

Content Analysis Applied to Conflict Reporting

Now it seems as urgent as ever to gain awareness about the narrative which news reporters craft, and how the public engages with it. Citizen participation is crucial to both conflict creation and resolution, so the information which much of the public consumes online has significance (86% of Americans get news from digital devices as of 2021).¹

This corpus has 959,000 total words and 36,228 unique word forms, and supports the analysis of articles in the timespan of January 1, 2010 until June 1, 2021 gathered in 12 documents (one document for every year), which appear in the NexisUni database for the search term “Yemen and conflict*.” The sources for the articles stem from a Statista survey detailing 21 select major newspapers in 2016 measured by circulation.²

The major newspapers ranking is a Western-centered one, hence the curiosity in the main research question of this paper: How does Western digital news media portray the conflict in Yemen? Therefore, the nature of this exploration is descriptive and can serve as the stepping stone for the further question of how the portrayal of a conflict influences the people reading about it who have the agency to influence the conflict itself; by influencing the actions of domestic politicians during elections, protests, town hall meetings or else. The main hypothesis for this initial research with a limited scope is that the information from online news articles which citizens consume feeds into the perspective of the citizens about the said conflict, which then become part of a person’s decision-making.

The broader hypothesis which this data serves for a continued research effort is how the information which citizens consume about a conflict impacts the said conflict. In a better world, we can be informed and aware about the opinions we have which impact the sacrifice or survival of fellow humans, regardless whether they are our soldiers fighting a “just war,” or rebel soldiers fighting under a foreign flag. The motivation behind a soldier’s gunshot is often just peace and protection, but this motivation is shaped by an official's commands, which in their own accord trickle down from leadership, and I wonder what part of the influence of perspectives is due to the media’s portrayal of events. Is there a turning point which makes war a necessity rather than a choice, traceable via studying news reporting?

As a summary, this corpus shows strong evidence about the prominence of Saudi Arabia in the conflict in Yemen, which could suggest a focus of the Western media towards Western allies like the Saudis, as opposed to more reporting on the role of Russia and China in the conflict, which could suggest more balanced reporting. There are many opportunities for further research. For example, investigating how the difference between words like “war” versus “conflict” impact the attitude of citizens towards the conflict (whether there is more civil engagement in the form of comments under the news articles, civil protests or lobbying through NGOs to influence the national foreign policy). The difference in portrayal of the Houthi fighters as “rebels” versus “freedom fighters” or national fighters could also suggest curious relationships between foreign aggression against the rebels or sympathy and military support of the local fighters. The lack of a “just,” “fair,” “peace” narrative could also suggest, as some of the abovementioned scholars note, the lack of a permanent conflict settlement because of the benefit of maintaining a status quo where there are weaker states giving opportunity to be used as negotiation stakes. The methodology of this research opens the chance to apply it to other conflicts varying in complexity, like the South China Sea disputes, Palestine-Israel or others, for the benefit of gaining quantitative information.

For the summary narrative of the report, please see [this document](#) or email ygerdzh@bowdoin.edu.

¹ Pew Research Center. “86% of Americans Get News Online from Smartphone, Computer or Tablet.” Accessed August 8, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

² Statista. “Circulation of Select Major Newspapers 2016.” Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272942/circulation-of-select-major-newspapers/>.