Media and Armed Conflicts: An Overview

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Abstract

Being newsworthy**,** conflicts attract much of the media attention. The interaction between the media (print or electronic) and the armed conflicts has taken multiple forms in history, and different journalists or news organizations have approached different armed conflicts differently. In the backdrop of the constant debate over morality and objectivity in journalism, this study investigates the evolving academic debate around the relationship of media and armed conflicts, especially with the advent of new communication platforms. The digital platforms that allow the sharing of multimedia content, including social networking and microblogging websites, facilitate disseminating the news content and serve as essential tools for newsgathering. The instantaneous nature of these platforms and unlimited outreach make them attractive tools to be used by traditional news organizations. They gain even more importance in the conflict zones — where it is difficult for them to have their correspondents on the ground. Therefore, the present paper outlines new technologies by the traditional news organizations that have reshaped the relationship between conflict and media. It also discusses the role of news media in shaping public opinion and policy.

Introduction

With technological advancements and the advent of new media, mass communication has been revolutionized. Whether print, electronic or both, the news organizations are no longer solely dependent on the transportation (of newspapers) or provision of landing rights (of radio or television channels) to distribute to the masses. The processes of news gathering and dissemination have now, to a great extent, been digitized. The digital platforms have simplified the process by providing unlimited (digital) space and instant outreach to millions of viewers. Social networking websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, by the (traditional) news organizations, have

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further eased the dissemination process as the content can easily be shared and received on such platforms.

Unlike television, radio, or newspapers, the digital platforms offer the masses the multimedia content and provide greater and quicker two-way communication opportunities. This facilitates the consumers to become part of the news and the release of information directly from the conflicting parties and the access to the firsthand information by the decision-makers (directly from the ones concerned) before designing their policies. The communication is instantaneous while information is abundant on the social media platforms, which may be regarded as 'spatial distributions'.

Latane (1996) has discussed three factors which influence the members of spatial distribution. These include strength, immediacy, and number of sources (Ibid). In the context of the use of social media platforms by traditional news organizations, it can be argued that all these three prerequisites are being met. First, the already established credibility of the traditional news organizations is their strength due to their professional standing. Second, social media provides them with the opportunity to instantly reach out to a large number of individuals simultaneously — fulfilling the requirement of immediacy. Third and last, the following of the traditional news organizations on their social media accounts further helps to increase the impact of the content they produce. However, this has also complicated the processing of the information in various cases, such as in conflict situations.

This paper attempts to unravel the literature on how the media and conflict have interacted with each other over time and evolved with technological evolution. In addition to laying down the prominent approaches to conflict coverage, the study also briefly discusses the potential of the news to (re)shape the policies and the impact the news coverage (may) have on the decision making process. It also discusses the use of new media by the traditional news organizations and the advantages the former offers to the latter. This paper also sheds light on the conflict coverage in the digital age, i.e., the modernity that the technological advancements have brought to the news gathering and dissemination processes.

Media and Armed Conflicts

There is no denying the fact that the media plays a vital role in armed conflicts. Many of the conflicts, especially those in the far-flung regions, could not have come into the public notice without media. Moreover, therefore, the journalists' contribution, in this regard, cannot be ignored (Hanitzsch, 2007). Before delving into this aspect's detail, this paper first presents how the media and conflicts have interacted with one another in historical times and how it has been used for setting agendas during conflicts and wars.

The French Revolution serves as probably the first and foremost example of its kind in this backdrop where the press was extensively used as a propaganda tool. The French General and great military strategist, Napoleon Bonaparte, published his own newspapers during the Italian campaign of the French revolutionary wars to bring his victories to people's glance (Shultz, 2013). The effort was much success in creating a positive image of his persona among the French public in particular, and the conquered European people in general, which finally paved the way for him to become the first Emperor of France.

Later, in the 20th century, when the electronic media — in the form of radio — had already been introduced, it was also used in the two World Wars as a

propaganda tool besides newspapers and pamphlets. Radio has also been found out to have played a crucial role in the Rwandan conflict, where the communal violence between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes was flared up by the local RTLM radio. This violence culminated into the 1994 Rwandan genocide,[3] and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda later held the hate media responsible for the escalation (Thompson, 2007). However, it is acknowledged here that these were not the only instances when media contributed actively — and adversely — in any war or conflict in history.

