

The News Media and Peace Processes

The Middle East and Northern Ireland

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Summary

The news media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. They can emphasize the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. But the media also can serve as destructive agents in a peace process. They can emphasize the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy. This report by Gadi Wolfsfeld, a senior fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace at the United States Institute of Peace in 1998–1999 and a professor of political science and communication at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, explains how and when the media take on each of these roles.

In chapter 1, Wolfsfeld argues that there is an inherent tension between the needs of a peace process and news routines. A successful peace process requires patience, and the news media usually demand immediacy. Peace is most likely to develop within a calm environment, and the media tend to have an obsessive interest in threats and violence. Nevertheless, the role of the media does vary. And if the role of the media is to become less disruptive to some peace processes, “both researchers and practitioners must better understand the reasons for these variations,” Wolfsfeld writes.

The report points to four major factors that have an impact on that variation: (1) the amount of consensus among political elites in support of the peace process, (2) the number and intensity of crises associated with the process, (3) the extent to which shared media—those used by both sides of the conflict—exist, and (4) the level of sensationalism as a dominant news value.

Wolfsfeld declares his own bias regarding the media and peace processes: “I . . . believe that journalists have an ethical obligation to encourage reconciliation among hostile populations,” he writes. “At the very least, journalists should do no harm.”

In chapter 2, Wolfsfeld discusses in detail the four variables mentioned above. Regarding the first variable, elite consensus, based on his own research and that of others, he concludes that “the greater the level of elite consensus [on certain policies], the more likely the news media are to play a supportive role in implementing such policies.”

The second variable has to do with the number and intensity of the crises affecting the peace process. Because media tend to stress conflict, and some media routinely sensationalize events, the more crises that occur during a peace process, the more heated the political atmosphere becomes, Wolfsfeld writes. Such an atmosphere influences political leaders to overreact to events, thus creating a vicious cycle of escalation.

The third and fourth variables zero in on two important factors that impact the peace process: the extent of shared news media that can reach both sides of the conflict, and the degree to which sensationalism has a major foothold in the media market. Wolfsfeld finds that the more extensive the shared news media, the more likely the media will play a con-

structive role in the peace process. A high level of sensationalism in a media environment, on the other hand, invariably worsens a situation.

In chapter 3, Wolfsfeld discusses his analytical strategy. He focused on two case studies: (1) the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and (2) the attempts to bring peace to Northern Ireland that centered on the Good Friday Agreement. For the first, he interviewed forty-one key actors in politics and the media, and for the second, twenty. He also analyzed editorials from five newspapers, three in Israel for a total of 229 editorials, and two in Belfast for a total of 147 editorials. The editorials were written in the wake of major events in the two peace processes, and Wolfsfeld assessed the type and range of opinion expressed. Finally, Wolfsfeld looked at the news coverage of two major terrorist attacks, one in Israel and the other in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 4 lays out in detail Wolfsfeld's analysis of the Israeli media and the Oslo peace process. "It was clear from the beginning that the struggle over Oslo would be bitter," he writes. Promoting a 'Peace frame,' "the Rabin government, for the most part, talked about the need for compromise to end the conflict. . . . The right-wing opposition to the peace process put forth a 'Security frame,' arguing that any concessions to the Palestinians would lead only to more bloodshed." A lack of elite consensus on the process, an extremely polarized society, a rash of terrorism, and sensationalist media resulted in an explosive situation. Analysis of news stories and editorials along with interviews with Israeli and Palestinian leaders and Israeli journalists explore the interplay among these factors and their impact on the peace process.

Chapter 5 looks at Wolfsfeld's data from the Northern Ireland peace process, in which the news media played a very different role. "The political environment in Northern Ireland was marked by a large degree of elite consensus in support of the agreement and by relatively little violence on the part of those opposed to the accords," he writes. "The media environment was characterized by many shared news organs and by a relatively low level of sensationalism. This set of circumstances turned the news media into an important tool for promoting the peace process." Wolfsfeld, through extensive interviews and analysis, examines these factors in detail.

Chapter 6 draws some conclusions and assesses the policy implications of Wolfsfeld's research. "This report contains good news and bad news for those interested in promoting peace," Wolfsfeld writes. "The bad news is that leaders cannot depend on the news media to help them when they are in trouble." Indeed, the news media are least likely to help in those cases where they might do the most good in helping to set a moderating tone, Wolfsfeld argues. "It is important for policymakers to understand this situation and find better ways to deal with it." A long-range political strategy needs to prepare to limit damage associated with inevitable failures along the road to peace. This can be accomplished in part by continually promoting a long-range perspective and by having crisis teams in place to deal with the media.

The news media, on the other hand, might organize joint meetings of editors and reporters from rival communities with the goal of fostering greater communication between them. Further, practicing "peace journalism" might include counteracting misperceptions about the conflict and the other side and reporting on areas of cooperation between antagonists. "It must be emphasized, however, that a more conducive form of

journalism depends on making *structural changes* in the news production process,” Wolfsfeld stresses. Such changes might include creating special sections in newspapers and programs in the broadcast media dedicated to peace issues, forcing journalists to search for materials that would be consistent with the values of peace journalism rather than with the media tendency to search out exclusively areas of conflict and extreme opinion.

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Introduction

The news media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. They can emphasize the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. The media, however, can also serve as destructive agents in the peace process. They can emphasize the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy. In this report I explain how and when the media take on each of these roles.

Considering the obvious importance of the topic, surprisingly little has been written about the role of the news media in the process of peace.¹ Searching through hundreds of studies on peace building and conflict resolution, I could hardly find even a passing reference to the news media. Yet those involved in peacemaking constantly confront the issue of how to deal with the press.

In general, an inherent tension exists between the needs of a peace process and news routines. A successful peace process requires patience, and the news media demand immediacy. Peace is most likely to develop within a calm environment, and the media have an obsessive interest in threats and violence. Peace building is a complex process, and the news media tend to deal with simple events. Progress toward peace requires at least a minimal understanding of the needs of the other side, but the news media routinely reinforce ethnocentrism and hostility toward adversaries.

The role of the media does vary, however, and both researchers and practitioners must better understand the reasons for these variations. In this report I point to four major factors that have an impact on this equation: (1) the amount of consensus among political elites in support of the peace process, (2) the number and intensity of crises associated with the process, (3) the extent to which shared media, used by both sides of the conflict, exist, and (4) the level of sensationalism as a dominant news value. The first two variables tell us something about the state of the political environment, while the final two relate to the media environment.

I demonstrate the importance of these four factors by comparing the role of the news media in two peace processes: (1) the Oslo peace process in the Middle East and (2) the process associated with the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. I conclude that the Israeli news media played primarily a negative role in the Oslo peace process, while the Northern Ireland news media played a more positive role. This difference stems from the very different political and media environments in which journalists in the two countries were operating. The Oslo peace process was characterized by a relatively low level of elite consensus in support of the government, a large number of serious and violent crises, a total lack of shared media between Israelis and Palestinians, and sensationalist news media that often inflamed the atmosphere. A substantially different political and media

environment in Northern Ireland significantly influenced the more positive role of the media in that peace process.

Researchers writing about peace face some of the same dilemmas as journalists. It is almost impossible to take a neutral stand on the issue. The very fact that the relevant fields are entitled “peace studies” and “conflict resolution” tells us that the implicit goal of such work is to promote peace and prevent violent conflict. This type of bias can threaten the integrity of the research. When the news media make it more difficult to promote peace, for example, this will be considered a “problem” that needs to be solved. Yet those opposed to a particular peace process would argue that such media are demonstrating their independence and protecting national interests.

Although there is no solution to this problem, it is helpful to state one’s biases at the outset, making it easier for readers to detect problems rooted in such prejudices. My own bias is that I support both of the peace processes discussed in this work. I believe that the Rabin government took an important step forward at Oslo and, like most Israelis, I hope it will succeed. Although I have no personal involvement in the Northern Ireland conflict, my position is the same. I believe the Good Friday Agreement was a major achievement and that it offers a real possibility for bringing peace to the area.

I also believe that journalists have an ethical obligation to encourage reconciliation among hostile populations. This does not mean that they should blindly accept every peace proposal that calls for compromise. Nor should they serve as propaganda organs for a propeace government. The goals of journalists working in conflict-ridden areas should be to provide as much information as possible about the roots of the problem and to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending it. At the very least, journalists should do no harm. They should refrain from practices that raise the level of hate, distrust, and violence between communities. I discuss these issues more fully in the conclusion of this report.

The report is divided into five parts. The first presents theoretical principles that explain why the news media play different roles in different contexts. The second briefly describes the research strategy employed in this study. The third and fourth parts present an analysis of the role of the news media in the Oslo process and in Northern Ireland, respectively. The conclusion discusses the more important implications of these findings for researchers and policymakers.

Theoretical Principles Guiding the Study

Journalists tell stories. As noted in the introduction, how they construct stories about a peace process can have an important impact on the process itself. Citizens depend on these stories to learn about what is happening. Is the process moving forward or backward? Does the overall level of hostility and violence appear to be rising or declining? Is the “other side” keeping its part of the agreements? How much of the public supports what the government is trying to do? Is it really going to work? Although members of the audience also apply their own interpretations to such stories, news represents a major reference point for public discourse.

The political and professional context for these news stories has a major impact on how they are written. All news media work from a particular cultural and professional base that helps define the construction of news (Gamson and Stuart 1992; Gamson et al. 1992; Ryan 1991). What is considered a reasonable story in one political environment may be considered offensive in another. Audiences can be especially sensitive about stories having to do with peace and conflict, because such items engage people’s most basic loyalties and identities.

The state of the political environment has a major impact because the construction of news is primarily a reactive process. Editors and reporters respond to stimuli that are provided by a multitude of sources and events and then give their audience a report about the state of their world. Major changes in the tone and content of news coverage reflect shifts in the political process.

The Impact of Elite Consensus

The success governments have in mobilizing consensus among political elites in support of their policies is an especially important variable affecting news coverage: The greater the level of elite consensus, the more likely the news media are to play a supportive role in implementing such policies. Positions taken by the major political parties serve as the most important indicator for the news media in these situations. Journalists depend on party leaders as their dominant sources for assessing the state of the political environment. The major opposition parties define which issues are contentious and worthy of public debate. Leaders from smaller parties or extraparlimentary movements have less power and are often framed as deviants.

Hallin (1986) makes a similar point in his work about the behavior of the American news media in the Vietnam War. Contrary to popular belief, U.S. news coverage of the early stages of the conflict was extremely supportive. This was in keeping with the almost universal agreement about the need to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. As the level of elite consensus declined, news reports and editorials began to focus on more negative aspects of the war. The media may also have accelerated the decline in

public support once the negative story took hold. Thus, changes in the political environment directly influence the news media to move from a supportive role to a more independent and critical role.

The influence of elite consensus on the role of the media can also be seen in the Gulf War. The U.S. Senate was split almost completely down the middle when it was asked to give Bush a green light for attacking Saddam Hussein. Once the war began, however, American journalists found it difficult to find members of the opposition who were willing to speak publicly against Bush's policy (Wolfsfeld 1997a). The changing level of consensus, or at least expressed consensus, had an important influence on the media. While early news coverage and editorials focused on the fierce debate in the United States, the coverage of the war itself can only be described as enthusiastic (Bennett and Paletz 1994). Normally cynical journalists found themselves swept up in a wave of patriotism, and it was difficult to find elite sources who were willing to publicly criticize the American intervention.

The level of political consensus among the general public can also have an impact on media coverage, but this type of influence is less direct and less significant. The indirect influence comes from the fact that political leaders consider the climate of opinion when forming their own positions. As pointed out by Bennett (1990), however, the range of debate expressed in the news media is for the most part simply an "index" of the range of debate among the political elite. The news media's almost exclusive dependence on institutional sources severely limits the range of public debate and marginalizes public opinion.

