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# Manufacturing Conflict? How Journalists Intervene in the Conflict Frame Building Process

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## **Abstract**

A considerable amount of research is devoted to the presence and effects of conflict frames in the news. However, it is unknown if journalists actively manufacture and inflate conflict in their coverage of politics, or if they merely respond to contentious politics as it happens. This study focuses on the extent to which journalists take an interventionist stance in the conflict frame building process. We conducted expert interviews ( $N = 16$ ) among Dutch political journalists. Results show that journalists indeed take an active stance in conflict frame building. They contribute to the emergence of conflict frames by using exaggerating language, by orchestrating, and by amplifying possible consequences of political conflict. However, intervention in conflict framing is not merely a result of individual agency of journalists. Rather, some role conceptions seem to counter an interventionist stance. Media routines that are embedded in organizational practices were found to facilitate this active role in conflict framing. Finally, journalists are mainly found to be active when politicians or parties with political power are involved.

## **Keywords**

framing, conflict, news, journalism, frame building, interventionism

Research has shown that conflict framing is one of the most important mechanisms of political news reporting (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). What remains unclear is the role journalists play in this process. How actively do journalists construct conflict? Do

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they exaggerate conflicts when making the news or do they merely respond to political conflict as it happens on the political stage? This study addresses these questions by investigating if journalists reporting political news play a formative role in the conflict frame building process.

To date, analysis of media content or media effects has been central to conflict framing studies. Earlier research highlighted the prevalence of conflict frames in the news (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Furthermore, distinct effects of exposure to conflict frames on political behavior (e.g., Mutz and Reeves 2005; Schuck et al. 2014), as well as other political perceptions (Avery 2009; Vliegenthart et al. 2008) have been found. These findings underscore the relevance of studying conflict framing. Yet, few studies have addressed the actual journalistic practice in which these frames emerge: the conflict frame building process.

We know that journalists play a pivotal part in the process that determines which frames actually end up in the media (Hänggli 2011). However, this aspect of the framing process has long been neglected in research (De Vreese 2012). Journalists prefer news that entails an element of conflict (Mutz and Reeves 2005). What remains unclear is how much the agency and intervention of journalists determines the modification of frames to emphasize conflict.

Relevant in the context of frame building is the concept of interventionism, the extent to which journalists take an active or passive stance in reporting (Strömbäck and Esser 2009). Journalists decide if and how to report about political conflict. They may seek out political conflicts, amplify political conflicts for the attractiveness of the story, or even actively orchestrate and manufacture conflict frames. However, besides the agency of individual journalists, other aspects such as media routines and external, political, influences obviously shape how journalists frame conflict (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). The aim of this study is to assess the importance of these influences for how active journalists are in the conflict frame process.

We conducted a series of semistructured expert interviews with political journalists in the Netherlands. We chose the Netherlands as a subject of our study, because it is an example of a democratic corporatist media system with a strong history of public broadcasting (Van Aelst et al. 2008). Furthermore, politically, it is a multiparty system where coalitions between multiple parties are usually necessary to form a government (Lijphart 1999). These characteristics distinguish the Netherlands from countries with different media systems and different party systems, such as the United States. Although the findings generated in this study are particularly relevant for the Dutch context, they will likely also inform our knowledge on frame building in countries with a similar political and media systems, such as, for example, Germany and Denmark (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The sample includes both reporters and editors working for newspapers, television, and news sites. We consider the in-depth quality of interviews with journalists the ideal way to disentangle how different aspects of the journalistic practice contribute to active conflict frame building: individual role conceptions, media routines, and external political factors. This study aims to provide insight into the circumstances that affect how journalists play an active role or passive role in the conflict frame building process.

## **Frame Building: How Journalism Shapes Conflict Frames**

In the framing process, particular aspects of reality are highlighted above others. A frame is concerned with variations in emphasis or salience of particular aspects in a media text (Druckman 2001). This study focuses on the specific application of conflict frames in political news. Conflict frames are defined as news frames that “emphasize conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest” (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 95). A conflict can consist of disagreement, tension between different sides, incompatibility between viewpoints, and politicians attacking each other in the media (Putnam and Shoemaker 2007). Conflict is considered an integral part of the political process, as it is central to a properly functioning democracy (Sartori 1987).

Research shows that conflict frames are some of the most frequently used frames in political communication (De Vreese et al. 2001), across different media systems, countries, and news formats (Lengauer et al. 2011). Conflict frames are influential for a considerable number of aspects of political life. For instance, conflict frames can negatively affect support for policies (Vliegenthart et al. 2008), but also have a positive impact on turnout (De Vreese and Tobiasen 2007), and lead to more balanced thoughts about issues (De Vreese 2004). Indeed, exposure to conflict frames may lead citizens to realize what is at stake and why political decision making is important (Schuck et al. 2014).

