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Faces of conflict

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CHAPTER 5

General conclusions and implications

General Conclusions and Implications

This dissertation sheds light on the whole conflict framing process. The empirical findings in this dissertation give insights on the production-side of conflict frames, the presence of different types of conflict frames in political news, and the effects of different types of conflict frames. In this concluding chapter, I will first summarize the main research findings. Subsequently I will address the main conclusions and implications of this dissertation. After this we will discuss practical implications. Finally, I will address limitations of this dissertation, along with suggestions for future research.

5.1. Summary of the Research Findings

The three studies presented in this dissertation provide a multi-methodological and comprehensive overview of the role of journalistic interventionism and substantiveness within the full conflict news framing process. The first stage of this process, conflict frame building, was the focus of Chapter 2. In this chapter, I show to which extent journalists take an interventionist stance in the conflict frame building process. This was done using a qualitative research approach. I conducted expert interviews (N = 16) among Dutch political journalists. Overall, the results of this study show that journalists take an active stance in conflict frame building. By using the well-known hierarchy of influences model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996; 2014), this chapter addresses which factors within that model influence the degree of this journalistic intervention in conflict frame building. The focus is specifically on the individual level, the routines level, and the external level of the model.

The findings in this chapter indicate that journalists contribute greatly to the emergence of conflict frames through subtle methods of journalistic news production, such as the use of exaggerating language, and the orchestrating and amplifying of possible consequences of political conflict. Nonetheless, journalistic intervention in conflict framing is not merely a result of individual agency of journalists. Rather, some individual role conceptions were even found to counter an interventionist stance. Going beyond the individual level, the findings suggest that media routines, embedded in organizational practices, facilitate an active journalistic role in conflict framing. Furthermore, the findings suggest that journalists are mainly active when politicians or parties with political power are involved in a conflict. Finally, the perceived role of the audience is an important driver of interventionism in the conflict frame building process

Chapter 3, the second study, focused on the second stage in the conflict framing process, namely frame presence in the news. The main aim of this study was to unravel the dimensionality of conflict frames and to thus create a more comprehensive and operational definition of the conflict frame.

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I conducted a content analysis (N= 1536) on online and offline political news. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (SEM), I identified different dimensions of conflict news: (1) level of substantiveness and (2) interventionism. Three further sub-dimensions reflected non-substantive news coverage: strategic coverage, personal attacks, and incivility. Interventionism was reflected by journalistic visibility in conflict frames and journalistic criticism or evaluations aimed at politicians. Based on this definition, I identified several contextual factors that explain the presence of different types of conflict frames. The findings indicate that, during an election campaign rather than a routine news period, news articles with conflict frames are less substantive, more strategy-focused, and consist of more personal attacks and incivility. Second, levels of interventionist conflict framing, but also substance, were less salient in tabloid news, compared to quality newspapers. Finally, conflict framing online included lower levels of interventionism, substance and strategy when compared to print articles. However, the level of personal attacks was higher.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the third stage of the framing process: the frame setting stage.

In this study, I conducted a survey experiment (n = 707) to assess the effects of different types of conflict frames on political participation. The experiment used a 2x2 between subjects factorial design. Specifically, the level of substance (substantive conflict frame versus nonsubstantive conflict frame) and intervention (detached journalistic style versus interpretative critical journalistic style) of a conflict framed news article was manipulated. Results indicate that different types of conflict frames did not result in direct effects on political participation. Nonetheless, the study does show the underlying process behind conflict framing effects by showing how effects are contingent on positive and negative emotions. Non-substantive conflict framing exerted an indirect effect on political participation via anger. In contrast an indirect positive effect of substantive effect of substantive conflict framing on some forms of political participation was found via enthusiasm. Surprisingly, interventionist reporting reduced political participation via enthusiasm. Hence, both positive and negative emotions serve as mediators of conflict framing effects on political participation

