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Nebojša Vladislavljević

## Media framing of political conflict:

A review of the literature

May 2015

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Media framing of political conflict: A review of the literature

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
1. Introduction .....	2
2. Conceptual issues .....	3
3. The media framing of inter-state and civil wars .....	7
4. The media coverage of institutional conflicts and popular protest in 'old' democracies .....	13
5. The media framing of conflict in non-democratic regimes and in democratisation	19
6. Lessons for further study of the media framing of democratisation conflicts.....	27
7. Bibliography .....	31

## Executive Summary

This paper provides a critical overview of the literature on media and conflict by focusing on the ways in which contemporary media frame different types of political conflict. It reveals a fractured field. There is an extensive literature on how media report on wars, on election campaigns and popular protest and social movements in western democracies, as well as some research on media coverage of violent conflicts in non-democratic regimes and democratising states, but there are only limited attempts to draw parallels between the media coverage of different kinds of conflicts and little cross-fertilisation of findings from the disparate literatures.

- Much of the literature discusses the ways in which western media frame foreign conflicts and domestic election campaigns and policy debates, while there is considerably less focus on the media framing of domestic conflicts in non-western settings, such as those that arise during and after transitions from non-democratic rule.
- Several authors claim that reliance on existing models of media and conflict in established western democracies may be misleading in the study of non-western, transitional settings. They therefore call for developing new theories that are more suitable to discern the role that media play in democratisation.
- In contrast, this paper identifies arguments and hypotheses from the existing literature for further exploration in the study of media framing of political conflicts – such as those on citizenship, elections, transitional justice and distribution of power – in transitions from authoritarian rule and in new democracies, which are at the centre of the MeCoDEM project.
- Media coverage of political conflict can only be understood in context. Several dimensions of the political context matter in this respect, such as regime type, international (foreign) or domestic perspectives, the degree of elite consensus, the degree of policy uncertainty, whether or not a conflict takes place within an institutionalised setting, and the stage of democratisation. Also, the literature suggests that media framing influences political outcomes, for example the decisions made by policy makers, the strategic choices of collective actors or popular responses to conflicts.

## **1. Introduction**

The media are by far the most important source of information about politics and conflicts for most people, which grants them a considerable influence over citizens' perceptions, opinions and behaviour. By reporting on some conflicts but not on others, and by representing conflicts they report on in particular ways, the media strongly influence the dynamics and outcomes of conflicts, and thus also shape the prospects of success of conflict parties. That is why participants in conflicts – including state officials, armed rebels and other warring sides, political parties, social movements, workers on strike and pro-democracy activists in authoritarian states – aim to exploit the media to foster their goals by adapting their activities to the logic of media operation. This paper provides a critical overview of the literature on media and conflict by focusing on the ways in which contemporary media frame inter-state and civil wars, extreme violence, institutionalised conflicts and social movements in western democracies, and conflicts in non-democratic regimes and in democratisation. The paper aims to draw parallels between media reporting on these political conflicts and to suggest arguments and hypotheses for the empirical study of media framing of democratisation conflicts – such as those over citizenship, elections, transitional justice and distribution of power – in transitions from authoritarian rule and in new democracies, which are at the centre of the MeCoDEM project (for details see Kraetzschmar and Voltmer, 2015).

This paper focuses on the news media. While the influence of the media that specialise in entertainment should not be underestimated, it is principally journalistic or news media that is considered to have the most powerful impact on how people perceive politics and conflict. The paper consists of five sections. The next section discusses conceptual issues, including the concepts of political conflict and contentious politics, the concept of framing and its uses, and provides brief remarks about the state of literature on media and conflict. The following three sections discuss main perspectives in the literature on the media framing of (1) violent conflicts, such as inter-state and civil wars; (2) non-violent conflicts in western democracies, including institutional conflicts – such as election campaigns and policy debates – and popular protest and social movements; and (3) political conflicts in non-democratic regimes and in democratisation. The last section draws all threads together by providing a brief assessment of the field and by discussing how some

arguments from the literature may be further explored in the study of democratisation conflicts, in line with MeCoDEM's research programme.

## 2. Conceptual issues

Politics involves both routine events and conflict. Policy implementation, law enforcement, administration, payment and collection of taxes, military service, lobbying, clientelism and related political phenomena largely (but not exclusively) fall into routine politics with little conflict. By contrast, contentious politics involves 'episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects' when a government is involved in one way or another (even indirectly) and interests of those involved are affected. It consists of both conventional and unconventional politics, that is, institutionalised politics and that which unfolds largely outside (or spills over from) institutions (McAdam et al., 2001, p.5-8). The concept of political conflict largely corresponds to that of contentious politics. Some scholars avoid the former as detached from actors, causes and dynamics of political action. However, it remains widely accepted in the social science literature, while the concept of contentious politics is used principally but not exclusively by scholars working in the social movement research tradition.

The literature on media and conflict specialises almost exclusively in one or another form of political conflict. Firstly, there is a long-standing interest of media scholars in international conflicts, principally inter-state wars.<sup>1</sup> Other conflicts with large-scale violence that have received ample media coverage (and have also been studied from the media perspective) include civil wars and humanitarian crises, especially in those cases which involved international intervention.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, there is a broad literature on the media and non-violent conflicts, principally in Western democracies, both within and outside political institutions: election campaigns and

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bennett, et al. (2007), Entman (2004), Robinson (2002), Hallin (1986), Carruthers (2011), Seib (2005), Robinson, et al. (2010), Tumber and Palmer (2004), Zaller and Chui (1996) and Aday, et al. (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Carruthers (2004), Pottier (2002), Myers, et al. (1996) and Ruigrok, et al. (2005). There is a considerable overlap between the literatures on the media and inter-state wars with that on civil wars and humanitarian crises. The 'CNN effect', for example, is highly relevant to both. For the media and extreme violence see, for example, Strauss (2007), Kellow and Steeves (1998), Melvern (2004) and Pottier (2002).

other institutional conflicts,<sup>3</sup> and those in which social movements and other civil society groups are involved.<sup>4</sup> More recently, scholars have started studying the role the media play in conflicts involving popular challenges to authoritarian regimes and in democratisation.<sup>5</sup> There is also an emerging literature on the impact of the media on violent conflict and conflict regulation.<sup>6</sup>

Such a specialised treatment of the media coverage of political conflicts is hardly a surprise. It reflects a research focus of the scholarly literature on political conflict in general – not only that which explores a media angle. Popular protest and social movements, revolutions, industrial conflict, interest group politics, democratisation, nationalism, civil war and inter-state war had until recently been studied narrowly without much interest in related forms of conflict. There have been more recent attempts to integrate findings from these disparate literatures within a broader ‘contentious politics’ (i.e., political conflict) perspective and to bridge at least some of these divisions (see McAdam et al., 2001; 2009). A similar attempt at integration of disparate scholarly findings from the media perspective focused on various forms of violent conflicts (wars, revolutions, riots, rebellions and terrorism) and on popular protest (Wolfsfeld, 1997). (Another attempt to look at ‘mediatized conflict’ (Cottle, 2006), is highly descriptive and is thus not discussed here.) This paper’s scope is somewhat broader since it discusses a broader range of non-violent conflicts, such as democratisation and highly institutionalised conflicts in western democracies, and it is not limited to highly asymmetrical conflicts – i.e., those in which governments are considerably more powerful than other actors. It is also considerably less ambitious: it does not aim to provide a common framework for the study of the media and conflict but to offer a concise overview of the literatures on the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Berelson, et al. (1954), Patterson (1980), D’Alessio and Allen (2000), Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Howarth (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Koopmans (2004), Cottle (2008), Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), Gitlin (1980), McCarthy, et al. (1996), McCarthy, et al. (1998), Smith, et al. (2001) and Walgrave and Manssens (2000).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, (Voltmer 2013), Lynch (2012), Jebiril, et al. (2013), Kern (2011), (Voltmer 2006), Bunce and Wolchik (2011) and Gordy (1999). The literature on the normative aspects of the relationship between the media and democracy and on media regulation in new democracies is extensive but is not discussed here.