There is good reason to believe that the level of elite consensus also has an important influence on the role of the news media in a peace process. The greater the level of disunity among elites over the process, the greater the likelihood that the news media will make the situation worse. The media serve as the central arena for such disputes, reflecting and even playing up those divisions and thus making them especially likely to turn ugly. On the other hand, in peace processes or stages of a process that are marked by a high level of elite support, journalists will become unabashed enthusiasts and story lines will become celebratory. Those who oppose the agreements will be framed as troublemakers.

A useful rule to follow in these matters is to start by looking at a particular political context, attempt to understand how political actors and journalists interact within the situation, and then examine how the resulting news stories influence the process itself. This idea, which surfaces at several points in the study, is referred to as the "politics-media cycle." Changes in the political environment lead to changes in the role of the news media that then lead to further changes in the political environment.

This process can also be understood by examining the way the news media construct frames about political issues. The news media routinely employ interpretive frames as a device for providing meaning to events, and the level of consensus has a major impact on the frames they employ. Gitlin (1980) provided the best description of media frames over twenty years ago:

Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports.

Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual. Frames enable journalists to process large amounts of information, to assign it to cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences [p. 7].

The news media construct frames for conflicts by attempting to fit the information they are receiving into a package that is *professionally useful* and *culturally familiar* (Wolfsfeld 1997a). The process is best understood as one in which journalists attempt to find a narrative fit between incoming information and existing media frames. The frames that are available for use by journalists vary over time, culture, and political circumstance. Media frames in most Western countries for covering women's issues, for example, have gone through important changes in recent years.

When a wide level of elite consensus exists, one frame tends to dominate media discourse, and few questions are raised about its validity. As the level of opposition grows, alternative frames emerge, and this competition is reflected in changing media coverage. The public debate in the United States over Vietnam is again instructive. The Cold War frame dominated public discourse during the early years of this conflict, and, as noted, this had a major impact on news stories (Hallin 1986). Given the high degree of consensus, sponsors of antiwar frames were either ignored or treated as deviants. In later years the growing disenchantment with the war among important elites increased the prominence of competing frames. The Vietnam issue entered what Hallin (1986) labeled "the sphere of legitimate controversy." Journalists who covered such issues felt obligated to present a more balanced form of coverage that gave government critics a significant amount of time and space to present their views.

This helps explain why it is so important to evaluate the level of elite consensus concerning a peace process. The lower the level of controversy among elites concerning the process itself, the more likely propeace frames will dominate media discourse. Peace frames will be used to organize information about both successes and setbacks: Successes will lead to more optimistic coverage and setbacks will be seen as "problems" that must be solved. Here too those who oppose peace will often be treated as troublemakers, especially if they resort to violence. The news media in such cases become active agents in promoting the peace process, constantly amplifying the existing consensus.

When, on the other hand, there is serious competition among frames about the peace process, the news media will legitimately give expression to both perspectives. In such cases a good deal of the news coverage will focus on the internal debate over the process, and journalists will actively search for sources from both camps. Another means to achieve balance when consensus is low is to switch back and forth between alternative frames in accordance with changing events. The news media can employ the propeace frame when the process is moving forward and more pessimistic frames during times of crisis.

A legitimate criticism of this argument is that it may be difficult to make a clear distinction between the independent variable—the level of elite consensus in support of peace—and the dependent variable—the use of propeace media frames. The news media, such critics would suggest, may simply make an independent decision to support the peace

process. They would then marginalize the opposition, and the level of consensus would appear much greater than it is. The media could also take the opposite stand and highlight the internal dispute over the process, thus giving the appearance that there is less consensus than actually exists. This criticism suggests that the argument is circular.

However, there is a difference between a circular argument and a circular relationship. I would argue that the social and political forces within a given society are far more powerful and enduring than any editorial decisions about how to cover a particular peace process. The major political parties and movements within a given society develop over an extended period and do not simply appear and disappear in response to media coverage. The political positions such organizations take with regard to a peace process can best be understood by looking at the groups' histories. Ideological changes within such institutions are normally slow and incremental.

In addition, editors do not simply invent interpretive frames; they absorb them from the society in which they operate. As noted, the construction of news is a reactive process, and journalists attempt to create stories that are politically acceptable to their readers. Editors working in Western democracies cannot afford to ignore the activities of major political parties or movements. Journalists report on such organizations; they do not invent them. The news media can be important agents in *accelerating* political changes within a given society, but to suggest that they *initiate* such changes contradicts most of what we know about how journalists operate.

Despite all this, it is important to make an empirical distinction between measures that are intended to gauge the state of the political environment and those that tell us something about the nature of media coverage. Examining the level of elite consensus involves looking at the positions taken by the major parties: The smaller the official opposition, the greater the consensus. The amount of support among the general public, which may also have an influence on news coverage, can usually be measured using survey data. The measurement of media coverage can be ascertained by content analyses of actual news stories and editorials. Distinguishing between political and media variables reduces the chance that researchers are merely measuring different aspects of the same construct.

The Number and Intensity of Crises

A second variable influencing the state of the political environment has to do with the number and intensity of crises affecting the peace process. Every peace process is marked by a certain number of breakdowns and setbacks. The greater the number and severity of these crises, the more likely the news media are to play a negative role in the process. The media's need for drama and their lack of a long-term perspective lead them to exaggerate the intensity and significance of these crises. Political leaders are pounded with huge headlines and angry questions. By heating up the political atmosphere, this type of coverage can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Political leaders may feel compelled to overreact to this sense of crisis and the cycle begins again.

The role of the news media in a relatively calm peace process will be very different. The tone of the reporting will be generally low-key and many stories will be relegated to a less prominent position in the lineup. Contrary to what has been alleged by their more ardent critics, the media rarely invent stories. If the peace process is not producing anything

interesting—meaning drama or conflict—journalists will look elsewhere for stories. The more stable and trouble-free a peace process, the less likely the news media will play a destructive role.

Here too the level of political consensus is important. Leaders are in a much better position to ride out a crisis when they can afford to lose a few percentage points in their performance ratings. They are in a very different position if such a crisis means losing their majority. As discussed, the amount of consensus will also have an effect on how the media view a crisis, on the meaning they give to events. When, for example, opponents of a peace process carry out acts of violence, journalists can see these as a sign either that peace is impossible or that peace is even more urgent.

There is an important lesson in all this for political leaders: Nothing succeeds like success. Leaders who can mobilize a broad consensus for their policies and manage to keep the peace process on a steady course with a minimum of setbacks have little to fear from the media. Taking control over the political environment is key to achieving success in the press (Wolfsfeld 1997a). The news media, however, are fair-weather friends. When leaders slip and fall, when consensus breaks down, the media amplify those failures into disasters. The more problematic the peace process, the more destructive the role of the news media.

The Influence of the Media Environment

The nature of the media environment also has an important influence on the role of the news media. As discussed, this study zeros in on two important dimensions of that environment: (1) the extent of shared news media that can reach both sides of the conflict, and (2) the degree to which sensationalism has a major foothold in the media market.

The greater the extent of shared media, the more likely the news media will play a constructive role in a peace process. There are cultural, commercial, and political reasons for this dynamic. As noted, journalists always write stories within a particular cultural framework. Presumptions about collective identity are an especially important element in the construction of news, and collective identity can provide a basis for dialogue. In an environment dominated by shared media, the underlying theme concerns what can be done to resolve conflict within “our” community. When, on the other hand, there are few or no shared media, the perspective is inherently ethnocentric. Routine coverage of a peace process focuses on the threat that “they” pose to “us.” The news media in each culture reinforce existing myths and stereotypes about the other.

Commercial motivations point in the same direction. Broadcasters and newspaper publishers working in an environment with shared media will be extremely reluctant to offend major segments of the audience. However difficult, they must find a tone and language that speaks to the largest possible population. Editors also will get continual feedback from their audience if they appear to move too far in a particular direction. The most sensible editorial position in these situations is to find a middle ground that appeals to a broad range of consumers.

The existence of a shared news media will also have an important influence on how political leaders and groups shape their messages. Leaders employ a less extremist form of rhetoric when they find themselves talking to multiple audiences. This process may even influence the ideologies of the warring groups as more moderate messages become more

familiar and acceptable. Those who have to communicate only with their own people, on the other hand, will emphasize sectarian loyalties in order to maintain their power base.

The level of shared media should be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. While some political or ethnic overlap often exists within the audience, the extent of this intersection will vary among conflicts. In general, the greater the level of overlap, the more likely that overlap will have an impact on media coverage.

Shared media are more likely to exist in domestic conflicts than in international disputes. When a conflict breaks out between different groups within the same country, the national news media will be constructing stories that will be consumed by members and supporters of all sides. This is less likely to be the case in attempts to bring about peace in international conflicts. In those situations one will find citizens from each country getting most of their information from their own news media. Here too the news media often make a problematic situation even worse.

Such worsening of a situation is especially likely when a high level of sensationalism characterizes the media environment. Sensationalism refers to the extent to which journalists feel obliged to construct and present news stories in a melodramatic style. Sensationalist norms place a high value on emotionalism rather than reason, on entertainment rather than information, on specific events rather than long-term processes, and on personalities rather than institutions.

There has been growing concern in the field of political communication about the influence of sensationalism on public discourse. The phenomenon has also been referred to as “infotainment” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Brants 1998; Brants and Neijens 1998; Graber 1994) or “tabloidization” (Newton 1999; Owen 2000). Despite differences in emphasis, most of these works center on the same point: The greater the influence of commercialism on news content, the less likely the media can serve as serious and responsible forums for public debate.

It is important to note that this work focuses on the *norms* that dominate the media environment. While looking at news formats (for example, the size of headlines) can also provide important information, it is critical to focus on how norms regulate the interactions between leaders and journalists. Journalists working in a relatively sensationalist environment feel more pressured to supply their editors with melodrama, and they pass these expectations to their sources. Political leaders and activists feel forced to dramatize their positions to compete for space. This often leads to a high degree of tension in the relationship, as leaders become frustrated over the media’s unwillingness to deal with substance. The normative approach allows us to look directly at how such codes influence the behavior of both journalists and political leaders.

Sensationalist media emphasize a number of news values that are incongruent with a peace process. Editors and reporters working in a sensationalist environment will be more likely to construct stories that are simple, dramatic, shortsighted, and ethnocentric. Emotional news coverage is designed to stir passions, and nothing could be more damaging for those engaged in conflict resolution. When sensationalism is considered a central news value, it influences every stage of the news production process. Journalists search for the most dramatic and emotional stories, while photographers and camera operators attempt to capture the most shocking images. Drama becomes the primary criterion for decisions

about story prominence. Those responsible for layout and graphics use formats and headlines that magnify the intensity and importance of conflicts.

Here too there are no absolutes: Every modern media system is characterized by at least some sensationalist media. When carrying out comparative work, researchers need to look at the *relative* importance of sensationalist values within the overall media environment. It is not enough to simply look at the audience share for tabloid newspapers, for example. Sensationalist news values can also have an important impact on journalists working for the mainstream media. Interviews with journalists and political actors can provide important insights about the extent to which such values influence interactions between them. The higher the demand for drama, the more political leaders will feel pressured to provide it.

Sensationalist news media have a vested interest in conflict. The best known historical example of this phenomenon is the flagrant attempt by publisher William Randolph Hearst to stir American anger against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. The oft-repeated story claims that a bored illustrator asked to come home from Cuba because “there will be no war.” Hearst allegedly replied, “You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.” While some have questioned the veracity of the story, there is no dispute that Hearst and others were able to significantly increase circulation by sensationalizing the Spanish-American conflict.

An even better demonstration of this phenomenon is much less well known. Ito (1990) reported on a number of research projects carried out in Japan concerning media coverage of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. This research shows that newspapers that carried “chauvinistic and sensationalist” articles and editorials during that conflict greatly expanded their circulation, while those that did not lost many readers. Angry mobs set fire to the premises of one newspaper opposed to the war, and it eventually went bankrupt. All this may explain the comments attributed to the newspaper journalist Kuroiwa Ruiko later in that century: “Newspapers should be anti-government during peace time and chauvinistic during war time” (Ito 1990, p. 431).

