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### Faces of conflict

*Interventionism and substantiveness in the conflict framing process*

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# CHAPTER 1

Introduction

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Topic and Aim of the Dissertation**

Conflict is an essential component of politics in any democracy, where political and other societal actors struggle to get their opinions across (Sartori, 1987). Through conflict, citizens receive different electoral options (Schattschneider, 1960). Conflict is the characteristic of how democracy is institutionalized, be it in parliamentary debate or during election campaigns (Wessler, 2008). Also, conflict precedes consensus, thereby ideally allowing the best idea to emerge within political discourse (Habermas, 2006; Peters, 2005). Most importantly for this dissertation, however, political conflict is today most often played out in a mediated arena, where journalists act as disseminators of a clash of political viewpoints. This importance of mediated conflict in the political process has rendered it a key element in political communication research over the years (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). It has also opened questions regarding the role that journalists play in the production, content, and effects of political conflict.

Research has traditionally placed journalists in the role of gatekeepers, influencing the media agenda by selecting what is to be disseminated and what is not, thereby informing the public (Shoemaker et al., 2001). In making these choices, journalists are guided by various decision mechanisms, norms, and news values (e.g., Cottle, 2003; Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Conflict has been identified among the most important of news values in research throughout the years, and it is a central part of journalistic production norms, such as the quest for objectivity and balanced reporting (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979; McManus, 1994; Tuchman, 1978). This all suggests that journalists play an active role in shaping the news in general (Entman, 1991), and conflict in particular. The importance of the journalistic voice within the news is often recognized as important within framing theory (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Journalists play a formative role in framing political news during the news-production process. Because conflict is so important as a journalistic news value and the relevance of conflict for politics, the concept of the “conflict frame” is one of the most frequently used and found frames in political communication research today (e.g., Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011). Similarly, previous research highlights the distinct effects of exposure to conflict frames on both citizen behaviour (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2016), and on political perceptions and attitudes (Avery, 2009; Vliegenthart et al., 2008). The prevalence and effects of conflict in the media underline the importance of conflict frames as a concept and explains the ample attention it has received in research toward political communication.

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In the political communication literature, conflict frames are treated as a generic concept and thus a fundamental aspect of news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, despite its importance, conflict framing research is characterized by unclear or overly general definitions and conceptualizations, which have likely also led to inconsistent findings as to which effects it has on political decisionmaking and citizens. In this dissertation, I will argue that, while conflict frames can fall under a single conceptual umbrella, journalistic work produces different types of conflict frames, and that these different types are visible in political news, and have differential effects. I specifically argue that conflict framing varies by 1) level of substantiveness, and 2) level of journalistic intervention. Through uncovering the role of different types of conflict frames in political communication, this PhD-project aims to offer a systematic analysis of conflict framing across all stages of the framing process. This includes the study of the emergence, presence, and effects of different types of conflict frames in political news. Research connecting these three different stages in the framing process is relatively scarce.

First, there is a dearth of studies uncovering the conflict frame building process and the role journalists play in this stage. Therefore, the first aim of this dissertation is to uncover to what extent journalists play an active role in the frame building process, as opposed to functioning as mere disseminators of conflict frames originating from political actors. The first study focuses on the frame building stage, so the role of journalists in framing political news in terms of conflict.

Second, I look at conflict frame presence. Here, I focus on actual manifestations of different types of conflict frames in news messages. The aim is to develop a comprehensive and yet multidimensional definition of conflict frames in the news. Therefore, the aim of the second study is to uncover different manifestations of conflict frames in political news.

Third, I look at the frame setting stage. Specifically, I look at the effects of different types of conflict frames on political participation. The typology I develop in the second study will be used as a starting point for a framing effects experiment. Furthermore, I address the underlying emotional mechanisms of these effects. Hence, the overarching research question for this dissertation is: What is the role of different types of conflict frames in the production, content and effects of conflict framing?

