



Faces of Conflict: Interventionism and Substantiveness in the Conflict Framing Process.

A.A.J. Bartholomé

English summary

Political conflicts in the media are a central aspect of a functioning democracy. Being exposed to different viewpoints helps citizens in forming an opinion and knowing what standpoints political parties take in political matters. The media play an important role in this process. Journalists often report on disagreement between political actors. This dissertation focusses on conflict framing in political news in the Netherlands. Framing refers to the process where journalists highlight some aspects of an issue above others while producing news. Conflict framing occurs when the journalistic focus is on disagreement between political actors or criticism coming from or aimed at political actors.

The studies brought forward in this dissertation shed light on several factors relevant to conflict framing. The main contribution of this dissertation lies in the focus on the different types of conflict framing, specifically by making a distinction regarding the level of interventionism and the level of substantiveness. Interventionism alludes to the extent to which journalists are active rather than passive in reporting on political conflicts in the news. This interventionism is manifested by visibility of the journalistic voice in the news, but also by an active journalistic stance in the news production process. Substantiveness refers to the nature of the political conflict. Reports on conflicts in the news can be focussed on substantive issues or mention details on legislation, but can also revolve around personal attacks, attacks on competence or integrity, strategy or can be characterized by incivility. Besides from looking at different types of conflict frames, this dissertation considers the whole range of the conflict framing process, including the production stage: conflict frame building, the presence of conflict frames in political news, and effects of exposure of citizens to news articles framed in terms of conflict on their willingness to participate in the political process.

In the first study (chapter 2), I look at the conflict frame building process. Specifically, I shed light on the role of journalists who report on political issues and make

decisions on whether to report about a certain conflict frame or not as well as to what extent to intervene in their reporting. The findings stress the contribution of journalists on the emergence of conflict frames. This happens by means of subtle methods and routines of journalistic intervention. These include the use of exaggerating language, but also journalists orchestrating conflict or amplifying possible consequences of conflicts. Journalists are particularly keen to adapt or intervene in conflicts when powerful politicians or parties are involved.

In the second study (chapter 3), I focus on presence of conflict frames in political news and I assess the dimensionality of conflict frames. This is done by means of a content analysis on newspaper and online news articles. In this study, I take different types of conflict frames into account. I particularly distinguish between differing levels of substantiveness and journalistic interventionism in conflict framing. Also, I look at how contextual factors affect the extent to which different types of conflict frames are manifested in the news. Findings show that during an election campaign rather than a routine news period, news articles with conflict frames are less substantive, more strategy-focused, and consist of more personal attacks and incivility. Second, levels of interventionist conflict framing, but also substance, were less salient in tabloid news when compared to quality newspapers. Finally, conflict framing online included lower levels of interventionism, substance and strategy when compared to print articles. However, the level of personal attacks was higher.

For the third and final study (chapter 4), I conduct an experiment to assess to what extent exposure to different types of conflict frames affects political participation. Dutch citizens were exposed to conflict framed news articles where the level of substance (substantive conflict versus nonsubstantive conflict) and level of journalistic intervention (detached journalistic style versus an interventionist and a more interpretative critical journalistic style of reporting) were manipulated. When citizens are exposed to articles with a

nonsubstantive conflict frame, this led to anger. This anger subsequently leads to a higher intention to participate in politics. However, exposure to a substantive conflict frame led to more enthusiasm and thereby indirectly to an increase in political participation. When people were exposed to interventionist reporting in conflict framing, they became less enthusiastic, which indirectly reduced political participation. Hence, conflict framing indirectly affects political participation via both positive and negative emotions.

In short, this dissertation contributes to political communication literature by working towards a more comprehensive and widely applicable understanding of conflict framing. Furthermore, the findings presented in this dissertation shed light on the importance of studying and understanding the extent of journalistic intervention in conflict framing, journalists do not merely function as disseminators of conflict frames, but actively shape the nature and occurrence of conflict in the news. By incorporating and linking different stages of the conflict frame building process, the dissertation provides an extensive overview of how conflict framing works.