3 Strategic communicators in violent conflicts - “Politics”

The international news coverage is a relevant source of information for the public’s understanding and interpretation of conflicts, because most of us do not directly experience the unfolding events (Cottle, 2006; Quandt et al., 2014). Since the public’s understanding and interpretation of conflict might be consequential for political processes, a large variety of actors compete over access to and influence on the news coverage to achieve an equally large variety of organizational goals (Wolfsfeld, 2004, 2011). Some of these goals are to bring peace to a region troubled by violent outbursts, to legitimate a military intervention or to promote and legitimize the cause of a violent terrorist group (Brüggemann & Weßler, 2009; Wolfsfeld, 2004; Yarchi, 2016). The media are, thus, not only a source of information, but also an arena in which actors compete for attention and favorable news coverage (Amsalem, Zoizner, Sheafer, Walgrave, & Loewen, 2018; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016; Wolfsfeld, 2011).

As outlined above, strategic communicators can be understood as actors that actively try to enter and influence the news discourse. Strategic communicators can be differentiated from other actors involved in the news production process by two main characteristics. First, strategic communicators are advocates. This means that they proactively communicate their perspective of an event or issue to the media. In doing so, strategic communicators send out purposefully constructed messages often without being asked for them beforehand (Jungblut & Fröhlich, 2015). They thereby employ persuasive communication strategies “to transform social power into political muscle” (Habermas, 2006, p. 419). The opposite of being an advocate is being a journalistic source. Sources usually do not actively send out their perspective of a given event to the news media. Rather, a “journalist actively approaches a source in order to receive information” (Jungblut & Fröhlich, 2015, p. 2). At times, journalists even tend to instrumentalize sources to illustrate or legitimize someone else’s or their own perspective (cf. Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018).

Second, “[t]he purposeful nature of strategic communication is critical” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7). This means that strategic communicators distribute their interpretation of an event or issue to the media with a goal that is beyond the news coverage itself. Through the active shaping of mediated communication, they seek to increase the probability of reaching a specific organizational goal (Hallahan et al., 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). An organizational goal can be understood as a “desired state of affairs which the organization attempts to realize” (Etzioni, 1964, p. 6). An organization’s capabilities to reach these goals thereby extends what a ‘normal’ individual can achieve on his own (Hartmann, 2015). Organizations can, thus, be described as a (more or less) formally structured association of people primarily based on the instrumental purpose of fulfilling specific goals (March & Simon, 1958; Röttger, 2000). Organizational goals determine the “relationship of the organization
to the larger society, which in turn becomes a question of what the society (or elements within it) wants done or can be persuaded to support” (Thompson & McEwen, 1958, p. 23) by relying on strategic communication. Organizational goals, finally, are not set in stone and must be understood as dynamic (Röttger, 2000; Thompson & McEwen, 1958).

To illustrate that think of an opposition party that is against a military intervention in another country. The party’s ability to demonstrate against this intervention and reach its organizational goal of ending the intervention by far extends what an individual activist usually is able to achieve. It is, however, important to outline that some organizational goals might be regarded by parts of society as more legitimate than others determining the potential and limits of strategic communication. It might, thus, be impossible to convince some parts of society why ending the intervention is necessary. Finally, while the fictive opposition party in its early stages might solely want to end this specific mission, after entering the parliament and gaining a larger share of political power, it might become an established party in the political system that has a new organizational goal, e.g. being part of the government. As a result, the party might decide to change their strategic communication efforts to increase the chance of reaching their new organizational goal. They might, for example, increase the amount of constructive ideas proposed in parliament and reduce the number of overly critical comments towards potential coalition partners.

As indicated above, strategic communicators are a diverse set of actors ranging, for example, from governments to social movements and NGOs (cf. R. Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2015). Existing research offers a first helpful differentiation of strategic communicators based on their political and social status differentiating between authoritative and alternative voices (Leuven & Joye, 2014). Authoritative voices often have a privileged access to the news due to their high political and social status, their degree of organization and resources, and their ability to sometimes control the flow of information (Gonen, 2018; Wolfsfeld, 1997). “The result of this structured preference given in the media to the opinions of the powerful is that these ‘spokesmen’ become what we call the primary definers of topics” (Hall, Clarke, Critcher, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1978, p. 58). Alternative voices, on the other hand, are often forced to attract the media’s attention through “exceptional behavior” (Wolfsfeld, 1997, p. 20). Social movements might have to create exceptionally unusual and spectacular forms of protest to appear news worthy just like minor political parties might have to give provocative and transgressive speeches to make the news. Even if they manage to enter the news discourse, alternative voices “only remain newsworthy if they remain deviant” (Wolfsfeld, 1997, p. 21), meaning that they have to struggle to be characterized as a legitimate conflict actor.

This raises the question of who can be considered an authoritative voice in the news. Research on framing (e.g. Entman, 2003; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) indicates that governments are part of authoritative voices, since they “provide a national