In the remaining part of this chapter, I introduce the background and aim of the dissertation in more detail. I will first focus on the broader relevance of conflict for journalism and political communication. This is followed by a description of framing theory as a theoretical background, and an explanation of the conflict framing process and the definition of conflict framing. Next, I will elaborate on the relevance

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of different types of conflict frames including varied levels of substantiveness and interventionism. This will be followed by an explanation of the research context. Subsequently, I will address the relevance of conflict framing. Finally, I will give an overview of the dissertation chapters and methodology used.

### **1.2 Journalism, Politics and Conflict**

The interplay between politics and journalism is essential for the functioning and development of democracy (Albæk et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the relationship between journalism and politics is today often described as troubled and complex. Based on a normative assumption of the role journalism should play within democracy, the literature is in part divided into scholars who argue that the majority of current political news has detrimental effects on an increasingly fragmented, disaffected and cynical citizenry, and those who argue that political news has positive outcomes too. In a negative outlook, political journalists are blamed for excessively focusing on strategy rather than substance, leading to distrust towards politicians and cynicism concerning the political system, a so-called "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). A similar concern is that market and commercial pressure affects the "internal logic" of the manufacturing and appearance of news messages. This process can lead to personalization, dramatization of events, simplification of complex affairs and polarized conflicts. These characteristics in turn allegedly promote a mood of anti-politics among the recipients of media messages (Habermas, 2006).

However, other researchers also adapt a more positive viewing point, focused on the "virtuous" aspect of exposure to political media content (e.g., Norris, 2000; De Vreese, 2005). Research positioned on this side proposes that exposure to contemporary political journalism does not necessarily lead to political disengagement and a decline in political participation. Instead, the media can still contribute to a functioning democracy by engaging and mobilizing voters (e.g., Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2016). As is often the case, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Indeed, whether exposure to media content leads to positive or negative effects is greatly contingent on a steadily growing list of individual and contextual factors, such as media systems (e.g., Albæk et al., 2014), personality characteristics (e.g., Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), or content characteristics (e.g., Min, 2004).

As one of the most important elements of political communication today, conflict is automatically an important part of this broader discussion. While the term conflict at first evokes a negative connotation, it is also often seen as pivotal for democracy (Sartori, 1987). Furthermore, the role of journalists in reporting on political conflict is essential. Both journalists and politicians have their share in the

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ubiquity of conflict in political news (Davis, 2003). However, there are no clear guidelines on how neither journalists nor politicians should behave. It is very relevant to what extent journalists intervene when reporting on political conflict, and consequently to what extent political conflict in the news focuses on issues or revolves around nonsubstantive matters such as strategy, personal attacks and incivility. And that brings along the next question, how do journalistic interventionism and substantiveness in conflict framing affect political participation? These questions revolving around conflict framing are central to this dissertation.

### **1.3 Framing Theory**

This dissertation is embedded in the news framing research tradition (e.g., De Vreese, 2005; Matthes, 2012; Scheufele, 1999). Framing can be understood as a process in which certain aspects and considerations of a political debate are highlighted over others. This entails a selection to be made concerning the information that is shared and certain judgments, decisions and behaviours that are suggested to the individual receiving the message (e.g., Nelson, 1997; Scheufele, 1999). A frame is often defined as a “central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). News framing is an important and large part of political communication literature and is the subject of a growing number of studies (Borah, 2011; D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). While a number of studies in political communication focus on issue-specific news frames, research has also identified generic news frames. These types of frames transcend particular themes and occur in relation to different topics and context. These generic frames are characteristic of news coverage and journalism in general (De Vreese, 2005). Several generic news frames have been identified in political communication literature (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1994; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Examples of these include a wide variety of frames such as human-interest frames, strategy framing and episodic framing. The focus of this dissertation will be one of the most widely used generic frames in political reporting: conflict framing.

As argued above, this dissertation will cover the whole news framing process. This news framing processes generally consist of three distinct stages, which are most often observed separately. The first is frame building, which refers to the process by which political events and issues is translated into specific news frames (De Vreese, 2005). This process is influenced by several factors both internal and external to journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Research on how these influences play out for conflict framing

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specifically is lacking, even though it is essential. As the role that journalists play in actively constructing conflict frames has so far not been studied, we do not know what journalistic motivations lead to different types of conflict frames. Therefore, chapter 2 will address the conflict frame building process through expert interviews with political journalists and editors.