A cynical saying associated with sensationalist journalism goes, “If it bleeds, it leads.” The practice has both long- and short-term implications for political conflicts and peace-making. The world constructed by sensationalist journalism is a frightening place filled with threats and violence, one in which leaders and citizens must constantly worry about security. Enemies appear powerful and unwilling to compromise. Given this atmosphere, those promoting peace and reconciliation appear, at best, naive, and at worst, traitorous.

Coverage of peace ceremonies provides the only important exception to this rule. When a serious breakthrough occurs in the peace process, the sensationalist press becomes euphoric. The emphasis on immediacy and drama drives editors and reporters to present an exaggerated version of successes. The political leadership is understandably pleased with such coverage, and perfectly willing to participate in the celebration. In the long run, however, overstated coverage may prove counterproductive. Rising expectations can lead to bitter disappointments when the process runs into trouble.

The level of sensationalism within a media environment has an impact not only on the peace process itself, but also on the internal debate about such a process (Wolfsfeld 1997a, 1997d). The emphasis on drama and conflict leads journalists to seek out the most

extreme voices and actions for the purpose of exciting audiences. This routine can inflame the internal debate over a peace process in two major ways: (1) political actors feel pressured to escalate their tactics in order to successfully compete for access to the media and (2) highlighting the most angry and violent forces makes it almost impossible for leaders to carry out a reasoned debate over the issue. Each side feels compelled to respond in kind to the threats, accusations, and insults that make for such dramatic headlines. Sensationalist news media turn every public debate into a shouting match.

This dynamic is not, of course, limited to public debates over a peace process. However, the potential for damage may be especially great during such public deliberations. Citizens' feelings about such issues are likely to be especially intense, and thus even the smallest of sparks has the potential to start a major fire. In addition, a calm political environment is an essential element in the promotion of peace. It will be difficult for leaders to convince the public about the benefits of peace when the peace process appears to be accompanied by so much conflict. Conventional wisdom holds that "we must make peace among ourselves before we can make peace with others."

This report examines the following four aspects of the political and media environment: (1) the extent of consensus among political elites in support of a peace process, (2) the number and intensity of crises associated with the process, (3) the extent of shared media, and (4) the degree to which sensationalist news organs dominate the media environment. Of course, other factors also are worthy of study. Nevertheless, these four variables provide a starting point for explaining the varying role of the news media in a peace process.

Three

Research Strategy

The research for this study focused on two case studies: (1) the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians and (2) the attempts to bring peace to Northern Ireland that centered on the Good Friday Agreement. The similarities and differences between these two processes provide a rich set of data for understanding how the role of the news media can vary.

In both cases the conflicts have been bloody and long. Neither peace process has been easy. Each negotiation has been difficult, and some opponents have used terrorism in an attempt to halt the process. Also, news media in Northern Ireland and Israel are both, for the most part, free from government control.

The two conflicts also exhibit important differences. The conflict in Northern Ireland is more of an internal dispute between two groups living within the same community. The major confrontation centers on whether that community should remain part of the United Kingdom or become part of Ireland. The people share a common language and to a large extent common media. They also, for the most part, vote in the same elections. The Israelis and the Palestinians, on the other hand, lived as completely separate communities until 1967. They speak different languages, and while many Palestinians monitor the Israeli media, most people rely on their own news reports. In addition, the ultimate goal of the Oslo process is to create two separate political entities that can coexist in peace, while in Northern Ireland the aim is for the two sides to live together.

Research on the role of the news media in the Middle East peace process began in the summer of 1994, about nine months after the first major breakthrough at Oslo. The central source of data for this research comes from forty-one in-depth interviews carried out between that summer and December 1995, about a month after Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Rabin/Peres governments, the Israeli opposition parties, the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian opposition (mostly Hamas). Interview subjects were chosen because they had an ongoing relationship with the Israeli press concerning the Oslo peace process. Thirteen journalists were interviewed who had covered the peace process for newspapers, television, and radio. The journalists were selected based on the importance of their news organ and their area of responsibility. Most interviews lasted for about an hour. All were taped and then transcribed.

A similar set of interviews was carried out in Belfast in April 1999. The Good Friday Agreement had been in place for about a year, and the two sides were finding it difficult to move forward. The Unionist camp had refused to join a power-sharing executive until Sinn Fein agreed to decommissioning. Twenty interviews were conducted with leaders from a variety of political parties, their spokespersons, and a wide range of reporters who

covered the peace process for the local press. The interviews were similar in length to those held in Israel.

The goal of these interviews was to understand the culture of political communication in each country. The best method for learning about the rules of the game is to talk to the players. These expert informants provide critical insights into the norms and routines that govern interactions between leaders and journalists and how such practices influence the construction of news stories. The interviews provide a rich set of data about the nature of the political and media environments and how the various actors cope with those environments.

Leaders in both countries constantly attempt to exploit their experience in order to find better ways to promote their messages to the media. Such pragmatic observations combined with existing knowledge in the field of political communication, and the added perspective offered by examining two different countries, should provide policymakers with a better understanding of the role the news media play in attempts to promote peace.

This study uses two additional sources of data. The first is an analysis of editorials from five newspapers, three in Israel and two in Belfast. The analysis looked at the range and type of opinions expressed about the peace process in each country. The Israeli editorials were written in the wake of seven major events, both positive and negative, that took place between the start of Oslo in September 1993 and the major terrorist attacks at the end of February 1995.² All together, 229 editorials from the newspapers *Ha'aretz*, *Ma'ariv*, and *Yediot Ahronot* were analyzed. Journalists permanently assigned to editorial writing wrote the majority of these pieces, which reflected their individual opinions.

By contrast, most of the editorials in the two Northern Ireland newspapers—the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph*—represented the official position of those newspapers.³ These papers published a few editorials after each event, so the sample includes a larger number of events than the Israeli sample. Twenty-two events were chosen that range from the violence associated with an Orange march in July 1997 to the Hillsborough Declaration in April 1999.⁴ The events took place both before and after the Good Friday Agreement was signed in April 1998. A total of 147 editorials were examined.

The editorials in both countries were coded as supportive of the peace process, opposed to it, or ambivalent toward it. Those who write opinion pieces make a concerted effort to make their position clear, which facilitates the coding. Editorials coded as ambivalent expressed support for the peace process but also pointed to reservations about its progress. To test the reliability of the coding scheme, two independent coders examined 10 percent of the editorials in Israel and Northern Ireland. The agreement rate was over 90 percent in both countries.

News coverage of two major terrorist attacks provides the final source of data. The first attack took place at the Beit Lid junction in Israel in January 1995 and the second in Omagh, Northern Ireland, in August 1998. Both attacks sought to end the peace process in each country. Despite the similarities, however, the news media in each setting drew very different political lessons from the incidents, thus demonstrating how the political environment can affect the construction of news stories about peace.

A glaring omission in the research plan demands an explanation. The research does not consider the role of the Palestinian press in the Oslo peace process. This seems

especially problematic because the Northern Ireland study includes an analysis of the media from both sides of the conflict. However, the Palestinian press does not operate by the same rules as the other media being examined. The Palestinian media are almost totally under government control, and editors have little discretion in deciding what frames to adopt. Thus, very few of the theoretical principles discussed here apply to this type of media environment. Although a comparison between democratic and nondemocratic environments would be extremely worthwhile, it is beyond the scope of this study.

Four

The Israeli Media and the Oslo Peace Process

Israeli journalists recall the last days of August 1993 with both embarrassment and excitement. The media had been continually following the ongoing peace talks in Washington, which seemed to be going nowhere. Suddenly, Israeli and Palestinian leaders announced that they had achieved a breakthrough in secret talks that had been taking place “somewhere in Scandinavia.” The agreement called for Israel to pull back from Gaza and from the city of Jericho in the West Bank and for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to take administrative control of these areas. Within a few days the media learned that the agreement was even bigger. Israel intended to formally recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the PLO would formally recognize the Jewish State. In addition, the Declaration of Principles (DOP) would set out a series of steps for moving the peace process forward.

The initial weeks after the breakthrough were euphoric, with the Israeli media joining in the celebration. This period came to be known as the peace festival, and the newspapers, television, and radio were full of rosy predictions about the new dawn (Wolfsfeld 1997b). There were stories about Israel becoming the “Switzerland of the Middle East” and predicting that peace with Syria was just around the corner.

The problem was that peace had not arrived—it was not even close. The DOP signed by Israel and the Palestinians merely established a framework for negotiations. While the signing of the Oslo accords represented an important breakthrough, the road to peace would prove to be long, difficult, and bloody. The leaders themselves were well aware of these difficulties but probably felt that they should ride the wave of optimism for as long as it might last. The news media served as the major engine for amplifying that wave and for raising public expectations about the future.

Despite initial enthusiasm, the political environment was not conducive to the promotion of peace. Prime Minister Rabin had been elected by an extremely slim margin in 1992 and had a great deal of difficulty maintaining his majority in the Knesset during the long months of negotiations. The initial agreement with the PLO passed the Knesset by a vote of sixty-one to fifty in September 1993. The “Oslo B” agreement, signed two years later when Rabin headed a minority government, passed by a mere two votes.

Public support for the Oslo peace process was somewhat higher but remained tentative. While support for the process stayed in the mid-60 percent range during the more positive events, it often dropped to around 50 percent after terrorist attacks (Steinmetz 1996). Rabin was never able to mobilize a massive amount of support for Oslo either in the Knesset or among the public.

The Israeli polity had long been split over the question of what to do about the occupied territories. Many in Israel still regarded the PLO as a terrorist organization

responsible for hundreds of deaths, and the opposition to Oslo was both extensive and fierce. Immediately after the initial accords were announced, the political right wing organized two of the largest demonstrations ever held in Jerusalem, numbering over 100,000 participants each. Countless protest movements were organized against the agreement. It was clear from the beginning that the struggle over Oslo would be bitter.

The two camps promoted major frames in keeping with the previous discussion. The Rabin government, for the most part, talked about the need for compromise to end the conflict. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, perhaps the most eloquent spokesperson for this perspective, envisioned a “New Middle East” marked by a political and economic boon to the entire area. The initial enthusiasm of the press reflected the power of the Peace frame.

The right-wing opposition, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, put forth a Security frame, arguing that any concessions to the Palestinians would lead only to more bloodshed. The term “security” has an almost reverential status in Israel, as one would expect from a country that has lost so many lives to war and terrorism. The minister in charge of the armed forces is called the “security minister.” The news media try to assess the “security situation” or have ongoing discussions about “security problems.” The Israeli-occupied area in Lebanon to protect the northern settlements was called the “security zone.” The Likud has always played the security card in its strongest attacks on the Labor Party, for any concessions to the Arabs are seen instinctively as a threat to security. The opposition’s major hope of defeating the Labor government was to have the debate over Oslo framed as a conflict over security rather than a conflict over peace. One of Netanyahu’s advisors talked about the resonance of the security message:

The security aspect means something to people. What worries them is security, that 80 percent of the population lives near the coastal plain [which the Likud claimed would be under direct threat if the territories were given back] or just that it is a real problem that everyone is worried about [Middle East interview no. 14; August 18, 1995].

The terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad movement proved to be the most important vehicle for promoting the Security frame. Instead of bringing peace, the Oslo accords led to a rapid rise in the death toll, with hundreds of Israelis being killed. Every terrorist attack provided “proof” that the opposition had been right all along: Giving in to the Palestinians encourages more violence. Thus, Prime Minister Rabin found it increasingly difficult to mobilize support for the peace process.