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfsfeld (2004), Gilboa (2009), Hamelink (2011) and Schoemaker and Stremlau (2014).

media reporting of various forms of political conflict and to draw limited parallels in an inductive way.

The main reason for the less ambitious approach is that the political context within which media framing occurs varies considerably along several dimensions, which renders a comprehensive, theoretically-framed analysis of disparate fields less productive. Firstly, the news media frame political conflicts differently in democratic and non-democratic settings, which is discussed in greater detail below. Secondly, normal rules do not apply in times of war and this boundary becomes blurred. Political actors from the 'other side' rarely get access to 'our' media, while domestic opposition to war is often marginalised for 'patriotic' reasons. The main issue in these circumstances is not a discussion over 'freedom of the press', but whether governments have the capacity to restrict information, which in turn depends on the situational circumstances (Wolfsfeld, 1997, p.28). Thirdly, the media behaviour seems to vary depending in part on whether foreign or domestic political issues are at stake and partly on whether they cover institutional conflicts or those largely outside political institutions. Therefore, this paper takes a different approach and builds upon existing research on media reporting on various forms of conflict by suggesting relevant arguments and hypotheses for further exploration in the context of democratisation conflicts, such as conflicts over citizenship, transitional justice, distribution of power, and elections in democratising states, which fall within MeCoDEM's research programme.

Some scholars of media and democratisation take a different view and aim to develop 'theories and effects that differentiate the role of mass media during democratisation from mass media in established democracies' (Jebril et al, 2013, p.33). There is not enough evidence to support normative conceptions of the link between media and democracy, especially when it comes to democratising countries, and reliance on western models may be misleading when it comes to non-western settings. As a result, scholars should aim at inductive study and theory-building as opposed to theory-testing (Jebril et al, 2013, p. 33-34). And yet, such attempts may be overly ambitious because political contexts after authoritarian breakdown vary considerably. The category of 'non-western' setting is defined negatively and conceals a huge variation in historical and cultural legacies and in regime types/situations. True, those arguments derived from the study of media and democracy in western countries that are underpinned by strong normative

assumptions are hardly useful in democratisation studies. Still, there is no reason why theories about specific aspects of media and democracy (such as how media frame non-violent conflicts), carefully developed and rigorously tested in empirical (case study- and variable-oriented) research in western democracies, should not serve as a solid starting point for democratisation studies. A clearly focused and disciplined comparative research thrives on such variation in the political contexts, dynamics and outcomes.

The other concept highly relevant for this paper is that of framing. It provides an alternative to the previously highly popular 'objectivity and bias' paradigm by aiming to uncover hidden assumptions behind media coverage. It takes into account the capacity of a media presentation to define a situation and the issues, and to set the terms of a debate, and reflects the richness of media discourse. Still, the term is sometimes used loosely, mostly as a metaphor (see Tankard, 2001, p.96-97). Some authors define frames broadly as cognitive structures that guide the perception and representation of events (Goffman, 1974). Other authors focus more on the active selection of frames and their outcomes. According to an influential view, framing involves selecting certain features of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a text 'in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993, p.52). Framing influences both which events appear in the news and how they are reported. The more general level of framing overlaps with the concept of agenda setting, which puts emphasis on the media influence on the public in terms of what to think about. By selecting and reporting news, the media focus public attention on some issues, people and problems, and not others (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The more refined level of framing refers to how the media discuss those issues, problems and people (Ruigrok et al., 2005, p.158-9). By highlighting some parts of information about a problem, frames elevate them in salience, often through placement or repetition, or association with culturally familiar symbols. Simultaneously, frames omit other aspects of the problem (Entman, 1993, p.53-54).

Framing occurs at several levels, including culture, the minds of elites and professional political communicators, the texts of communications, and the minds of individual citizens. This paper principally focuses on news media framing, but the levels are closely connected. Individuals react to framing in communication texts largely on the basis of existing common schemas in their minds, which originate from

a society's culture. Elites, communicators and others who engage in framing are constrained in choosing from the cultural stock which records past framing. Framing is strategic when communicators, such as politicians, commentators and editorial writers, aim to exercise political influence by proposing interpretations that advance their interests or goals. Likewise, social movements 'frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists' (Snow and Benford, 1988, p.198). Others, including reporters and the mainstream news media editors, for the most part engage in framing without trying to advance any specific political or policy agenda (Entman, 1993; Entman et al., 2009, p.176).

### **3. The media framing of inter-state and civil wars**

Scholarly literature on the media coverage of conflicts focuses principally on wars between states, and to a lesser extent on civil wars and extreme violence. While this perspective is not central to the MeCoDEM project research agenda, it includes the largest section of the literature on media and conflict and provides several hypotheses that hold a potential of shedding light on various aspects of the media representations of democratisation conflicts. It is hardly surprising that wars rank highly when it comes to the news media. Wars between and within states are episodic, sensational and emotionally charged events that involve conflict and provide dramatic images and are thus aligned to the logic of news media operation. They are also highly culturally resonant and trigger emotions of patriotism and nationalism, especially when 'our' side is involved in conflict. As a result, war coverage tends to boost audience numbers and thus, through increased interest of advertisers, also increase profits for news organisations.

Constraints on the media reporting of wars in which their country's armed forces are involved normally go beyond those in the coverage of domestic politics. In democracies, governments have to justify involvement in wars and get popular support (or at least avoid the rise of strong opposition to such involvement), and thus put a lot of effort into shaping public opinion through the news media. They may choose from a broad repertoire of instruments, such as censorship, press 'pools' and the 'embedding' of reporters within military units and subordinating them to various

restrictions, carefully prepared military briefings, dissemination of information of questionable credibility and secretive operations targeting journalists and their news organisations with the aim to win the propaganda war. Attempts to get and report information from the 'other' side often lead to accusations of treason (Kellner, 2004; Tumber and Palmer, 2004, p.2-3,5; Cottle, 2006, p.75-76).