The second stage, frame presence, is characterized by the actual coverage of frames by the media. This aspect of framing is generally studied by means of content analysis in order to investigate the manifestations of frames in the news (e.g., Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). While a number of studies focus on the occurrence of conflict frames as a generic concept, research towards the possibility of different types of conflict frames in actual news content is again lacking. The development of a typology including different types of conflict frames by means of a content analysis will therefore be addressed in chapter 3.

The third and final stage is frame setting, which alludes to the consequences of exposure to news frames, both on an individual and on a societal level (De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). The effects of exposure to conflict frames on citizens has been studied before. However, these studies identified several and sometimes contradictory results, and show inconsistent or overly general operationalizations of the independent variable. Not many studies take into account different types of conflict frames. Surprisingly, because the few studies that do take different types into account, suggest that different types of conflict frames can have different effects on people (Lee, Mcleod, & Shah, 2008; Min, 2004). Along these lines, I also argue that an answer into the differential effects of conflict framing depends on the study of their underlying processes. Therefore, in chapter 4, I will assess the effects of different types of conflict frames and the role of emotions as likely strong mediators when it comes to conflict.

Hence, this dissertation will take the whole range of the conflict framing process into account in order to investigate the production, occurrence, and differential effects of different types of conflict frames (see Figure 1.1 below for an overview).

### **1.4 How Conflict Frames Matter: Conflict as a Double-edged Sword?**

As noted before, the prominence of conflict in political communication is highlighted by the ample attention it has received in research, as well as the widespread use of conflict frames by journalists reporting about political news. The features that make events including an element of conflict noteworthy may explain the prominent place of conflict in the news. Conflict signals disagreement and a problem or dispute between actors that require to be solved (Pinkley, 1990). The fact that there is an unsolved pro-

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blem leads to an element of uncertainty and tension that alerts outsiders, especially when the outcome of the conflict can be of consequence to someone. Indeed, political conflict is traditionally associated with high levels of attention of the audience (e.g., Schattschneider, 1960). The attention-grabbing features of conflict framing incentivize both journalists and politicians to use conflict to get noted by the audience (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012).

Normatively, from a deliberation theory perspective, the competition of diverging and contrasting ideas in the public debate are beneficial for citizens in making political choices. Subsequently, political communication in the public sphere that includes competing viewpoints, can ideally contribute the deliberative process (Habermas, 2006). In an ideal process of mediated democratic deliberation, a conflict takes place in the media. Here, the media serves as the public sphere. Further along in this process the conflict will be resolved by means of a communicative process characterized by rational arguments. Frames compete over attention in the media, gain importance and after a while lose importance when they get resolved through deliberation (Simon & Xenos, 2000). Deliberation in the news, when characterized by civility and a respectful exchange of ideas, is often considered a vital component of a democratic system and conflicting positions can reduce information costs for citizens drastically (Wessler, 2008).

These core characteristics of conflict, paired with the pivotal role in politics and society, have led the concept to be at the center of research in other contexts apart from news framing and political communication. A large branch of early conflict research focuses on interpersonal conflict or negotiations (Donohue, 1998; Donohue & Roberto, 1993; Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994). These studies deal with varying topics ranging from effects of frames in conflicts for outcomes of organizational disputes to peace negotiations. Furthermore, another category of related studies focuses on the roles of the media and journalism in war or violent conflict escalation (e.g., Cottle, 2006). These include classic studies that investigate media strategies of parties in the two world wars (e.g., Dovring, 1959; Laswell, 1971). But also more recent studies focus on the effects of coverage on the outcome of conflict and war (e.g., Taylor, 1992), and the role of the mass media in escalating conflicts, even to the point of determining media responsibility in genocide (Thompson, 2007; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014).

