

Bernd Hirschberger

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

A Theoretical Model and Empirical Case Study
of the Conflict in Israel and Palestine

From:

Bernd Hirschberger

External Communication in Social Media During Asymmetric Conflicts

**A Theoretical Model and Empirical Case Study
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Social media increasingly shapes the way in which we perceive conflicts and conflict parties abroad. Conflict parties, therefore, have started using social media strategically to influence public opinion abroad. This book explores the phenomenon by examining, (1) which strategies of external communication conflict parties use during asymmetric conflicts and (2) what shapes the selection of these communication strategies. In a comprehensive case study of the conflict in Israel and Palestine, Bernd Hirschberger shows that the selection of strategies of external communication is shaped by the (asymmetric) conflict structure.

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For further information:

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1. Introduction

1.1 Wars of words and images – The effectualness of pictures and stories of war and their strategic exploitation by conflict parties

Pictures and stories of war make a difference.

In their recent contributions to the study of conflicts and peace scholars like Mary Kaldor (Kaldor 1999 & 2013) and Chistopher Daase (Daase 1999) have demonstrated that modern conflicts are complex and embedded in a global context of interactions and interdependencies. The outcome and development of a conflict, therefore, is not simply determined by the military capacities of the actual conflict parties (“hard power”) but is also shaped by socio-cultural factors, such as the image of the conflict parties, their credibility, the perception of shared values and moral support (“soft power”) (cf. also Nye 2008; Nye 2009): In the modern globalized world, many conflicts attract the attention of even those countries that are far away from the actual center of the conflict (Yarchi 2016: 291f.). This can stimulate external moral, diplomatic, economic or even military interventions by state, or private, actors (Jakobsen 1996). These interventions can have a significant impact on the course of the conflict, as they can provide valuable support for a conflict party or they can assert pressure on a conflict party. The image audiences abroad have of a conflict and its actors influences whether external actors intervene in a conflict or not. And, if external actors decide to intervene, the image of the conflict and its actors they have influences what kind of measures they choose for their intervention (cf. Kaldor 1999: 57-68 using the example of the war in Yugoslavia as an illustration; Yarchi 2016: 292f.).¹ On the one hand, negative pictures and stories from conflict are proven to encourage mobilization against conflict parties. On the other hand, however, it is noteworthy that positive pictures and stories can also mobilize in favor of conflict parties:

1 Moreover, Autesserre observed that the focus of the reporting about conflict also influences which activities aiding NGOs choose: In the 2000s media reports increasingly stressed the role of sexual violence. In the following time, NGOs more frequently initiated campaigns related to this topic (Autesserre 2014: 138).

Negative pictures and stories can mobilize against a conflict party.

The picture “The Terror of War”, a photography by Nick Ut from 08th of June 1972 shows a group of children fleeing from their home village, the village of Trảng Bàng. A South-Vietnamese airplane had accidentally dropped napalm on the village, an incendiary weapon said to have caused more damage than the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Guillaume 2016: 1+7; cf. also Neer 2013). The children are fleeing from the heat and the fire the napalm had caused. In the center of the picture is a naked girl, the 9-year old Kim Phuc, later known due to the picture as the “Napalm Girl”. Her face shows an expression of pain and horror. She had to rip off her burning clothes while running, screaming “Too hot! Too hot!”. Her skin is peeling off from her body due to the injuries which had been caused by the burn (TIME Magazine 09.09.2016; CNN 27.09.2016: image 19; Business Insider 03.12.2018; Welt 07.03.2013; Harris 2018) (*For copyright reasons the picture cannot be printed here. However, the image can be accessed online, e.g. on the website of the US National Gallery of Arts: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.136637.html>, accessed on 03.08.2020*).

Pictures like the picture of “The Terror of War” depicting the cruelties of the war in Vietnam went around the world (Harris 2018: 194). This picture has been even listed by the TIME Magazine (TIME Magazine 01.11.2016) as being one of the most influential pictures of all time. CNN deemed it one of the most iconic images as well (CNN 27.09.2016: image 19). Moreover, the picture was awarded in 1973 with the title “World Press Photo of the Year” (World Press Photo Foundation s.a.) as well as a Pulitzer Prize (The Pulitzer Prizes 09.03.2016). Indeed, pictures such as “The Terror of War” shocked the world, fueling public protests and helping activists in the Western world to mobilize against the US engagement in the war in Vietnam (Guillaume 2016: 8; Miller 2004²).