What remains understudied is how conflict frames emerge in the media: the frame building stage. Frame building refers to the processes that affect how media frames are formed and how frames are created and adapted by journalists (Scheufele 1999). Journalists do not solely report about political events, but they also shape these events (Entman 1991). This agency of journalists in framing the news is a characteristic of political news coverage (Cook 1998). Under certain circumstances, journalistic frames adjust or even prevail over actor frames (Brüggemann 2014). Also, media strategies of political actors have been found to be contingent on media frames and preferences in an issue (Ihlen et al. 2014). Central in the process of conflict frame building is the concept of journalistic intervention or “the media’s discretionary power” as the degree to which the media take a formative role in shaping the agenda of election campaigns (Semetko et al. 1991: 3).

Two aspects of interventionism are of importance for frame building. First, interventionism determines the degree to which journalists are visible in a news item (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011). This is, for instance, accomplished by adapting a more interpretative style of reporting (Hanitzsch 2007) and “journalists reporting about political news in their own words, scenarios and assessments” (Esser 2008: 403). Second, interventionism signifies an active approach by journalists when creating or adapting frames as opposed to a passive approach (Hanitzsch 2007). This includes constructing their own frames and altering existing frames (Schnell 2001).

Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) suggest that frames put forward by political actors contain less political contestation than journalistic frames. This strongly suggests that journalists shape political discourse into conflict frames rather than just reporting conflict as it happens. Yet, the precise role of journalists in this process, as well as an examination of

their professional attitudes toward such practices, remains unstudied. So far, the content analytical research only suggests that journalists contribute to conflict, but do they do this simply by juxtaposing contrasting views or do they actually affect the severity of the conflict by the inclusion of conflict-laden language or by agitating political actors during interviews? Hence, the main research question is as follows:

**Research Question 1:** How interventionist are journalists in the conflict frame building process?

## **A Multidimensional Approach toward Studying Conflict Frame Building**

Research toward the production of news frames benefits from applying a multilevel approach that takes into account different internal and external forces that influence journalistic performance (Gans 1979; Scheufele 1999). Therefore, we align our research question with the widely used “hierarchy of influences model” as proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2013). We use this model to assess how different levels of influences affect the degree of journalistic intervention in the conflict frame building process specifically. We focus on the individual level, the routines level, and the external level of the model.

### *Individual Level*

Role conceptions and journalistic values play an important role in the production of news content (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). In this study, they are important, because they directly relate to the starting point of our study: interventionism (Strömbäck and Esser 2009). Journalistic values may also affect intervention in the conflict frame building process. It is likely that journalists who support active conflict frame building possess role conceptions and values connected to interpretative styles of reporting. This would stand opposite to the “disseminator role,” which is all about disseminating the news as quickly, accurately, and neutrally as possible in a detached way (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). The disseminator role presumably hinders journalists to interfere much by exaggerating or manufacturing conflict frames. Those that embrace the interpretative role, however, are more likely to include an analysis and interpretation and take an active stance in the conflict frame building process.

### *Routines Level*

Journalistic practice consists of the routinized production of news stories. There are certain patterns, rules, procedures, and practices embedded in the way journalists work (Shoemaker and Reese 2013), which may explain journalistic intervention in conflict framing. In a survey among Swedish journalists, Strömbäck et al. (2012) found that journalists believe that conflict played a bigger role in the practice of news production than it should according to their individual views.

Based on previous research, we identified three media routines likely to play a role during in conflict frame building: (1) objectivity, (2) journalistic storytelling, and (3) reliance on other media.

First, the journalistic objectivity norm, or the “ritual of objectivity” (Tuchman 1978), is likely to contribute to the *emergence* of specific conflict frames as well as the *prevalence* of conflict framing in the news. The objectivity norm describes the idea of balanced reporting as good journalism (Skovsgaard et al. 2012). Balance in reporting often requires inclusion of an oppositional voice.

Second, journalistic storytelling as a routine often leads to the addition of an element of conflict to a story to transform events into a news commodity (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Journalists use dramatic depictions to transform an issue into a vivid story (Cook 1998; Gitlin 1980). In a study on frame building in reporting of stem cell research in the United States, Nisbet et al. (2003) illustrate how pitting opposite sides against each other is one of the ways in which journalists provide the audience with a comprehensive and attention-grabbing story.