This report argues that the Israeli news media made the situation even more difficult. The Israeli media have become increasingly sensationalist in recent years (Peri, in press). In earlier years, ideological papers owned by political parties had a wide circulation. Virtually all of these newspapers went out of business as commercial newspapers came to dominate the marketplace. The two most popular newspapers—*Yediot Ahronot* and *Ma’ariv*—employ a tabloid format that includes large colorful headlines, the extensive use of visuals, and an extremely dramatic and emotional form of coverage. Intense competition between the two papers has led to an increasingly high level of sensationalist reporting. Despite this, both newspapers also employ some serious writers on their staff, which allows them to bridge the gap between different types of readers.⁵ A third important newspaper—*Ha’aretz*—is intended for a more sophisticated audience. It has by far the

smallest circulation but is considered essential reading by the social, political, and economic elites in Israel.

The electronic media in Israel have also become more sensationalist. Until a few years ago only one television station in Israel—Channel 1—modeled on the BBC, a public broadcasting system. Channel 2, a more commercially oriented station, began regular broadcasting in 1993 using a more dramatic format. It quickly became the more popular station for news. The first channel has been forced to make similar changes to compete. At the same time, the number of radio stations in Israel has increased dramatically, and they, too, use dramatic stories to increase ratings. The term “ratings culture” is often used in Israel to describe these changes.

When sensationalist news media cover a problematic peace process, the worst-case scenario for leaders is created. A sensationalist media turn every debate into a shouting match and every setback into a disaster. A calm political environment is an important condition for the promotion of peace. News is almost always about conflict, and sensationalist news is dedicated to presenting that conflict in as dramatic and emotional a package as possible.

As discussed, the relative importance of sensationalism in a given media environment can be best ascertained by talking with journalists and their sources. These expert informants are in the best position to explain the rules of the game. Israeli journalists are acutely aware of the influence of sensationalism, a familiar topic of discussion. While most editors and reporters would probably prefer to engage in more serious reporting, they have resigned themselves to the existing market. The prevailing assumption is that dramatic coverage is the only way to compete for audience share. One journalist talked about this ongoing need for exaggeration:

The media go too far about every subject under the sun. They went too far about the Oslo process. They went too far about the peace with Jordan. They go too far when it comes to terrorist attacks, and they go too far when it comes to scandals. That's the “tabloidization” process that all of the media are going through. It's not related to the peace process. It has to do with the media [Middle East interview no. 6; May 11, 1995].

The Israeli authorities were continually frustrated by the sensationalist coverage given to terrorism. It was true, they said, that terrorism represented a significant threat to the peace process, and no one suggested that terrorism was not a legitimate news story. They objected to the proportion and tone of the coverage. The “marathons of mourning” with twenty-four-hour call-in shows, constant hours of sad music, and lurid coverage of the funerals made terrorist attacks seem like full-scale war. In previous years, terrorism had been given a much less dramatic frame. One of Rabin's closest advisors, a former journalist, talked about the change in coverage:

There's no comparison between the coverage today and what it was like in the past. Twenty-four soldiers died in an ammunition truck after a mission in Egypt. . . . There was an ordinary headline in *Yediot Ahronot*. Nothing like what you have today. There were two pictures, a list of all the dead and that was it. Two days after that there was nothing. Today with all of the pictures, the headlines, and the color, it's a completely different world. . . . I once wrote about a bomb that went off at the central bus station in

Tel Aviv. It was a one-page story in my paper, one and a half pages in *Yediot Ahronot*, and that was the end of the story. People were killed. Today a bomb in the central bus station in Tel Aviv would be like the end of the world [Middle East interview no. 4; March 19, 1995].

It is extremely difficult to make long-range policy in this type of charged atmosphere. Public hysteria becomes an important element in planning and strategy, and people expect the government to “do something.” Leaders faced with such situations will often respond with symbolic gestures such as setting up special committees or carrying out a few highly publicized raids (Wolfsfeld, in press). The goal is to provide the media with something to use until the wave passes.

Rabin’s initial policy was to “continue with the peace process as if there was no terrorism, and to fight terrorism as if there was no peace process” (editorial, *Jerusalem Post*, December 9, 1992, p. 6). This became increasingly impossible as the atmosphere grew more heated. Demands to retaliate against the Palestinians and halt the peace process grew. Even the president of Israel, Ezer Weizman, who is not supposed to get involved in political debates, argued for suspending the talks.

Ironically, the vast majority of Israeli journalists supported the peace process. The right-wing opposition constantly accused the press of progovernment bias. But when journalists have to choose between personal and professional considerations, the latter always win. As one reporter put it, “The person who is going to promote me is my editor, not [then Israeli Foreign Minister] Shimon Peres.” (Middle East interview no. 31; June 6, 1995) The most important criterion was always to come up with the “best” news story, meaning one that would beat the competition. In the case of terrorism, this led to shocking stories filled with gory pictures and sounds of screaming and uncontrollable crying.

These terrorist acts were a tremendous achievement for Hamas, and the hysterical coverage certainly contributed to that success. One of the most important goals of these acts was to force the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to pay attention. Without the violence, they would have ignored Hamas. After the attacks, Hamas became a major player. One of the Hamas leaders talked about the role of the Israeli news media in all this:

The enemy can sometimes serve us indirectly. We don’t have any large news institutions that will publicize and cover the things that we’re interested in. . . . So in the end, the Hamas actions force the [Israeli] media to report and relate to the activities and positions of the movement. I want to use the military actions to prove my abilities on both the local and regional level. The Israeli press helps with this. Therefore, through my military action I am trying to pass a message that Hamas is a central force among the Palestinians, and it is impossible to ignore it [Middle East interview no. 17; June 8, 1995].

Hamas leaders see the Israeli press as a Zionist tool for oppressing the Palestinian people. Yet they depend on the Israeli media to pass on their message to both Israelis and Palestinians.

Public anger was directed at all Palestinians, and media coverage reflected this. The voices against Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat suddenly became much louder, while those who previously supported him were placed on the defensive. Political actors and journalists both understand how such changes in climate can influence their relationship.

Journalists tend to look for sources and information that fit easily into a prevailing story line. When the peace process is going well, they construct stories that reinforce this optimism, and when it goes poorly, their search changes accordingly.

Images of the Enemy

Images of the enemy provide one of the most important indicators of the relative success of competing frames. The Security frame is based on an ongoing distrust of the other side, while a Peace frame puts forth a more moderate image of the opponent. In the early stages of the Oslo accord, the Israeli media showed significantly more positive images of Arafat and the PLO. Before Rabin's election in 1992, the government forbade Israeli journalists to meet with PLO leaders. After the breakthrough at Oslo, Israeli reporters suddenly had access to the entire leadership. After years of reporting about people they had never actually met, reporters were flying all over the Arab world to interview them. The interviews were courteous and respectful, and for the first time Israelis saw a very different Palestinian. At least to a certain extent, the masked terrorists had become educated statesmen.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians were still considered a threat, which made them newsworthy. This was especially true for the more sensationalist news organs, because threats and violence are so central to their editorial policy. *Ha'aretz*, the least sensationalist of the three Israeli newspapers, was the only one to have a reporter living among the Palestinians. Even she, however, was Jewish.

The media never abandoned the terrorist image, but merely placed it on the shelf. As the peace process turned more violent, the more traditional frames reemerged. The Palestinian leadership became increasingly frustrated by the way the Israeli media portrayed them. A PLO leader argued that the emphasis of the Israeli media on terrorism was destroying the peace process:

I think the Israeli media in general, and Israeli television in particular are not passing on our message, or to be more exact, they are passing on the unusual situation like the bombing at Beit Lid. They are using the articles and the pictures to inflame the situation rather than to calm it. The Israeli press, and especially the Israeli television, should be reporting in a way that helps the peace process. They attack the Palestinians for the Hamas actions as if all Palestinians are carrying out these kinds of acts, and they're trying to destroy the peace process. If they really want peace, Israeli television should be telling the Israeli viewer about the other side of the Palestinian people [Middle East interview no. 18; January 16, 1995].

This statement illustrates a central problem concerning the image of enemies in more sensationalist media. Meeting the combined goals of drama and simplicity leads to one-dimensional portrayal of the other side. The sensationalist world is always painted in black and white; there is little room for grays. Consequently, such media portrayals make it difficult for the public to distinguish between propeace and antipeace forces within the other side. This is especially dangerous because the terrorist image is more newsworthy. Moderate, compromising statements with the potential to calm the atmosphere and

improve the images of the enemy rarely survive the editorial process, even when they come from those in charge of the government.

The Palestinians interviewed for this report were acutely aware of the cultural problems associated with dealing with the Israeli press. Comments along these lines included, "The Israeli press is concerned with Israeli interests, not those of the Palestinians"; "I can't get my message across because the media are for the Jews"; "I would like to have an objective picture in which the Palestinians are treated like human beings"; and "Even if there's peace, the Israelis will still think they're special." The Israeli media were considered hostile, ethnocentric, and condescending. While most of those interviewed believed that the image of Palestinians had improved since Oslo, they still felt they were a long way from achieving respect and legitimacy.

It is also important to understand that the Israeli press produces news for the Jewish population, which for the most part continues to view the Palestinians as enemies.⁶ Contrary to the situation in Northern Ireland, the Israeli and Palestinian media are completely separate and, as a consequence, ethnocentric in their orientation. While many Palestinians do monitor the Israeli press, there is virtually no flow of news in the opposite direction. Only news stories from the Palestinian press that are especially frightening or insulting to Israelis are translated and published in the Israeli press.

The lack of shared media stems from the absence of a collective identity between the two populations. This point serves as another reminder that the role the news media play in political conflicts is directly related to the environment in which they operate. As a consequence, the news media are least likely to play a constructive role where they are most needed. The greater the cultural distance between two peoples, the less likely the news media will be in a position to bridge that gap.

The Internal Debate over the Oslo Process

The key to understanding the role of the news media in any political process is to look at the *interaction* between the political and media environments. In the Oslo process, an extremely polarized society, a rash of terrorism, and sensationalist media proved to be an explosive combination. This point becomes especially clear when examining the influence of the press on the internal debate over Oslo.

The media have become the central arena for such debates, and their rules of access and coverage help shape public discourse. The debate takes place not only in news stories and editorials, but also on talk shows and in the entertainment media. Each of these forums has guidelines for deciding who can participate and how the antagonists are expected to conduct themselves. In the sensationalist media such rules are designed primarily to ensure the largest possible audience. Inevitably, the public is presented with a narrow, emotional, and shortsighted debate in which values and ideology take a back seat to entertainment.

One of the foundations of any democracy is that citizens must be given an opportunity to deliberate over the major issues of the day. The quality of that deliberation clearly depends on the level of information and analysis available. Those living in nondemocratic countries face more obvious difficulties, for the authorities make a concerted effort to control the flow of information. The problems facing Western democracies are subtler and

less detrimental. Nevertheless, a number of media routines prohibit serious discussion of political policies, forcing citizens to make decisions based on an extremely slanted set of information and images.

The editorial sections of the Israeli newspapers demonstrate a reasoned, responsible debate over Oslo. In the three major newspapers, a total of 115 editorials favored the peace process, 80 opposed it, and 34 were ambivalent. The editorials in all of the papers teach quite a bit about the underlying ideologies of the two major camps in Israel. The proponents talk about the reasons for continuing the peace process despite the problems, while opponents point to the dangers in continuing the Oslo process.

The debate within the news pages is an entirely different matter. There, the contest is based on who can provide the most dramatic rhetoric and events. While all news media place a premium on drama, the sensationalist press places this value above all else. This value influences not only how the events are covered, but also the strategies of the actors themselves. The interviews for this report provide convincing evidence that the Israeli news media were important agents in intensifying the level of rhetoric and violence.

Many of these problems relate to the rules of access to the news. There are two major doors for entering the news media (Wolfsfeld 1997a). The front door is reserved for a select group of VIPs. These are people with such political and social status that almost everything they say and do is considered newsworthy. The back door is reserved for the rest of society. The only way to gain access is through novelty or deviance. This makes it extremely difficult for members of the opposition to promote their ideological frames to the public. They are forced to choose between obscurity and extremism. A leading member of the opposition described the rules of entry:

What do the journalists see as newsworthy? Violence and riots, that's what they're waiting for. So when you bring them reasonable opinions, it doesn't interest them. They want blood. . . . They want something drastic, some type of scoop that will get them a medal from their editor [Middle East interview no. 15; August 21, 1995].

