

Beyond peace journalism: Reclassifying conflict narratives in the Israeli news media

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Abstract

This article presents a general framework for deconstructing and classifying conflict news narratives. This framework, based on a nuanced and contextual approach to analyzing media representations of conflict actors and events, addresses some of the weaknesses of existing classification schemes, focusing in particular on the dualistic approach of the peace journalism model. Using quantitative content analysis, the proposed framework is then applied to the journalistic coverage in the Israeli media of three Middle-Eastern conflicts: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the conflict surrounding Iran’s nuclear program, and the Syrian civil war. The coverage is examined in three leading news outlets – *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, and *Ynet* – over a six-month period. Based on hierarchical cluster analysis, the article identifies four characteristic types of narratives in the examined coverage. These include two journalistic narratives of violence: one inward-looking, ethnocentric narrative, and one outward-looking narrative focusing on outgroup actors and victims; and two political-diplomatic narratives: one interactional, and one outward-looking. In addition to highlighting different constellations of points of view and conflict measures in news stories, the identified clusters also challenge several assumptions underlying existing models, such as the postulated alignment between elite/official actors and violence frames

Keywords

narratives, news, peace journalism

The news media constitute a decisive arena where narratives about conflict, war, and peace are constructed and disseminated to the public. Despite considerable scholarly attention to the journalistic coverage of conflicts, surprisingly few analytical frameworks allow a comprehensive classification of conflict coverage, particularly in connection with its potential contribution to conflict escalation/maintenance and de-escalation/resolution. Peace journalism, a notion originating from the work of Johan Galtung as ‘a normative mode of responsible and conscientious media coverage of conflict, that aims at contributing to peacemaking, peacekeeping, and changing the attitudes of media owners, advertisers,

professionals and audiences towards war and peace’ (Shinar, 2007: 2), has emerged as a prominent classification framework within journalism studies and peace research. Galtung distinguished between two distinct modes of conflict reporting: war/violence journalism and peace journalism. War/violence journalism treats conflict as a zero-sum game and is propaganda-oriented, elite-oriented, and victory oriented. Peace/conflict journalism, by way of contrast, has a win-win orientation and is

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truth-oriented, people-oriented, and solution-oriented (Galtung, 1998, 2006). This framework has been operationalized in a large and growing number of studies, most of which have demonstrated a dominance of war frames in the news (de Fransius, 2014; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Shinar, 2009; Workneh, 2011).

However, the framework of peace journalism has also invited much criticism. It was criticized for its simplistic epistemological assumptions, gross dualism, advocacy orientation, normative grounding, and insufficient attention to the various constraints that shape the reality of news production (Hanitzsch, 2007a; Loyn, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Peace researchers have usefully addressed some of these concerns at the conceptual, empirical, and practical levels (Kempf & Shinar, 2014; Lynch, 2013; Ottosen, 2010; Shinar, 2007). In this article, we specifically take issue with peace journalism's dualism of war versus peace journalism as the conceptual lens through which conflict coverage is empirically and critically examined.

The primary purpose of this article is to advance a nuanced classification framework that deconstructs conflict news narratives while addressing some of the weaknesses of existing classification schemes, in particular the peace journalism framework. For this purpose, we draw on conflict research in social and political psychology, political communication, and journalism studies, together with a conceptualization of news stories as narratives (Bell, 1991; Bird & Dardenne, 2009; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008). We demonstrate and assess the applicability and utility of this classification framework in an exploratory manner in the context of the journalistic coverage in Israeli media of three Middle-Eastern conflicts: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the conflict surrounding Iran's nuclear program, and the Syrian civil war.

Conflict news stories as narratives

All conflicts, suggests Cobb (2013: 3), are 'a function of the stories that are told, retold, and foretold about the conflict'. Following the 'narrative turn' in social studies (Czarniawska, 2004), narrative approaches have become increasingly popular in conflict studies (Cobb, 2013; Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Maoz, 2011). Spanning across a range of contexts, from individual storytelling in inter-group encounters (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Ron & Maoz, 2013) to schoolbook texts and other educational settings (Adwan, Bar-Tal & Wexler, forthcoming; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012), scholars have examined the characteristics and effects of conflict narratives. According to these inquiries, such narratives can

contribute to reinforcing conflict-supporting beliefs and the de-legitimization of the 'other', but can also contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliatory efforts, by opening opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and support for peaceful solutions (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012; Cobb, 2013; Maoz, 2011).

News narratives have largely remained outside of these narrative-focused investigations in conflict studies, in part due to a more individual-psychological orientation of this scholarship, and in part due to the common view of news stories as a realm of information on current events rather than storytelling. However, as communication and journalism scholars have long argued, journalists can be viewed as prominent storytellers in contemporary society, and news coverage, correspondingly, as a form of narrative (Roeh, 1989; Tuchman, 1976). A narrative approach to news suggests that the news media do not merely convey information but also participate in the construction, maintenance, and dissemination of cultural narratives, which refer to the group's myths, values, identity, and view of the world (Bird & Dardenne, 2009; Carey, 1989; Lule, 2001). These narratives extend from the present to the past and the future, linking contemporary events to prior events and collective memories, as well as to future scenarios and courses of action (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2015). As such, conflict-related news narratives play an important role in the public discourse on conflict (Baden, 2014) and in the social web of conflict narratives within this discourse (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Narratives, in our understanding, are conceptually different from frames, a related and more popular concept in studies of news content in general and conflict coverage in particular. Framing is commonly understood as the process through which selected information is embedded into a coherent interpretative framework (Baden, 2014; Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). The resulting frames differ from narratives in two major aspects that are relevant to our framework. First, frames are less accommodating than narratives. They are 'central organizing ideas' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), which provide selective interpretations and evaluations for some specific situation/problem.¹ In contrast, narratives can potentially (though not

¹ Our discussion of frames refers to issue-specific frames, which are also the focus of most studies on news framing of conflicts. Our conceptual analysis does not apply to the notion of generic frames (de Vreese, 2005).

necessarily) include a wide range of voices, events, and viewpoints (Czarniawska, 2004). Capturing this complexity (or lack thereof) is important in the context of this study, as it connects to narrative approaches to conflict resolution/transformation, which emphasize the need for ‘opening’ conflict narratives to include different voices and viewpoints (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012; Cobb, 2013).