There are also self-imposed constraints that prevent journalists from reporting what they know about conflict. The mainstream news media coverage of international conflict largely reflects the dynamics of power relationships in government and among political elites in general. If there is consensus on important policy issues in the official circles, it is largely reflected in media coverage even if evidence from credible unofficial sources about policy failure or important but unreported events is available. If however some government factions and institutional interests, or political parties, openly oppose government policy in a particular area, media coverage becomes less constrained and is likely to reflect various perspectives on the issue, though largely in proportion with the perceived power of political players and their ability to spin the media. This is what largely shapes the content of the news, its prominence and duration as well as who is granted a voice. What matters is less whether particular viewpoints in the news are backed up with credible information, and more who pushes them forward and whether they are opposed by influential political actors (Bennett, 1990, p.106; Zaller and Chui, 1996; Bennett et al., 2007, p.48-50). 'Recording' rather than critically examining government policy is not the sign of partisanship; it arises from the journalists' reliance on professional norms of objectivity and is conditioned by the lack of resources of outsiders to sustain stories (Entman, 1989, 37-38; Bennett et al., 2007, p.28-30). And yet, such 'indexing' of power relationships raises important issues of political accountability and manipulation, and brings into question the normative view of independence and power of the media in western democracies (Bennett et al., 2007, p.48-50).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the arrival of new communication technology, and opportunities it provided for news gathering and live reporting on the battlefield, appeared to empower journalists to avoid at least some constraints on reporting and to strongly increase the impact of the news media on foreign policy formulation and implementation. Whilst this claim to strong media power became known as the 'CNN Effect', it actually involved the influence of both print media – with their broader span and depth of coverage and influence on elites – and broadcasting,

with its real-time 24/7 coverage and visual impact on both audiences and elites. Examples frequently cited are international interventions over the Kurdish crisis in northern Iraq in 1991, Somalia in 1992 and Kosovo in 1999 (Shaw, 1996, p.79; Wheeler, 2000, p.300). And yet, the media focused on Somalia only after sustained encouragement by U.S. government officials and aid workers, at the time when up to half a million people had already succumbed to hunger and after the government had already decided to intervene militarily (Livingston and Eachus, 1995, p.417-425). Moreover, new technologies fail to reduce compliance of the news media with the official line. A study of the U.S. mainstream media coverage, which focused on extreme abuses of war prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison under the control of the U.S. military, demonstrated that – despite ample available evidence from credible (but unofficial) sources of deliberate torture – the media largely followed the framing of the story by the official sources as ‘mistreatment’ and ‘abuse’ by low-level military personnel (Bennett et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2007, p.49-60; but see Rowling et al., 2011).

Only exceptional circumstances – such as extraordinary events, major policy failures or scandals – and rapidly changing power relationships may release these self-imposed constraints on the media so that they can introduce underreported interpretations of events. One version of this argument is that there is a hierarchy of official and semi-official political players who push news frames down to news organisations and the public. Occasionally counter-frames that originate from secondary social or political sources may go up: when there is conflict in the official circles or when mid-level sources help push counter-frames up, or when the events that are framed are culturally ambiguous (Entman, 2003, p. 420-423). Another version of the argument suggests that policy uncertainty also matters. When there is no policy on a particular issue, or there is no policy consensus within government and among political elites in general, the media tend to cover the issue from various angles and reflect the debate. If however political elites share views on policy with regard to an issue, the news media tend to comply with the official line. Even in the unlikely case of critical media coverage, the official policy is unlikely to be changed and the government will employ instruments under its control, and its credibility as the media’s primary source, to shape media coverage (Robinson, 2002, p.30-32). In short, the outcome of the process is the ‘semi-independent press’: the reliance on the

official sources is interrupted occasionally by 'moments of relative independence' (Bennett et al., 2007, p.106).

What follows from the constraints on media reporting is 'skewed' media representations of war. One of the features of such 'war journalism' is the focus on military strategy, professionalism and technology, military victories, and the enemy's losses. The causes of conflict and rationale for war are given much less attention and space in media coverage. For example, the U.S. military actions in the early stages of the Vietnam War were regularly represented on television as setting the pace of war (58%) and the assessments of their overall 'war effort' as favourable (79%), which hardly reflected facts on the ground (Hallin, 1986, p.146). More recently, American and British media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War provided a considerably more space for 'battle stories' and stories about war strategy and tactics than for any other theme (Aday et al., 2005, p.11; Goddard et al., 2008, p.16-17).

The news media tend not to report on human and other consequences of war, such as (civilian and military) casualties and material destruction that inevitably follow. Coverage of the 1991 Iraq War in American media provided a 'clean' interpretation of war with only infrequent displays of casualties (Hallin, 1994, p.55). Advances in technology in recent decades, such as satellite videophones, have provided reporters with considerably better access to the battlefield and thus also the opportunity to provide their audiences a more comprehensive picture of the war, including that of its human and other consequences. And still, wars have more recently been framed by the media in even more simplistic and 'sanitized' terms than usual, ignoring a great loss of life and extensive material damage. A study of the 2003 Iraq war found that the U.S. electronic media presented 'action-packed' but 'largely bloodless' view of the war to their audiences. Casualties were rarely shown: civilians mostly recovering in hospitals, while rare showings of the dead always involved pictures from afar, covered or through a surrogate, such as coffin (Aday, 2005, p.149-150).

The media's framing of war normally comes from the perspective of its country of origin. The media and the general public tend to adopt a patriotic/nationalist stance, supporting the country's armed forces and their operations and reducing space for legitimate criticism of the official policy. Media coverage often goes back to history, referring to earlier wars and their role in shaping national identity. The U.S. media, for example, covered the Vietnam War largely as a 'national endeavour',

especially in its early stages, and news anchors frequently referred to it as 'our' war. The media representations sometimes evoked the memory of the Second World War. The same themes applied in the coverage of the 1991 Iraq War, probably to an even greater extent than in the Vietnam War's early years (Hallin, 1986, p.142; Hallin, 1994, p.53).

A flip side of such framing of war is that internal dissent is highly underreported or misrepresented. In the first two weeks of the 1991 Iraq War, only 1.5 per cent of news sources that three major U.S. commercial television networks used were anti-war protesters. Images of the protests in the mainstream media were often put side by side with images of U.S. flag burning in anti-American demonstrations in Arab states, aiming to demonstrate the irrational character of anti-war protesters in the U.S. (Kellner, 2004, p.143, 145). The space for anti-war protest remained roughly similar in the U.S. media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, but rose somewhat in the British media and in Al Jazeera (Aday et al., 2005, p.13; Goddard et al., 2008, p.16). The British case suggests that even if the country's entry into war is highly contested in the political arena and news media coverage, and public opinion is initially largely against military involvement along the lines suggested by government, once the war has begun critical voices tend to moderate their positions and media reporting largely reverts to supporting the official policy. The news media narrowed down access for the anti-war activists and even that which existed became increasingly unsympathetic (Murray et al., 2008, p.22-23).

Civil wars are hardly less important than inter-state wars. If anything, their human and other consequences are even more severe. Between 1945 and 1999, there were five times more civil wars (counting civil wars of both ideological and ethnic variety) than those between states and this proportion also applies to the loss of life. Civil wars were considerably longer than inter-state wars, unfolded in 73 states and produced a far greater number of refugees (Fearon and Laitin, 2003, p.75). The media representations of civil wars and humanitarian crises share important features with those of wars between states. The media can report on their country's internal conflicts or, alternatively, on international – foreign or 'other peoples' – conflicts.

Various frames feature in western media coverage of violent conflicts within developing countries. The Cold War frame was very popular before the 1990s, even if reported conflicts had little to do with the rivalry of superpowers. The end of communism and the rise of new civil wars boosted the popularity of the 'ancient

ethnic hatreds' frame. Western correspondents and commentators who covered conflicts surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia and its aftermath – i.e., Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia – often suggested that violence originated from the pre-modern nature of the Balkans and deep and irreconcilable divisions between groups and hatreds, which their members supposedly held for those across the ethnic divide. Likewise, media representations of political conflicts in African states have long involved negative stereotypes and relied on the themes of 'ancient hatreds' and 'tribalism' (a 'second-class term for "ethnic group"'). The civil war and genocide in Rwanda were reported as the slaughter of Tutsi by Hutu, i.e., just another instance of age-old cyclical killing sprees in the region (Carruthers, 2004, p.163-164). Scholars are highly critical of such simplistic views and point to a distinctly modern, as opposed to 'ancient ethnic' or 'tribal', character of these conflicts, with roots in imperial legacy and contemporary political struggles and manipulations of ethnic feelings by political entrepreneurs (see Gagnon, 2004; Pottier, 2002). The media coverage of 'other people's' wars is subject to fewer internal constraints and depends on international factors to a much larger extent than the coverage of conflicts by domestic media. As a result, it is less relevant to MeCoDEM project's research agenda than the coverage of domestic violent conflicts.