Challengers for media access compete not only with the government but also with each other. The rules of this daily competition are simple: The media prefer more powerful challengers to weaker ones (Bennett 1990; Paletz and Entman 1981; Gans 1979). Among the weak, whoever provides the best show gains entrance (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991). This selection process has two important influences on the tone of the public debate: (1) the public is disproportionately exposed to the more radical voice and (2) these journalistic norms place pressure on opposition groups to use disorder and violence to be heard.

The relationship between disorder and access means that sensationalist news media provide an inverted picture of the political world. The smaller, more radical groups become the most significant players, while elected leaders from the opposition appear less important. A content analysis carried out on newspaper stories about the peace process during the first year of Oslo confirm this notion (Wolfsfeld 1997b). Seven percent of all stories dealt with opposition by extraparlimentary movements, while only 2 percent related to the opposition in the Knesset. In addition, interviews with leaders from the more moderate movements reveal an ongoing frustration over the amount of attention given to the smaller, more violent groups (Wolfsfeld, 1997a).

At first glance it might appear that this dynamic would have made it easier for the government to promote the peace process: The more the opposition appears extremist and violent, the better the government looks. However, peace requires a calm environment to take root. Any government finds it extremely difficult to persuade people of a “new dawn” in a climate marked by violence and vindictiveness. The lack of peace within the country is a serious impediment to establishing peace with one’s neighbors.

The vehemence of political rhetoric reached an all-time high in Israel after the second Oslo agreement was narrowly approved in the fall of 1995. Knesset members, settlers, rabbis, and opposition movement leaders grew increasingly desperate to halt the withdrawal from the occupied territories. Acts of civil disobedience had become both more commonplace and more violent. There were also a number of attacks on government ministers. Judging from the headlines Israel appeared to be on the brink of civil war. This rise in violence reached its peak with the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November of that year.

It would be a mistake to suggest any one cause for this rise in violence. Important political forces were at work, and the settlers and their supporters believed that the Oslo accords represented a direct threat to their existence. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that the news media played at least some role in inflaming the atmosphere during this period. A review of the exaggerated, hysterical coverage of terrorism and the insistence that any Jewish challengers pay the media the “dues of disorder” in order to be heard support such an accusation. Sensationalist news media transform public debates into shouting matches.

In sum, a good deal of evidence indicates that the Israeli news media played a mostly negative role in the Oslo peace process. Most of this evidence comes either from those who were directly involved in the process itself or from the journalists who covered it. Almost all of these informants expressed a sense of frustration and anger. Most believe that the Israeli press was more interested in entertaining than in informing, in escalating conflicts than in helping to resolve them, and in cheapening political discourse than in enriching it. The Israeli press appears better equipped to build walls than bridges.

However, it is critical to place these findings within a broader framework. Oslo never enjoyed a high level of consensus, and neither Rabin nor Arafat was successful in his efforts to halt terrorism. It was an extremely difficult and painful peace process. The Israeli news media simply made it much worse, providing a perfect example of an interactive effect. When sensationalist, ethnocentric news media cover a problematic peace process, the combined impact is especially destructive.

It is worth looking briefly at the peace process with Jordan to further illustrate this point through a counterexample (Wolfsfeld 1997b). Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in the Arava desert on October 26, 1994. The Rabin government had no problem mobilizing a large amount of elite consensus around this agreement: It was approved in the Knesset by a vote of ninety-one to three. Also, no violence was associated with the agreement. It was a short, smooth, and successful process.

The Israeli media became an enthusiastic participant in the celebration over the agreement with Jordan. A content analysis of newspaper articles published at the height of this process found that 74 percent of the news items during this period were positive,

21 percent mixed, and a remarkably small 5 percent negative (Wolfsfeld 1997b). Governments rarely enjoy this type of support, especially in peacetime.⁷

This is why it is so important to look at both the political and the media environments. This point becomes even clearer when one analyzes the role of the news media in the Northern Ireland peace process.

The Case of Northern Ireland

The news media played a very different role in the Northern Ireland peace process.⁸ The reasons for this difference have to do with the nature of the political and media environments in which the news about peace was constructed. The political environment in Northern Ireland was marked by a large degree of elite consensus in support of the agreement and by relatively little violence on the part of those opposed to the accords. The media environment was characterized by many shared news organs and by a relatively low level of sensationalism. This set of circumstances turned the news media into an important tool for promoting the peace process.

This does not mean that the media played an ideal role in Northern Ireland. Many of those interviewed raised a number of complaints against the press. Unionists who were opposed to the Good Friday Agreement believed that media bias prevented any serious deliberation about the risks and costs associated with the process. Members of the nationalist party Sinn Fein were also dissatisfied. While they were pleased with the changes that had taken place in their media image, they still believed that the press was biased against them. One also heard from many different groups concerns about the growing tendency toward “soundbite news” among journalists in Northern Ireland. The difficulty leaders faced in attempting to send complex messages in twenty seconds or less paralleled those found in other Western countries.

Nevertheless, when one compares this situation to that of Oslo one finds a world of difference. The discussion that follows describes some of those differences and explains some of the reasons for them.

The Political Environment

Building a wide consensus in support of the Good Friday Agreement was a long and difficult process. All of the leaders involved had been through a large number of previous attempts that had ended in failure. The most recent example was the Anglo-Irish agreement signed in November 1985, which all Unionist parties had rejected. It was clear that only an agreement enjoying a wide spectrum of political support could have any chance of succeeding. Leaving out parties associated with the various paramilitary groups would be especially dangerous, for this would increase the likelihood of violence.

The international commission headed by George Mitchell worked for more than two years on the agreement. In Mitchell's book, *Making Peace* (1999), he talks about how difficult it was to keep all of the various groups at the same table. His efforts eventually proved successful, and the Good Friday Agreement received more support across the political spectrum than any previous attempt. Not only was the agreement supported by the major parties from each camp (the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour parties), it was also endorsed by the political parties associated with paramilitary groups

(Sinn Fein, the Progressive Unionist Party, and the Ulster Democratic Party). The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the United Kingdom Unionist Party were the only major groups to oppose the accord.

The level of political consensus was reinforced by the decision to carry out a national referendum on the Good Friday Agreement in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. The accord received 71 percent support in the North and 94 percent in the South—a critical turning point for the peace process. The very fact that the plan had been put to a democratic vote placed those who would continue to oppose the agreement at a considerable disadvantage. The peoples of Northern Ireland and Ireland had spoken and even those who lost would be expected to respect that decision.

No such referendum was ever held in Israel. Many of the opponents to the Oslo peace process argued that the Rabin government had never been given a mandate to recognize the PLO or to give up territories. They argued that neither of these policies had been put forth in Rabin's election campaign, and thus the government had no legitimacy. This claim became a common theme for opposition posters and bumper stickers. A referendum on the Oslo peace process might have undermined such a claim, especially if it received a sizable majority.

Table 1 presents a rough summary of the relative levels of political consensus in the two countries. The first measure is based on the number of elected representatives who supported the various peace agreements. The Israeli tally includes the Knesset votes on both the first and second agreements with Palestinians. As discussed, the Oslo B agreement barely passed (sixty-one votes to fifty-nine) while the first Oslo agreement received somewhat more support. The Northern Ireland figure is based on the results of the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which were held in June 1998. Although these party leaders did not actually vote on the Good Friday Agreement, they were all active during the referendum campaign. The figure of 75 percent is based on the proportion of representatives who were elected from parties that supported the agreement.⁹

Table 1. Estimates of Elite and Public Consensus Surrounding Peace Processes in Israel and Northern Ireland

Indicator	Israel	Northern Ireland
Percentage of Legislative Members Supporting Agreements ^a	51%–55%	75%
Percentage of Support for Agreement Among Public ^b	32%–44%	56%–73%

a. The Israel figure is based on first and second votes in the Knesset on Oslo agreements. The Northern Ireland figure is based on the number of representatives elected from parties that supported the Good Friday Agreement. (See footnote 9.)

b. The Israel figure is based on seventeen monthly polls of the Jewish population carried out by the Tami Steinmetz Institute for Peace at Tel Aviv University. (See footnote 10.)

Estimates concerning the amount of public support also come from two different types of measures. The Israeli figure is based on an ongoing survey conducted by the Tami Steinmetz Center (1996) at Tel Aviv University examining public opinion about the Oslo peace process. It is based on a total of seventeen surveys conducted between June 1993 and October 1995 (when the Oslo B agreement was signed).¹⁰ The Northern Ireland figures are based on polls carried out by the *Irish Times* (1998) during the referendum campaign.

Although these figures cannot be considered perfect measures of political consensus, they do provide a general sense of the political climate in the two countries. As discussed, the differences in consensus among the political elite are especially likely to have an impact on the role of the news media. The political parties in Israel were completely divided over Oslo, which came as no surprise to those familiar with Israel's political history. The level of elite support in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, was much higher and included almost all of the major political parties. Here too it is important to take an historical perspective. Only a few years earlier, the political environment in Northern Ireland was quite similar to that in Israel.

Evidence gathered from interviews carried out in Northern Ireland demonstrates the impact this changing level of consensus had on the local news media. One of the most meaningful insights relates to how assumptions about political consensus influence the language and tone of news reports about the peace process. In the past, journalists in Northern Ireland had to be cautious because any implicit support for the peace process would bring charges of bias or even disloyalty. The more polarized a society, the more likely journalists are to come under attack. When all of the major political forces are pointing in the same general direction, it becomes easier for journalists to frame news stories reflecting that fact. One newspaper reporter talked about this change:

There was almost a discomfort of even using the term peace process in the media for a long time, because a lot of Unionists wouldn't accept it was a peace process. It was a surrender process, or an appeasement process. I feel more comfortable using it now because the Ulster Unionists have embraced it to a degree and are starting to take ownership of the peace process. But up until 1996, the Unionists saw the peace process as a conspiracy by the Republicans to lure them into a united Ireland [Northern Ireland interview no. 7; April 13, 1999].

This observation, and others like it, illustrates that political change precedes changes in media coverage. The Ulster Unionists' willingness to accept this particular peace process was the result of a long and difficult process of negotiation and political maneuvering. As the political climate began to change, journalists felt "more comfortable" adopting the propeace frames that had previously been considered controversial. The reactions journalists receive from their audiences tell them whether their stories fall within the realm of contemporary political consensus.

Nevertheless, when the media do adopt a particular frame, it can have a significant impact on the political process. An important example of this change occurred when the Unionist *Ulster Newsletter* and the Nationalist *Irish News* published a series of common editorials in favor of the peace process. As the political camps began to move closer on

the peace process, so did the newspapers. In the culmination of this cooperation, both newspapers asked their readers to vote yes in the referendum. A British official claimed that the *Newsletter's* endorsement was especially important for the process:

The fact is that the *Ulster Newsletter*—which in the past was a decidedly pro-Unionist newspaper, not a moderate Unionist newspaper, but I would say actually a newspaper that was to the right of center within the Unionist community—actually advocated a Yes vote in the referendum. It led the way at a time when it wasn't at all clear which way the Unionist community was going to go on this. . . . The paper was prepared to take a lead role in advocating endorsement of the agreement [Northern Ireland interview no. 6; January 13, 1998].

This provides an excellent illustration of the politics-media cycle of influence. Changes in the political environment—political parties moving closer—led to changes in media norms and routines—a more propeace stance—that then led to further changes in the environment—the rising legitimacy of the peace process among Unionists. If the official quoted above is correct, the *Newsletter* played a critical role in moving the peace process forward.