The flow of information from the war zone plays a vital role in characterizing the conflicting parties. According to Ponsonby (1928), truth is the first casualty in any war. Since the political leaders and state officials convey the (respective) government's stance, there is a need for a neutral source that can impartially report about the events occurring in a conflict zone. Therefore, to counter propaganda and incitement of violence using the means of mass communication, the term 'information intervention' was coined to provide a platform to alternate voices through relaying factually correct information (Thompson, 2002). Hence, it was considered essential to bring the issues to the (political) consciousness of the audience. In such an attempt, the US-based news channel, Cable News Network (CNN), covered the first Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991) live and became a major global actor in the international relations (Gilboa, 2005). Since then, many news channels, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), have initiated live coverage of the violence and conflicts.

Information flow from the conflict zones has been revolutionized with further advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The internet has made it possible to avail the different discrete sources of information, such as radio, television, and newspaper, on a single device (Gilboa et al., 2016). The internet has made it easier for the news organizations to disseminate their message and hosts multiple social networking websites on which the media organizations rely for images and other (activists' or citizen journalists') reports to cover any conflict. This attitude is being observed in the case of the Syrian civil war. The traditional news channels, such as the BBC, have used war zone images posted on the Syrian activists' social media platforms (Doucet, 2018). It may be argued that the audio-visual messages posted online that come straight from Syria have kept the Syrian conflict alive for the traditional media and the public around the globe. Pantti (2013) contends that social media has played an even more significant role in the Syrian conflict than the Arab Spring, in both news gathering and dissemination. With the (news) media's role and contribution evolving over time with the technological advancements and advent of the new media, their approaches to cover any conflict have also transformed over the last few decades. The following section discusses these approaches in brief.

Approaches to Conflict Coverage

Media is often argued to have adopted one of the two primary approaches to cover any conflict. The first approach is when the media becomes a part of the conflict and

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[3] The UN defined the term "genocide" at the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in New York on December 9, 1948. The objective of the Convention was to declare genocide a crime under international law. It condemned genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war and provided a definition of the crime. The prescribed punishment for the genocide is not subject to the limitations of time and place (for more details see http://www.un.org/millennium/law/iv-1.htm).

exacerbates the situation (Puddephatt, 2006). This is similar to what is argued for the role of the RTLM radio in the Rwandan genocide. Another example is the New York Times which represents Israel as a victim and the Palestinians as aggressors. Therefore, Israel considers the newspaper as an essential source (Bourdon, 2016). Bourdon has presented three levels to analyze the quality of the journalistic work produced in conflict situations. These include the journalist's political affiliation with the conflicting parties, Ethno-religious identities of the journalists, and pressures experienced by the journalists in the conflict coverage process. However, the second approach to conflict coverage is concerned with the Independent reporting of the incidents and episodes of the conflict (Puddephatt, 2006).

Villard, in 1903, for the first time emphasized to present both sides of the story; this set the foundation of objectivity in journalism (Mindich, 1998). The approach of moral or ethical journalism further expanded to peace journalism, for which a seminal study by Galtung and Ruge (1965) provided the basis. Their study was based on the analysis of how the three crises — i.e., that in Congo, Cuba, and Cyprus — were presented by four Norwegian Newspapers. Based on their findings and analysis, it was suggested that the journalists should focus on long term development rather than mere events in a conflict: they should be trained to deal effectively with their stereotypes, more content should be focused on reporting from culturally diverse societies, and more coverage should be given to the non-elite individuals and groups (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Therefore, it may be argued that peace journalism, in general, focuses on humanitarian issues, balanced reporting, and least reliance on elite sources of information in a conflict. Mitra (2016) has contended that journalists must be trained to practice peace journalism in their local contexts.