Third, the routine of reliance on other media should play a role. Under the influence of time pressure, journalists have been shown to habitually rely on other media as an inspiration for their own reporting (Reinemann 2004). This can eventually lead to pack journalism, where journalists reporting on the same story place an emphasis on the same angle and viewpoints (Schudson 2003). Indeed, the competition between news media for audience attention has been associated with a preference for conflict and drama both in a U.S. (Bennett 2005) and in a European context (Esser 1999).

### *External Level*

Which frames come forward and which do not is determined in a constant negotiation process between journalists and their sources: political actors (Lewis and Reese 2009). Although politicians are known to use the media to fight out political disputes and achieve political goals (Davis 2003), politicians also use existing political conflicts as means to generate media attention and increase own media visibility (Strömbäck et al. 2012). However, not much is known about circumstances under which frames constructed by politicians have the upper hand over media frames, and for which types of sources journalists are more likely to intervene in the frame building process. Prior research suggests that powerful institutional actors such as parliamentary and government members are not only featured more in the news than less resourceful actors (Herman and Chomsky 1988) but are also more successful in getting their own frames in the media (Tuchman 1978). It is likely that journalists will make a greater effort in involving powerful actors in conflicts, taking a more active stance.

As a result of this imbalance of news exposure, less resourceful political institutions and individuals have to be creative to get news exposure and may be more likely to resort to dramatized news forms, such as conflict (Van Dalen 2012), in an effort to fill the oppositional space when official and powerful actors close ranks (Cook 1998). This strongly suggests that the dynamics of journalistic conflict frame building in relationship with political frames depend on the size and influence of a political actor.

In sum, we thus posit that three levels of the influences model affect the degree to which journalists intervene in the conflict frame building process: The study of individual role conceptions will tell us to what extent journalists believe they should bring conflict into the news; journalistic routines can explain if there are embedded structures in journalistic practice that support conflict framing, and political power might be an important external factor that determines the influence of journalists compared with political elites in bringing conflict into the news.

## Method

To investigate to what extent journalists intervene in the conflict frame building process, we conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with Dutch political journalists and editors in charge of the editorial teams specialized in political news. These elite interviews lasted on average forty-five minutes. Interviews serve as a commonly used method to capture the experiences and opinions of journalists (e.g., Lecheler 2008; Lewis and Reese 2009). For this study, the depth and richness of the data provided by qualitative interviews were deemed pivotal to uncover the specific circumstances in which conflict frames emerge in political news.

### Interviews

The interviews were semistructured with an interview protocol that served as the main guidance for the interview, but which still gave the possibility to deviate from the predetermined dimensions. The interview protocol was organized around the three levels of influence discussed above. On the *individual level*, questions were asked to address the stance of journalists toward political conflict and the role of an interventionist journalistic role conception for conflict frames specifically. Furthermore, questions were included about other journalistic values and role conceptions to see how these other individual characteristics affect interventionism in the frame building process. On the *routines level*, questions were structured around daily practices, organizational procedures, audience perceptions, and reliance on other media. We assessed how journalists deal with the news and how journalists practically follow up on news in general and news about political conflict specifically. The aim was to investigate whether the objectivity norm and the routine construction of narratives affect the emergence of conflict frames and the active role of journalists in this process, without steering the interview subjects toward these specific routines by asking direct questions. Finally, on the *external level*, questions were asked concerning the role of politicians in the conflict frame building process as well as the differences between less and more well-known politicians.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews also included vignettes. Interviewees were presented with short hypothetical news selection scenarios and asked how they would deal with particular news situations and follow up on evolving stories. Vignettes provide a good way of tapping journalistic practices because they allow interviewees to imagine situations similar to the actual daily practices of news making, and thereby allow them to provide

the interviewer accurate depictions of their experiences (Jenkins et al. 2010). This approach was adapted to enhance the external validity of the interviewee responses

### *Sample*

We used purposive sampling to identify the interviewees. We utilized two main selection criteria: (1) interviewees either had to work as journalists on political news or managed the team responsible for political news and (2) interviewees had to work for one of the leading newspapers, television news shows, or news Web sites in the Netherlands. Both seasoned journalists, who were experienced and possessed an extensive knowledge concerning the topic, and journalists early in their career with a still taintless and more detached view on the subject were sampled. Selecting respondents from various organizations ensures a variety of perspectives and reduces the effects of institutional characteristics of particular organizations (Shenton 2004). Therefore, interviewees included television journalists working for both Dutch commercial and public news. Also, journalists from the major newspapers including both “quality” and more “populist” oriented newspapers were included. The journalists in the sample are at the center of the political frame building process in the Netherlands and deal with framing of political news on a daily basis. To gauge the exact size of the sample, we followed a strategy developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), who suggest that theoretical saturation in interviewing is achieved when adding new cases becomes counterproductive, which is the case when the new data do not add any substantive new findings. For an overview of our sample composition, see Table 1.