When the peace process was no longer considered controversial, the news media could take an active role in promoting it. An analysis of editorials appearing in the Nationalist newspaper, the *Irish News*, and the Unionist paper, the *Belfast Telegraph*, provides striking evidence about the extent of this support. As noted, the analysis is based on editorials written after twenty-two events that took place between July 1997 (eight months before the Good Friday Agreement) and mid-April 1999. The final tally for the *Irish News* shows a remarkable sixty-four editorials in support of the peace process, five that express a more ambivalent attitude, and only one that opposed the process. The distribution of opinion in the *Belfast Telegraph* is equally one-sided: sixty-two editorials in favor, eighteen ambivalent, and again only one opposed to the process. This finding is especially surprising given that these editorials were written during periods of violence, when the process appeared to be in danger. Editors in Northern Ireland apparently felt little need to provide a balance between proponents and opponents of peace.

There is also good reason to believe that this same viewpoint carried over into the news section. This helps explain the frustration of those who were against the Good Friday Agreement. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by Ian Paisley, was the most outspoken about media bias. The party argued that it was not being given a fair share of time and space to explain its positions. A spokesperson for the party described the difficulties in swimming against the media stream:

They want the world to be soft and easygoing and people to talk, and we all sit around the table and everybody's good friends and pals, and love, peace, and harmony breaks out, and everything's wonderful, and this man [Paisley] comes along and says, "Wait a minute! That's not right. It's not right to kill people. . . . We're not going to suffer this." And you know, right's right and wrong's wrong. And this man upsets them, and he stirs things up, and he's a thorn in the side of the establishment. They would love Ian Paisley not to be there. They would love the DUP not to be there [Northern Ireland interview no. 10; April 14, 1999].

None of those interviewed could think of a single journalist who opposed the peace process. When asked if there was something inherently unfair about the way the media related to the opposition, a reporter for one of the radio stations replied:

Unfair to an extent. There's no doubt about it that both governments are pushing the pro-peace line, and I think that no matter who you are, you can't fail but want that line to work. Everybody has that sense of wanting it to work so badly that you feed into it. But I believe also that in Northern Ireland you would fail abysmally unless you took both sides . . . everything is sensitive and you've got to balance everything [Northern Ireland interview no. 1; April 14, 1999].

Editors do make room for other voices, but one gets a sense that the playing field is uneven. When so many forces work to promote the peace process, media norms and routines reinforce the deviant status of opponents.

The August 1998 terrorist bombing at Omagh most tellingly demonstrates the influence of consensus on media coverage. In the most destructive attack ever carried out in Northern Ireland, twenty-nine people were killed and over two hundred injured. While no group claimed responsibility, most suspected that the 'Real' Irish Republican Army (RIRA) carried out the attack in an effort to derail the peace process.

On the basis of Israel's experience, one would have expected this bombing to dramatically set back the peace process. However, the response within Northern Ireland was exactly the opposite: The tragedy provided a major impetus for the propeace forces. The news media played an important role in constructing and amplifying this reaction.

The front page of the *British Telegraph* (August 16, 1998) illustrates the difference in coverage. At first glance the news stories look familiar. As in Israel, the faces of the victims stare out at the reader. The lesson to be learned, however, is very different, for amid those pictures, the following message appears:

Let our entire community unite against this evil. Let us commit ourselves to peace and peace alone. Let us back the forces of law and order. Let us resolve to build a new future together, unionist and nationalist alike. Let this be our sincere and lasting tribute to the victims of Omagh.

The Peace frame also dominates the editorial section of the newspaper. In the days following the Omagh attack, the *Irish News* printed nine editorials in favor of continuing the peace process, and the *Belfast Telegraph* published three. Not a single editorial appeared in either paper suggesting the process should be slowed or halted. The DUP was calling for just such a move, but it was not given any editorial space to express its view.

The comparison between coverage in Israel and Northern Ireland provides striking evidence of how political context influences the construction of news stories. Consider, for example, the front page of the newspaper *Ma'ariv* that appeared the day after a terrorist attack in Beit Lid in January 1995. Nineteen were killed in that incident and sixty-eight injured. Accompanying the pictures of the victims were two large headlines: "With Tears of Rage" and "Complete Closure of the Territories." The front page included a call by President Ezer Weizman of Israel to suspend negotiations with the Palestinians, stating that "maybe Arafat's not the right partner."

The anti-Palestinian theme was a major element in all coverage about Beit Lid (Wolfsfeld, in press). The front page of *Yediot Ahronot* (January 23) concluded that Arafat had been reluctant to condemn the attack. The same day, a story in *Ha'aretz*, based on information supplied by a former advisor to the previous government, talked about an audio tape in which Arafat was purported to have said, "We are all suicide bombers" (p. 5). The story did not reveal how long he had had the tape, but this was clearly an appropriate time for him to release it and for the media to publish a story about it. The next day *Ha'aretz* published an article that contained a leaked report from the meeting of the Rabin government headlined, "Security forces at the government meeting: Arafat is not keeping his commitment to operate against extremists" (p. 5b). *Yediot* had a similar story, indicating that a secret report prepared by the military's legal department suggested that the PLO was constantly breaking the agreement (January 24, p. 3). Here too, the article gave no information about when the report had been written. Other stories focused on calls by various leaders to end all cultural contacts with the Palestinians and on those Palestinian groups that were "celebrating" the attack on Beit Lid.

These differences in coverage can be attributed to differences in the two political environments. Israel remained divided over Oslo, and a large proportion of the population continued to hold Arafat responsible for all terrorism. Such frames had dominated media discourse after every previous attack, even though Arafat condemned the violence. The unity of purpose that had characterized the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, allowed the major political parties to work together against those who wanted to stop the peace process. The Omagh bombing marked the first time that Sinn Fein issued an unequivocal condemnation of a terrorist act, and this had a positive influence on many in the Unionist camp.

Omagh and Beit Lid powerfully demonstrate the influence of political consensus on the construction of media frames. The ongoing competition between the security and Peace frames in Israel meant that every act of terrorism would evoke the Security frame. Indeed, Prime Minister Rabin himself employed the Security frame after such attacks by suggesting that the only solution to terrorism was to find a way to keep the Palestinians out of Israel. Only separation of the two peoples, he argued, would accomplish that. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, the wide consensus in support of the Peace frame meant that it was applicable even in the wake of a terrorist attack such as Omagh. In the Israeli case, the "natural" reaction was to halt the peace process, while in Northern Ireland the reaction was to accelerate it.

The explosion at Omagh killed people from every camp, providing further impetus to a unified response. Whereas most previous attacks had been directed at either Protestants or Catholics, the shock waves from this attack ran through both communities. A senior journalist discussed this factor:

You had members of the Gaelic Association, of the DUP, of the Ulster Unionists, you had women out buying clothes for their children going back to school, Catholics, Protestants, you had people from the Irish Republic, you had people from Spain killed there. It was a bomb that touched everybody's life in some way. . . . That bomb was pretty unique in the sense that it was a bonding bomb. It actually drew people closer together [Northern Ireland interview no. 11; April 15, 1999].

As noted, some in the DUP attempted to promote a different frame about Omagh. Similar to the opposition's claims in Israel, they argued that the attack proved that the Irish Republican Army would never respect the cease-fire. Representatives of the opposition appeared on a number of talk shows, but here too they felt sorely outnumbered. As one of their key spokespersons put it, "The press bought into this process before the referendum. They bought into it at the Assembly elections, and they bought into it at Omagh" [Northern Ireland interview no. 10; April 14, 1999].

A Sinn Fein leader who was especially emphatic about the role of the media after Omagh argued that the brunt of the media rage was targeted at the RIRA. The media in the South, for example, printed a full-page photograph of the alleged head of that organization. This led to a boycott, and the man apparently lost his business. The same source claimed that press coverage also had a more significant impact on the peace process:

The media coverage made it very difficult for anybody to oppose the Good Friday Agreement, particularly from within Republicanism or Nationalism. A lot of people I know who are very anti-agreement but not necessarily pro-armed struggle just went into hiding for a week or two . . . because people would say "well, it's the agreement or it's over." I think the media very definitely did the opposite of inflaming the conflict. It genuinely and probably very consciously worked overtime to make conflict, in terms of military conflict, all the more difficult [Northern Ireland interview no. 3; April 13, 1999].

This leader also believed the media reaction to Omagh may have influenced the RIRA to declare a cease-fire after that attack.

It was argued earlier in this report that the Israeli news media tended to blur the distinction between the Palestinian authorities and the rejectionists, especially after terrorist attacks. In the case of Omagh, Northern Ireland's news media did exactly the opposite. They created a bond, albeit temporary, among the propeace groups from both camps, and made a clear distinction between Sinn Fein and the terrorists. Such a distinction can be an important tool in the process of reconciliation.

The media emphasis on the Peace frame represents a relatively new phenomenon in Northern Ireland. Changing media frames are rooted in changes in the political environment. As pointed out by McLaughlin and Miller (1996), the traditional media frame for dealing with such attacks in Northern Ireland had focused on the need to find a solution to terrorism. Similar to the Security frame used in Israel, it generally opposes making any concessions to the "enemy." At issue is how to restore law and order rather than how to find a political solution. A good deal of the research dealing with the media in Northern Ireland has been critical of this bias (for a review, see Cottle 1997). The local and British news media, it was argued, were nothing more than government mouthpieces propagating the antiterrorist theme.

Some might argue that the Northern Ireland news media continue to do that. It's just that most of the major political forces are now promoting a different frame about the conflict. While leaders such as Ian Paisley enjoyed some of the benefits of this cozy relationship in earlier years, they now find themselves in an uphill battle to promote their less popular frames to the media. Given the results of the referendum, those opposed to the

Good Friday Agreement should be entitled to about 30 percent of the public space devoted to this issue. There is little evidence that they receive this space.

The political environment surrounding the Northern Ireland peace process was also much calmer than in Israel, and this too had an influence on the role of the media. In Israel, news stories about violence constituted a major part of the Oslo coverage. Not only was there a much higher level of terrorism but, as discussed, the internal protests were both massive and violent. Most of the opposition to the Good Friday Agreement, on the other hand, was verbal. Acts of violence occurred, especially during “marching season,” and there were several casualties in both camps, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule.

This is not meant to imply that the peace process was smooth. Bitter arguments erupted along the way, and many deadlines passed without agreement. Also, there is no guarantee that the peace process will continue. Still, all major paramilitaries operating in Northern Ireland declared a cease-fire, and there were no massive protests against the agreement, thus providing leaders with an extremely conducive environment for negotiation. These conditions also ensured that the news stories about the peace process focused on negotiations rather than on violence, allowing for a relatively reasonable debate over the process, at least temporarily.

All of these different factors have a strong connection. The high level of elite consensus surrounding the agreement provided a sense of unity that made violent dissent more difficult. This was especially true after Omagh because of how the leaders and the news media reacted to that attack. The relatively low level of violence led to a relatively calm environment for negotiating peace and also had an important impact on the tone of coverage. In short, nothing succeeds in the media like political success.

The Media Environment

The nature of the local media environment also influenced the role of the press in the Northern Ireland peace process. Two aspects are especially worthy of note: (1) the two communities share many media and (2) the level of sensationalism in most of the press is relatively low. Unlike the variables discussed earlier, these factors are more culturally enduring, and thus political leaders have less direct control over them. Fortunately for authorities who supported the peace process, these factors worked in their favor.

It is especially significant that so many Protestants and Catholics get their news from the same media. The greatest overlap in audience composition occurs in television and radio. According to Tim Cooke (1998), two daily television news programs—Ulster Television’s *UTV Live* and BBC Northern Ireland’s *Newsline*—account for a combined audience share of about 70 percent. The only way to maintain such large audiences is to adopt a political perspective acceptable to both sides of the conflict. Owners, editors, and journalists all have a clear commercial interest in appealing to as wide an audience as possible.