The Rwandan conflict in 1994 is probably the most cited example of how domestic media framing contributed to extreme violence. Some authors argue that pro-government radio broadcasts (RTLM) supplied listeners with ideas that pushed them to simultaneously fear, hate and dehumanise members of the minority group and thus conditioned, facilitated and legitimised violence and served as an instrument of mobilisation for genocide. Radio was also a voice of authority that issued orders to kill, which were obeyed by members of the majority group (Kellow and Steeves, 1998; Melvern, 2004). And yet, analysis of the broadcasts suggests that direct media effects were highly unlikely: hateful and inciting messages were considerably less frequent during the first few months of the genocide, when the most people were killed. Tone of broadcasts was belligerent and its ideology nationalist, anti-RPF and hostile to Tutsi as well as pro-government. Broadcasts that preceded the genocide portrayed the history of Rwanda through nationalist and anti-RPF lenses, often with negative accounts of Tutsi actions, but there were few calls to attack Tutsis during 'high genocide period' and even several warnings not to attack civilians. During the 'low genocide period', there were inflammatory broadcasts and

calls to arms. RTLM's broadcast range largely did not overlap with sites of genocidal violence and neither did the timing of broadcasts with timing of violence in different regions; most perpetrators surveyed suggested that face-to-face mobilisation and fear were key motives to take part in violence, rather than incitement by radio (Strauss, 2007, p.614-5,623-5,630).

Still, there is evidence of 'marginal and conditional effects', which are significant only in a broader context of violence. 'Radio instigated a limited number of acts of violence, catalyzed some key actors, coordinated elites, and bolstered local messages of violence'. It 'emboldened hard-liners and reinforced face to face mobilization, which helped those who advocated violence assert dominance and carry out the genocide' (Strauss, 2007, p.630-631). More broadly, the broadcasts of Radio Rwanda and RTLM – the main pro-government media – 'othered' the minority group by simultaneously drawing upon various constructions of Hutu and Tutsi identities from various parts of the country's history, such as ethnic, occupational/status, racial and political identities. Broadcasts were 'polyphonic' but a key theme was the unequal power relationship. Tutsis – the minority group – were presented as 'dominating, or wanting to dominate' Hutus, the majority group, regardless of whether domination was expressed through an occupational/status position (pastoralists vs. cultivators), racial difference ('Hamites' vs. others) and/or political affiliation (the Rwandan Patriotic Front vs. National Revolutionary Movement for Development) (Baisley, 2014). To sum up, the media reporting on wars between and within states shares important features. It touches upon some of the most important moral and political issues, such as those of life and death of large numbers of people and of regional and/or global security. And yet, it may not always directly affect the main constitutional, political and policy issues that are of principal concern to the main political actors and the public back home. By contrast, the media framing of internal non-violent political conflicts strongly influences debates on the main political issues, which is the focus of the next section.

#### **4. The media coverage of institutional conflicts and popular protest in 'old' democracies**

This and the next section's discussion is highly sensitive to differences in the ways the news media report on political conflicts in democracies and non-democratic regimes. Despite a great variation in democracies with respect to who gets access to

the political process and the news media and who does not, and to varying levels of media influence that political actors normally enjoy, it is not difficult to distinguish between the role the media play in democratic and non-democratic regimes; whether democratic institutions, including press freedom, are taken seriously or not can be empirically assessed. This is not to say that there are no violations of press freedom in democracies, but only that these are not systematic (Dahl, 1989; Schmitter and Karl, 1996). This section explores the media coverage of electoral and other forms of institutional conflicts and of popular protest and social movements in 'old' democracies of Western Europe and North America, while the next section examines the media reporting on conflicts in non-democratic regimes and in democratisation.

The media framing of non-violent conflicts in old ('consolidated') democracies varies considerably with regard to whether it concentrates on political conflicts that largely unfold within or outside political institutions. The former include, for example, election campaigns, legislative and policy debates, while the latter involve popular protest and social movements. There is a broad literature on how the news media report on institutional conflicts in democracies and I highlight a few main points here and then move on to a more detailed discussion of the media framing of conflicts that spill over from democratic institutions to the streets, and of conflicts in non-democratic settings. According to the 'indexing' thesis that I touched upon in the previous section, the media coverage of politics in democracies reflects power relations within the political elite. The news tends to reflect elite consensus even if there is conflicting but trustworthy evidence from unofficial sources. Only when there is controversy over policy within government or between the mainstream political parties, the media provide contrasting perspectives on the issue. Exceptional events, investigative reporting and leaks, and outsider counter-spin may also open up space for competing narratives and thus create 'moments of relative independence' of the media (Bennett, 1990; p.106-7; Bennett et al., 2007, p.48-50,62-68,106).

This argument implies that in those areas in which a robust political competition is highly institutionalised – because these stand at the very centre of the democratic process – and is reflected in specific norms that govern press behaviour, such as in election campaigns, the media routinely present competing frames. Various devices support such framing, including frequent independent introduction of public opinion polls, with positive connotation. By contrast, those areas in which there are no such rules for press behaviour and in which there is often elite consensus,

such as national security and foreign policy, the media largely relay the official perspective (Bennett, 1990, p.106-107; Bennett et al., 2007, p. 48-50). It appears that legislative and policy debates on domestic issues are somewhere in between. Policy uncertainty is another factor that may increase media influence. The lack of policy or policy consensus within the government and political elite produces competing media framing with regard to foreign policy (Robinson, 2002). The assumption remains, however, that these are exceptional moments. Recent research on policy uncertainty in other policy areas suggests a more complex answer. The underlying conditions in modern policy systems provide ample space for alternative interpretations of problems or solutions and thus amplify rifts in government. These divisions in turn may produce policy uncertainty, but the media may not take up these opportunities to engage in policy debates, and their potential to shape policy varies across policy domains (Howarth, 2010).

The coverage of election campaigns follows elaborate rules that aim to provide a level playing field for the competition of political candidates and/or political parties for the citizens' vote. Many studies of the media coverage of election campaigns over several decades, especially in the U.S., have revealed that there is little partisan bias in news reporting. Partisanship exists but is largely reserved for editorial writers and commentators (Berelson et al., 1954; D'Alessio and Allen, 2000). The coverage of election campaigns puts less emphasis on substantive issues and more on strategies, poll results and the chances that some candidates would win the contest. The 'game frame' interprets elections from the perspective of sports contests or horse races: being contests with uncertain results, elections have high news value (Patterson, 1980). The journalists' focus on strategies however goes well beyond election campaigns and often takes the form of 'strategy frame', which puts emphasis on the politicians' opportunistic motives as opposed to a substantive policy agenda. Such strategic (as opposed to issue-based) coverage increases political cynicism, which undermines the quality of democracy (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997).