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed to allow full immersion and deep understanding of the material. We used thematic coding to analyze the transcribed interviews, using the step-by-step plan proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method consisted of capturing themes or patterned responses in a systematic way. The analysis was carried out using the software MAXQDA. We did not apply a strictly inductive methodology; the analysis was driven by predetermined theoretical boundaries. Specifically, we used the individual level, the routines level, and the external level of the hierarchy of influences model to limit and structure the findings. Initially, we also included the organizational level as a research dimension, but during the coding process, it became clear that findings did not reveal clear differential organizational influences.

In the first step of the analysis, initial codes are given when the data display characteristics of interest to the research question and a specific theoretical dimension (e.g., When a journalist describes how noncoalition conflicts make him yawn. This falls within the external level and is given the initial code “noncoalition conflicts deemed boring by journalist”). The second step consists of determining patterns in the list of initial codes and categorizing these codes as candidate themes (e.g., a large number of initial codes can be categorized under the broader theme of a journalistic preference to intervene when powerful actors are involved). After defining these themes, the data and



**Table 1.** Interview Subjects.

Interview Subject	Interview Date	Media Type	Job	Length of the Interview
Journalist1	May 20, 2014	Online	Journalist	43:23:00
Journalist2	May 30, 2014	Television	Journalist	50:00:00
Journalist3	June 03, 2014	Newspaper	Editor	44:13:00
Journalist4	June 05, 2014	Television	Editor	26:23:00
Journalist5	June 06, 2014	Newspaper	Journalist	48:11:00
Journalist6	June 10, 2014	Newspaper	Editor	48:48:00
Journalist7	June 12, 2014	Newspaper	Editor	40:36:00
Journalist8	June 12, 2014	Online	Journalist	57:47:00
Journalist9	June 18, 2014	Newspaper	Journalist	46:03:00
Journalist10	June 18, 2014	Television	Journalist	47:28:00
Journalist11	June 20, 2014	Newspaper	Editor	54:15:00
Journalist12	June 25, 2014	Newspaper	Journalist	48:13:00
Journalist13	June 26, 2014	Online	Journalist	41:33:00
Journalist14	June 27, 2014	Newspaper	Journalist	43:39:00
Journalist15	July 01, 2014	Television	Journalist	55:03:00
Journalist16	July 11, 2014	Online	Journalist	01:00:31

codes are assessed again and subcategories and subthemes are defined (e.g., coalition consequences is defined as a subtheme; codes that fall within this category consist of journalists describing how coalition conflicts are interesting because they have consequences, as opposed to conflicts involving opposition politicians). The third step was to review the themes. In this step, extracts were analyzed in more detail. This was done by going through the data again to determine whether themes should be discarded, put together, expanded, or recoded, or different subthemes should be defined. The relations between the themes and the subthemes were also taken into account in this step. In the final step, we defined the themes extensively by working them out concisely theme by theme and reporting on them in the “Findings” section.

## Findings

We organize the findings by discussing them structured around the different levels of the multidimensional approach, that is, by focusing on the individual, routine, and external levels. Within these levels, we will discuss the themes and patterns that emerged during our analysis of the semistructured interviews.

### Individual Level

The analysis revealed a general expression of ambivalence among interviewees when it comes to the question whether conflict in the news is a “good” or “bad” thing. This uneasiness about conflict as a substantial part of journalistic life is best illustrated by

several examples. For instance, when confronted with a political conflict, a television journalist almost cynically described the attitude of political journalists toward conflict as something “which we in The Hague . . . enjoy *thoroughly*” (Journalist10). However, at the same time, some journalists also indicated that they disliked conflict reporting:

I hate reporting that purely deals with the political conflict or consists of 80% conflict. Many journalists tend to only shortly explain in the remaining 20% what really matters. I disapprove of this practice. (Journalist13)

Interestingly, this ambivalence proved to be much more visible characterization of journalistic perceptions. For instance, it was also present in the journalist views of interventionism in political conflict reporting. When prompted, most interviewees indicated that they did not exaggerate or manufacture conflicts during reporting. Nevertheless, a number of journalists suggested that this was a common practice for *other* journalists—particularly those working for the largest Dutch tabloid newspaper—and that they disapproved of such practices. Overall, our interviewees reported that they value accuracy and trustworthiness, and indicated that these values prevented them from exaggerating or blowing up conflicts to the extent that the facts are violated.