Second, frames do not have the temporal qualities that are at the core of common definitions of narratives. Narratives can be understood as ‘discursive representations of time-ordered sequences of events’ (Baden, 2014: 11; see also Abbott, 2008; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002), and as such they often connect conflict-related events from different points in time (from historical events to future projections; see Bar-Tal, 2013). Frames may also include past-oriented attribution of responsibility and future-oriented treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993), but they function within a restricted time span, focusing on specific events that need to be coherently framed. Narratives can thus be viewed as higher discursive constructs, which contain and connect specific frames (Fisher, 1997). Within this framework, conflict narratives link frames into a chain of connected events (a plot) and assign specific roles to important conflict actors (Baden, 2014).

Existing classifications of conflict news

Scholarship on conflict news coverage is abundant, offering various perspectives and entry points into the subject matter (for a useful review, see Cottle, 2006). As noted above, this article is particularly concerned with the conceptual dualism of war versus peace journalism as a dominant approach to account for different ways of framing and narrating conflicts in the news. Therefore, the focus in the review is on key classifications in the peace journalism framework, and selected additional scholarship which links to these aspects. The dualism in the peace journalism approach is strongly spelt out in Galtung’s (1998: 261) heavily cited framework that suggests conflict coverage is either ‘peace-oriented’ or ‘war-oriented’, ‘truth-oriented’ or ‘propaganda-oriented’, ‘people-oriented’ or ‘elite-oriented’, and ‘solution-oriented’ vs. ‘victory-oriented’. To be fair, Galtung himself concedes that most media are ‘in-between’ (p. 262), but this is not how his framework has been applied to the realities of conflict reporting (de Fransius, 2014; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Workneh, 2011). While some of these dualisms were largely discarded in operationalizations of Galtung’s framework – in particular the truth versus

propaganda distinction – others, as well as the general framework of peace versus war journalism, have remained relatively intact.

One such fundamental distinction is between elite and non-elite actors, with war/violence journalism being ‘elite-oriented’ and peace journalism being ‘people-oriented’ (Galtung, 2006: 1). In studies which operationalized the peace journalism framework, the indicator of elite orientation has been central in classifying a news story as belonging to ‘war journalism’. Based on the assumption that ‘the more the coverage relies on elite and official sources, the more it displays a tendency towards war’ (Workneh, 2011: 46), examinations of the media coverage of diverse conflicts consistently found that reliance on elite/official sources was one of the most salient indicators of war journalism (e.g. Lee & Maslog, 2005; Shinar, 2009; Workneh, 2011). In studies examining the level of press independence, political communication scholars similarly found a dominance of government sources and frames in conflict coverage (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007; Robinson et al., 2009). Indeed, the general tendency of the news media to rely on official/elite sources (Bennett, 1990; Gans, 1979) seems to be even more pronounced in conflict situations, where demands for patriotism and authoritative information move to the forefront (Cottle, 2006; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005).

However, the elite vs. non-elite actor classification mechanism, particularly in the context of peace journalism, raises several difficulties. First, it disregards the context in which official sources are used. Are all references to official sources equal? Should calls for violence and peace by official sources be classified under the same category within a peace journalism framework? Second, it disregards the salience of the references within the story. Should the appearance of elite or non-elite actors in the headlines have the same weight as a passing reference to them at the end of the story (often out of a need for balance)? Third, it obscures important distinctions within the non-elite group. For example, should foot soldiers or armed rebels be coded the same way as ordinary citizens or NGO members in the context of peaceful versus violent narratives?

Another actor-based distinction that is central to peace journalism concerns the representation of different sides of the conflict. In Galtung’s (1998: 261) framework, the subcategories of “us–them” journalism, ‘voice for “us”’, and ‘dehumanization of “them”’ are defining features of war journalism, while peace journalism is associated with ‘giving voice to all parties’ and

'humanization of all sides'. As suggested by Zandberg & Neiger (2005), journalists can be seen as serving two masters, through being members of 'contradicting communities' – the professional and the national. While the professional community adheres to values such as objectivity, neutrality, balance, and criticism, the national community demands solidarity. In times of crisis and war, the pendulum often swings toward a more patriotic-ethnocentric mode of coverage (Cottle, 2006; Schudson, 2002), resulting in a positive representation of 'our' ethno-national group, and marginalization or demonization of the 'other' group (Carter, Thomas & Ross, 2011; Liebes, 1997; Steuter & Wills, 2010). Yet, recent studies suggest that during the 21st century, media representations of conflicts around the world tend to give more visibility to the other side in conflict (Kampf & Liebes, 2013), and to use non-domestic sources more generally (Hayes & Guardino, 2010). For instance, in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Israeli media started giving more visibility and voice to Palestinian actors (Balmas, Sheaffer, & Wolfsfeld, 2015; Kampf & Liebes, 2013). Notably, these new trends have been primarily documented in the context of the level rather than the nature of the representation.

Media representations of victims in a conflict are particularly important in the context of us–them constructions. While war journalism, in Galtung's (1998: 261) terms, focuses on the victims and the suffering on 'our' side, peace journalism emphasizes the 'suffering all over'. And indeed, research points to a clear difference between the representation of 'our' victims and 'others' victims. Wolfsfeld, Frosh & Awabdy (2008) argue that when one's own citizens are hurt, the news media employ a 'victims mode' of reporting – which personalizes the victim – but when injuries and loss of life on the other side are inflicted by the own group, the news media tend to use a 'defensive mode' of reporting, by depersonalizing the victims. At the same time, there is evidence for a greater focus on victims on all sides of conflicts in contemporary news coverage, due to profound changes in the global media environment (Kampf & Liebes, 2013; Orgad & Seu, 2014).

