40$, $p = 0.01$. Neutral text: $t = 4.2$, $df = 45$, $p < 0.001$. Contra-moral-disengagement text: $t = 4.7$, $df = 44$, $p < 0.001$

Although the decrease in moral disengagement was smallest in the group of participants who read the moral disengagement text (cf. Figure 14), the group differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.22$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.90$).
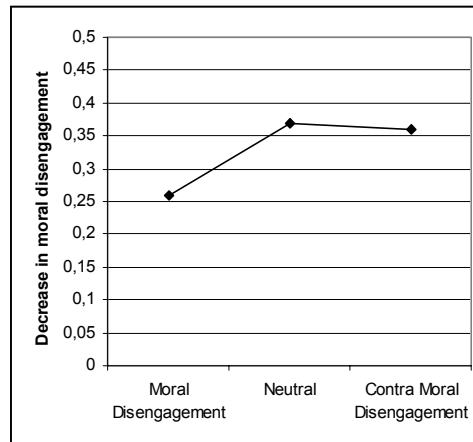
Figure 14: Fourth experiment: Decrease in moral disengagement

It is clear that the balanced, comprehensive background information on the Russian-Chechen conflict included in all three text versions had the impact of reducing the participants' degree of moral disengagement. Including elements of moral disengagement in the presentation of information may reduce this impact, but in our case the effect was not strong enough to reduce it to a significant degree.

Insofar, the results of the fourth experiment also resemble those found in a study by Kempf (2006) in which neutral texts about the approval of the Road Map by the Israeli Knesset influenced German students to interpret the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as less religious in essence, an independent Palestinian state as less threatening to Israel, and accordingly the conflict as less intractable overall.

5.   Discussion

Summarizing our results, we may conclude that they are consistent with findings by Wolling (2002), according to which the quality of information is a crucial factor in the evaluation of news reports.

De-escalation-oriented conflict coverage is *no less* acceptable to audiences than traditional reporting. *Nor* is escalation-oriented coverage more suitable for the purpose of arousing interest, and (at least in the quality press) de-escalation-oriented coverage has the same potential to do so.

The capability of the media to attract attention with quality seems to be restricted by the text genre and the media format, however, and the political knowledge of the audience may have an impact as well. Particularly, the format of the regional press seems to be too narrow and its audience too little interested in and informed about international politics to make it an effective forum for constructive conflict coverage.

As Eilders (1997) has found, the more political knowledge readers have, the less they will be influenced by traditional news factors. The better informed they are, the more they will have their own ideas about which aspects of an issue are relevant to them.

In accordance with audience surveys which found that the readership of daily newspapers would like to read the sort of political news coverage which gives more background information, is more critical and less influenced by established institutions (Weber, 2003), it is particularly the escalation-prone news factors of simplification, negativism and personalization that seem to lose their impact when the text genre and the media format offer enough space for more complexity, more balanced reporting and the coverage of structural issues.

Although news factors *do* have an impact on the responsiveness that a news article elicits in its audience, the impact of news factors is not uniform. In particular, the news factor of simplification does not have news value of its own, but to the contrary: more complex reporting can attract the interest of an audience even to (structural) issues that are not very exciting per se.

Nonetheless, constructive conflict coverage has some limitations: Explicit arguments rejecting the escalation-oriented bias of mainstream coverage may produce a boomerang effect, making articles seem partial, and de-escalation-oriented coverage has a better chance of evoking a positive response if it does not interpret the situation within a too radically reversed framework. Caution is essential, and it can be assumed that it is even more essential the more extensive the mainstream coverage has been and the more the respective (escalation-oriented) mental models are set in audience members' minds.

While the experiments demonstrated a significant impact of escalation-oriented news frames which biased the participants' mental models towards antagonism (first experiment), strengthened their approval of the use of military measures (third experiment) and encouraged moral disengagement (third experiment), it can be assumed that the opposite effect of constructive conflict coverage which was observed in the experiments was not due solely to de-escalation-oriented framing and/or to arguments in favor of peaceful conflict resolution.

As the results of the fourth experiment seem to indicate, the avoidance of simplification in favor of presenting sufficiently detailed and balanced information about a conflict context is a powerful method to counteract mental models which divide the world into "good" and "evil" and to immunize audiences against moral disengagement – even when the presentation of information is not completely unbiased.

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