Institutional conflicts in 'old' democracies are similar to wars and civil wars in the sense that the focus of media attention is principally on elites. But an important aspect of media framing of political struggles in democracies involves conflicts in which non-elites and political outsiders feature as key conflict parties, principally in the form of popular protests and social movements. The main feature of popular protests is a disruptive action that aims to mobilise public opinion and put pressure

on its opponents. It is therefore a political resource of ordinary people, who lack regular access to the political process, information, organisational and financial resources, and access to the media. Protesters' success – in terms of achieving their particular goals – does not depend on the direct use of power, but on indirect persuasion mediated by the news media and by other political actors. Social movements, on the other hand, are those instances of popular protest that are sustained over time. By acting upon their common interests, ordinary people mobilize consensus partly by drawing on deeply rooted feelings of solidarity or identity (della Porta and Diani, 1999, p.14-16,167-170; Tarrow, 2011, p.9-12).

While using unconventional action against their opponents, social movements do it with an eye on the mass audience that they can reach through the media coverage of their action. They use the media to mobilise support among the general public since its other channels of communication are not sufficient. The media coverage of a movement also grants it credibility as an important player, which is necessary to have any impact, and helps expand the range of players in conflict, which increases the movement's influence. In turn, social movements offer drama, conflict, action and photo opportunities (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p.116-117). Movements also rely on the media for information about the position of authorities, other opponents and the general public on the issues that they consider important and also learn about their actions from this source. Therefore, movements depend on the media for strategic information on which they develop their action strategies, but also use them as a 'sounding board' for the assessment of strategies; their opponents and allies largely follow the same route (Koopmans, 2004, p.370).

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the mainstream media reported popular protest largely by drawing on the 'law and order' frame, which identified protesters not simply as unconventional but as outright deviant. This frame put emphasis on the violence and drama of protest, while shifting attention away from their goals and undermining their legitimacy as political actors. A prominent example is the media coverage of the New Left in the U.S. in the 1960s. Large anti-war protests brought media attention to the student movement. The media trivialised its goals and other important features, presented the movement parallel with counter-protests to highlight its 'extremism', emphasised internal disputes, presented protesters as deviant or unrepresentative of broader currents in society, deliberately underestimated their numbers and derided their effectiveness. When parts of the anti-war movement turned more militant, media

coverage introduced new angles in reporting. It relied on the official sources and representations, focused on communists within the movements as well as symbols that made them appear 'unpatriotic' and violent; it also delegitimised their actions through the use of quotation marks (e.g., 'peace march') and by increasing focus on the right-wing opposition to the movement (Gitlin, 1980, p.27-28).

Such media coverage triggered divisions and power shifts within the movement. Growing media attention helped recruit activists but increasingly it attracted those who were enthralled by the content of the coverage, and not by more complex initial goals of the movement, which in turn strengthened more radical parts of the movement in relation to others. All movements face this sort of framing and have to endure pressures that transform leaders into celebrities, put emphasis on extravagant behaviour and trigger 'transitional crises of generations', as well as encourage a showdown between moderate and radical factions. Those movements with reformist (as opposed to revolutionary) goals can achieve media credibility more easily since they are more aligned to the prevailing news frames in democracies; those with revolutionary goals, by contrast, can retain media coverage only as 'deviants', which in turn earns them even more disparaging framing (Gitlin, 1980, p.30-31,286-287).

The media coverage of popular protest and social movements and their overall status in democracies has changed considerably since, which is reflected in the term 'social movement society' that scholars coined in the 1990s (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). State officials remain privileged in terms of media framing, but the media also keep a repertoire of anti-authority frames. The 'power corrupts' frame, which is about the corruption, cruelty or incompetence of the powerful, originates from 'investigative reporting' and a broader journalistic belief that they should perform the role of 'watchdog'. Another is the 'innocent victims' frame, which prevails in war journalism but becomes relevant in the coverage of popular protest when protesters suffer at the hands of the police (Wolfsfeld, 1997, p.37-39). The media also serve as an important channel through which popular protest is diffused in democracies. The lack of organisational resources required to recruit activists and mobilise public support is compensated by the media's transmission of protesters' messages to mass audiences, which brings attention to their goals and facilitates emulation (Walgrave and Manssens, 2000). Participants in protest events also learn through media

coverage – and especially through television coverage’s visual demonstration – how to protest and how to respond to their opponents’ actions.

Some social movement scholars examine the extent to which the media faithfully represent popular protests by studying historical cases of protest through media archives (‘media traces’) and by comparing them with data collected from other sources, such as police and other official records and participant observation. Early studies suggested that newspapers were highly selective in terms of reporting on protests: size and location of the event were principal criteria for selection and the reporting of national and local media outlets differed considerably (Danzger, 1975; Snyder and Kelly, 1977). More recent studies provide a more complex picture. One quantitative study collected evidence from the official records (permits) of all demonstrations in Washington D.C. in 1982 and 1991, and compared them to representations in the mainstream print and electronic media in the United States. It found ample evidence of what authors called the ‘selection bias’. Only a small number of demonstrations were reported and only very large protests were covered. The positioning of the issue at the centre of demonstrations within a media attention cycle also mattered: when media coverage focused on a particular issue, protests that were aligned to the theme were more likely to get coverage, especially in electronic media. This trend suggested that the news media played an important role in agenda setting (McCarthy et al., 1996, p.494-495).

These scholars also explored the ‘description bias’, that is, a gap between features of those protest events that were reported and their representations in the news media, focusing on information that was omitted, misrepresented and framed with elements of information that were reported. They found that the media framing of demonstrations was largely accurate with respect to key forms of action, such as speeches, marching, singing and placarding. Those forms of action that prevailed in protest events were also those that dominated in reporting. Therefore, the news media did not typically stress incidents in relation to other features of protest events. Electronic media coverage was more ‘thematic’ – focused on the historical and/or ideological context behind events – than ‘episodic’, i.e., focused on the events’ particular features; there was also a temporal shift from ‘episodic’ to more ‘thematic’ coverage (McCarthy et al., 1998, p.117-26; McPhail, 1998, p.190; Smith et al., 2001).

Social movement scholars argue for the most part that popular protests and social movements have become an important part of the contemporary democratic

process. While images of the 'madding crowd' prevailed in both elite and mass perceptions of popular protest in the first half of the twentieth century (McPhail, 1991), and only slightly loosened up in the 1960s and the 1970s, the 'social movement repertoire' has now spread widely in 'old' democracies. It is broadly accepted as part of democratic politics by both elites and citizens at large and is regulated in detail, which has reduced its more disorderly features. In other words, popular protest has become institutionalised (see Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). In the context of newly established democratic regimes, the institutionalisation of popular protest is considered to be an important indicator that democracy has become consolidated (Ekiert and Kubik, 1999). As a result, popular protests and social movements get coverage not too dissimilar from that of political parties, interest groups and other 'legitimate' actors. The media focus not only on the 'spectacle', but also on movements' goals and policy proposals, though it remains harder for protesters to sustain media interest. One could argue therefore that empirical evidence about the shift in media representations of protest over time simply reflects the new status of popular protest in democratic politics.

The alternative explanation is that protest coverage (and thus potentially coverage of other parts of the political process) has become more media-centric: it has more to do with a media attention cycle, that is, media agenda-setting, and less with the promotion of public awareness and understanding of the issues that protesters advocate. Bearing in mind earlier findings about the importance of a media attention cycle in the selection of protests, it appears that the news media tend to pick and choose events for reporting mostly in line with cycles of attention to substantive topics. Apparently, the media tend to cover those protests than fit into existing coverage of certain themes. One implication is that one of the few legitimate channels through which citizens can signal their preferences to the authorities – in addition to elections and public opinion polls – is now undermined (McCarthy et al., 1996, p.497; 1998, p. 127).