The countervailing trends in the representation of different conflict parties, on top of the tension between professional and national loyalties of journalists, leave open questions as to the classification of different dimensions of the respective representations and their interplay. For instance: does greater visibility necessarily mean more positive portrayals? And where do we locate negative portrayals of the ingroup in relation to peace versus war journalism?

With regard to classifications of reported, conflict-related events, the peace journalism framework focuses on two major categories: events associated with violence and war, and those associated with peace initiatives and processes (Galtung, 1998, 2006). The normative expectation is that instead of the prevalent emphasis in the news on violent events, the news media would give more emphasis to negotiations and peace initiatives (e.g. Galtung, 2006; Shinar, 2009). This approach was criticized for its advocacy orientation (Loyn, 2007), as well as for paying insufficient attention to the various constraints and values that shape news production (Hanitzsch, 2007a; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Furthermore, this classification does not only obscure the likely coexistence of the two orientations in news stories (as in reports on political debates about the preferred course of action), but also the existence of other, middle-ground realms of conflict management, such as political and economic pressures.

Finally, a key distinction in the peace journalism framework is made between a focus of war journalism on the here-and-now versus a focus of peace journalism on the causes and consequences of the events, including historical and cultural contexts (Galtung, 1998, 2006). Indeed, as in the case of reliance on official sources, a focus on here-and-now events was found to be one of the most salient indicators of war journalism (Lee & Maslog, 2005; Shinar, 2009). However, the social meaning of context and consequences may depend on the context. Collective memory of past traumas and rivals' conflicting versions of the historical causes of conflicts can be detrimental to conflict resolution (see Bar-Tal, 2013). Similarly, future scenarios which foreground violence or negate the possibility of peace are not necessarily conducive to conflict resolution. The news media, which serve as narrators of the present, agents of collective memory (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), and shapers of future scenarios and agendas (Neiger, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2015), can construct both positive and negative longitudinal narratives (Cottle, 2006).

In summation, peace journalism and other related frameworks offer valuable distinctions and important insights regarding the narration and framing of conflict news stories. At the same time, by often glossing over relevant subdistinctions, the context in which specific content elements are positioned within the news story, and the interplay between the different elements, they do not sufficiently account for the complexity of conflict coverage.

Towards a new classification approach: An actor-event framework

The classification framework advanced by this article is based on a comprehensive deconstruction of conflict-related news narratives (see Figure 1). Following a definition of narratives as discursive representations of sequences of events, which commonly focus on the actions of specific actors (see Abbott, 2008; Baden, 2014; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002), we categorize conflict coverage based on the depicted actors and events – the two building blocks of any narrative. The proposed framework attempts to address the weaknesses identified above in existing approaches by offering more complex categories and more nuanced distinctions in relation to the actors and the conflict-related events depicted in news stories. Furthermore, this framework suggests a contextual approach, based on a compositional logic. Following the criticisms discussed above, we argue that what is important is not only if specific dimensions are present or not, but how different dimensions are linked to one another and grouped together within specific narratives. For instance, which conflict actors are portrayed in the context of different types of events? What is the interplay between different dimensions of actors' representation, and which realms of events are grouped together?

Actors in conflict coverage

For conflict actors, the classification framework first distinguishes between ingroup and outgroup actors. This distinction, which is fundamental in narrative approaches to conflict (Bar-On, 2008; Bar-Tal, 2013; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012; Ron & Maoz, 2013), allows us to evaluate the representation of different sides of the conflict in news narratives, while taking into account the position of the examined news media in relation to the conflict (a dimension which is often ignored in studies employing the peace journalism framework). Within this framework, ingroup actors are those who belong to the country/group where the news outlet operates.

In both ingroup and outgroups, there is a wide array of actors who populate conflict coverage (Kampf & Liebes, 2013): a sole classification into establishment vs. non-establishment actors does not do full justice to the more complex realities of conflict. Thus, we identify four categories of subgroups: (1) establishment actors, consisting of political officials as well as other state officials (including the high command of the army); (2) armed forces, consisting of soldiers, police, armed

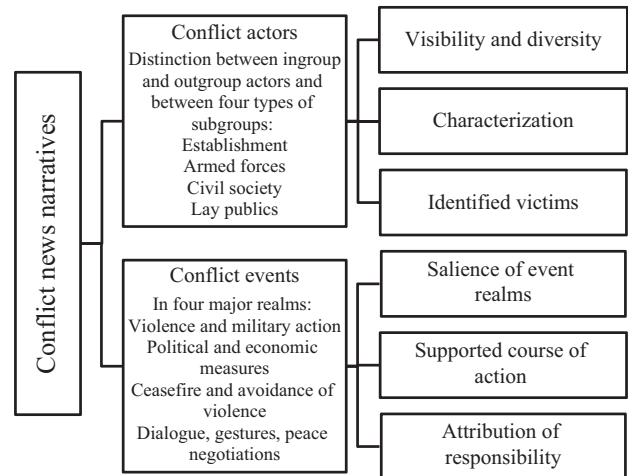


Figure 1. Classification framework

resistance groups, and other militants; (3) civil society actors, consisting of members of conflict-related NGOs and other private organizations (who appear in the news story in association with their membership in the respective organization); and (4) lay publics, consisting of ordinary citizens and other private individuals, including victims of violence.

Our classification framework evaluates a range of textual dimensions in relation to the actors portrayed. We examine (a) the diversity and visibility of the different types of actors; (b) characterization; and (c) the level of information about victims.

Diversity and visibility. This dimension addresses the range of actors from the different subgroups that appear in the news narrative (diversity), and the level of attention given to each subgroup in the story (visibility). Giving voice to a range of actors is a normative demand that links to the peace journalism framework (Galtung, 2006) and narrative approaches to conflict resolution (Cobb, 2013), as well as to journalistic norms (see Baden & Springer, 2014). At the same time, even when different types of actors are represented in the story, some actors are given more prominence through journalistic quoting practices and editorial selections (Dor, 2005). Thus, visibility in the suggested framework reflects the extent to which different subgroups are present in different textual elements of the news story, from headlines and pictures to quotes and descriptions in the main text.