Similar pictures and stories of the cruelties of wars and the conflict parties fighting in these wars have been published and circulated for other conflicts, too. Pictures of the abuse of detainees in the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib published in 2004 by CBS News (BBC 16.05.2018; Aljazeera 01.10.2017; CNN 04.03.2019), or the video titled “Collateral Murder” showing US soldiers firing with heavy weaponry at unprotected civilians published in 2010 by Wikileaks (Wikileaks 05.04.2010), for example, harmed the reputation of the USA worldwide. Similar to the Vietnam War such pictures raised questions about the necessity and legitimacy of military involvements and about how they are conducted and created outrage against conflict parties. All of these examples, therefore, clearly show that negative pictures and stories from conflicts can mobilize against conflict parties and their involvement in the corresponding conflicts.

2 Cf. also Westwell (2011: 13) with a differentiated assessment of the effectualness of images from the Vietnam War such as “The Napalm Girl”.

Positive pictures and stories can help to mobilize support in favor of a conflict party.

Another unnamed picture from an unknown author shows a female fighter smiling and showing the V sign as a gesture of victory. The picture was shared multiple times on social media and was also taken up by many traditional forms of mass media (*For copyright reasons the picture cannot be printed here. However, the image can be accessed online, e.g. in an article of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty from the 27th of October 2014: <https://www.rferl.org/a/under-black-flag-rehana-kurdish-female-beheaded-islamic-state/26660097.html>, accessed on 03.08.2020*).

The woman is known by the pseudonym Rehana. The woman depicted in the picture, however, was given the nickname “Angel of Kobane” as a means of heroifying her on social media. Alongside the picture and the nickname, the myth was spread that the woman had killed more than a hundred Daesh fighters as a sniper fighting for the Kurds in Northern Syria (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 27.10.2014; Ibraaz 01.06.2016; Digg 17.11.2014; Hotech 22.10.2014).

The image and the related stories are not only a heroification of the depicted woman, but they also serve as a visualization of the extraordinary contribution made by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYD) in the fight against Daesh, a group which is perceived in the Western world as evil because of their conducting of gruesome terrorist attacks in many parts of the world, including the Western world. At the same time, the image also serves as a testimony for the progressive values of the PYD by showing that women and men fight in the PYD on equal footing, something that would be inconceivable for most other groups in the Middle East (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 27.10.2014). All of this has helped to justify international interventions in favor of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq despite links of the former to the PKK, which is deemed by many countries as a terrorist organization, despite links of the Northern Syrian PYD's ideology to Marxism and despite criticism of the NATO ally Turkey (cf. also Kardaş & Yeşiltaş 2017).

Already in past conflicts like World War II depictions and narrations about war heroes and their heroic deeds were used to generate support for involvements in conflicts (Foley 2015: 9ff.; Bray 1995; cf. also Murray 2000; Koppes & Black 1990). Pictures of the cheering “liberated” civil population, for example, have been useful for mobilizing support (an approach employed e.g. also by Daesh in the third issue of its Dabiq Magazine³). In the Gulf War in 1990/1991, moreover, the euphemizing framing of the conflict as a war fought with extraordinary, “surgical” precision was used. It could increase the acceptance of the military involvement significantly (White 1994: 133f.; cf. also Habermas 1999). All of these examples, therefore, clearly

3 Accessible online via: Clarion Project (2014): Dabiq Magazine, Issue 3: page 15; cf. also Gentile 2017: 67.

show that positive pictures and stories from conflicts can mobilize in favor of conflict parties and their involvement in the corresponding conflicts.

Other examples, furthermore, show that not only positive pictures and stories from conflicts can generate support for conflict parties. Not conflict-related pictures and stories do so as well. Many Arabic countries, for example, showcase the luxury they can afford as oil-exporting countries (cf. e.g. Zeineddine 2017) and can thus distract onlookers, to a certain extent, from human rights violations happening in the corresponding countries or from involvements in bloody wars like the civil war in Yemen.⁴

Pictures and stories can be used during conflicts strategically.

As the literatures on propaganda and persuasion (e.g. Spring 2011), strategic communication (e.g. Mor 2007) and public diplomacy (e.g. Melissen 2005: 13f.; Mor 2006; Pratkanis 2009) show,⁵ pictures and stories are not only effective, and for this reason powerful, but that this power of communication and notions can be (and is) used by conflict parties to support their own interests (respectively what they perceive to be their interests) by strategically preparing and designing their communication and strategically selecting arguments and the content of their external communication.