5.2 Main Conclusions and Implications

5.2.1 Towards a Comprehensive Definition of Conflict Frames

The first contribution of this dissertation is that it provides a step towards a more comprehensive and widely applicable understanding of conflict framing. In chapter 3, I suggest a typology of conflict

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frames that distinguishes between different types of frames. The typology is based on my study of frame building in Chapter 2, as well as the available literature. This typology incorporates different elements of separate branches of literature that all fall under the umbrella of conflict framing. A generic definition of conflict framing is used to establish an overarching method of identification for conflict frames in general, whereupon different dimensions within this overall framework are used to distil ways of discriminating between types of conflict frames. These findings are particularly relevant because framing in general has long been associated with unclear definitions and operationalizations (Scheufele & Tewskbury, 2007). The field of framing is often said to be suffering of incoherent applications and fuzzy conceptualizations (Matthes, 2009). The findings from this dissertation may contribute to resolve some of this fuzziness for the particular case of conflict framing. Previous studies describe conflict as by definition strategic or non-substantive (e.g., Gross & Brewer, 2007), characterize political conflict by uncivil political discourse as opposed to civil and courteous political deliberation (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), or make the distinction between attacks on style and integrity or personal attacks and attacks based on issues (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). This dissertation includes the first work combining these elements. Furthermore, we adhere to earlier claims in literature that conflicts can also be substantive (e.g. Lawrence, 2000; Min, 2004).

This has important implications for further theorizing and empirical research towards conflict framing. In future research, the basis of identifying conflict frames can be a generic definition that does not entail specifications regarding substantiveness, war, game and strategy metaphors, incivility or level of journalistic intervention. The subdimensions that come forward in this dissertation can then be used to distinguish between types of conflict framing within political news that adhere to this more general definition. These subdimensions can then be used for cross-country comparisons and cumulative research based on consistent conceptualizations. An example of an application of research on these subdimensions is given in chapter 4, where the effects of interventionism and substantiveness on political participation are assessed. The differential effects I find in Chapter 4 prove a starting point for further research towards different types of conflict frames and how the appearance of these different subcategories of conflict varies over time, context and topics.

5.2.2 The Central Role of Journalistic Intervention

The findings presented in this dissertation shed light on the importance of studying and under-

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standing the extent of journalistic intervention in conflict framing in particular, and the news frame building process in general. In chapter 2, I show that journalists play a central role in conflict frame building. The insights of this study highlight that journalists do not merely function as disseminators of conflict frames, but actively shape the nature of conflict in the news. They even sometimes consciously create conflict frames. This adds to the existing interventionism literature by highlighting that interventionism is not only relevant as a role conception (Hanitzsch, 2007), or as a content characteristic (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011), but is also embedded in journalistic work and routines in the frame building process. In chapter 3, I build on these findings by developing a typology including a measurement instrument to gauge interventionism in media content. Findings show that conflict frames can be distinguished by an interventionist style, with more journalistic interpretation and evaluations of politicians involved in the conflict, and a detached and more neutral style. The level of interventionism was found to differ between characteristics of media outlets, such as online and offline news and quality and populist newspapers. After establishing to what extent journalists intervene in the conflict frame building process and to what extent this translates into actual news content, chapter 4 investigated the consequences of exposure to interventionist conflict frames for the political participation of citizens. The findings of chapter 4 indicate that the effects of interventionism in conflict framing not straightforward and perhaps even relatively limited.

The findings regarding interventionism also contribute to framing theory by shedding light on the general frame building process. Frame building is an aspect of framing that is generally understudied (Hänggli, 2012). My findings indicate that frame building is about more than just perceiving certain aspects of reality, but also about shaping that reality. The findings in this dissertation show the workings of journalism in the particular case of conflict framing, and hereby also how this matters for actual news content. The findings implicate that while journalists intervene and take an active stance, journalism is not solely characterized by relentless interventionism aimed at framing news in terms of conflict. Specifically, the level of individual journalistic intervention is being curtailed by journalistic norms and values, such as the need for accuracy, which prevented journalists from intervening (Chapter 2). The journalistic norm of objectivity also directly contributes to the emergence of conflict frames in political news (Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & De Vreese, 2012; Tuchman, 1978). The studies in this dissertation show that where journalistic values on the one hand contribute to adaptation of a conflict frame, other values prevent journalists from going overboard. This sometimes contradictory characteristics of news values has been highlighted

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by scholars before (Deuze, 2005), and my findings give further insights in these frame building dynamics, which are generally understudied in framing research.