Characterization of ingroup and outgroup actors. As argued above, a systematic distinction should be made between the level and type of representation of conflict

actors. Furthermore, there is a need to account for positive and negative representations of both ingroup and outgroup actors. Thus, in addition to examining the level of visibility given to different actors, we examine the degree to which they are portrayed in a positive or negative light.

Identified victims. Within the different subgroups, the representation of ‘our’ and ‘others’ victims has special importance. Given the growing body of literature on the ‘identified victim effect’ (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Slovic, 2007),² and against the background of the growing visibility of victims in conflict coverage (Kampf & Liebes, 2013), there is a need for a systematic evaluation of the different levels of victim representation in relation to different types of reference groups. The suggested framework therefore also looks specifically at the level of information supplied on ‘our’ and ‘others’ victims.

Events in conflict coverage

While the peace journalism framework focuses on two major realms of events that journalists can report on (violence and war versus peace initiatives and processes), we suggest distinguishing between four main domains: (1) violence and military action (warfare, military operations, terrorist attacks); (2) economic, political, and media measures (economic sanctions, political pressures, propaganda); (3) ceasefires and maintenance of nonviolence; and (4) gestures, dialogue, and peace negotiations. The first and second realms address distinct forms of coercive power: physical violence versus the application of non-military measures, whereas the third and fourth realms represent distinct forms of nonviolence: the non-application of violence (i.e. nonviolence without peace) versus active, peace-oriented measures. Furthermore, we do not assume that news narratives necessarily belong to only one of these realms exclusively. Rather, we examine the grouping of these different realms in journalistic coverage through a cluster analysis approach.

The four realms of events are appraised with respect to three dimensions: (a) their salience in the narrative; (b) support for actions in the respective realms; and (c) the complexity of attribution of responsibility to the depicted events (see Figure 1).

Salience of event realms. Conflict narratives can operate in different timescales (Bar-Tal, 2013), from narratives that connect to the realm of collective memory, through narratives focusing on recent events, to future scenarios (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2015). In determining the salience of the four different realms of events in conflict narratives, we look at both the main topic of the news story and the degree to which the four realms of events appear in different temporal layers of the story: the distant past (history/collective memory), mid-range past (the last few years), recent events (the last few days), near future (the next few days/weeks), and the far future. The degree of salience is determined by the centrality of the relevant realm of events, from ‘low salience’, that is, no events/scenarios in this realm appear in the news story, to ‘high salience’, that is, events/scenarios belonging to this realm are not only the main topic of the item, but are also represented as dominant in both past depictions and future scenarios of the conflict. This aspect addresses the problem of dualism associated with the distinction in the peace journalism framework between a focus of war journalism on the here-and-now and a focus of peace journalism on the causes and consequences of the events, including historical contexts (Galtung, 1998, 2006).

Supported courses of action. In a similar vein, in order to capture the context in which these realms are situated it is important to examine whether references to future scenarios and events in the different realms are discussed as desirable (i.e. such that should be strived for), or as undesirable (i.e. such that should be avoided). Expressions of support or opposition to particular courses of action can be part of the news media’s functioning as a forum for public debate or part of journalists’ own advocacy in more interventionist journalistic cultures (see Hanitzsch, 2007b). Our classification framework addresses such expressions of support or opposition in relation to each of the four realms, ranging from violence and military action to negotiations and peace processes.

Attribution of responsibility. In conflict narratives, parties of all sides tend to externalize responsibility, presenting the other side as responsible for the conflict and for specific events in it (Cobb, 2013). This pattern can also be found in news narratives (e.g. Ariyanto et al., 2008), as attribution of responsibility is a central function of news frames (Entman, 1993; Matthes & Kohring, 2008), as well as a central element in media frames advanced by different sides of the conflict (Sheffer et al., 2014). Narrative approaches to conflict

² The ‘identified victim effect’ suggests that people’s compassion and willingness to act against suffering is much higher when victims are given a name, a face, and other identification/personalization details.

resolution suggest that the goal should not necessarily be to internalize responsibility instead of externalizing it, but rather to strive for narratives of mutual responsibility, where responsibility is both internalized and externalized (Cobb, 2013). Our classification framework therefore accounts for the complexity of attributions of responsibility in news stories by looking into whether news stories assign responsibility to one or more parties.

Research questions

In the following sections, we assess the applicability of our framework and demonstrate its utility for analyzing Israeli news coverage of three Middle-Eastern conflicts: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the conflict surrounding Iran’s nuclear program, and the Syrian civil war. Our primary research question in the empirical part of this paper focuses on the main types of news narratives in conflict coverage:

RQ1: Which narrative clusters emerge from an analysis of Israeli news coverage of the above-mentioned three conflicts?

Two additional questions examine the relative prevalence of these narratives in different media outlets and conflicts:

RQ2a: To what extent do different media outlets employ different hierarchies of narrative clusters?

RQ2b: To what extent do different conflicts generate different hierarchies of narrative clusters?

The intention of this article is not to empirically test or validate the above advanced actor-event approach but to demonstrate its utility for the empirical identification of conflict news narratives and their properties. Cluster analysis, the analytical strategy we employed, is essentially a descriptive technique to classify objects based on a set of specified properties (our classification framework outlined above). The actor-event approach we advance in this paper can be said to be useful if it yields a structure of meaningful clusters that contribute, conceptually and empirically, to our understanding of conflict news narratives.