While these are other relevant branches of literature that emphasize the importance of conflict as a general concept, the main aim of this dissertation is conflict framing in political communication and journalism. Conflict framing in political news is generally focused on the display of confrontation and/or disagreement between two or more political actors in the media (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011).



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The term conflict has an intuitively inherent negative connotation and early literature mainly focused on negative consequences associated with conflict framing in the news. However, an overview of the literature on conflict framing points out the double-barrelled nature of the concept. For instance, while conflict is often associated with unfavourable outcomes on citizens (e.g., Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Vliegenthart et al., 2008), several other studies highlight positive outcomes (e.g., Jebril et al., 2013; Schuck et al., 2016). This suggests that conflict framing in the news is consequential and important when citizens are exposed to it.

Conflict frames have been associated with several negative outcomes on citizens. For instance, public approval of politicians decreases after exposure to conflict-laden television coverage (Forgette & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, studies have found conflict frames to contribute to the erosion of political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), to decrease political participation (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Klein-nijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006), and to depress citizens' support of European integration (Vliegenthart et al., 2008). The role of the media in portraying conflicts has also been criticized. For instance, the production of news is increasingly characterized by a sensationalistic style (Graber & Smith, 2005). Another concern often voiced by scholars, specifically vis-à-vis mediated contentious political content, is the increased personalization and the tendency to report on conflicts in terms of a horse race and on personal attributes as opposed to policy positions and more substantive disagreement, hereby restricting the deliberative process that is essential to democracy (e.g., Wessler, 2008; Patterson, 1993).

Apart from negative consequences of conflict framing, there are also advantageous sides. While conflict frames inherently entail confrontation, they do not necessarily involve a destructive side (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011). More recent studies argue that conflict framing leads citizens to realize what is at stake and even empirically show that exposure positively affects political engagement (De Vreese, & Tobiasen, 2007; Min, 2004; Schuck et al., 2016). Conflict frames are also found to cause an increase in support for certain policies (Vliegenthart & Schuck, 2008). Hence, the literature suggests reasons why conflict framing matters in a positive or a detrimental way for politics, and conflict remains a fascinating subject of study.

Yet, as mentioned above, despite the importance and relevance of conflict framing, there is a lack of clear and coherent definitions in the literature. The term "conflict frame" was first used by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), who describe it as news media focussing on events where two sides are pitted against each other. In their work, conflict framing was strongly connected to game and horse race

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framing. Later studies that focus on conflict frames (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993) incorporated definitions that focus on “disagreement between individuals, institutions, or countries”, and “an emphasis on points of divergence between conflicting parties” (De Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, p. 109). In this dissertation, I choose to initially follow these general definitions of political conflict as a form of disagreement between competing political actors, and therefore exclude more specific and arguably different notions of conflict such as conflict through political strategy, war and game metaphors (Patterson, 1993), and incivility (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). While the difference between conflict and the above-mentioned concepts might seem easily upheld, all of the above have been used to refer to conflict and/or conflict framing. However, the multitude of these more specific operationalizations is troubling. Given the conceptual variation and vagueness that exists in conflict framing literature, Rinke, Wessler and Weinmann even suggested to introduce a new term for framing that includes substantive competition of policy in the news, so-called “contestation framing” (2013, p. 475). I however suggest that these different manifestations may reflect underlying subdimensions that are all variations within the overarching generic concept of conflict frames, rather than separate concepts or part of conflict framing by definition.

The generic definition of conflict framing may thus consist of different underlying dimensions, which influence the type of effects a conflict frame can have (Min, 2004). Hence, while the generic definition of conflict framing is important and the starting point of this dissertation, I also want to depart from a strictly generic view of conflict framing and incorporate a more nuanced and elaborate description of conflict framing in political news. Specifically, in this dissertation I focus on the level of substantiveness and interventionism as subdimensions of conflict framing.