5.2.3. Creating a link between frame production, content, and effects

By incorporating and linking different stages of the conflict frame building process, the dissertation provides an extensive overview of how conflict framing works. The different studies conducted inform each other, and thus form a multi-methodological view of framing. This is interesting from a theoretical, but also a methodological point of view. I used the results from Chapter 2 regarding the conflict frame building process and interventionism to make my codebook and thus typology in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the insights from this content analysis in Chapter 3 elicited are directly used in Chapter 4 to formulate the independent variable in the experiment.

The work conducted for this dissertation provides new insights in an increasingly fragmented field of qualitative versus quantitative political communication research. The literature on news and political framing is characterised by distinct groups of studies. Studies looking at the journalistic production stage are mainly focussed on news values, journalistic roles, norm conceptions, and the social forces that influence news framing (e.g., Donsbach, 2004; Gans, 1979; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Frame building studies typically use methods such as expert interviews or observation. Another group of studies focus on actual coverage of news frames (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). These studies typically use content analysis as a method of studying frames. Yet another group focuses on effects of framing (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; De Vreese, 2004; Slothuus, 2008), using panel studies and increasingly employing experimentation. The generally conceptual and methodological separation of these branches of literature implies the need to link different stages of the framing process, to investigate every aspect that is relevant to how frames come about, the nature of their presence in the media and the effects they exert (or do not) on citizens. Such an approach is often neglected in communication science, and framing theory is often criticized for the lack of coherence and inconsistent definitions (Entman, 1993). Theory development in framing can benefit from an all-inclusive approach and a generalizable application of conflict framing that holds across different steps in the framing process (e.g., De Vreese, 2005; Matthes, 2009). Furthermore, the insights from separate stages can be used to base research designs aimed at a particular stage in the framing process on insights derived from studies towards another stage, which could improve the validity and comparability of the findings. There are some examples of

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recent studies that do undertake this challenge, for instance by investigating the extent to which journalistic role conceptions translate into news content (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Van Dalen, De Vreese & Albæk, 2012). In sum, no content analysis can do without a proper view of journalistic action, and no framing experiment should be conducted without systematic knowledge of how realistic stimuli, based on real news coverage and frames, can be designed. This dissertation contributes by providing similar linkage between the different stages of the framing process.

5.2.4 Uncovering the underlying mechanisms of framing effects

In chapter 4, I find that the effects of different types of conflict frames in the news are contingent on enthusiasm and anger. While it is known that framing effects exist and are relevant, the underlying psychological mechanisms that can explain why such effects occur are often neglected (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1999; D'Angelo, 2002). Unsurprisingly, a growing line of research focuses on such underlying mechanisms (Lecheler, De Vreese, & Slothuus, 2009; Slothuus, 2008). This study contributes to this growing line of framing research that incorporates and examines particularly the emotional psychological mechanisms in framing effect studies (Holm, 2012; Kühne, Weber, & Sommer, 2015; Lecheler, Schuck & De Vreese, 2012). Previous literature has shown the link between conflict and negative emotions (Gross, Brewer, 2007). Furthermore, the effect of emotions such as enthusiasm and anger on political participation was also established (Valentino et al., 2011). This dissertation is the first to link and incorporate these findings in a full mediation analysis. Also, we add to the literature by showing that nonsubstantive emotions can lead to negative emotions such as anger, consistent with the findings of Gross and Brewer (2007). This implies that this mechanism of conflict framing which already was established in a US-context, is also relevant in the Dutch setting. Furthermore, it was found that besides from affecting negative emotions such as anger, substantive conflict also led to positive emotions such as enthusiasm and hope. In the case of enthusiasm, this led to an indirect effect on participation. This highlights the importance of both positive and negative emotions in framing effects research and shows that the way in which conflict is manifested in media coverage affects the subsequent psychological process. Given the fact that in chapter four of this dissertation it was already shown that the manifestations of conflict can vary along different contextual factors, this is a very relevant finding. Conflict in political news has many faces, and which face citizens are exposed to matters for the emotional process that follows.