Some other approaches related to moral journalism, especially for conflict coverage, have also been argued upon. These mainly include the journalism of 'attachment' and 'detachment'. These two approaches also explain the role that the journalists have traditionally been playing in any conflict. The phrase 'journalism of attachment' was coined by a BBC journalist, Martin Bell, with the purpose of not to stand back while reporting from the conflict zones, instead to highlight the horrors of the conflict to impart the sense of responsibility and action to ameliorate the hardships (being) faced by the conflict victims (Bell, 1998). However, as per the detached journalism approach, a journalist should only report the facts and reality without any twist. With contested opinions and views on whether simply to report from the conflict zone — practicing detachment — or interpret the events keeping under consideration the principles of fairness and accuracy, the content available on the social media platforms to be picked up by the journalists poses further challenges in conflict coverage. The coverage of the Syrian conflict is an example, where the images posted by the activists from the war zone and gathered through other sources were interpreted and counter interpreted by the mainstream media as well as the conflicting parties in their own ways (Pantti, 2013). This ensued a debate that further deepened the fissures at local, regional as well as international levels.

Impact of Media on Public Perception and Decision Making
Media plays a crucial role in conflicts because the public, policymakers, and even the conflicting parties assess gravity through the news. It also creates perceptions among the masses regarding the oppressor or terrorist and the victim. This is in line with the assertion of Deprez and Raeymaeckers (2011) who have suggested that the way media represents Israel-Palestine conflict and the parties involved has a direct impact on public perception. Many other scholars (e.g., Han & Rane, 2011; Jackobsen,

2000) have attempted to shed light on the role the media plays, pertaining to any conflict situation, in (re)forming or (re)shaping the public opinion. It is expected that the decision-makers will not ignore the public's opinion on a certain important issue due to the political costs involved (Han & Rane, 2011). It is argued that two primary factors have contributed to the increased role of the (news) media in influencing the decision-making process, especially concerning the (Western) intervention in conflicts. After the Cold War, the absence of security threats has made military intervention a matter of choice rather than compulsion. Second, the media's power to bring war at home with live images from the war zones has helped shape the public debate towards any conflict (Jackobsen, 2000).

The term 'CNN effect', first coined in 1991 after the US intervention in Northern Iraq, has also been extensively used to study the news media's potential to influence policymaking (Gilboa et al., 2016). It generally deals with the violent phase of a conflict and particularly the need for humanitarian intervention (Ibid). However, Jakobsen (2000) has rejected the CNN effect model for being irrelevant, especially when Western governments decide whether to intervene or not in any conflict. Furthermore, Gowing (2011) believes that the approaches to understanding the news media impact on decision making, such as the CNN effect, are irrelevant for being very narrow since they are related mainly to the foreign policy. However, today's communication is bottom-up and affects both the foreign and domestic policies without distinction (Ibid).

Nevertheless, Wolfe, Jones, and Baumgartner (2013), in their seminal study, have qualified the news media as a primary variable for being directly linked to policymaking. In this regard, the feedback model, proposed by Hans Methias Kepplinger, can be regarded as the first of its kind to provide a framework to conduct a quantitative analysis of media effects on the decision-makers. The model represented a synthesis of various approaches, used in previous studies on traditional media, to analyze the news effects (Kepplinger, 2007).

Furthermore, the outreach of the content posted on social media and its instantaneous nature is credited for further increasing the direct or indirect impact of news media on the policymaking process. This is evident from the case of Alan Kurdi — a three-year-old Syrian refugee boy who was found washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015. The toddler's body face-down picture was shared by millions of social media users at different digital platforms (Devichand, 2016). The news, along with the picture, made headlines in the mainstream media outlets. The iconic image of Alan Kurdi going viral was probably not enough to move the policymaking process, but the contextualization of the incident and its publication by the mainstream media did help to accomplish this (Mortensen, Allan, & Peters, 2017).