Method

Our empirical investigation focused on the coverage of three Middle-Eastern conflicts in the Israeli news media over a period of six months (July–December 2012). In looking at three different conflicts – the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the conflict surrounding Iran’s nuclear

program, and the Syrian civil war – over a shared period of time that encompassed a wide range of military and diplomatic events, we aimed to capture a broad spectrum of conflict coverage as a basis for classification.³

The three conflicts that the study focuses on were selected to maximize diversity within a shared framework. All three are contemporary Middle-Eastern political conflicts with a ‘system/ideology’ dimension in which some conflict actors strive for ‘a change of the ideological, religious, socioeconomic or judicial orientation of the political system or changing the regime type itself (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, 2011: 108). However, within this shared framework there is high variability. The Syrian and Iranian conflicts represent, respectively, intrastate vs. interstate conflicts, while the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is between a state and a non-state group (in the context of an occupation). This difference is also associated with different positions of the Israeli media toward the conflicts: while Israel is a direct party to the conflict in the Palestinian and Iranian cases, it is not a main participant in the Syrian conflict (although it is potentially affected by it, and it carried out airstrikes in Syria several times during the war). The three conflicts also differ in their intensity and dynamics over time: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a protracted, intractable conflict, with cycles of escalation and de-escalation; the Iranian conflict is based on a long-term tension with threats for future escalation and violence; and the Syrian conflict is based on a quick eruption of a high level of violence.

Our media sample included three leading news outlets in Israel – *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, and *Ynet* – representing a combination of quality and tabloid newspapers, as well as different political orientations. *Haaretz* is considered the national elite newspaper (often compared to the *New York Times*), *Israel Hayom*

³ In the decades-long Israeli–Palestinian conflict, key events in the chosen period of time included the decision to accord Palestine Non-Member Observer State status in the UN, and an eight-day Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip (‘Pillar of Defense’), which consisted primarily of Israeli airstrikes in Gaza and rockets fired from Gaza to Israel. Six Israelis and 167 Palestinians were killed in this operation, which ended with a ceasefire. In the Syrian civil war, which started in March 2011, the chosen period was shortly after a ceasefire attempt, and included several key battles and offensives. By the end of 2012, more than 40,000 people were killed in this war. Key events in the conflict surrounding Iran’s nuclear program during this period included the publication of several reports regarding Iran’s uranium enrichment capabilities, negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, and an ongoing debate in Israel over military action against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.

is the most widely circulated newspaper in Israel, and *Ynet* – the Internet portal of the Yedioth Ahronoth Group – is the most popular Israeli news website. *Haaretz* represents a left-liberal editorial line, whereas *Israel Hayom*, owned by the conservative Jewish-American billionaire Sheldon Adelson, is known for its alignment with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government's policies. *Ynet* generally adopts a mainstream-centrist editorial line.

The sampling frame was created based on a keyword search⁴ in the digital archives of the three news outlets for all relevant conflict-related items in the examined period. This search yielded a total of 2,728 items: 1,198 for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, 792 for the Iranian conflict, and 738 for the Syrian conflict. For our sample, we randomly selected from the complete list 60 items for each conflict in each news outlet, resulting in a total of 540 news items (three conflicts × three news outlets × 60). Of these, 60 randomly selected items were double coded for evaluating intercoder reliability.

Media coverage was coded based on a nuanced coding scheme that deconstructed the narrative components of conflict-related news stories. The coding scheme was tested and refined until Cohen's Kappa coefficient for intercoder reliability reached a minimum of 0.7 for all questions. Final reliability scores ranged from 0.72 to 0.97. In all, 19 composite variables were constructed from the coding book's dozens of questions. These variables correspond to the six subdimensions presented in Figure 1: visibility and diversity of actors (six variables), characterization of ingroup and outgroup actors (two variables), level of information on victims (two variables), salience of different realms of events (four variables), support for different courses of action (four variables), and complexity of responsibility attributions (one variable). The composite variables are presented in detail in Table I. Note that we define the ingroup in this framework as referring to actors from the country where the news outlet is located (in our context: Israeli actors) and the outgroup as referring to actors from the relevant non-Israeli conflict society (i.e. Palestinian, Iranian, or Syrian actors). The 19 variables were then entered into a hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's

method – squared Euclidean distance) to identify patterns of narratives in the coverage.⁵ Following a classification of the sample as a whole, aimed at identifying characteristic types of narrative across conflicts, we repeated the clustering procedure within conflicts.

Results

A four-cluster solution was selected for a combination of interpretability and statistical properties. Table II shows the means of the 19 variables for each of the resulting narrative clusters, as well as their overall means. One-way F tests and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests were used to determine which classifying variables produced significant differences between the clusters and where the differences lie. The F tests show that 16 of the variables meaningfully discriminate between the four clusters. The three variables that do not distinguish between the groups (i.e. have non-significant F values) are the characterization of the ingroup, salience of the ceasefire/non-violence realm, and support for economic/political measures. Two other variables – total number of subgroups and attribution of responsibility – significantly distinguish between the clusters (in particular Cluster 4 versus the others), but the small differences do not lend themselves to a substantive interpretation.

The four identified narrative clusters include two political-diplomatic narratives (Clusters 1 and 2) and two violence-centered narratives (Clusters 3 and 4). The two clusters in the violence realm are characterized by high salience of events and scenarios associated with violence and military action. However, these two narrative clusters are different in their viewpoint or direction of gaze. One is inward-looking, ethnocentric narrative, focusing on 'our' actors and victims (Cluster 3). This cluster thus has, on average, the highest positive difference between the numbers of ingroup and outgroup actors, as well as the highest level of information on ingroup victims. The other violence-centered cluster (Cluster 4) is outward-looking, focusing on outgroup actors, including others' victims. It thus has the highest negative difference between the numbers of ingroup and outgroup actors, as well as the highest level of information on outgroup victims.

The two political-diplomatic narrative clusters are both marked by high salience of events associated with economic and political measures. However, one is again

⁴ The selection of search terms was a result of a long, systematic process aimed at determining and validating the optimal keywords for producing the most exhaustive and accurate sampling frame for each conflict. The final search terms (translated from Hebrew) were the following: 'Palestin*&(conflict|intifada|peace|negotiations|operation|attack)'; 'Syria&(war|fight*|protest*|uprising)'; 'Iran & nuclear*'.

⁵ The clustering of news stories follows the procedure suggested by Matthes & Kohring (2008), with the difference of clustering narrative components rather than framing elements.