### **1.5 Conflict Frames and Substantiveness**

Some studies described conflict frames as being conceptually part of the game frame or horse race coverage (e.g., Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010; Takens et al., 2015), or as being essentially non-substantive (Gross & Brewer, 2007). The media logic thesis holds that the content of political news is the product of news values and format requirements that media make use of to attract news consumers (Esser, 2013). In this dissertation, I argue that conflict frames are not by nature part a nonsubstantive concept or a game or contestation frame. Rather, conflict frames can also be substantive and at times focus on issues or the ideas and political opinions around which the political contestation revolves (Lawrence, 2000). So, this means that I theorize that we can differentiate between substantive conflict frames that focus mainly on

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political ideas, policy issues, ideological issues and values, and nonsubstantive conflict frames that address the political process, politics as a game or personal attacks.

In political communication, scholars have expressed the concern that strategic news as such becomes more prevalent, often at the cost of substantive news (e.g., Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Patterson, 1993). Furthermore, the use of this strategic game frame is associated with eroding political trust and an increase in political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Jackson, 2011). In fact, there is evidence of differences in effects between substantive and nonsubstantive news content in the context of political conflict. Experimental findings indicate that when conflict news focused on policy items they increased turnout, while conflicts consisting of personal attacks depressed likelihood to vote (Min, 2004). Similarly, compared to substantive news, non-substantive news on controversial issues discounts partisan affiliation as a primary consideration (Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008). Thus, differences in substantiveness can likely also be used to characterize conflict frames in political news and these differences will be important for outcomes on citizens.

Because of the clear link with conflict, the concept of substantiveness will be incorporated in the current dissertation. First to investigate how conflict framing in political news can vary in the level of substantiveness or nonsubstantiveness by assessing the presence of these different types conflict frames. Furthermore, the dissertation will investigate the effects of substantiveness or nonsubstantiveness in conflict framing on political participation.

### **1.6. Interventionism**

The second dimension of conflict framing that is central in this dissertation is the concept of journalistic intervention. This concept refers to the degree to which the media take a formative role in shaping the agenda of election campaigns or "the media's discretionary power" (Semetko et al., 1991, p. 3). Interventionism as part of the conflict framing process resonates with research on mediatization, or the degree to which political communication is constructed by media logic as opposed to a political logic (Strömbäck, 2008). The amount of journalistic interventions in news framing has been suggested to be an indicator of mediatization (De Vreese, 2014). When journalists have a greater role in determining the frame of a news story, they become more central actors.

Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) suggest that frames put forward by political actors contain less political conflict than journalistic frames. This strongly suggests that journalists have an active role in shaping

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political events and opinions into conflict frames rather than just reporting conflict as it happens. Indeed, there are several circumstances in which journalistic frames adjust or even prevail over actor frames (Brüggemann, 2014). Aside from playing an important role in the frame building process, interventionism is also relevant for the manifestation of actual news content by means of journalistic visibility (Strömback & Dimitrova, 2011). Noninterventionist reporting is characterized by a descriptive style, which offers a detached and factual description of events. Interventionist reporting is associated with a more interpretative style, focused on meaning of events and that goes beyond facts and statements and incorporates journalistic explanations and analysis. A second way in which interventionism can be visible in news content is when journalists enact a watchdog role and evaluate or criticize politicians themselves (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). When this is the case, journalists can effectively become an actor involved in the political conflict. Here, interventionism is interpreted as the extent to which journalists pursue particular missions and values instead of functioning as a detached, objective observer (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). This dissertation will incorporate interventionism in three ways. First, I investigate the extent to which journalists themselves think they intervene in the conflict frame building process and what the consequences for conflict frames in the news production process are. Second, I assess the extent to which journalists visibly intervene in media content. Third, I will examine how the absence or presence of journalistic interventionism in conflict framing affects framing effects on citizens.