A second theme that emerged from the analysis revolves around the subtle ways in which journalists do intervene and sometimes seek out actively and even orchestrate conflicts. Several subthemes that reveal these instances are described below. First, most interviewees stressed that there is a tendency to word conflicts as sharply as possible in the media while remaining to the facts. Language is used to report about conflict in a more attractive way, but most journalists stressed that violating the truthfulness of the message is avoided. A second method in which journalists intervene is by giving news items a title that suggests a stronger conflict than is necessarily the case. Some journalists indicated that certain words that add weight to the conflict and increase dramatization are added, especially in the title to attract attention from the audience.

I tend to gear up a little when making headlines. To justify this for myself I say: at least people will read the article. . . . This is perceivably effective. If you use boring headlines . . . they don't stimulate the reader to continue. (Journalist16)

You often nuance things in the text. In the title you use words such as “on collision course,” or “to perish,” those kind of terms. . . . This helps to make something insightful and engaging to readers. (Journalist9)

Third, when describing their practices, a number of journalists indicated that they actively look for policy topics and agenda points that can potentially function as a source of conflict between political actors. This practice is a clear indicator of an active stance by journalists; instead of waiting for news events to happen, possible conflicts are identified and politicians are approached for comments on those policy subjects:

There are upcoming points on the political agenda for which you know disagreement exists between parties. There are certain topics on which the coalition parties disagree profoundly and where conflicts arise, which you, as a journalist, investigate and pay attention too. (Journalist2)

Journalists generally indicated that the watchdog role is imperative to this theme and contributes to an active approach in looking for political conflict.

We cannot take into account the interests of politicians. We want to get to the bottom of a story. This does not mean exaggerating, but sharply uncovering the truth. And the discussion is that exaggerating or amplifying will always be there, simply because the interests are different. (Journalist7)

In the analysis, another assertive behavior that emerged as a reoccurring theme was journalists asking steering questions. By asking questions in a particular way, journalists actively engage the conflict frame building process. This is illustrated in the next example where the interviewee indicates that although conflicts are not actually caused by the journalist, they are certainly facilitated by them:

I will not go as far as to incite conflict. Just think along a little bit. . . . Sometimes I say to politicians, if you would attack [another politician], I would consider it worth reporting on that. . . . That is what I mean with “thinking along.” (Journalist16)

To expand the scope of a conflict, interviewees indicated that they sometimes made a conflict look more severe than it actually is by adding possible and potentially hypothetical consequences of a political conflict for the politicians or political parties involved, even if such consequences are unlikely: “You [as a journalist] will always try to make the story look worse by sketching possible consequences. While you actually know that 99% of all conflicts will be dismissed with a compromise” (Journalist11). In effect, this example shows how the scope of a conflict is enlarged by the enactment of the interpretative journalistic role conception. Prospective speculation regarding future events also serves as a way to uphold the value of trustworthiness while avoiding the introduction of false facts.

In sum, the findings indicate that professional values such as trustworthiness and factuality pose clear limitations on the extent and manner in which the interview subjects took an interventionist stance in the conflict frame building process. Nevertheless, the analysis yielded subtle practices in which journalists do take an active stance in the conflict frame building process. In the next section, we will address how these interventionist approaches are affected by journalistic routines.

### *Routines Level*

*Application of the objectivity norm.* Journalists indicated that it is a routine to involve politicians or political actors with opposing viewpoints when producing stories about news issues. For political conflicts, stakeholders who were not already involved in a

conflict are approached and asked to respond to new quotes by other stakeholders in the conflict. The majority of interviewees indicated that they approached these actors because they expected or even hoped that they joined a particular side in an evolving political conflict in the press. This is illustrated by this quote from a reporter concerning routines in news production on a conflict within a Dutch party:

When the number two has criticism on the number one, you ask certain questions: Should you be having this position? Why is that person not doing well? And of course you want to obtain viewpoints on the issue from the number one. Then you ask: What are your reactions to these allegations? (Journalist8)

Another reporter voiced a similar reaction. When asked about his working routines when presented with a scenario where a party member criticizes the party leader, he issued the following response:

I would find it interesting to go to the party leader and ask: This party member said this and this about you, what is your opinion on this . . . and what are the consequences for the party. . . . Shouldn't the party member fear for his position? (Journalist16)

This example illustrates a more general pattern: The objectivity norm is not merely a way in which journalists juxtapose political actor frames; questions are also formulated in a certain way that enables the scope of conflicts to expand. When there is no oppositional voice found to openly back up claims about a conflict, a number of interviewees also explained that they resort to anonymous accounts to include as opposing viewpoints, despite their reluctance to do so:

When there is a media discussion about the leadership of a politician and you cannot get a member of the party to respond openly, then it can also work [to use anonymous accounts]. Maybe politicians are willing to say something anonymously. That is not ideal, but it also indicates the sensitivity of the issue. (Journalist2)

*Dramatic narratives as building blocks of conflict frames.* When describing the power of conflicts in the news, interviewees indicated that, in their view, the attraction of political conflict is that audiences like to pick sides in a conflict so that they can relate and identify themselves with their preferred politicians or parties. A television journalist stated, "Conflict is always really beautiful. You have a good guy. You have a bad guy. The viewer can pick sides" (Journalist4). The interviews also showed that a political conflict is interesting because there has to be an outcome. Conflict has to be consequential. When asked about what makes a political conflict interesting, this interviewee identified this as an important feature of political conflict that makes it newsworthy: "Because the ending is unknown. How is it going to end? There is more tension and that is interesting. How are they going to solve that?" (Journalist9).

The analysis also showed that certain conflicts are valued more than others. Three characteristics of conflicts emerged as themes that give a conflict journalistic value. First, a conflict has to imply a tangible outcome. For instance, a major ideological change

within a party, a change in power relations within parties and coalitions, or the future of policy measures. Also, the interviewees indicated that conflicts that have a high entertainment value are interesting for the audience, for instance, personal conflicts where politicians attack each other or news items where the bad relations between ministers are exposed:

To make a conflict interesting to readers, you need details. You need to show how these people sometimes struggle with each other. . . . People like it when politicians are not shown as profiteers, but as human beings who also suffer. That is the power of a political conflict. (Journalist14)

Third, personal accounts and detailed descriptions of political conflicts are ways in which to involve readers in a story. However, some interviewees also indicated that these details are not always readily available. In the following example, a lack of time prevented the following newspaper journalist to thoroughly find out everything about a given conflict, but nonetheless decided on reporting about it.

It is sometimes the case that you do not know everything you should know about a political conflict. You know a few things. But you still think it is important enough for the newspaper, even if it is not complete. . . . I would not call this exaggerating. (Journalist12)

This particular quote shows how constraints that are embedded in media routines prevented some of the journalists in exposing all of the facts and constructing a full and complete story with all of the facts.

*Routine reliance: Following the crowd.* The interviewees indicated that they sometimes had to report on political conflicts because a news event is already a big issue in other media outlets and they have to follow the “pack.” The following television journalist voices this opinion: “One media outlet does not want to be second behind another one” (Journalist15). This reasoning occurs even when journalists do not think a conflict is that relevant: “You do not want to be the only medium that does not bring news about which the whole country is speaking. Even if you think: Is this really interesting?” (Journalist8). In the last quote, the journalist mentioning news “about which the whole country is speaking” also illustrates that perceptions of the audience plays a pivotal role in this process. Even though having reservations about an issue’s newsworthiness, journalists will feel obliged to report about a conflict because of the wish of the audience.

When a conflict is already in the media, a common practice that came forward in the interviews was that journalists tried to find an angle that is unique to their own media outlet. They often seek to add novel facts to introduce some sort of development to the narrative of the news story. This could be done by phrasing questions to politicians involved in the conflict in a particular way, for instance, by emphasizing possible consequences of a conflict for a power structure or by raising stakes of a particular conflict. When introduced to a vignette describing a conflict already present in the media, a journalist responded,

When we meet them [the politicians] in the parliament, we ask: "What caused this fight and which side are you on?" . . . And then they all have to speak out about the issue and because of the phrasing of the questions you already pick your angle, kind off. (Journalist12)

### *External Level*

Power is an important part of the conflict frame building process. Three main themes emerged that describe which types of conflict and for which types of political actors journalists are more likely to intervene: coalition consequences, consequences for policy, and consequences for internal party relations.

First, journalists are more likely to intervene when the conflict affects the coalition. The Netherlands is a multiparty system where coalitions are needed to form the government. Constant negotiation between the government partners is needed to ascertain continuity of the incumbent coalition. Conflicts can thus potentially affect these relationships. As a result, interviewees unanimously exhibited a preference for conflicts that can affect coalition relations:

Small parties that are part of the opposition and differ in opinion are often not considered newsworthy. But when coalition members differ in opinion about an important subject among themselves, it is. If they do not agree, this can potentially cause a crisis in the government. (Journalist8)

Coalition members who oppose government plans are considered as nonimportant and only newsworthy in special occasions. Paradoxically, while it is of importance to members of the political opposition to get into the news and voice their opposition toward the ruling parties, for the coalition it is important to showcase unity. The coalition preferably avoids getting into the news with a conflict angle. Subsequently, to find conflicts within the coalition, a more active, interventionist approach is required. In these specific ways, political power affected the extent to which the interviewees intervene and attempt to pursue conflicts. However, interviewees did indicate that less influential politicians who are not part of the coalition intervened in the conflict frame building process by informing journalists about conflicts within the coalition.