## **5. The media framing of conflict in non-democratic regimes and in democratisation**

Non-democratic regimes rely on the news media as one of many instruments to preserve their power. They are rarely monolithic, however, and the media face

different constraints in different regime types. The most influential typology of modern non-democratic regimes distinguishes between totalitarian, post-totalitarian, authoritarian and sultanist regimes, according to the criteria of pluralism, ideology, leadership and mobilization (Linz and Stepan, 1996; p.38-54; Linz, 2000). Totalitarian regimes, such as those in Germany under Hitler or the Soviet Union under Stalin, featured a highly repressive and ideological one-party rule – with charismatic and highly unpredictable leadership – which aimed to destroy social, economic and political pluralism and involved extensive top-down mobilization. The regimes considered the media as tools of regime propaganda and of mobilization of the population for regime purposes, while the communists also put emphasis on their role in educating the public to facilitate a major social transformation. Post-totalitarian regimes originated from de-Stalinization and involved a repressive, but highly predictable single-party rule, with formalistic ideology, extensive institutional but limited social and economic pluralism, and little mass mobilization. While totalitarian grip on the media relaxed considerably (as did its educational purpose), the media remained state owned and were expected to boost public support for the communist rule and to de-legitimise other worldviews.

Authoritarian regimes (such as non-communist regimes of Southern Europe, South America and East Asia before the ‘third wave’, and China’s regime today) involve extensive economic, social and institutional, but limited, political pluralism, and also feature highly predictable rule, with little focus on ideology and mobilization, but with distinctive mentalities (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p.38-51; Linz, 2000). Some of these regimes consider the media as an important industry and provide ample investment for technological development to increase competitiveness internationally (Votmer, 2013, p.77). Finally, sultanist regimes, on the model of Mobutu in Zaire or Marcos’s Philippines, are extreme personalist (neo-patrimonial) rulerships in which there is arbitrary rule with little space for ideology, mobilization and the opposition, but with tendencies towards dynastic and familial power. Extensive control over the media often goes together with attempts to build the leader’s personality cult, but is sometimes undermined by weak state and weak technological penetration of society (Chehabi and Linz, 1998). The ‘third wave’ of democratisation in the last quarter of the twentieth century spread across all world regions, but domestic and international pressures for democracy often resulted in hybrid regimes, which mix democratic procedures with authoritarian governance. Independent media exist in such regimes,

but face various obstacles in their operation. The government enjoys formal or informal control over the most powerful (especially electronic) media and often prevents opposition forces from gaining access to these media (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Non-democratic regimes rarely use the media solely as propaganda machines. Many have the capacity to create and sustain powerful frames that mobilise loyalty among the population (Vltmer, 2013, p.66). The narrative of economic development and modernisation is often strategically deployed, and relayed through the media, to boost the legitimacy of non-democratic rulers. East Asian states of the 1970s and the 1980s are often cited in this respect, but the communists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe also drew much of their authority from this frame early on, as did military governments in Latin America in the 1960s and the 1970s. In decades after de-colonisation in Asia and Africa, the frame of the anti-colonial struggle remained a powerful vehicle for boosting the legitimacy of non-democratic rulers, who often equalled opposition to their rule with disloyalty to the state. More exclusive nationalist frames, based on national/ethnic victimisation and stereotypes towards others, have frequently been employed at least partly with the aim of preserving the power for non-democratic rule, not least in Serbia and Croatia in the early stages of Yugoslavia's breakup (Woodward, 1995; Vladisavljević, 2008).

A default media strategy of most non-democratic regimes in dealing with political opposition and popular protest in general is to promote the 'law and order' frame. Oppositional activities are officially considered to be attempts to undermine political stability and to create 'chaos' and 'uncertainty', not least in the interests of 'foreign powers'. Simultaneously, the flow of information is limited through censorship and/or informal pressures on the media to prevent the diffusion of popular mobilisation. Some regimes frame and deal with all protests in the same way – both anti-regime protests and those that feature particularist demands of industrial workers, ethnic minorities and other groups; other regimes take pains to co-opt some groups for ideological and other reasons, which is reflected in their media framing. For example, protests by industrial workers' were always dealt with carefully in communist states due to their strategic ideological position in communist ideology, which was fully reflected in the official media coverage (Vladisavljević, 2008). In many authoritarian and hybrid regimes the media take part in the broader

authoritarian manipulation package that aims less at mobilising loyalty among the public and more at undermining alternatives to non-democratic rule. This does not simply refer to political opposition, but also to information alternatives, music alternatives and may even include the 'destruction of sociability' (Gordy, 1999).

While playing an important part in the survival of non-democratic regimes in some periods, the media may also undermine them in other periods. There is ample evidence that the fall of authoritarian regimes, including military regimes, begins with conflict between 'hard-line' and 'soft-line' politicians within the ruling elite, which often triggers the 'resurrection of civil society' (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Likewise, unexpected domestic and external events in hybrid regimes may suddenly undermine regime incumbents and strengthen opposition forces. In these contexts, the media are suddenly released from many constraints in the reporting of elite and mass conflicts and, if they take this opportunity, may strongly influence events and facilitate democratisation. This logic mirrors the 'indexing' of power relations by the media in western democracies. This is less likely to occur in post-totalitarian and sultanist regimes because they are more resilient to elite conflict. In the former case, the single party provides its officials more incentives to stick together in the face of uncertainty so that they largely tend to break down under non-violent pressure 'from below' (see Geddes, 1999). In the latter case, an autocrat has already removed potential credible successors from the political process so that regime collapse is likely to occur through a military coup or revolutionary violence (Snyder, 1998; Goodwin, 2001). In both cases, a severe regime crisis or collapse precedes the media's more independent role.

Two aspects of the media are especially relevant in democratisation: technology and framing. Communication technologies, including traditional and new media, aid democratisation principally by facilitating diffusion – the transmission of ideas, institutions, policies, models and forms of action from one country to another (Whitehead, 2001; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). And diffusion, in turn, is one of the main reasons why democracy appears to spread in waves (Huntington, 1991). The 'third wave' of democratisation involved several smaller, regional waves in which democracy was established (or non-democratic regimes were liberalised) in several countries within a short period, all in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The 'coloured revolutions' in post-communist authoritarian states followed in the next few years and, more recently, the 'Arab Spring' across much of North Africa and the

Middle East. The media facilitate diffusion by spreading alternative information. Firstly, a gradual spread of knowledge about alternative, more successful political and economic models shapes the attitudes, expectations and interpretations of the public and may undermine the legitimacy of non-democratic regimes, which, for example, occurred despite censorship in Eastern Europe under communism (Whitehead, 2001). Secondly, the media spread information about anti-regime protests. Even heavily censored information in the media under regime control – and information broadcast by international (foreign) media – about other protests in the country or across the border signals to actual and potential regime opponents that popular protest is possible and shows (especially on television), how it could be organised. The emulation of previously successful ‘democratic revolutions’ may trigger widespread anti-regime protests (and perhaps even trigger regime breakdown) even in those countries in which structural conditions – such as underdevelopment, severe internal ethnic and other divisions, and the lack of democratic traditions – hardly favour the establishment of democracy (Beissinger, 2007).