While there is more separation among newspaper readers, a significant amount of overlap also exists within this audience. *The Irish News* and the *Newsletter* are more sectarian, but the *Belfast Telegraph* prides itself on attracting readers from both communities. The less partisan *Telegraph* has by far the largest audience, with almost three times as many readers as the other two papers (Rolston 1991). Rolston states that the ratio of

Protestant to Catholic readers is similar to that of the general population.¹¹ The British press also attracts a wide readership from both communities.

Thus, while all news media are not shared, the sharing certainly is much greater than found in most conflicts. Cooke (1998) also notes this difference in his article about the role of the news media in this peace process: "Northern Ireland does not fall victim to one of the difficulties apparent in some other divided societies—that of a media divided by language and speaking to only one side in the conflict" (p. 4). This report argues that shared media in Northern Ireland—media that target people from both sides of the conflict—have a major impact on coverage of the process.¹²

The ability to bridge the gap between the two communities begins at the hiring stage. Northern Ireland has an extremely strict Fair Employment Commission that ensures that all companies, including the news media, employ people from both communities. Although the commission cannot prevent all forms of discrimination, it does ensure that every news organization employs both Protestants and Catholics. People from both communities also work on the more partisan newspapers. A leader from Sinn Fein talked about the overlap:

. . . for example, I think the new editor of the [Nationalist] *Irish News* may have worked for the [Unionist] *Telegraph* at one stage. . . . You wouldn't go into the *Irish News* and say, "Yes, there are all Nationalists," and go into the *Telegraph* and say, "They're all Unionists." It's not like that. And of course, the difference is because here it's much more difficult to assess ethnic differences [than in the Middle East] and . . . it's not polite [to do so]. In middle class circles, which are of course where the newspapers circulate, it's not polite to ask somebody's religion [Northern Ireland interview no. 3; April 13, 1999].

Northern Ireland has a large number of shared media in part, too, because ethnic differences are not obvious. In the Middle East, linguistic and cultural gaps dividing Israelis and Arabs are reflected in their separate news media. The people of Northern Ireland have much more in common, which facilitates movement between the two societies. This mixing of the populations also makes it easier for reporters to gain access to sources from both communities. None of the journalists who were interviewed for this report had any problems interviewing people from either side.

Here too the role of the media in conflicts can be understood only by looking at the larger social and political context in which they operate. At the height of "the Troubles," journalists found it more difficult to write news stories that would be considered fair to both sides. The narrowing of the divide between the major antagonists made it easier for the news media to bridge that gap, too. Part of the reconciliation process in any conflict is to build a set of terms and concepts that will be acceptable to all sides. A Northern Ireland university professor who has studied these issues talked about this change:

Years ago that's where you would've seen differences. For example, look at the mid-eighties when the *Newsletter* constantly fumed against the Anglo-Irish Agreement, refused to call it the Anglo-Irish Agreement even. What did they call it then, the Anglo-Eire Dictat? Whereas the *Irish News* was much more positive about that [Northern Ireland interview no. 12; April 16, 1999].

As noted, the Unionist *Belfast Telegraph* makes a concerted effort to attract Catholic readers. A number of those interviewed referred to the paper as Unionist “with a small ‘u.’” A journalist who writes for the paper talked about how assumptions about the audience influenced coverage:

I’m working for a paper that has a mostly Unionist readership, but is cross-community, has a Catholic readership, so it is the only main paper in Northern Ireland that can boast a sizeable section of its readership coming from the two communities, although, we’re still predominantly a small “u” Unionist paper. . . . So you’re trying to straddle two communities. It’s very difficult with the *Telegraph*. If you’re with the *Newsletter* or the *Irish News* you can just do whatever the hell you want, and you’re not going to offend your readers [Northern Ireland interview no. 7; April 13, 1999].

It is far easier to produce news stories that echo local myths and prejudices than it is to find common ground between hostile groups. Many journalists in Northern Ireland are forced to make an extra effort to attract a larger audience. Northern Ireland provides perhaps the only example in which the commercial interests of the news media actually *benefit* those attempting to promote peace.

The media environment in Northern Ireland is also more conducive to peace in part because journalists have adopted a less sensationalist approach to covering the conflict than in Israel. The BBC tradition of public broadcasting remains an important influence on all of the electronic media, thus raising the level of discourse. This tradition emphasizes two important values: distance and restraint. While drama still plays an important part in the construction of news in Northern Ireland, these values serve as important counterweights.

Popular sensationalist tabloid newspapers include the “Sunday papers,” which are based in London. But the three regional newspapers—the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Newsletter*—provide the most extensive print coverage of the peace process, and they are not sensationalist. Although the *Telegraph* and the *Newsletter* do sometimes run large headlines, the reporting is not overly dramatic. There almost seems to be a division of labor in which citizens turn to the tabloids for entertainment and to the more serious news media for information.

Journalists and political leaders who were involved in the two peace processes offer the most important evidence about the different level of media sensationalism in Israel and Northern Ireland. As discussed, such interviews are the optimal method for gaining insight into the professional norms and routines that distinguish each culture and how they influence the political process. A telling indicator of these differences is the manner in which political leaders in the two countries relate to the press. Every single Israeli leader and spokesperson who was interviewed for this report referred to the sensationalism of the Israeli news media and the problems associated with that. Leaders in Belfast, on the other hand, had considerable respect for their media, especially in that regard.

This sense that the Northern Ireland news media were generally serious and responsible could be found across the political spectrum. An Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) assemblyman, for example, talked about the good fortune of not having “too many tabloid journalists” whose major goal is to “stir up trouble” (Northern Ireland interview no. 9;

April 15, 1999). A Sinn Fein representative said the more restrained tone of coverage in Northern Ireland might be related to its religious culture.¹³ He talked about the differences between local coverage of the conflict and coverage in English newspapers:

One of the differences between journalists in England and journalists here, or journalists who have lived here for some time and journalists who come from the outside, is that journalists here are much more tuned into the sensitivities of reporting a conflict and reporting all of the death and tragedy, and they are therefore much more careful. This makes sensationalizing very difficult. Now it still happens with the Sunday tabloids, but it makes it much more difficult, whereas when you're coming over from England and maybe to a lesser extent when you're coming from Dublin, it's much easier to want the big, simple, sexy story and to be really blasé about . . . trampling over people's feelings [Northern Ireland interview no. 3; April 13, 1999].

A similar message comes from the journalists themselves. Many of the reporters interviewed talked about the dangers of irresponsible reporting. One journalist was both vivid and succinct: "Sensationalism can cost lives." Indeed, editors in Northern Ireland think very carefully before sending reporters to cover street violence. This is apparently a professional norm that has developed over time partly because of the negative impact reporters with tape recorders, microphones, and cameras can have on such incidents. A correspondent for one of the radio stations talked about this change in policy:

Initially any street violence, any civil disorder at all, we would have had a reporter out on the scene reporting there. . . . As the situation developed further and the media, I'm not speaking just purely about our station but more generally, accepted and realized that people were playing to the camera, they backed off. I mean there have been nights when there's been quite a lot of violence, a high level of violence compared to the start of it, and no reporters have gone. It's just been a case of ongoing violence, don't exacerbate the situation by being there, let them sort out whatever they can as best they can, but don't give them the oxygen of publicity to further hurt and insult the opposite side [Northern Ireland interview no. 1; April 13, 1999].

Israeli reporters would argue that such behavior amounts to self-censorship. The public has a right to know what is happening, and journalists have a duty to tell them. The difference in the two sets of norms centers on whether or not journalists should be concerned with the social and political consequences of their reporting. In Israel and many other countries, journalists assume that the press can remain independent only if it reports on everything, regardless of the outcomes. One could easily defend each of these approaches. However, the choice of one model over another can have a significant impact on the role of the news media in the escalation of violence.

None of this is meant to suggest that the press in Northern Ireland is free from the ills that plague the media in other countries. Northern Ireland's political leaders and journalists themselves complained about how difficult "soundbite news" made it to present serious ideological discussions. A representative from the DUP also criticized the media's preference for news from paramilitaries. He argued that the smaller Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) received more coverage than his own party because it posed more of a threat:

[It's] because they're an armed terrorist group. That's it, there's no doubt about that. If you've got guns in this country, you're important. It doesn't matter how many votes you get or how many people you help in a year. If you've got a gun, you're important. We can't threaten anybody [Northern Ireland interview no. 10; April 14, 1999].

These remarks sound similar to ones made by nonviolent groups in Israel. The news media in Northern Ireland still look for drama, a tendency that can create serious problems for those unwilling to produce it.

In general, however, political leaders and spokespersons in Northern Ireland feel less pressure than those in Israel to use extremist language and tactics to gain access to the media. This is a critical difference between the two political cultures. Sensationalist media pressure actors to use extremist rhetoric and actions—a great danger. Differing political systems may also account for variations in the amount of press sensationalism. The institution of primaries in Israel has increased the need for Israeli politicians to obtain the maximum level of media exposure (Peri, in press). The strong political party system in Northern Ireland serves to lower incentives for grandstanding.

A more moderate media create an atmosphere more conducive to internal as well as external peace: A more restrained media environment can lead to a more moderate political environment. One of the most significant influences the news media can have on public discourse is to raise the volume. The level of amplification is directly related to the norms and routines adopted by journalists. They can turn the knob either up or down, directly affecting everyone involved.

The concern about sensationalism expressed by many of the journalists in Northern Ireland may also be related to their enthusiastic support of the peace process. It is clear to them that sensationalist news coverage has potential for inflaming an already dangerous situation. While some might object to such a partisan approach, one can certainly appreciate journalists' desire for peace. One of the most respected journalists in Northern Ireland put it like this:

I'm unapologetic in saying I want peace. I want an end to all this violence, this war. Journalists come into journalism to have wars. Many of them want to see themselves as war correspondents. I certainly don't want to be a war correspondent. I've seen it all. I've been to the bomb scenes. I've seen life desecrated, wiped out. I've seen my own local pub and shop at home where my sister worked for many years as a student. I saw young Michael Donnelley killed at a petrol pump serving petrol. I saw the bomb attack on those premises. I've seen dozens and dozens of attacks, many of my school friends are dead as a result of violence. So I want an end to it all [Northern Ireland interview no. 11; April 15, 1999].

Conclusions and Implications

The research for this report focused on the two major aspects of the political environment most likely to influence the media's role in a peace process: (1) the level of elite consensus in support of the process, and (2) the number and intensity of crises marring the process. The Rabin government failed in both of these areas, and the Israeli news media played a mostly negative role in that process. The media's negative role became especially clear after terrorist attacks, when hysterical news coverage questioned the entire peace process.

Authorities in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, enjoyed both a higher level of elite consensus and a smaller number of crises. These conditions helped mobilize the news media in support of the process. Coverage of terrorist attacks demonstrates this principle best. When reporting on terrorism, in direct contrast to the Israeli media, the Northern Ireland press stressed the need to accelerate the peace process to prevent further acts of terror.

The differences between media environments in the two conflict areas continue in that vein. The Israeli press was more sensationalist and more ethnocentric than the news media in Northern Ireland, which also contributed to the different roles the media played. Larger numbers of journalists in Northern Ireland produced news stories for both Protestants and Catholics, forcing them to adopt a more balanced and constructive form of coverage. These journalists were also more concerned about the damaging effects sensationalist coverage might have on the conflict. In Israel, on the other hand, the battle over audience share appears to overshadow concerns about social responsibility.

This report contains good news and bad news for those interested in promoting peace. The bad news is that leaders cannot depend on the news media to help them when they are in trouble. Political leaders often buy into the myth that if only they could hire the right publicity people or produce the best spin, they could create a positive image for themselves and their policies. The construction of news about peace, however, is directly related to the state of the political environment. Leaders who are unable to mobilize a broad political consensus for their policies will have little success in promoting those policies to the media.

The news media, especially sensationalist news media, make a problematic peace process much worse. They have a vested interest in dramatic conflict, and this has a negative impact on both the peace process itself and the internal debate over it. The news media not only amplify the tension and violence associated with such conflicts, they often encourage it. As deviance is one of the primary criteria for access to the media, those who want to be heard must prove that they are more extremist than their competitors. Moderate voices are routinely excluded from the discussion because they are not considered newsworthy.