### **1.7 Context of the Dissertation: The Dutch Case**

The Netherlands is an example of a democratic corporatist media system with a strong history of public broadcasting (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Politically, the Netherlands has a multi-party system where coalitions between multiple parties are usually necessary to form a government (Lijphart, 1994). These characteristics distinguish The Netherlands from countries with different media systems and different party systems, such as the United States. The findings of this dissertation are particularly relevant for the Dutch case, nonetheless, they will inform our knowledge on frame building in countries with corresponding political and media systems, for example countries such as Germany and Denmark (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, its multi-party system differentiates the Dutch political system from other countries, for instance those where a two-party system is in place. This may have consequences of the characteristics and prevalence of conflict framing. In two-party systems, it may be easier and relevant to include members from the oppositional party in a conflict story, because they represent the main opposing political

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actor. Comparisons between the United States and Sweden, with a democratist corporate system similar to The Netherlands, has indeed concluded that conflict frames are more prevalent in the United States when compared to Sweden (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011).

Furthermore, the distance between the pragmatic Dutch press and politicians is relatively large, as opposed to more partisan and polarized media cultures, which may have consequences for journalistic intervention in conflict frames, which are put forward by political actors. The multiparty system leads to the importance of forming coalitions with multiple parties as a requirement for forming a government and alters the political power dynamics relevant for conflict frames. Because of the need to negotiate compromises to rule the country, imposed by the multiparty system, the Dutch political environment is often called "poldermodel". Hence, political conflicts are traditionally resolved by making a deal which a majority of parties can agree with. This has led the political discourse, and particularly the tone of political disagreement in the Netherlands to be characterized by substantiveness and civility when compared to a more polarized context, such as for example the United States, where polarization in politics has notably increased over the years (Ceaser & Busch, 2005).

Nonetheless, during the past years, the political correctness and the politeness of contentious political discourse has been challenged by the rise of populist parties, starting with populist party led by Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002 prior to the elections (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010) The populist party of Pim Fortuyn won greatly in the subsequent elections and even took part in the ruling coalition. However, this party was eventually marginalized in popularity and disappeared from the political stage. Nonetheless, from Pim Fortuyn onwards, the tone of the overall debate seemingly changed. This is illustrated by the current electoral success of populist party PVV, led by Geert Wilders. When compared to Pim Fortuyn, Wilders' style is characterized by an even more politically incorrect vocabulary and severe personal-based attacks on other politicians, receiving ample media attention in the process (Kleinnijenhuis, Scholten, Van Attenveldt, Van Hoof, & Krouwel, 2007) This gives rise to question whether the tone of conflict framing in the Netherlands is still mainly characterized by substantive conflicts, or by nonsubstantive forms of conflict framing, such as incivility and personal attacks. By looking at different types of conflict frames in the news coverage, this thesis seeks to address this question. Most of the focus of research on conflict framing has focused on the US-context, which is characterized by only two relevant parties, high levels of polarization and prevalent ad hominem attacks in conflict news. Research on conflict framing in democratic corporatist systems such as The Netherlands is far less common.

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### **1.8 Outline and methodology of the dissertation**

To investigate the conflict framing process in the Dutch political discourse, this dissertation contains three separate studies. Each chapter represents a step in the integrated process model of framing as proposed by De Vreese (2005). Chapter 1 will focus on conflict frame building, and specifically on journalistic intervention in this stage where conflict frames are being produced. Chapter 2 will address the actual presence of different types of conflict frames in media content. This chapter will also focus on how contextual factors influence the presence of these different types of conflict frames. Finally, in Chapter 3, the frame setting stage will be central. In this chapter, the effects of different types of conflict frames on political participation are central, along with the underlying emotional mechanism that drives these effects.

One of the main strengths of this dissertation lies in the methodological variety. Each step in the framing process has different characteristics and was ideally studied using tailored methodology. In the first study, we used qualitative interviewing methodology to uncover specific circumstances in which conflict frames emerge in political news. The depth and richness of qualitative interviews was deemed pivotal to answer the research questions for this stage of the framing process. Indeed, interviews are often employed to research journalists (e.g., Lecheler, 2008; Lewis & Reese, 2009). Interviewing journalists about their work is sometimes criticized because there is a risk of answers being distorted by social desirability or by journalists simply not knowing enough about their own practices to answer questions accurately. For this purpose, we used vignettes to minimize this type of bias. Journalists were presented with short hypothetical news selection scenarios. Vignettes are effective for interviewing journalists, because they allow interviewees to imagine situations similar to the actual daily practices of news making, and thereby allow them to provide more accurate depictions of their working practices (Jenkins, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010).