Many conflict parties nowadays, indeed, acknowledge the relevance of the image of the conflict and its actors. And many conflict parties have started to realize

4 Cf. e.g. New York Times 20.10.2018, reporting about the efforts of the Saudi government to present their country as “vibrant” and their efforts to silence opponents. The article, however, does not distinguish clearly between domestic and external communication. In other parts of the world the use of branding to distract from human rights violations can be observed as well (c.f. e.g. Transparency International 29.01.2019 about the case of Azerbaijan).

5 Some constructivist authors and approaches describe the possibility to use pictures and stories strategically, too. Finnemore and Sikkink e.g. argue that actors can become “norm entrepreneurs” and that they retain the capacity to strategically (re)construct their social environment (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998: 910; Chwiero 2009: 14). Similarly, proposing a “strategic constructivism”, Jabko points out that notions and communicating are an attractive and valuable resource and tool to influence (Jabko 2006: 8) and that actors can resort to notions “to articulate and advance their interests” and that, therefore, notions are valuable resources, in particular in settings with tensions between competing actors (Jabko 2006: 8; cf. also Eberlein & Radaelli: 783). This characterization of notions and communication resembles also the characterization of Weishaupt who describes notions, referring to Blyth, as “strategic weapons” in the competitive political battle for control (Weishaupt 2011: 46, referring to Blyth 2002). Also other concepts, such as “rhetorical action” (Schimmelfennig 1997: 219ff.) and the approach of a “discursive institutionalism”, as proposed by Schmidt (Schmidt 2008a; Schmidt 2008b), describe impactful strategic uses of communication and Balzacq emphasizes the importance of integrating the possibility of strategic purposes of communication within the field of securitization (Balzacq 2005: 173).

that they can use their external communication to influence this image by strategically influencing audiences abroad. A good example for such an actor, for which corresponding considerations have become a central part of its strategic planning, are the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), as their 2015 military doctrine illustrates well: To react to the challenges with which it is confronted within its strategic environment the IDF describes that it wants to broaden its strategic focus from a classical approach focused only on the military combat in the battlefield and conventional (interstate) warfare to a new “multidiscipline concept”⁶ encompassing „military, economic, legal, media, and political“⁷ aspects. “Achieving and maintaining legitimacy”⁸ is described as the paramount goal of the new approach. To achieve this goal the IDF has included in its 2015 doctrine a “campaign” that “has both defensive and offensive aspects”.⁹ On the one hand, it aims at “creating legitimacy for Israel (including freedom of action for the IDF)”.¹⁰ This means the IDF wants itself and the State of Israel to be perceived in a positive light: It wants to be well-accepted by the Israeli population as well as by the international community (especially by the most important institutions and the governments and the public of particularly important foreign countries). It wants to convey its actions in a way making them perceived as appropriate and necessary or even positive to avoid negative interventions and to mobilize support. Building up a capability to achieve legitimacy “should [according to the 2015 IDF doctrine especially] take into account the power of the media through mechanisms operating in the short term and by planning and synchronization between operations on the battlefield, the perception-public relations effort and the legal effort”¹¹. On the other hand, it simultaneously aims at “delegitimizing the enemy ([and] thereby restricting its moves)”,¹² i.e., it wants the opponents of the State of Israel to be perceived in a negative light¹³ and thereby annihilate arguments for supporting these enemies or even trigger interventions against them by providing arguments to do so. Therefore, it is perceived as important by the IDF to “take into consideration the state of legitimacy in assessing the overall situation and adapt relevant components from the processes involved in

6 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 31.

7 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 31.

8 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, headline for paragraphs no. 34-36.

9 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 34.

10 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 34.

11 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 5, paragraph no. 34.

12 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 34.

13 Cf. also IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 5, paragraph no. 33, section A; the IDF concept of a “war over perceptions” has been also been paraphrased as a “war for hearts and minds” that is directed to multiple audiences (cf. Shavit 2016: 28+36): toward the own domestic population to maintain support, toward the enemy’s followers and civil population to break the popular will, the “civil morale”, and decrease popular support (cf. also Shue 2011: 471), and toward audiences abroad to mobilize support and delegitimize support for the enemy.

building the force and operating it".¹⁴ This shows how much the IDF cares about its image and how highly it assesses the strategic value of its image. Consequently, "Achieving legitimacy"¹⁵ and "the ability to impact the shaping of perception in all the circles associated with the conflict"¹⁶ also is defined by the leadership of IDF as a vital task and core competence of the Israeli military. Besides "intelligence, [...] psychological warfare, diplomatic and political channels" the doctrine highlights thereby, in particular, the importance of "public relations, [and] professional information"¹⁷, i.e., external communication, as methods to shape the perception of audiences abroad.