Table I. Operationalization of classification variables

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Values</i>
Actors: visibility and diversity	Visibility: establishment Visibility: armed forces Visibility: civil society Visibility: lay publics	0–8: From low to high visibility. An aggregate variable based on the existence of references to the relevant subgroup in four textual elements: headlines, full text, pictures, and quotes. 0: no references to the relevant subgroup in the article; 8: the subgroup appears in four textual components for ingroup and outgroup actors.
	Difference between number of actors in ingroup and outgroup	–4–4: From a high focus on the outgroup with no references to ingroup actors, to a high focus on the ingroup with no references to outgroup actors. 0 represents a balanced representation of ingroup and outgroup actors. Differential variable, calculated by subtracting the number of Palestinian, Iranian or Syrian subgroups (0–4) from the number of Israeli subgroups that appear in the item (0–4).
	Total number of subgroups	Total number of subgroups, including also third-party countries and international organizations (in addition to ingroup actors and actors from the relevant outgroup conflict society).
Actors: characterization	Characterization of ingroup Characterization of outgroup	–4–4: from highly negative to highly positive representation. Based on explicit positive and negative references to the four types of subgroups (establishment, civil society, armed forces, and lay publics) in the ingroup and relevant outgroup. Differential variable, based on the difference between the level of positive representation (0–4; from no positive representation to positive representation of all four subgroups) and negative representation (0–4).
	Actors: identified victims	Level of information on victims: ingroup Level of information on victims: outgroup
Events: salience of different realms of events/measures	Violence and military action Political/economic measures Ceasefire/nonviolence Dialogue/negotiations	0–6: From low to high centrality of the relevant realm of events. 0: no events/scenarios in this realm appear in the news story; 6: events/scenarios belonging to this realm are not only the main topic of the item, but are also represented as dominant in both past depictions and future scenarios of the conflict.
Events: level of support for different courses of action	Support: violence Support: economic/political measures Support: ceasefire Support: negotiations	–2 to 2: From strong opposition to strong support. Calculated as the differential between expressions of support (0–2) and opposition (0–2) in relation to expected events or advocated measures. –2: no expression of support in the article and expression of opposition in the headlines/lead; 0: balanced or neutral position; 2: support in the headlines/lead and no expression of opposition.
Events: responsibility	Complexity of attribution of responsibility	0–3: From low to high complexity. Ranges from no attribution of responsibility through one-sided responsibility to bi- and multi-party responsibility.

outward-looking, dealing with others' politics and diplomacy (Cluster 2), while the other (Cluster 1) is interactional. Cluster 1 is thus the most balanced in its level of representation of ingroup and outgroup actors, as well as

highest in the realm of dialogue, gestures, and peace negotiations.

With regard to the visibility of different types of subgroups, establishment actors are found to be the most

Table II. Narrative clusters

Variables	Mean scores (Standard deviations)				Total (n = 540)	F value
	Cluster 1: Political- diplomatic interactional narrative (n = 176)	Cluster 2: Political- diplomatic outward-looking narrative (n = 134)	Cluster 3: Violent inward- looking narra- tive (n = 77)	Cluster 4: Violent outward- looking narra- tive (n = 153)		
<i>Conflict actors</i>						
Visibility: establishment	5.43 ^a (1.23)	3.25 ^b (1.30)	3.19 ^b (1.91)	4.10 ^c (1.55)	4.19 (1.72)	72.97**
Visibility: civil society	0.11 ^a (0.42)	0.19 ^a (0.58)	0.92 ^b (1.23)	0.65 ^c (0.99)	0.40 (0.87)	25.72**
Visibility: armed forces	0.41 ^a (0.78)	0.33 ^a (0.62)	2.36 ^b (1.57)	2.17 ^b (1.21)	1.17 (1.38)	143.64**
Visibility: lay publics	0.53 ^a (0.78)	1.09 ^b (1.32)	3.21 ^c (1.62)	1.93 ^d (1.11)	1.45 (1.47)	107.60**
Difference between ingroup and outgroup	-0.10 ^a (0.90)	-0.95 ^b (1.16)	1.30 ^c (1.04)	-2.21 ^d (1.33)	-0.71 (1.61)	193.24**
Total number of subgroups	5.28 ^a (1.57)	4.84 ^a (1.42)	5.25 ^a (1.92)	6.75 ^b (1.68)	5.58 (1.78)	39.17**
Level of information on victims: ingroup	0.10 ^a (0.44)	0.04 ^a (0.26)	2.69 ^b (2.14)	0.12 ^a (0.50)	0.46 (1.27)	185.28**
Level of information on victims: outgroup	0.11 ^a (0.46)	0.62 ^b (1.07)	1.55 ^c (1.59)	2.85 ^d (1.38)	1.22 (1.58)	180.60**
Characterization of ingroup (from negative to positive)	-0.01 (0.76)	-0.11 (0.56)	0.04 (1.19)	-0.01 (0.65)	-0.03 (0.76)	0.81
Characterization of outgroup (from negative to positive)	-0.60 ^a (0.72)	-0.37 ^a (0.92)	-0.49 ^a (0.99)	-1.12 ^b (0.89)	-0.67 (0.90)	20.52**
<i>Conflict events</i>						
Attribution of responsibility	1.53 ^a (0.67)	1.47 ^a (0.67)	1.30 (0.70)	1.15 ^b (0.69)	1.38 (0.67)	9.93**
Salience: violence and military action	1.60 ^a (1.52)	1.04 ^b (1.12)	2.35 ^c (1.23)	2.46 ^c (1.36)	1.81 (1.46)	32.14**
Salience: economic, political and media measures	1.43 ^a (1.51)	1.55 ^a (1.37)	0.45 ^b (0.97)	0.58 ^b (0.97)	1.08 (1.35)	24.69**
Salience: ceasefire, nonviolence	0.19 (0.63)	0.25 (0.72)	0.18 (0.45)	0.21 (0.73)	0.21 (0.66)	0.28
Salience: dialogue, gestures, peace negotiations	0.43 ^a (1.02)	0.18 ^b (0.59)	0.13 ^b (0.52)	0.08 ^b (0.38)	0.23 (0.72)	7.30**
Support: violence and military action (from strong opposition to strong support)	-0.40 ^a (0.89)	-0.19 (0.62)	-0.01 ^b (0.64)	-0.07 ^b (0.77)	-0.20 (0.77)	7.36**
Support: economic, political and media measures	0.11 (0.62)	0.03 (0.53)	0.01 (0.30)	0.07 (0.36)	0.06 (0.49)	0.95
Support: ceasefire, nonviolence	0.06 (0.30)	-0.01 ^a (0.19)	0.12 ^b (0.40)	0.07 (0.32)	0.05 (0.30)	3.11*
Support: dialogue, gestures, peace negotiations	0.23 ^a (0.61)	0.06 ^b (0.29)	0.04 ^b (0.19)	0.01 ^b (0.33)	0.10 (0.44)	9.13**