This dynamic has a number of unfortunate implications for those interested in the promotion of peace. First, it means that the news media are least likely to help in those cases where they might do the most good. When elites and the public are fairly divided over a peace process, the media have the potential to tilt the balance in one direction or the other. Given the way news is constructed, they are most likely to tilt the scales against peace. Some might argue that this is for the best; a peace process without a broad range of internal support is in any case doomed to failure. Nevertheless, almost every peace process eventually runs into trouble. It is at just these junctures that the media impact can be so critical.

Indeed, this is exactly what took place as this report was going to press. A new *Intifada* broke out in September 2000 after a summit at Camp David had failed to bring about a new agreement. The Israeli media again framed Palestinians as vicious terrorists, and the Security frame returned in full force. The Palestinian news media played a similar role in fanning the flames of hatred and violence. Each society returned to its own private world, with its media continually repeating that its people were the true victims. Based on the heartbreaking images and stories, how could anyone fail to realize the evil of the enemy? The news media had once again made a bad situation even worse.

Another negative consequence is associated with this phenomenon. As is often said, it is much easier to destroy than to build, and this is certainly true in the area of media and peace. Hamas was extremely successful at using terrorism to derail the Oslo peace process, and the hysteria of the Israeli news media was an important element in this dynamic. As noted, there is an inherent contradiction between the demands of a peace process and the needs of the news media. A peace process is composed mostly of long, complicated negotiations where the need for secrecy far outweighs the need for publicity. Opponents can easily exploit this situation by providing the media with the drama they desire.

It is important for policymakers to understand this situation and find better ways to deal with it. It is critical to develop a long-range political strategy that also takes into account the needs of the media. The Rabin government, for example, was extremely meticulous in planning the peace ceremonies that followed every success. There was little preparation, on the other hand, for dealing with disasters, which provided Oslo opponents with important advantages. The better leaders understand how and why the role of the news media can change, the better prepared they will be to exploit their opportunities and to limit the damage associated with their failures.

The adoption of such a strategy might include two major components. The first involves continually promoting a long-range perspective to journalists and the public. Leaders and spokespersons would have to fight their natural political tendencies to exaggerate successes and constantly present optimistic visions of the future. It is important that they also provide warnings about crises that might occur down the road, lower expectations about when to expect a breakthrough, and constantly attempt to place current events within a longer historical context. While this would involve going against journalists' preference to focus on the immediate, such efforts could make a difference. At the very least, this strategy would put leaders in a better position to react to disasters by pointing to their previous warnings.

The second component of such a policy entails setting up a crisis team to deal with such situations. In quiet times the team could develop crisis scenarios and policy recommendations for dealing with news media during such situations. When a crisis does break out, this team could form the equivalent of a “war room” that would implement the policies as rapidly and efficiently as possible. It is important for political leaders to look at the struggle for peace as part of an ongoing campaign.

Other important implications of this report deal with how journalists operate. The idea of a shared media is an important one. Although it is not realistic to attempt to create shared media where they do not already exist, it is possible to increase the level of interaction among different news media. Organizing joint meetings of editors and reporters from rival communities could lead to greater cooperation between them. The organization Search for Common Ground, based in Washington, D.C., conducts such seminars in a number of conflict areas, including the Middle East. Efforts might also be made to persuade certain news media to hire journalists from the opposite camp in an effort to provide their audience with an alternative perspective.

It is also worth considering more significant changes within the news media. The differences in the journalistic cultures of Israel and Northern Ireland demonstrate that professional norms and routines do vary over time and circumstance. The notion of ethics should not be limited to the single value of “objectivity.” Journalists working in conflict-ridden areas could adopt norms that would minimize the risk of escalating conflict and maximize the potential for reconciliation. Robert Manoff (1996, 1997, 1998) is one of a number of scholars who have put forth a model of “peace journalism” that includes a series of practical suggestions for changing editorial policies along these lines.¹⁴ Examples include counteracting misperceptions about the conflict and the other side, using analytical frameworks that have been developed in the field of conflict resolution, and reporting on areas of cooperation between the antagonists.

It must be emphasized, however, that a more conducive form of journalism depends on making *structural changes* in the news production process. Such changes might include creating special sections in newspapers and programs in the broadcast media dedicated to peace issues. Such sections and programs would force reporters to search for materials that would be consistent with the values of peace journalism. The stories could include essays written by foes, stories about the other side’s culture and society, stories that deal with various peace proposals, and stories about individuals and groups that are working for peace and reconciliation.

Many news people would object to such changes, arguing that they violate important journalistic values. Nevertheless, the goal of such sections and programs is not to replace conflict journalism but merely to add peace stories for balance. Galtung (1998) has suggested an intriguing parallel in this regard. How, he asks, would the health section of the newspaper look if it were devoted only to the study of diseases? There would never be any news devoted to preventive medicine, research on possible cures, or advances in understanding and curing disease. Instead, the health section would focus almost exclusively on the most frightening diseases, any illnesses or epidemics on the horizon, and sad stories about the sick and the dying. Such is the nature of conflict journalism today.

Another approach would be to wage war against sensationalism. Such a battle is never easy, because owners and editors are understandably reluctant to risk losing audience share. However, the notion that “sensationalism can cost lives” can be a powerful message in war-torn societies. If peace groups and other organizations attempted to place this issue on the national agenda, editors might adopt more responsible policies. The success enjoyed in recent years by women’s groups and minorities in changing media routines demonstrates that such efforts can produce results.

At the very least there is a need to begin a dialogue about these issues among policymakers, journalists, researchers, and peace activists. As noted in the introduction, little research has been done on this topic, even among those who study conflict resolution. This is in stark contrast to the enormous amount of research and public discussion about the role of the news media in terrorism and war. It is to be hoped that a growing awareness of the central role the media play in other political processes will lead to an increased focus on the role they play in attempts to bring peace.

Notes

1. A number of studies deal with such topics as the role of the media in foreign policy and diplomacy (Cohen 1987; Cohen 1986; Fromm et al. 1992; Gilboa 1998; Gowing 1997; Henderson 1973; O’Heffernan 1993, 1991; Serfaty 1991; Strobel 1997); several relate to the problems peace movements face in attempting to mobilize the news media (Glasgow University Media Group 1985; Gitlin 1980; Hackett 1991; Ryan 1991; Small 1987); a few articles deal with the role of the news media in disarmament and international cooperation (Bruck 1988, 1989; Dorman, Manoff, and Weeks 1988; Gamson and Stuart 1992); and several have to do with images of the enemy (Ayres 1997; Becker 1996; Eckhardt 1991; Ottosen 1995). Some work has been done on “peace journalism,” which talks about the need to change journalists’ norms and routines for covering peace and conflict (Adam and Thomotheram 1996; Bruck and Roach 1993; Galtung 1998; Himmelfarb 1998; Lynch 1998; Manoff 1996, 1997, 1998; Roach 1993; Shinhar, forthcoming).
2. The seven events were the opening week of the peace process (September 1993), the Baruch Goldstein massacre (February 1994), the terrorist attacks in Afula and Hadera (April 1994), The Cairo Agreement (May 1994), the terrorist attack in Dizengoff (October 1994), the attack on Beit Lid (January 1995), and the terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (February–March 1995).
3. The Unionist *Belfast Telegraph* was selected, rather than the *Newsletter*, because it has by far the largest circulation. Rolston estimated its readership at 500,000, which is three times the audience of either the *Irish News* or the *Newsletter*. This tells us something about the potential impact of such a paper on the political climate. However, the *Newsletter* is a more purely unionist newspaper, and thus an analysis of its editorials might have produced somewhat different results.
4. The twenty-four events are the violence associated with an Orange March (July 1997), announcement of an IRA cease-fire (July 1997), Sinn Fein joins the talks (September 1997), Sinn Fein leaders meet with Prime Minister Blair (October 1997), Sinn Fein leaders first visit Downing Street (December 1997), LVF leader shot in Maze prison (December 1997), Loyalist and Catholic killed (January 24, 1998), UDA member killed (February 1998), IRA terrorism, Sinn Fein expelled from talks (February 1998), attack on Armagh police station (March 10, 1998), Sinn Fein back in talks (March 1998), Good Friday Agreement (April 1998), Referendum (May 1998), Drumcree standoff (July 1998), Omagh bombing (August 17, 1998), meeting between Adams and Trimble, first Assembly meeting (September 1998), Hume and Trimble nominated for Nobel Peace Prize (October 1998), Loyalists murder Catholic (November 1998), violence following Protestant march (December 1998), Loyalist violence (January 1999), human rights activist murdered (March 16, 1999), and Hillsborough Declaration (April 3, 1999).

5. Caspi and Limor (1999) argue that “although both dailies adopt many of the features of the popular press, one could hardly label them ‘sensationalist.’ Even if their editors are at times guilty of banner headlines that border on the hysterical (after a terror attack, for example), they are careful not to adopt the more common features of yellow journalism such as nude photos or low-level language” (p. 81). I would argue that the level of sensationalism is a variable that can be placed along a continuum. Israeli newspapers are not the worst of the lot, but they are certainly not the best, especially (as Caspi and Limor suggest) when it comes to the coverage of political violence.
6. This ethnocentric orientation is also a problem for the Arab citizens of Israel, who represent a significant minority in that country (Avraham, Wolfsfeld, and Aburaiya 2000; Wolfsfeld, Avraham, and Aburaiya, forthcoming).
7. The Israeli news media played a less positive role in the post-agreement stage. Preliminary findings from research under way reveal that the Israeli press now mostly ignores Jordan unless something particularly negative occurs.
8. Much has been written on the media and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Most of this work takes a critical view of the local media’s willingness to cooperate with the British government against Sinn Fein and the IRA in the years leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. For an excellent summary of this literature see Cottle (1997). Two other important works in this area are a volume written by Miller (1994) and one edited by Rolston and Miller (1996). McLaughlin and Miller (1996) as well as Cooke (1998) have carried out more recent studies that deal with changes that have occurred in light of the peace process. Another comparison between the role of the media in the two peace processes can be found in Shinhar (forthcoming).
9. The political parties in favor of the agreement in Northern Ireland included the Ulster Unionist Party (28 representatives), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (24), Sinn Fein (18), the Alliance Party (6), the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (2), and the Progressive Unionist Party (2). Opposing the agreement were the Democratic Unionist Party (20), the Northern Ireland Unionist Party (4), the United Unionist Assembly Party (3), and the UK Unionist Party (1). A number of other political parties that also favored the yes vote (Unionist Democratic Party, the Greens, Labour Coalition, and the Workers’ parties) did not win any seats in the Assembly.
10. The average level of support among all of these surveys was 37.6 percent, with an average of 23.8 percent saying they were undecided. If the Arab citizens of Israel (almost all of whom supported the Oslo accords) had been included in these surveys, the average amount of support would probably have risen to about 45 percent. This is still far from a consensus. In addition, previous research suggests that the Hebrew press mostly ignores the Arab population in Israel (Avraham, Wolfsfeld, and Aburaiya 2000; Wolfsfeld, Avraham, and Aburaiya, forthcoming). The voting figures from the Knesset include both Jewish and Arab representatives.
11. The figures are based on a readership survey from 1988. An estimated 61 percent of readers were Protestant and 32 percent Catholic. The proportion in the population was about 57 percent Protestant and 37 percent Catholic.

12. Alan Bairner (1996) makes exactly the opposite claim about the media in Northern Ireland, arguing that the fact that so much of the press is partisan reinforces the divisions in the area. The disagreement between us has to do with the difference in perspective. This report emphasizes the comparative perspective. Northern Ireland, compared to other areas in conflict, has more political overlap in audience composition.
13. It is interesting to note in this context that none of the religious newspapers in Israel are sensationalist.
14. For a list of scholars who have written on this topic, see note 1.

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