



Article

# Under-cover: The influence of event- and context-traits on the visibility of armed conflicts in German newspaper coverage (1992–2013)

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**Thomas Zerback**

Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Germany

**Johannes Holzleitner**

Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Germany

## Abstract

Although armed conflicts are an intensively researched domain in communication science, not much is known about the factors influencing their visibility in the news media. Based on research on the international flow of news, we identify traits of conflicts and the nations involved that potentially determine visibility. In our study, we combine data on 119 armed conflicts between 1992 and 2013 and an analysis of German newspaper coverage. We can show that several event- and context-oriented factors exert an influence on how much attention the media devote to a conflict. Conflict visibility was determined by the geographical distance between the reporting country and the conflict, the involvement of nuclear weapons, a military involvement of the reporting country, political sanctions imposed by supranational organizations, and (to a lesser extent) the number of fatalities.

## Keywords

Armed conflicts, news factors, news value, visibility, war coverage

In 2014, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) (2014b) registered 40 armed conflicts around the world. These events were very different in nature: some were fought in remote regions of the world, others close to Western democracies; some claimed a vast

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## Corresponding author:

Thomas Zerback, Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Oettingenstraße 67, 80538 Munich, Germany.  
Email: [zerback@ifkw.lmu.de](mailto:zerback@ifkw.lmu.de)

number of casualties, whereas others took far less human lives. Besides such specific characteristics, armed conflicts are negatively connoted events and in many cases politically relevant, which is why the media devote a substantial amount of coverage to them (Jones et al., 2013).

From a normative point of view, media visibility of conflicts is important because it can lead to public awareness (Wanta and Hu, 1993) and sometimes even put them on the political agenda (Franks and Shaw, 2012; Robinson, 2014). However, research also shows that although conflicts are a significant part of daily coverage, only a tiny fraction makes it to the news (Hawkins, 2002, 2011). The normative relevance of conflict visibility and their strong concentration in media coverage lead to the main question of this article: why do some conflicts receive journalistic attention while others do not?

A possible answer is offered in the literature on the international flow of news. It basically argues that (among other factors) event-inherent characteristics, called 'news factors', serve as predictors of journalistic selection (Eilders, 2006; Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). Empirical studies confirmed this basic notion and have shown that the amount of coverage on foreign affairs depends on the national context and on the traits of the event itself (Wu, 1998). However, it is surprising that the determinants predicting journalistic selection of conflicts have not received much scholarly attention. Researchers have either concentrated exclusively on the general amount of conflict coverage, without statistically testing for influential factors (Hawkins, 2002, 2011) or conflicts themselves served as determinants of a more or less intensive coverage about nations as a whole (Segev, 2015). Furthermore, most content analyses of conflict coverage and survey studies have focused on single conflicts (e.g. Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005). Although they offer detailed insights into how journalists reconstruct conflicts, they represent case studies, while longitudinal analyses encompassing multiple conflicts are scarce.

This study attempts to fill these gaps in two ways: (1) we move beyond a mere description of the amount of conflict coverage and attempt to identify the factors that make some conflicts more newsworthy than others. We do so by analyzing the impact of specific conflict-related characteristics on conflict visibility in the media. With regard to the nature of these characteristics, we distinguish between event-oriented (e.g. death tolls) and context-oriented factors (e.g. economic power of the countries involved) and determine their relative impact on conflict visibility. (2) Instead of focusing on one conflict, our study is based on a broad quantitative basis, covering 22 years (1992–2013) and 119 armed conflicts worldwide during that period.

The article proceeds in three steps: first, we give an overview of what is already known about conflict visibility in the news media; second, we derive crucial factors influencing conflict visibility by reviewing the literature on the international flow of news; and third, these factors serve as independent variables explaining the visibility of armed conflicts in two German national quality newspapers. Our dataset is based on three sources: first, a detailed documentation of  $N=119$  armed conflicts worldwide between 1992 and 2013 offered by the UCDP; second, an electronic database search of the archives of the two newspapers to determine the annual amount of articles referring to each conflict; and third, complementary data from several external scientific and official databases that provide additional information on the nations involved in the conflicts.

## News coverage on armed conflicts

The term 'armed conflict' represents a key concept in international humanitarian law. It is defined in the 1949 Geneva Conventions (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1949) and further extended in its Additional Protocols I and II (ICRC, 1977a, 1977b). According to this conceptualization and contrary to a war, an armed conflict does not require a formal declaration, which signals that the opponents have officially recognized the state of war or conflict. Also, it does not need to extend over time or result in a certain number of victims. Finally, internal disturbances and tensions – such as temporary riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence, and other acts of a similar nature – are not considered armed conflicts. Armed conflicts can be further divided into three sub-categories: international armed conflicts (conflicts between states), non-international armed conflicts (conflicts between government forces and non-governmental groups or solely non-governmental groups), and internationalized conflicts (cases, where a foreign government sends troops to a country to support a local movement opposing the government) (Vit , 2009).