a, b, c, d Significant differences between clusters at $p < 0.05$, based on Tukey's HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

dominant subgroup in news stories overall, while civil society is the least visible subgroup. However, the visibility of the different subgroups varies across clusters: establishment actors are most dominant in the peace-oriented cluster (Cluster 1), while civil society and lay publics are significantly more dominant in the violent narratives.

Notably, the data also show a general negativity trend, applying to both ingroup and outgroup actors. As

expected, characterization of the ingroup is generally more positive than representations of outgroups. However, ingroup characterization is still on the negative side in the sample as a whole and in three of the four clusters. The exception is Cluster 3 – the inward looking, ethnocentric narrative – where ingroup representation is more positive on average. Interestingly, it is also only in Cluster 3 that there are on average more ingroup than outgroup subgroups in a given news story. In all other

Table III. Narrative clusters by conflict

Narrative cluster	Conflict		
	Israeli–Palestinian (n=180)	Iranian (n=180)	Syrian (n=180)
(1) Political-diplomatic interactional narrative	25.0%	61.1%	11.7%
(2) Political-diplomatic outward-looking narrative	18.3%	34.4%	21.7%
(3) Violence-centered inward-looking narrative	36.7%	2.2%	3.9%
(4) Violence-centered outward-looking narrative	20.0%	2.2%	62.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

clusters, there are on average more outgroup actors (as indicated by the negative value of the *Difference between ingroup and outgroup* variable).

An examination of the presence of the four narrative clusters in the different news outlets suggests that while each cluster was present in each of the three outlets (with a minimum of 11% of the total number of items in each outlet), there were also some noteworthy differences among the three outlets in the prevalence of the different clusters. In the highbrow, left-leaning *Haaretz*, the diplomatic-interactional narrative (Cluster 1) is somewhat more prevalent than in the two other news outlets: 35% of the sampled news items belong to this cluster in *Haaretz*, in comparison to 32% in *Ynet* and 31% in *Israel Hayom*. At the same time, together with *Ynet*, *Haaretz* is characterized by a higher prevalence of the violence-centered, outward-looking narrative (Cluster 4) in relation to *Israel Hayom* (31% vs. 23%, respectively). In terms of the classification variables, one of the major differences that this finding reflects is the significantly higher level of information on outgroup victims in *Haaretz* and *Ynet* in comparison to *Israel Hayom*. Interestingly, however, *Ynet* is also characterized by the highest level of information on ingroup victims among the three outlets, which partly explains why it also has the highest percentage of items belonging to the inward-looking violence-centered narrative (Cluster 3). These findings may reflect the more general tendency of *Ynet* toward personalization, also indicated by the greater salience of lay publics in its stories (in comparison to the other news outlets). The overall relationship between the clusters and the news outlet is statistically significant ($X^2 = 19.23$; d.f. = 6; $n = 540$; $p < .01$).

The differences between the three conflicts in relation to the four narrative clusters are even more pronounced ($X^2 = 301.12$; d.f. = 6; $n = 540$; $p < .001$). As suggested by Table III, the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict during the examined time period was most varied in relation to the four clusters: the most dominant

cluster – the violence-centered inward-looking narrative – accounts for about 37% of the coverage, while the other three clusters account for between 18% and 25% of the news stories. In contrast, the coverage of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts heavily concentrates on specific clusters: the political-diplomatic narratives in the Iranian case and the violence-centered outward-looking narrative in the Syrian case.

In addition to looking at the distribution of the four identified clusters across the three conflicts, we also examined which narrative clusters emerged when hierarchical cluster analysis was run separately for each conflict. The results suggest that the Palestinian and Syrian conflicts follow a structure similar to the cross-conflict classification: the resulting narratives are based on a matrix of viewpoints (inward/outward looking) and a focus on violence/military action versus politics/diplomacy (albeit with different emphases in relation to the cross-conflict classification, such as more emphasis on ceasefire/maintaining nonviolence in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict within the political-diplomatic clusters). The Iranian case provides an example where the different realms of events/measures take precedence over actor variables in distinguishing between the clusters (as the actors remain relatively stable across the coverage, with a continuous emphasis on official actors). The main news narratives in the Iranian case are thus distinctly clustered around three types of conflict management measures: (a) violence/military action (44% of the items, referring to military measures and scenarios where violence was initiated by Iran, Israel or third parties); (b) political-economic measures (51%, focusing primarily on economic sanctions against Iran); and (c) the realm of dialogue and negotiations (5%). Unlike the more complex picture emerging from the cross-conflict classification, this internal classification of the Iranian conflict can be more readily understood as a continuum of a peace journalism framework (which can be achieved when the actors are kept relatively constant). It is also

noteworthy that while the stories about the Iranian conflict overwhelmingly belong to the political-diplomatic clusters in the general sample (see Table III), in the internal clustering procedure one of the resulting clusters has an emphasis on violence/military action. This finding underscores the fact that the violent realm is by no means absent from the political-diplomatic general clusters (as clearly seen in Table II). However, violence is mostly discussed rather than enacted, as one among many possible courses of action. The internal clustering of the coverage of the Iranian conflict reveals that the nonviolent solutions had the slight upper hand in the narration of the story in the Israeli media (as in reality).