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5.3 Societal implications

My findings give important insights for journalists who cover politics, in the Netherlands and abroad. My findings regarding interventionism suggest that conflict in the news is not only the result of political actors and their propensity to engage in conflict, but also of journalistic intervention. This journalistic role is expressed both behind the scenes, in frame building processes that are invisible to those that only see the end result—news content framed in terms of conflict. However, it is also displayed in the actual manifestation of news content, where journalists are visible either by adapting an interpretative style, speculating, or criticizing politicians. What remains is the question of the desirability of journalistic intervention. The findings in the experiment conducted in chapter 4 of this dissertation show that interventionism, at least in the context tested in this dissertation, generally had only indirect detrimental effects on participation via enthusiasm. This initially suggests that journalistic intervention, which is often seen as good and analytic journalism, could have negative effects on audiences.

The societal importance of interventionism and critical journalism is often emphasized (e.g. Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2011). Results in this study seem to suggest that interventionism that is clearly visible in journalistic work might not necessarily lead to desirable behavioural outcomes in citizens. However, my findings do not imply that watchdog journalism as such is a bad thing. As shown in chapter one, journalists can also intervene in a less visible way, by asking critical questions, uncovering hidden stories and exposing wrongdoings of the powerful. Also, journalists could present facts or alternative viewpoints from other political actors to expose politicians or inform the public. These examples of interventionism can go along with a more detached and less interventionist writing style. These findings are interesting when paired with observation that journalistic involvement has become more explicit (Peters, 2011). This author further suggests that a more detached journalism can have consequences for emotional response as well, which resonates with our findings. The question is whether the presentation of journalistic intervention is necessary, and does not go at the expense of the information or substance, that can be similarly emotionally moving.

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Like in any type of scholarly work, several shortcomings should be noted. These range from general shortcomings that apply for the dissertation as a whole, to methodological shortcomings and particular shortcomings for individual chapters.

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The first shortcoming I would like to address is the fact that the findings throughout the dissertation are based on a single country case, namely the Netherlands. Nonetheless, the mechanisms and findings in this dissertation are likely generalizable to other countries. Particularly countries that share the characteristics of the Dutch parliamentary and media system, such as for instance Denmark and Germany (Haling & Mancini, 2004). The Netherlands is an example of a democratic corporatist media system, with a multiparty political system and a strong history of public broadcasting (Van Aelst et al., 2008). The findings on frame building, media content characteristics and psychological mechanisms that underlie conflict framing effects presumably play out similarly in countries with relatively similar media systems. Nonetheless, replication of the findings is desirable, both in similar as in other contexts, with different media systems and other party systems. For instance, in a two-system party such as the United States, where polarization is more prevalent (Ceaser & Busch, 2005), the workings of conflict framing should play out differently. Hence, future research should focus on comparisons between different countries. The typology developed in this dissertation provides a conceptual starting point for such a cross-country comparison.