After uncovering the frame building process, I continue to look at the frame presence stage. Hence, for the second study, I conducted a quantitative content analysis to assess the presence of different types of conflict frames in Dutch newspaper- and online articles. A quantitative approach was essential here, to tap more general patterns and characteristics of news content. First an automated method was employed for sampling and to identify news articles with conflict frames (Burscher, Odijk, Vliegthart, De Rijke, & De Vreese, 2014). The time-gains made by sampling in such an efficient matter were employed to develop an elaborate coding procedure where coders rated conflict framed content on

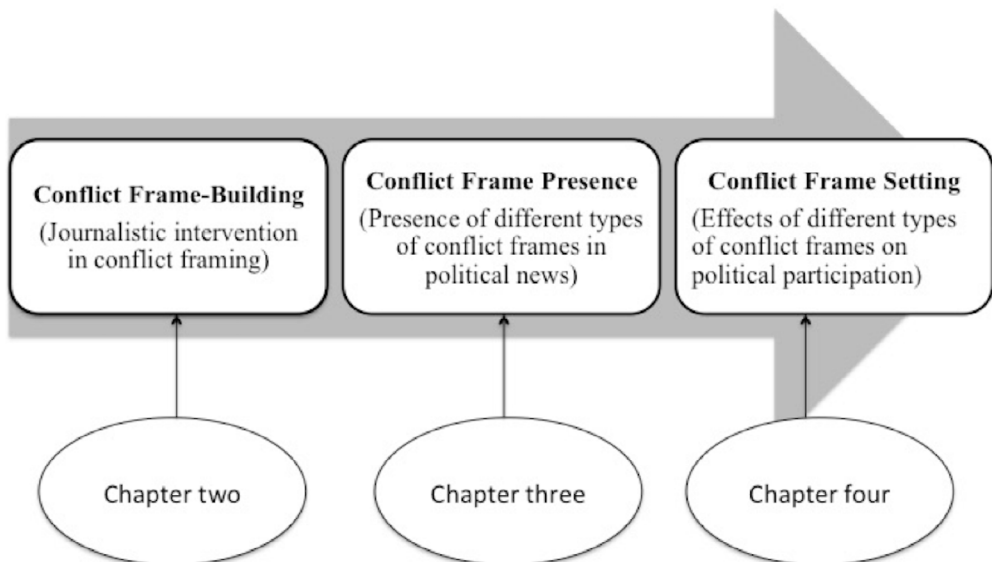
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a wide array of characteristics. Coders were trained extensively and coded a large number of newspaper articles, so that comparisons between time-periods, outlet types, as well as medium types could be made.

Finally, the dissertation focuses on the final stage of the conflict framing process, the frame setting stage. Here the aim is to see how conflict frames affect political participation. For this purpose, I conducted an experiment. Experiments offer several benefits that make them suitable for conducting framing effect studies. They help establish cause and effect, and are suitable for replication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). In the experiment conducted for this experiment, the content of news articles was manipulated, but the rest of the survey was kept constant for the participants, similar to previous studies (e.g., Lecheler & De Vreese, 2013). By adopting this method, we minimized the influence of external factors. Survey experiments are considered suitable for this purpose, due to the enhanced possibility they offer for randomization and manipulation (Arceneaux, 2010) effects of exposure to different types of conflict frames while limiting eventually confounding and uncontrollable influences.

I will shortly summarize the essence of the separate chapters below, along with the connection between these chapters. (See figure 1.1 for an overview).

**Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework of the dissertation**



## Chapter 1

In **Chapter 1**, I investigate how conflict frames emerge in political news. The focus of this chapter is specifically on the role of political journalists in this process of conflict frame building. While it is known that the influence of journalists is decisive in determining which and how frames end up in actual news content, this aspect of the framing process has long been neglected in research (De Vreese, 2012). Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to uncover the role of journalists in the particular case of the conflict frame building process. The concept of interventionism is central in this study. Journalistic interventionism alludes to the extent to which journalists are visible in the news (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011), but also to the extent to which journalists take an active stance in the frame building process (Hanitsch, 2007). This entails the construction of their own frames and adaptation of existing frames (Schnell, 2001). For conflict framing, it is unknown to what extent this journalistic intervention is the case. Hence, the main research question this chapter answers is: How interventionist are journalists in the conflict frame building process? To investigate this research question, extensive semi-structural expert interviews were conducted among Dutch political journalists and editors. The interviews and findings are structured by employing the hierarchy of influences model, as proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). This model functions as a framework throughout the chapter in assessing both internal and external influences on journalistic conflict frame building.

In **Chapter 2**, I focus on conflict frame presence. Specifically, I focus on the dimensionality of conflict frames and investigate which different conflict frames emerge in the news. The first dimension I use to distinguish conflict frames with is by level of interventionism. I hereby build forward on the findings in chapter 1, where the relevance of journalistic intervention in conflict framing was highlighted. Furthermore, I also distinguish between conflict frames by focusing on level of substantiveness. Conflict news can focus on policy issues (e.g., Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010), or on nonsubstantive, strategic, aspects of politics (e.g., Adriaansen, Van Praag, & Vreese, 2010). Conflict news can also be characterized by incivility between politicians, instead of civil and courteous political deliberation (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Finally, nonsubstantive conflict can focus on personal attacks, aimed style and competence (Min, 2004). Besides from substantiveness, conflict frames may vary by the extent to which journalists intervene during the news production process. The findings in chapter 1 show that journalists have a propensity to intervene in the conflict frame building process. This intervention in conflict framing can be visible in journalistic speculation on consequences of conflicts, through journalistic interpretations and analysis of political disagreements, or through the inclusion of direct commentary by the journalist



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(Hanitzsch, 2007). The extent to which journalistic intervention, but also substantiveness, are visible in conflict frames in political news is unknown. Therefore, chapter three consists of a content analysis (N = 1536) that employs factor analysis to develop a typology of conflict news coverage. Different aspects of conflict news are distinguished with level of substantiveness and interventionism as the main dimensions. After the confirmation of this typology, the chapter focuses on the prevalence of these different subdimensions of conflict frames in Dutch news and how contextual factors affect which types of conflict frames appear in the news.

In **Chapter 4**, I build on both chapter 2 and 3 by focussing on the consequences of exposure to different types of conflict frames. After the previous chapters highlighted the importance of interventionism (chapter 1 and 2) and substantiveness (chapter 2), this chapter aims to investigate the potential effects of exposure to different types of conflict frames on political participation. Because the outcomes of exposure to interventionist news content in general and on political participation in specific are to my knowledge largely unknown, this is a relevant new area of media-effects research. Exposure to substantive conflict is known to affect opinions and political participation of citizens differently, when compared to exposure to nonsubstantive conflict frames (e.g., Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008; Min, 2004). Results towards the effects of substantiveness have however been inconclusive. Therefore, in this chapter I will also examine the underlying context and process by introducing emotions as mediators. Framing effects are known to be greatly contingent on emotional processes (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Lecheler, Schuck, & De Vreese, 2013). Particularly conflict has been associated with negative emotions such as anger (Gross & Brewer, 2007). Emotions such as anger and enthusiasm in turn have been associated with political participation (Valentino et al., 2011). Hence, it might be expected that emotions play an important role in mediating effects of different types of conflict frames. For this purpose, chapter 4 will describe a survey embedded experiment (n = 707) to investigate how different types of conflict frames affect political participation, and to assess the role of emotions in this process.

In sum, the aim of this dissertation is to better understand conflict frame building, conflict frame presence in media content, and the effects of different types of conflict frames. Using a variety of research methods, the dissertation shows that two dimensions, interventionism and substantiveness, play an important role across the conflict framing process.

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