A cultural and political similarity, along with geographic proximity, facilitate diffusion of democracy by aiding emulation. Serbia’s ‘democratic revolution’, which removed Milošević from power in 2000, strongly influenced opposition protests in other post-communist states in the following years because they shared the legacy of both communist and post-communist non-democratic rule (Beissinger, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). Popular protest against Arab autocratic rulers spread even faster from one country to another – within months and weeks – since the audience in all Arab countries could follow events directly on satellite television channels that broadcast in Arabic. It helped that the ‘public sphere’ had emerged in the Arab world in previous years, principally under the influence of satellite channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya (Lynch, 2012; see also Jebri et al., 2013). The spread of anti-regime protests, however, was also constrained by the factors that initially promoted diffusion. There was little emulation of anti-regime protests in neighbouring non-Arab countries with non-democratic regimes. Initial optimism about the prospects of democratisation in Arab countries ultimately faced the reality of political, economic and other conditions adverse to democratisation, just like after the ‘coloured revolutions’ in the former Soviet Union.

Media framing also matters. The foreign media coverage of authoritarian breakdown amidst massive popular mobilisation often employs the ‘people power’ frame, which provides encouragement to those involved in the struggle and helps them secure international support. On the eve of communism’s collapse in Eastern Europe, the frame drew on the efforts of political dissidents and informal opposition to frame anti-regime resistance strategically through the discourse of ‘civil society’, even if its organisational underpinnings were largely absent. It stressed the injustice of systematic violations of human rights by the repressive state, spoke about ‘citizens’ (as opposed to classes or nations) and offered the solution of popular protest as the way of promoting political reforms (see Glenn, 2001, p.50-51). The ‘people power’ frame centres on non-violence as a way to establish democracy and is reflected in (both international and domestic) media’s colourful labelling of popular mobilisation against non-democratic rule to clearly distinguish it from old-style revolutionary violence: Portugal’s ‘Revolution of the Carnations’ in 1974, Czechoslovakia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’ (or ‘Refolution’) in 1989, the ‘Coloured Revolutions’ in post-communist states – Serbia’s ‘Bulldozer Revolution’, Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’, Ukraine’s ‘Orange Revolution’ and Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Tulip Revolution’ in 2005 – Lebanon’s ‘Cedar Revolution’ in 2005, and the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011-2012.

By featuring confrontation, emotion and visuality, the ‘drama of democratic transitions’ is well aligned with high news values, which secures extensive coverage in foreign media (Voltmer, 2013; p.93). The drama of regime change in media representations reflects a deep-seated conflict between contrasting visions of a country’s political development and great uncertainty, but also arises from the ‘strategic dramaturgy’ of social movements that push for political change (McAdam, 2000; Garton Ash, 2009, p.383-384). Recognisable visual frames of democratisation also emerge and shape how anti-regime protests evolve. Most people remember democratisation in specific countries – or democratisation in general – by referring to ‘iconic’ images, such as those of the people dancing on the Berlin Wall and of several hundred thousand protesters braving freezing weather for a month in Ukraine’s Orange Revolution (Voltmer, 2013, p.63).

There is no consensus among scholars about the media framing of different stages of democratisation. Some studies seem to suggest that authoritarian breakdown, which lifts restrictions on the press freedom, tends to be followed by ‘wild’ media pluralism that is reflected in competing and confrontational framing of

politics. In a way, the lack of press freedom under the old regime tends to be overcompensated after regime breakdown, at least until the dust settles, i.e., until the media stage becomes more commercialised and/or the previously accumulated oppositional energy is dissipated. For example, whilst the media provided information about various political actors and policy proposals in transitions from authoritarianism in Africa and Latin America, there was ample negative coverage and denunciations of old regime politicians and of some from the new government in many countries, as well as little effort to foster a meaningful debate on the key issues of political development (Randall, 1993, p.641-642). The unintended consequence of such media framing of conflict, in the context in which a broader social consensus about democracy does not exist, may be to undermine a new democratic government, perhaps even facilitate democratic erosion or breakdown.

Other studies show, in contrast, that the media coverage of democratisation is less confrontational in democratic transition than in democratic consolidation. The content analysis of the mainstream and regional press coverage of Spain's democratisation after the death of Franco revealed the framing of key moments in democratisation as broadly sympathetic to, and supportive of, government's efforts to introduce political and economic reforms. The shared focus of coverage was on the introduction of democratic institutions through reconciliation and forgetting of the past, and through territorial decentralisation. Oppositional activities were gradually accorded greater space in the media coverage, which became more confrontational as democratic institutions had taken roots. The press strongly contributed to successful democratisation by acting as an unofficial partner to the government and opposition in the elite pact that promoted democracy and reflected a broad social consensus (Barrera and Zugasti, 2006, p.28-30,32-34).

Another hypothesis is also worth considering: how media frame conflicts in different stages of democratisation depends principally on other factors, such as the mode of transition and prior regime type. In pacted transitions (e.g., Spain after Franco), the media coverage of politics is less confrontational because the media do not want to undermine a co-operation between old regime soft-liners and opposition moderates upon which new democratic institutions are being built; a more adversarial media reporting occurs only later, when a direct threat of democratic breakdown has already subsided and democratic institutions have become more resilient. In revolutionary transitions, in contrast, a dampened media coverage of politics does not

last long because a direct threat of democratic breakdown is absent so there is no significant difference between stages of democratisation in this respect (e.g., Serbia after Milošević). Also, it may well be that the lifting of censorship leads to a highly pluralistic media scene and the confrontational coverage of politics early on in transitions from highly repressive and durable non-democratic regimes only (such as those in Eastern Europe after communism and some authoritarian regimes in developing countries towards the end of the Cold War), which subsides over time once the public gets used to political pluralism, and not in transitions from less repressive non-democratic regimes, such as contemporary hybrid regimes.

Transition to democracy is considered to be over when free, fair and competitive elections exist, when the basic freedoms, such as those of speech, press and association, are broadly respected and when there are no 'reserved domains' or nonelected bodies that prevent elected officials from exerting full control over the main levers of power (Dahl, 1989, p.221; O'Donnell, 1996, p.35; Schmitter and Karl, 1996, p.55-56). In short, democracy is about competitive elections and those freedoms and conditions that make such elections possible. During and after the 'third wave', many regimes crossed the threshold of democracy. They resemble old democracies by establishing the vertical accountability of elected officials to citizens by way of elections. Still, they remain low-quality democracies in which the rule of law is absent and clientelism and corruption prevail. The executive largely ignores constitutional limits to its power and dominates the legislature, the judiciary and various agencies of horizontal accountability, and thus creates space for arbitrary and ineffective rule, hindering long-term prospects of economic growth and democratic development (O'Donnell, 1996; 1998).

In the absence of high levels of conflict that often occurs during transition from non-democratic rule, foreign media tend to lose interest in 'routine' conflicts, such as those over citizenship, distribution of power, elections and transitional justice. The coverage of such conflicts by domestic media is likely to reflect the political context in which there is no accountability of elected officials to other branches of government, with high levels of polarisation, fostered by arbitrary rule and 'irresponsible' political pluralism. In this context, the mediatization of politics might threaten the very foundations of democratic institutions or help entrench the low-quality democracy, not least by facilitating populist tendencies, undermining emerging political parties and fostering cynicism among citizens (see Voltmer, 2013, p.51,97-100). New

democracies sharply divided along ethnic, linguistic, racial and ideological lines – especially after large-scale violence – and thus in need of inclusive politics, may find that confrontational media framing of most, even routine political issues brings into question not only their new democratic institutions, but also the very foundations of the state.