A study conducted on the 'Alan Kurdi Effect' noted that though the public sympathy on the starkest picture moved the European governments to soften their stance on refugees immediately, this change of policy was temporary and soon they reverted to stricter policies (Sohlberg, Esaiasson, & Martinsso, 2018). Hence, the Western countries imposed stricter refugee laws only after about a month of the incident. Therefore, it is argued that despite the images evoking sympathy, the political contingencies and right-leaning agenda took over the compassion (Ibid). Moreover, it may also be argued that the United States did not militarily intervene (during the Obama administration) in the Syrian conflict because of the absence of sustained campaigning by the mainstream American news outlets for getting (militarily) involved in the conflict and absence of the mainstream American journalists on the ground (Doucet, 2018). Therefore, it is contended that traditional

news organizations' role in public mobilization and government decision-making is relevant.

Evolution in (Traditional) News Organizations

As an initial step, all major traditional media news organizations ensured their digital presence through websites where they posted their (multimedia) content. However, it was not deemed enough, and the social media websites were perceived as great opportunities as they offered instantaneous worldwide outreach through virtual space without any costly structural arrangements for dissemination and gathering of news. It is to note here that social media's importance lies in its sociability where a large number of people (can) spontaneously share their emotions, feelings and opinions (Su, Reynolds, & Sun, 2015). This was largely overlooked in the past by the traditional media due to either shortage of airtime and/or space, or the editorial policies.

The concepts of network and participatory journalism manifest the increasing role of the audience in the news-making and production process. Journalism has now become open-sourced and non-linear (Alejandro, 2010). The digital communication and internet have also altered the news dissemination and gathering methods of traditional news organizations. The new communication technologies have enabled traditional news organizations to receive information even from those areas with no reporters. The citizen journalists post content on social networking and microblogging websites, such as Twitter and Facebook, which is then rechecked, confirmed, and broadcast or published by the traditional news organizations (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Furthermore, the news organizations, such as The New York Times, consider their social media marketing an important strategy to promote their brand (Hong, 2012). Since the outreach on social networking platforms is unlimited, it makes them highly attractive means of news dissemination for the traditional news organizations (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). Hong (2012) has found a positive correlation between social media use for news dissemination by the newspapers and the traffic on the news website. One can safely argue that social networking and microblogging websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become an essential part of the newsgathering and reporting process (Bane, 2019).

Unlike the content creation primarily on the social media platforms, the news generation in traditional news organizations — known for their credibility and responsibility — is more institutionalized. In this situation, Ravasi, Etter, and Colleoni (2019) assert that social media's rise has strengthened the traditional media's impact. Moreover, they maintain that traditional media's organizational reputation makes the social media content, disseminated through the former, acceptable to the public. Therefore, they both complement one another — leading to a maximized impact. The examination of outbound hyperlinking of the top 25 US national newspapers (from 2012 onwards) revealed that 98 per cent of their websites contained outbound links to Twitter and Facebook. This reflects the increasing role of Social Networking and microblogging in news media (Weber, 2017). Furthermore, Su and Borah (2019), in their recent study on the intermedia agenda-setting effect between Twitter and newspapers, contend that social media only portrays the traditional media's agenda.

Conflict Coverage in the Digital Age

The contemporary conflicts are taking place in an environment where production and consumption of news have blended. The viewers can become part of the story; they can share the same news story with additional information or comments. These developments pose a challenge to the existing hierarchies of news production, consumption and distribution (Papacharissi, 2015). Gilboa and colleagues (2016) have called the diversity in communication as hybridity that captures the complex top-to-bottom and bottom to top communication where the (local, national, and international) media, as well as the conflicting parties, interact. The hybridity allows the actors involved in any conflict, including the fighting (armed) parties and the affected communities, to interact with media and the outside world on multiple levels and tell their part of the story. Therefore, digitization and technology have made possible the real-time communication and changed the dynamics of conflict coverage.

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the expansion of worldwide internet and technological advancements in communication. This was when blogging was introduced as an alternate account to traditional media for covering conflicts (Bennett, 2013). Therefore, the new media's emergence challenged the traditional media's gatekeeping role and the latter's quasi-monopoly over the news. The advent of social networking platforms gave rise to citizen journalism and micro-blogging. These platforms offered interconnectedness among multiple and diverse actors, including the political elite and decision-makers (Tenenboim, 2017). In this backdrop, the news organizations quickly understood the new environment and reinvented their business models where social media gained a central position. The use of social media by traditional news organizations offered them multiple advantages. In the countries where press freedom is curtailed, the social networking platforms, such as Twitter, could serve the purpose since they are less constrained by the geopolitical boundaries (Ahmed, Cho, & Jaidka, 2019). Hence, traditional news organizations could continue their news operations in these states without obstruction.