Opposition parties tell us: "The situation within the coalition is complicated, they fight each other for every inch of ground." And then they hope we investigate that and pay attention to the fact that [it does not go well] between the coalition parties. (Journalist10)

This is a practice in which political actors not well-known, and therefore less valuable for the press, do manage to get media attention and influence the political process through the media.

A second pattern emerging from the analysis on the external level was the preference for conflicts that implied consequences for policy. This theme highlights a journalistic preference for political conflicts that have the potential to actually result in an outcome in the form of new or amended policy. Hence, conflicts need to have a promise of

consequences and change the existing policies and laws. This is also related to the audience of the media text, consequences in the form of policies imply changes for citizens.

Recently there was a small-time politician with a deciding vote who threatened to vote against a certain policy. In such instances the media is very receptive. . . . Because it would have become a big conflict if he [The politician] would have voted no. (Journalist7)

This has consequences for lesser known politicians and their chance for exposure. When a politician from the opposition attacks the coalition, but has no chance of affecting the coalition policy because there is no majority, the journalists we interviewed did not identify this as newsworthy. In contrast, the interviewees deemed politicians who are needed for a majority or are in a position to change policy or exert power are more likely to get press coverage when involved in a conflict.

Finally, the interviewed journalists indicated that conflicts that could effectively change the course of the party were most interesting for their reporting. These include internal conflicts that represent an ideological power struggle or potential change to the course of the party. These instances motivate journalists to dig deeper into a conflict and thus intervene in the frame building process:

Is there a conflict between two people or does it split up the party? Are there more people who think differently? For example party leaders or party departments. Does the conflict between two people represent something bigger? I would try to find that out. (Journalist15)

The findings with regard to external factors and political power in conflict frame building indicate that formal power is indeed an important determinant when it comes to interventionism in the conflict frame building process. The consequential nature of a conflict between powerful actors enhances the attractiveness for journalists. Simply pitting political actors from the opposition against government actors is not deemed interesting enough by most of the interviewees. Our results also show that journalists and political actors in a position of power have a conflict of interests. Actors in a position of power are often the ones who try to prevent news from being framed in terms of conflict. For coalition relations, it is beneficial to maintain an image of harmonious relations. Hence, it is necessary for journalists to expose conflict within the coalition without much overt cooperation from political sources within the coalition.

## Discussion

This study examines the circumstances under which conflict frames emerge in the Netherlands. Our findings highlight the active role journalists play in the emergence and prevalence of conflict frames in the news media. Journalists do not merely disseminate conflict frames put forward by political actors, but actively shape when and how conflict appears in the news. Subtle methods of journalistic news production are applied to facilitate, emphasize, and sometimes even exaggerate conflict. This is partly

explained by journalistic role conceptions that value exposing facts, controlling the government and informing citizens about conflicts within the coalition. However, it is limited by other journalistic professional norms that value accuracy and trustworthiness. This is seemingly a paradox, but it is known that journalistic ideology consists of a set of news values that often contradict each other (Deuze 2005). The findings indicate that journalistic intervention in conflict framing is encapsulated in journalistic routines. These include the practices of transforming political events into a vivid story and juxtaposing political actors. Furthermore, pack journalism and news hypes function as self-reinforcing processes in which the initial framing of a subject structures and fuels follow-up reporting (Vasterman 2005). Journalists prefer to intervene in conflicts between powerful actors or conflicts with consequences for the coalition, policy, and power relations within political parties. This corresponds with earlier findings such as those by Bennett (1996), who suggests that power can be defined as the ability to affect the outcome of a particular news event. Bennett's arguments can also be connected with the findings on the routines level, conflict narratives require developments to remain interesting for the audience, and the types of conflict identified on the external level resemble conflicts with prospective outcomes that can keep the narrative going. However, the findings seemingly contradict earlier findings that suggested that the use of conflict frames contributed to the visibility of less powerful political actors (van Dalen 2012). Lesser known politicians have a greater need to become a part of the news and will provide the journalists with conflict frames, resulting in a reduced need to intervene. Although this is relevant for the Dutch context particularly, our findings also resonate with earlier findings from a U.S. study by Esser (2008). In this study, it was shown that political campaigns that are more scripted and characterized by more news management led to an increase in media interventionism in the United States.