Armed conflicts are an integral part of news coverage. In a study of US news, Jones et al. (2013) found that over the past five decades, the top 10 countries mentioned in the *New York Times* and NBC Nightly News were usually those where serious wars took place. Among the most covered nations from 1950 to 1991 were Russia, Vietnam, Israel, and Cambodia; from 1992 to 2006, it was Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Similarly, Wanta and Hu (1993) showed that between 1975 and 1990, international conflicts were among the four most extensively covered issues in four major US media outlets (the *New York Times*, ABC, NBC, and CBS).

Despite their general significance in the media, conflicts are not covered to an equal extent. In his analyses of US, UK, Japanese, and French media outlets, Hawkins (2002, 2011) found that conflict coverage is extremely unbalanced. Relatively few 'chosen conflicts' draw almost all of the media's attention, while others ('stealth conflicts') are marginalized or even non-existent in daily news. Hawkins asserts that there often is a sharp drop between the shares of coverage devoted to the chosen and to the stealth conflicts: in 2009, the top four conflicts received 97 percent of the airtime provided to all conflicts by the main US television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox News) and 87 percent of the conflict space in the *New York Times*. Hence, the character of coverage often is rather dichotomous, in a way that a conflict either receives considerable attention or almost none.

To identify possible determinants of journalistic conflict selection, the following paragraph reviews the literature on the international flow of news, which concentrates on the characteristics of foreign events and the nations they take place as factors influencing news decisions.

## The international flow of news

Since the 1960s, scholars have worked intensively on the question what influences the international flow of news (Galtung and Ruge, 1965;  stgaard, 1965) and have identified a wide array of characteristics, called news factors, contributing to a country's or an

event's news value for domestic coverage (for an overview, see Wu, 1998). The term news value thereby is defined as a subjective journalistic evaluation or a mental judgment of an event's newsworthiness, which (among other factors) increases the likelihood of the event being covered by the media (Shoemaker, 2006). News value theory basically argues that news factors as event-inherent characteristics contribute to an event's news value because they match journalistic selection criteria (Eilders, 2006).

In their review of the different theoretical and empirical approaches, Chang et al. (1987) divided these factors into two categories, which they refer to as 'context-oriented' and 'event-oriented' (p. 400). *Context-oriented factors* focus on the origin of foreign news and refer to the characteristics of the nation where an event happens (e.g. its economic power). Furthermore, context-oriented factors encompass characteristics concerning the relationship between the foreign and the reporting country, which is why they are sometimes referred to as relation-oriented factors (e.g. Segev, 2015). Relations between two countries can be assessed among cultural, economic, political, and geographical dimensions and are expressed in terms of similarity on these dimensions. *Event-oriented factors* represent the traits of the event itself. Among the most important event traits are negativity (e.g. damage), the degree of deviance (e.g. something novel, odd, or unusual), and its social significance (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006).

With regard to armed conflicts, not much is known about the importance of context- and event-oriented factors. Although sometimes case studies offer anecdotal evidence for the (lacking) news value of certain conflicts (e.g. Franks and Shaw, 2012), quantitative analyses following the tradition of the classic news value paradigm are scarce. Usually, conflicts are treated as one factor among others promoting coverage about a foreign country as a whole (e.g. Segev, 2015). The only study explicitly linking event- and context-oriented characteristics to news coverage on conflicts was conducted by Zillich et al. (2012), who content analyzed seven German media outlets (four television broadcasters, three national newspapers) and determined the share of various news factors within media coverage (status of nations involved, reach, damage, aggression, benefit). They found that reach (the extent to which the population was affected) was by far the most prevalent factor in foreign news about wars, whereas the importance of the other factors depended on the conflict phase.

However, an identification of news factors relying solely on content analysis can be misleading because it is focused on what is already the result of journalistic selection. For example, just because nations that are prevalent in the news have a high status does not necessarily mean that journalists actually selected them because of their status. One possibility to cope with this problem is to extend the analysis by including information on what might have been selected in the first place (Rosengren, 1970). In our case, this information consists of a pool of conflicts that actually took place as well as their characteristics.

### *Context-oriented factors of armed conflicts*

The attributes of a nation where an event takes place have been among the first factors that researchers have investigated (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Östgaard, 1965). The basic idea behind considering national context variables when examining journalistic selection

is that journalists might consider them as indicators of significance with regard to their home country. Significance can manifest itself along political, economic, cultural, and public dimensions and refers to the actual or potential impact that a certain news content has on the four dimensions (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006: 14–15). Shoemaker and Cohen assume that the higher the social significance of an event, the more likely it gets covered by the media.