The new technologies, often through social media, offer the (traditional) news organizations relatively easy access to information from the (practically unapproachable) conflict zones and provide them with multiple tools to gather and verify that information. Since the advent of social media websites, international news channels have also been using modern techniques, such as crowdsourcing, to cover the conflicts. In the Gaza-Israel conflict (2008-9), Al-Jazeera set up a crowdsourcing reporting platform which allowed reporters and citizens to send SMS and Twitter messages to report conflict-related incidents. These reports were counterchecked with other sources and then reported to the audience (Zeitzoff, 2011). As already discussed, the social media platforms, particularly social networking and microblogging websites have also become important news dissemination. Therefore, the importance of digital platforms cannot be subdued when discussing the conflict coverage by the (traditional) news organizations in contemporary times.

Conclusion

This study began to highlight the growing use of social networking platforms by traditional news organizations to cover the conflicts. The appraisal of literature was aimed at understanding the nexus between media and the armed conflicts, the importance of new technologies in the field of journalism in general and conflict

coverage in particular, and the adaptability of the digital media as a platform for gathering and dissemination of news primarily produced by the traditional news organizations. It is highlighted that social media varies from traditional media in various aspects. Some of the prominent differences are that, unlike the traditional mass communication means, the digital — i.e., the modern means of communication — are open-sourced, instantaneous, and inclusive.

When solely relying on 'professional' journalists in the field for covering any conflict, the newsgathering from the conflict zones was a precarious and costly affair for the news media. However, the newsgathering — even from the conflict zones — has become much easier and cost-effective with the advent of social networking platforms. Citizen journalism has made it possible to get real-time images from the conflict zone. The content, uploaded on the digital platforms, can then be disseminated to millions of internet users worldwide. Therefore, it is argued that the logics of media production and media consumption are interlinked on social media platforms. This differentiates them from the way the traditional media functions (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This is one of the chief reasons why traditional news organizations are now increasingly using social networking and microblogging websites for conflict coverage.

Moreover, the retweets and shares of the news content by the netizens and the news organizations themselves spread the information even to the latent audience who are otherwise unaware of the happenings related to the conflict. Hence, it may further be argued that the traditional media, which has already achieved the status of the fourth pillar of the state, has now become more potent after the advent of social networking platforms. This has allowed the news organizations to become even more impactful — enhancing their ability to influence the perceptions, policies, and decisions.

It is recognized that the impact of the conflict-related news increases manifolds, mainly when it also contains dynamic and moralistic content. Furthermore, there is a greater probability of the public opinion influencing the policy change effectively if the campaigns are managed on both the traditional and social media. The above discussion on the Alan Kurdi effect and the Obama administration's decision to avoid military intervention in Syria highlight that both the new and traditional media are imperative for shaping public opinion and policy decisions.

Despite social media's growth, traditional news organizations' role is still pivotal in amplifying different actors' voices in the armed conflicts. The bloggers and activists (citizen journalists), in the conflict zones, still depend on coverage by the traditional news organizations (Bennett, 2013). One viral picture or video from the conflict zone has the power to (re)shape the public opinion and the governments' stance and policies. In this backdrop, access to authentic and credible news probably serves as the biggest challenge. The traditional news organizations and professional journalists can play their role in this regard and authenticate the information being generated from the conflict zones.

In all these circumstances, it is imperative to explore how communication complexity helps to ignite the conflicts and facilitate an informed understanding of the conflict among public and policymakers. The communication experts can also direct their research to determine the impact of diversification and multiplication of news sources on intervention strategies. From a scholarly perspective, the emerging role of (new) media in conflict resolution and conflict management will also contribute to the field in the wake of new technologies.

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