Different levels of influence affect how conflict frames emerge and the extent to which journalists are active in this process. These levels are interlinked and are not always clearly distinguished in the journalistic practice (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). For instance, journalistic values are respected as much as possible when producing news, but sometimes suffer, given the limitations imposed on newsroom organizations by routines that are caused by a shortage of time and resources. Similarly, the preference for powerful political actors may be explained by the heightened stakes in such a conflict, which results in a narrative which is more consequential to the readers, who are the main consumers of news stories.

The validity of the sample ensures that the findings likely give a good indication of how conflict frames emerge in Dutch political news. These findings resonate with earlier studies conducted in the United Kingdom (Cook 1998) and Sweden (Strömbäck 2008), which highlight the agency of political journalists in the frame building process. The findings of the current study are likely relevant for countries with media and political systems similar to the Netherlands. The Dutch political system is characterized by a multiparty system in the parliament. This system makes coalition forming with multiple parties a requirement for a government and alters the political power dynamics relevant for conflict frames. These dynamics are presumably different in, for example, two-party systems where it is more relevant to include members from the



oppositional party in a conflict story, because they represent the main opposing political actor. Furthermore, the distance between the pragmatic Dutch press and politicians is relatively large, as opposed to more partisan media cultures, where less intervention in frames put forward by political actors is likely. Indeed, different news cultures have differing levels of conflict frames in the news (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011) and journalistic values also differ between countries (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Cross-national studies could reveal the extent to which the presence of conflict frames is explained by differing degrees of journalistic intervention and type of political system.

Even though the journalists interviewed in our study were open about their work practices, the self-reported nature of studies such as ours must be taken into account. Naturally, our findings show how journalists *perceive* their routines and practices. Via use of vignettes and a varied sample, we aimed to make sure that these perceptions are as varied, specific, and insightful as possible (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Future studies will have to compare our results with content-analysis data of conflict reporting in the Netherlands and beyond.

Our focus on individual journalistic perceptions also alludes to another limitation of this study, namely, that factors on the organizational level and market pressures are not taken systematically into account. We did ask journalists about differences between news organizations with differing commercial aims and reporting styles, but we found no structural differences. Noticeably, journalists from all types of media outlets emphasized the importance of the audience, even those working for public broadcasters. Cross-national comparative studies or studies with a more macro-level or quantitative approach could assess differences between various types of organizations more proficiently. Organizational processes may fuel journalistic intervention in the form of exaggerating headlines when journalists do not write their own headlines. Furthermore, news media can differ in their modes of news presentation. This can potentially contribute to both the emergence of conflict and the way in which conflicts emerge (Cottle and Rai 2006). For instance, a television roundtable discussion in which different political actors participate may increase the chance of disputes. Content studies seem most adequate to reveal the consequences of these architectural characteristics for conflict framing.

Conflict frames emerge not exclusively because of the agency and intervention of journalists. News framed in terms of conflict often resonates with political reality and reflects disagreement fought out on the political stage. Journalists do not just send frames without adding meaning, nor do they solely provide the public with their own frames (Brüggemann 2014). This study shows that journalists can influence the construction and adaptation of conflict frames, and sheds light on contextual features that affect the amount of journalistic framing when it comes to political conflict. This adds to the literature because the role of journalists in the frame building process is still a relatively neglected area (Hänggli 2011).

In conclusion, the current study contributes to the frame building theory by showing the active role that journalists play when framing news in terms of conflict. This study reveals some of these interventionist practices. Furthermore, it sheds light on the role of media routines and politicians in when and how journalists intervene in the

conflict frame building process. Future studies could further disentangle the motivations of journalists. What drives them to intervene in the conflict frame building process? Regarding these motives, our results emphasized the important role of the audience. Future studies must assess to what extent commercial, organizational, and other higher order factors play a part and drive these motivations. These factors are harder to disentangle in a qualitative study. Also, the dynamics of political power deserve more attention. Our results point to the flexible nature of political power. Contextual factors affect how less powerful actors can become more newsworthy, for instance, by diverting from party policy. Future research must disentangle these ever-shifting power balances, both in political media systems that are similar to and different from the Dutch case. Finally, research towards different types of conflict frames seems needed. Most research is focused on conflict as a generic concept, but our results imply that different types of conflicts are present; future studies must uncover how visible these different types of conflicts are in actual press coverage.

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1. The full interview protocol will be made available upon request.

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