



Framing National Interest.

How Media Discourses Influence Western Policy Agendas Towards Foreign Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

To what extent and how do media discourses shape the sometimes erratic and often problematic responses of Western policymakers to armed conflicts around the globe? The thesis examines this question from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives. It highlights the contingency of the Western gaze and the ability of non-governmental political elites to influence processes of foreign policymaking by shaping public discourse on the national interest.

The thesis statistically analyses how much time and resources the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany spend on 20 of the most intense armed conflict between 1998 and 2010. Based on original data covering 42,000 newspaper articles and 4,200 foreign policy events, the thesis shows that a conflict's place on the foreign policy agenda is systematically related to media discourses that suggest doing something about a specific conflict. The analysis demonstrates furthermore that much of the discursive patterns in media precede foreign policy activity, which indicates that the media do not just report on foreign policy developments, but also help to bring them about. In the second part, this thesis uses Western reactions to the civil war in Darfur as a theory-developing case study to explore who is able to shape foreign policy discourse and how. It problematizes wide-spread conceptions of the elite, the media, and the public and develops an analytical framework that is based on discourse theoretical notions put forward by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek. In contrast to the widespread top-down narratives in which governmental elites simply dictate a foreign policy consensus to media and public, this thesis argues that the dividing line is rarely between 'the government' and 'the people.' Rather, political conflict revolves around competing ideological positions that try to define the meaning of the national interest. Media discourses are a central forum for the hegemonic struggle between these positions and societal actors other than governmental officials can effectively intervene in this process.



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Bio

Patrice Wangen currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen in the ERC project “Diplomatic Face-Work Between Confidential Negotiations and Public Display” (DIPLOFACE). He was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the George Washington University, holds a MSc in European Studies from Maastricht University, as well as a BA in Political Science and History from the University of Greifswald. In his work, he explores how modern data scientific tools like machine learning and social network analysis can help us to understand the nature and impact of sociological and discursive processes in international politics. His main research interests revolve around armed conflicts, media analysis, international politics, and the development of a post-structuralist or critical constructivist approach to advanced quantitative methods.