That a conflict party dedicates so much space and such a central role to the aspect of using pictures and stories strategically in a document describing its general military strategy shows how central and relevant the aspect has become for conflict parties in modern conflicts: For one, conflict parties acknowledge (unlike classical neorealist or rationalist theories might expect¹⁸) the high strategic relevance of pictures and stories. On the other hand, they engage in external communication to strategically use this power of pictures and stories to their advantage.

The rise of social media further increased possibilities and relevance for conflict parties to engage in external communication.

The rise of the mass media and especially the rise of social media of recent has further increased the possibilities and relevance for conflict parties to engage in external communication (cf. e.g. Samuel-Azran & Yarchi 2018): Whilst traditional forms of mass media such as television, radio and newspapers continue to play an important role and remain influential, in the recent years, social media has become a new arena with a more and more growing importance. Social media, moreover, offers conflict parties the advantage of being able to spread their messages without any editorial modifications of journalists and media-makers. Furthermore, social media is comparatively easy to access for conflict parties (cf. e.g. Kwon et al. 2012). Setting up and taking care of a Facebook page or a Twitter account is comparatively

14 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 5, paragraph no. 35.

15 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 5, unnumbered table "Core abilities required by the IDF".

16 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 5, paragraph no. 33.

17 IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 35.

18 Within the mainstream of the rationalist and realist traditions external communication so far typically either is conceptualized as "cheap talk" (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001: 402), as a mere appendix to power-political decisions or limited to aspects such as audience costs and a signaling function during bargaining. In general, communication is perceived in the rationalist and realist traditions typically as purely instrumental but not as additionally (possibly) constitutive and/or persuasive (Strong 2015: 6ff.).

cheap in comparison to the expenses needed for editing a newspaper or a television broadcast (Evans 2016: 334; Kuntsman & Stein 2010; Al-Monitor 13.10.2015¹⁹). Whilst aiming to theorize the external communication of conflict parties in general, therefore, considering their growing relevance, this study focuses in particular on the external communication of conflict parties in social media.

1.2 Research focus, research questions and core thesis

Pictures and stories of war make a difference. And pictures and stories can be used during conflicts strategically. Scholars from the fields of public diplomacy (e.g. Yarchi 2016; Mor 2006; Mor 2007) and related literatures such as digital diplomacy (e.g. Kretschmer 2017) or cultural diplomacy (e.g. Bu 1999) and, even earlier, scholars studying propaganda and persuasion started to explore the phenomenon of the strategic use of communication during conflicts. So far, besides the relevance of the topic, however, most contributions to this research are still mostly descriptive and anecdotal. In general, scholars of public diplomacy have been pointing out that their field still lacks theorization and comprehensive, systematic empirical studies (e.g. Entman 2008: 87; Gilboa 2008: 56; Fullerton 2016).²⁰ Similarly, while schol-

19 Cf. also Hanson 2013: chapter "Questioning the Media".

20 Considering that social media are still a comparatively young technology, even less research examining the use of social media for external communication during conflicts has been published than about the strategic use of external communication during conflicts in general. From the few contributions already existing so far on the use of social media during conflicts, many contributions focus on the innovative character of the new technology and its strategic and tactical implications. These contributions, however, so far mostly neglect to categorize the content of the social media messages used for external communication. Within the small number of contributions that looks also at the content of the communication in the social media during conflicts most contributions so far have a simple inductive design and are mostly descriptive. All the contributions focus only on single communication channels and events, such as the communication of the Israeli army and Hamas during the Gaza Wars in 2008/2009 (Ward 2009), in 2012 (Zeitsoff 2016; Zeitsoff 2013; Kruse 2013) and in 2014 (Orth 2017; Aouragh 2016 – both using a poststructuralist perspective; El Zein & Abusalem 2015), and the Flotilla incident (Allan & Brown 2010; Kruse 2013; Mor 2014). Other studies deal with (online) media efforts during the Second Intifada (Shai & Moskowitz 2018) and the Lebanon War in 2006 (Mor 2012; Mor 2012b). A study of Kohn (2015) examining the Instagram posts on the Instagram page of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is a seldom example for a study examining posts from a stage of the conflict that is not a particularly intensive stage of the conflict. The study, however, examines only the posts from August until September 2013 (Kohn 2015: 198), i.e., only a rather short timeframe. Another example is a small study of Garnett who examined a small sample of 378 tweets from two months from the Twitter channel of the IDF (Garnett 2015). Furthermore, various studies about the communication of extremist groups have been published (especially about the communication of Islamist groups such as Daesh).

ars from conflict research have acknowledged the relevance of communication in the context of conflicts, so far from this perspective as well the important nexus between conflict and communication has yet to be explored in comprehensive studies.