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to present a nuanced classification framework that deconstructs conflict news narratives while it addresses some of the weaknesses of existing classification schemes, in particular the peace journalism framework. Another aim was to apply this classification framework to the analysis of news coverage of three Middle Eastern conflicts in the Israeli media. The proposed classification framework integrates and adapts components and insights of existing frameworks, while going beyond existing approaches. First, it offers a nuanced approach to evaluating the representation of conflict actors and events, which escapes the dualist nature of the peace journalism indicators. Second, it provides a more contextual approach – within individual dimensions (for example, by taking into account the positioning of the news outlet vis-à-vis the conflict, or the nature of the discussed context and consequences in the article), as well as in the interrelations among the different dimensions. The latter is achieved by connecting actors and events and replacing the predetermined nature and additive logic of the peace journalism framework with an inductive, compositional logic. Third, our classification framework does not suggest that any of the resulting narratives is necessarily more valid, truthful, or propagandist than the others.

On the empirical level, we find that the constellations of viewpoints and conflict events presented in the news are more complex than usually presented in research. This is most pronounced in relation to the postulated alignment between elite/official actors and violence frames (Galtung, 2006; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Workneh, 2011). In accordance with the literature, establishment actors are found to be the most dominant subgroup in news stories, and violence and military action form the most dominant realm of events. However, establishment

actors are most dominant in the most peace-oriented narrative. Here, our findings challenge the peace journalism model, where the presence of elite/official actors is used as an indicator for war journalism. The presence of different subgroups, our findings suggest, should be considered against the context in which they appear.

Our findings also complicate arguments about balance in conflict coverage and the relationship between ingroup and outgroup representations. Of particular interest in this context is the finding that while the representation of ingroup actors is not as negative as that of outgroup actors, it is still slightly negative on average (except in the inward-looking narrative). This not only supports arguments about general negativity trends in the news (Soroka, 2014; Wolfsfeld, 2004), but suggests that while journalists and the news may not be balanced, they also do not abandon a critical stance. ‘Rallying around the flag’ and loyalty to the national group (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005) are thus apparent in our sample only to a limited degree. This may be attributed to the range and type of conflict phases included in the sample, the relatively small number of Israeli casualties during this period, and the inclusion of the Syrian case, where Israel is not a main participant in the conflict. Applying this framework to the coverage of the 2014 Gaza war, for example, would likely produce somewhat different results.

In addition, the finding about the greater emphasis on outgroup actors in relation to ingroup actors is in accordance with the trend identified in recent scholarship of giving increasing visibility to ‘the other’/non-domestic voices in the Israeli media (Balmas, Sheaffer & Wolfsfeld, 2015; Kampf & Liebes, 2013). However, bringing the visibility and negativity trends together suggests that greater visibility of the other side is not necessarily accompanied by a more empathetic representation. It is thus important to include in evaluations of conflict coverage measures of both salience and characterization/tone.

The differences found among media outlets with regard to the narrative clusters are in accordance with the editorial lines of the respective news organizations (e.g. more emphasis in *Haaretz* on the most peace-oriented cluster), as well as their news values and narrative style (e.g. greater focus in *Ynet* on personal stories of victims). In a similar vein, the substantial differences between the three conflicts in the hierarchies of narrative clusters correspond to the specific characteristics of the conflicts and Israel’s position in relation to them. Thus, the intractable, highly contested, close-to-home Israeli–Palestinian conflict generates more varied narratives, including

ethnocentric narratives, whereas the Syrian civil war, where Israel is not a main actor and which is marked by extreme violence, generates witnessing narratives in the Israeli media. The unsurprising nature of the detected differences may support the validity of the suggested classification framework.

Our study is not without limitations, however. First, the coding scheme is rather complicated, thereby not lending itself to easy replication. Indeed, complexity is an inherent feature of this classification framework, but the coding scheme could well be simplified. Second, a quantitative approach cannot fully account for some important components of conflict narratives, in particular those associated with the symbols, ethos systems, myths, and collective memories of conflicts, as well as various visual dimensions. Third, despite the relatively broad parameters of the study, our empirical investigation is limited by its focus on the Israeli media and the particular six-month period of the sample. This may be consequential for the types of narratives we identified, since cluster analysis as exploratory technique inevitably leads to solutions that are dependent on the empirical material studied. Even within the Israeli context, a focus on a time period with active peace negotiations might have produced somewhat different narrative clusters. Thus, future investigations need to address the question of whether the narrative patterns identified in this study can be generalized to other media systems and conflict contexts.

Fourth, another limitation pertains to the meaning of the identified narratives in relation to conflict escalation/maintenance, or to opening opportunities for de-escalation/conflict resolution. While the approach presented in this article transcends the peace-war dualism, the identified narratives do not map neatly onto a peace-war continuum, and their possible effects remain at best conjectural. Ultimately, content analysis of news narratives can go only so far and there is a need for examining the reception of particular news narratives in political and public debates. Another productive avenue could be longitudinal content analyses, where the news coverage can be examined in relation to actual developments in the conflict. Such an investigation can also address a fifth limitation of this study, which focuses on individual news stories as short narratives rather than the unfolding of conflict coverage over time as part of a serial narrative (see Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008). Sixth, and finally, while our classification framework attempts to address the need for a nuanced approach that takes into account journalistic practices and values, there is still a need for investigating the factors that lead to the journalistic

production of different types of conflict narratives. The challenge for future research is thus to systematically connect the content of conflict coverage to both its production and effects.

That being said, in exploring the complex and contextual dimensions of media narratives, this study expands on the important body of literature regarding the contribution of the news media to public discourse about conflict, war, and peace, and consequently, to shaping public attitudes and perceptions about conflicts and conflict resolution. In addition, with some adaptations, our suggested classification framework may be useful for assessing the construction and transformation of conflict narratives not only in news content, but also in other venues, such as individual storytelling in intergroup encounters.

Replication data

The dataset and SPSS output for this study can be found at <https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/>.

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