Another shortcoming is the use of interviews as a way to measure journalistic routines. This means that the findings show how journalists perceive their routines and practices. I used several strategies, such as the use of vignettes variation in the sample, to make sure that the findings are as reliable, specific and insightful as possible (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Nonetheless, the self reported nature of the findings should be taken into account, and future studies could use methods such as newsroom observation to further disentangle the frame building process and corroborate my findings on interventionism. Furthermore, combining studies towards role conceptions with methods such as content analysis could shed further light on the link between journalistic practices and actual media content. Another methodical shortcoming alludes to the experimental findings in chapter 4. Particularly, the short-term nature of the effects found should be emphasized. Effects were measured only directly after exposure. Even to previous research suggests that framing effects can be relatively long-lasting (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011), it is unknown to what extent the effects in this particular case are persistent over time. To assess how long these effects last, replications of the study that involve multiple measurements of the dependent variable over time are needed. Another shortcoming in the experimental design is the fact that it was carried out in an online environment rather than in a more controlled setting such as the laboratory. The quality of data in online and more traditional lab settings is suggested to be relatively similar (e.g. Germiné

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et al., 2012). Nonetheless, it is still possible that conducting this study in an online setting would have led to different results.

The third main shortcoming refers to the mediation analysis. My findings in chapter 4 indicated there was an indirect effect of different types of conflict frames on political participation, mediated by emotions. Hence a causal effect on the basis of two-step measurement where emotions and political participation are measured at the same time. This could arguably have implications for causality. It is common to conduct an analysis in such a way (e.g., Hoffman & Young, 2011; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2012), but only acceptable if the theoretical foundation of such an approach is very strong. In the case of this study, the connection between emotional reactions on news content and political participation, which has been widely emphasized in earlier studies (e.g., Namkoong, Fung, & Scheufele, 2012; Valentino et al., 2011). This provides a solid theoretical basis to back the use of this approach. Nonetheless, future studies using a multi-step approach should be done for more definite conclusions on causality.

The experimental nature of the design of my effect study should also be noted. An experiment ensures the internal validity of an effect study and arguably serves as the best direct way to measure effects with as little confounding variables as possible. Nonetheless, sacrifices are made to the external validity and real-world applicability. A suggestion for future research would be to conduct panel studies to look at the aggregate effects of exposure to different types of conflict frames.

The final limitation that will be addressed here relates to a conceptual choice. I define typology and substantiveness as two separate subdimensions of conflict framing. One of the subdimensions of nonsubstantive conflict framing that is established in chapter 3 is 'strategy', which alludes to a focussing on strategic aspects of politics rather than substantive issues. Some authors argue that news content characterized by this type of reporting is driven mainly by journalistic actors, rather than political actors (Zaller, 2001). Along these lines, this type of reporting has been suggested as a characteristic of media interventionism (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). Nonetheless, I chose to include strategic reporting in the substantiveness dimension, and not in the interventionism dimension. The main argument for this is that, while I do acknowledge that strategic framing is presumably predominantly used by journalistic actors, this is not necessarily the case. Political actors can also focus on strategic considerations, or accuse other politicians of having strategic interests.

My studies provide a good starting point for future studies, which can further disentangle the concept of conflict framing. My typology has focussed on two very important aspects of conflict fra-

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ming. Nonetheless, there may be more characteristics of conflict that may be of importance. For example, what if a conflict frame in the news focuses on a one-sided attack? Two sides of an issue can come forward in a news article that gives one point of view or political actor considerably more room to attack or discredit the political opponent, or to bring forward arguments for his or her side of the issue. Future research should assess to what extent this leads to different outcomes on citizens than fair and balanced conflict.

Furthermore, future research should focus on other actors that play a role in the conflict framing process: Politicians. Individual journalists cannot be held as solely responsible for the existence of conflict frames. The interplay between journalists and politicians is of great importance. Journalists and political actors have a paradoxal relationship, in that they that simultaneously have different agenda's, and are co-dependent (Lewis & Reese, 2009). Where this dissertation is particularly focussed on the journalistic side, future work should address the role of politicians in the conflict frame building research.

In sum, this dissertation makes an important contribution to the political communication and journalism literature by identifying and studying factors that influence conflict framing. Conflict framing is a concept with many faces, and highlighting different types of characteristics of contentious news coverage is a fruitful endeavour for future research. The typology brought forward in this dissertation, which focuses on substantiveness and interventionism, can serve as a starting point for further research.

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