This study, thus, aims to breach this gap by examining *external communication*²¹ during *asymmetric conflicts* systematically: Theoretical concepts for distinguishing communication strategies during conflicts are introduced, a theoretical model explaining the selection of communication strategies during asymmetric conflicts is developed and the model is tested systematically in a comprehensive empirical study. The study, this way, examines two research questions: (1) *which strategies of external communication conflict parties use during asymmetric conflicts* and (2) *what shapes the selection of these communication strategies*. The examples of powerful pictures and stories from conflicts above have shown that not only one type of communication strategy can be chosen by conflict parties, but that conflict parties can choose from different types of content for their external communication. To understand how external communication is used during asymmetric conflicts, and how it can influence how audiences abroad perceive the conflict, it is first necessary to understand which strategies of external communication conflict parties use during asymmetric conflicts. The first research question addresses this open question. Moreover, in a second stage, it is important to understand the reasons for the corresponding selection of strategies of external communication. This open question is addressed in the second research question. To answer the question, the hypothesis is developed that *the selection of strategies of external communication is determined by the structure of the conflict*.

Empirically both research questions were examined by studying the external communication of the conflict parties in the conflict in Israel and Palestine in social media as an exemplary case. For the study neither a „Pro-Palestinian“ nor a „Pro-Israeli“ normative perspective was adopted, instead a pacifist/humanitarian perspective was applied. The analysis does not aim to judge what is just, right or true, but instead endeavors to explore analytically the examined phenomenon and

The communication of these extremist groups, however, are a very particular type of communication, as unlike ordinary conflict parties they tend to have a hostile attitude toward the Western mainstream, an attitude which influences also their external communication (cf. chapter A.1.2. „Detailed discussion of the categories of the definition of external communication“ in the online annex).

21 The study focuses on the analysis of “external communication”, which is understood as open and fully attributable unidirectional mass communication of an official organization representing a conflict party that is directed to a foreign audience, toward which the communicating actor has a friendly or at least neutral attitude, and in particular to so far unaffiliated civil population (cf. section 2.1.).

to ultimately formulate, as concluded from the research results, recommendations that can contribute to conflict resolution.

1.3 Overview – Thesis outline

In **chapter 2** the core concepts of this study, “external communication”, “branding” (communication presenting oneself positively) and “shaming” (communication presenting the opponent negatively), are introduced. Thus, chapter 2 creates a typology of strategies of external communication.

In **chapter 3** theory of how the structure of asymmetric conflicts shapes the selection of strategies external communication is presented, arguing that the asymmetric distribution of capabilities shapes different interests of the different conflict parties (prioritization pathway), different opportunities to convince for the different conflict parties (audience pathway) and different opportunities to present for the different conflict parties (picturability pathway).

In **chapter 4**, then, the case selection (the conflict in Israel and Palestine) is explained and the research design and methodology used for the empirical research in this study are introduced: an innovative triangulative approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

In **chapter 5** the results of the first part of the empirical research are presented. It shows which strategies of external communication have been chosen by the different conflict parties in the conflict in Israel and Palestine: The external communication of the Israeli authorities is dominated by branding and the external communication of Hamas and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is dominated by shaming.

In **chapters 6, 7 and 8** the second part of the empirical research is presented. The chapters show how the selection of strategies of external communication by the conflict parties in the conflict in Israel and Palestine is shaped by the structure of the conflict.

Chapter 6 shows that the asymmetric distribution of capabilities shape the various interests of the different conflict parties and how these varying interests, in turn, make the conflict parties choosing different strategies of external communication.

Chapter 7 shows that the asymmetric distribution of capabilities shapes different opportunities to convince and different opportunities to present for the different conflict parties. It is shown that the Palestinian side as the underdog has better opportunities to use shaming, whilst the Israeli side has better opportunities to use branding. Furthermore, it is shown that these divergent opportunities influence the selection strategies of external communication by the conflict parties:

The conflict parties pick predominantly those strategies of external communication for which they have the best opportunities to use them.

In **chapter 8**, then, the variation of strategies of external communication over time is explored and potential alternative explanations are tested and rejected.

In **chapter 9**, finally, the results of the research and its theoretical core contributions are summarized: The study contributes to both the research on asymmetric conflicts and on public diplomacy by providing a theoretical model for an important aspect for both fields, external communication during asymmetric conflicts. Furthermore, conclusions on the generalizability of the empirical research are drawn and proposals for future research are made, arguing that the theoretical model introduced in this study is also applicable to various other cases. Finally, moreover, recommendations for practitioners derived from the results of this study are presented.