## **6. Lessons for further study of the media framing of democratisation conflicts**

This overview of the literature on the media framing of political conflict reveals a fractured field. There is an extensive literature on how media report on inter-state and civil wars, on election campaigns, other institutionalised conflicts and social movements in western democracies, as well as on conflicts in non-democratic regimes and democratising states – and on the causes and consequences of such coverage. And yet, there are only limited attempts to draw parallels between the media coverage of disparate conflicts and little cross-fertilisation of findings from the disparate literatures, just like in the study of other aspects of different types of political conflict. Much of the literature discusses the ways in which western media frame foreign conflicts and domestic election campaigns and policy debates, while there is considerably less focus on the media framing of domestic conflicts in non-western settings, such as those that arise during and after transitions from non-democratic rule.

This overview of the literature reveals that the political context appears to be an important factor that shapes the media framing of various forms of political conflict. Several dimensions of the political context matter in this respect, such as regime type, international (foreign) or domestic perspective, elite consensus or conflict, policy consensus or uncertainty, type of conflict, policy area, a more or less institutionalised nature of the political conflict at stake, and the stage of democratisation. Also, the literature suggests that media framing strongly influences political outcomes and thus fosters or undermines democratic institutions in new democracies in various ways. The following insights seem to be especially relevant for the study of media framing of those democratisation conflicts that are at the centre of MeCoDEM's research agenda, i.e., conflicts over citizenship, transitional justice, distribution of power and elections in four democratising states: Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa (for details see Kraetzschmar and Voltmer, 2015).

Comparative regime analysis suggests that regime type matters greatly when it comes to various political outcomes, including the media framing of political conflicts. Since press freedom is a part of the very definition of democracy, the more democratic the regime is, the greater space exists for competing frames in the media coverage of democratisation conflicts. It is important to clearly distinguish different regime types because excessively vague terms, such as ‘regime in (democratic) transition’, are highly popular in the literature but may be misleading for some purposes. This term may include various regime types (or regime situations): regimes just after authoritarian breakdown (literally in transition from one political regime to another), hybrid regimes – which mix democratic institutions and authoritarian rule on a more permanent basis – and new democracies, or regimes that are above the procedural threshold of democracy. Going back to MeCoDEM’s conflict cases, one should expect more competing perspectives in the media coverage of democratisation conflicts in South Africa and Serbia – as more advanced in democratic development – than in Kenya and Egypt.

Within this rather broad conceptual terrain and a few insights from the literature on media and conflict are worth exploring. First, the ‘indexing’ thesis, which was developed in the study of media and foreign policy in western democracies, if applied to MeCoDEM’s research agenda, could appear in the following form: the political elite consensus on the issue at the centre of a particular democratisation conflict is reflected in media reporting, even if trustworthy but conflicting evidence exists from unofficial circles; conversely, the lack of elite consensus is reflected in competing perspectives on the issues in media coverage, largely in proportion with political actors’ perceived power. Likewise, when there is no policy on the particular issue, the media tend to present different perspectives on it. For example, when it comes to democratisation conflicts in Serbia, one should expect more pluralistic media coverage of the 2001 transitional justice and the 2008 election conflicts, which involved severe elite conflicts, than in the 2010 Pride parade conflict in which right-wing groups tried to challenge an emerging elite consensus.

Second, the study of media coverage of various political conflicts in western democracies suggests that highly institutionalised conflicts, such as election campaigns and to a lesser extent legislative debates, provide more space for competing frames in the media than other conflicts. Robust political competition is most highly institutionalised in election campaigns, which is reflected in specific

norms that govern press behaviour. The media thus routinely present competing perspectives in election coverage, which is not the case when it comes to other parts of the political process. (The assumption is that elections are competitive, free and fair.) One could therefore hypothesise that the media framing of elections will be more pluralistic than that of other forms of conflict in new democracies. Such effects may be even amplified in this political context. Unlike 'old' democracies, most new democracies lack horizontal accountability – or checks that the legislature, the judiciary and independent regulatory agencies exert upon the executive – which may increase the significance of election campaigns and secure their more pluralistic coverage.

Third, a literature on the media coverage of election campaigns in western democracies claims that 'game' frames prevail. And, more broadly, that 'strategy' frames are abundant in the media coverage of politics in general. (One could perhaps even draw parallel with war journalism's focus on military strategy, as opposed to that on the causes of war.) It would be interesting to explore how widespread strategic framing (as opposed to issue-based coverage) of conflicts in transitions from authoritarian rule and in new democracies is. Is it limited to the coverage of election campaigns or does it spread out to other conflict types? Or perhaps its significance depends on other factors, such as the historical and cultural legacy of a particular country? What are consequences of widespread strategic framing (if any) for the quality of democracy in these contexts?

Fourth, it remains unclear how media frame conflicts in various stages of democratisation, that is, whether more pluralistic and confrontational framing of conflicts is to be expected in transitions from authoritarian rule or later, once the basic democratic institutions have already been put into place. The four countries selected for empirical research in MeCoDEM provide a solid testing ground to explore the two hypotheses or, alternatively, the claim that the role media play in democratisation principally depends on other factors, such as the mode of transition and prior regime type. The reason is that these countries found themselves – during selected democratisation conflicts – in a wide range of democratisation stages, had different old regime legacies and had gone through different modes of transition.

Fifth, a review of the literature suggests that contemporary media coverage of popular protests and social movements in western democracies is not very different from that of political parties. The focus is not only on the spectacle aspect of popular

protests, but also on goals and policy proposals, in sharp contrast to the coverage of social movements before the 1970s (and of contemporary non-democratic regimes), which used to concentrate on violence. Does the same argument apply in new democracies in which popular protest has not yet become institutionalised? South Africa's service delivery protests are an interesting testing ground for this argument. Also, how the media coverage of such 'legitimate' protests differs from that of largely 'illegitimate' political action – e.g., xenophobic attacks in the same country and of similar protests in other countries, such as right-wing violence surrounding Serbia's Pride parade or Muslim-Christian violence in Egypt? Finally, is media framing of 'illegitimate' popular protests different (and if so, how) from that in western democracies?

Sixth, the literature on media and conflict in divided societies suggests that the exclusivist media coverage of 'rival' ethnic, linguistic, racial, ideological or sexual minorities may undermine democracy and facilitate violence. 'Othering' of minority groups by drawing on various constructions of the opposing group identities, often based on victimisation polarises the society while the media can also aid recruitment and co-ordination of the perpetrators of violence, strengthen their resolve and help them gain power. A hypothesis may be formulated in this way: the more exclusivist the media coverage of 'rival' ethnic, linguistic, racial, ideological or other groups, the more likely that it will undermine democratic institutions and facilitate violence. Which factors facilitate such exclusivist coverage of minority groups? Specific conflict types, the depth of social divisions, political polarisation or the stage of democratisation? Kenya's 2007 and 2013 election campaigns provide contrasting cases that should shed light on these issues.

To sum up, this literature review of the media coverage of various forms of political conflict shows that, despite the highly fragmented nature of the field, existing research provides some conceptual and theoretical tools for the empirical study of the media framing of democratisation conflicts. In this section, I discussed some of the most obvious hypotheses in the literature, those that are directly relevant from the perspective of MeCoDEM's research programme, and especially of the media framing of democratisation conflicts in Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa. It appears that (at least some of) the proposed variables and mechanisms work in parallel on different levels, compound or cancel out each others' effects, and/or combine in different ways in various political contexts, thus forming distinctive

trajectories. A detailed analysis of quantitative and qualitative empirical data from democratisation conflicts in selected countries should provide at least some additional insights on the role media play in democratisation.

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