In line with this assumption, several studies have shown that nations with great economic power (e.g. Wu, 2000) or a positive economic development (Kyungmo and Bernet, 1996), a large population (Jones et al., 2013), and an elite status (Kariel and Rosenvall, 1984) are more likely to become the subject of foreign news. Furthermore, relational traits like geographical proximity, existing economic and military connections between countries (Jones et al., 2013), as well as value-based similarities (Sheafer et al., 2013) have been linked to a higher media visibility. Extending the idea of context-orientation to the more specific case of armed conflicts, we derive the following hypotheses:<sup>1</sup>

*H1.* The greater the economic power of the main parties involved in a conflict, the more visible it will be in newspaper coverage.

*H2.* The greater the military power of the main parties involved in a conflict, the more visible it will be in newspaper coverage.

*H3.* The higher the geographic proximity between the reporting country and the country where conflict takes place, the more visible the conflict will be in newspaper coverage.

*H4.* The closer the reporting country is politically tied to the main parties involved in the conflict, the more visible the conflict will be in newspaper coverage.

### *Event-oriented factors of armed conflicts*

Like nations, conflicts themselves can differ according to their social significance: they can include only two parties or a much higher number, and even more important, they might involve the reporting country as a participant. Hawkins (2002, 2011), for example, states that the media tend to devote more attention to conflicts that in some way involve the home country (see also De Swert et al., 2013). Accordingly, we assume that differences in significance influence conflict visibility in the news media.

*H5.* The higher the number of nations involved in a conflict, the more visible it will be in newspaper coverage.

*H6.* If the reporting country's military is involved in the conflict, it will be more visible in newspaper coverage compared to conflicts, without military involvement.

Another important characteristic contributing to an event's news value is a negative (Yan and Bissell, 2015) or deviant character (a deviation from existing norms or the usual flow of events) (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). Although conflicts can be regarded as negative and deviant events per se, they can still differ in the respective degree.

As an indicator of negativity, research has focused mainly on the amount of damage caused by a conflict, particularly in terms of human fatalities. However, contrary to the theoretical expectations, it seems that high death tolls do not necessarily contribute more news coverage. Hawkins (2002) shows that the Israel-Palestine conflict dominated media coverage in 2000, whereas simultaneous conflicts like the wars in Congo, Angola, Ethiopia-Eritrea, and Sierra Leone were almost invisible. Nevertheless, about 300 lives were lost in the Israel-Palestine conflict compared to 70,000 in Ethiopia-Eritrea during the same year. Based on his data, Hawkins further assumes that positive deviant events, like peace treaties, may enhance conflict visibility (Hawkins, 2002: 229). Also, political sanctions imposed by supranational organizations like the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU) can be promoters of conflict coverage. Sanctions as a form of punishment represent negatively deviant events, which should provoke more media coverage regarding the conflict.

However, it is important to note that although the patterns described in Hawkins' study are quite compelling, his statistical analysis does not control for alternative explanatory variables (e.g. the military power of a nation). Therefore, one goal of our analysis will be to test the influence of death tolls, sanctions, and peace treaties, while keeping additional context- and event-oriented factors constant. We therefore put forward the following final hypotheses:

*H7.* The higher the death toll in a conflict, the more visible it will be in newspaper coverage.

*H8.* Political sanctions imposed by supranational organizations will result in a higher visibility of the conflict in newspaper coverage.

*H9.* Successful peace treaties will result in a higher visibility of the conflict in newspaper coverage.

## Method

To test our hypotheses, we rely on three main data sources: first, a detailed documentation of armed conflicts worldwide between 1992 and 2013 offered by the UCDP; second, supplementary data from several external scientific and official databases ('The Correlates of War Project', 'The World Bank', 'The CIA World Factbook') that provide further information on the nations involved; and third, an electronic database search of the archives of two German national quality newspapers (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ)) to determine the annual amount of articles referring to each armed conflict. The period of investigation was chosen because the electronic archives only reached back to the early 1990s, but also because the end of the cold war, including the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, marks an important turning point in war history, shifting the political focus on armed conflicts in the world (Franks and Shaw, 2012).

Although concentrating on one country makes our investigation a case study, Germany is quite suitable to analyze the visibility of armed conflicts because it belongs to the politically and financially most powerful countries in the world and as such it is involved in a wide range of international armed conflicts, however, only to a certain degree.<sup>2</sup> Its

modest involvement is also an advantage when analyzing the news value of conflicts because in countries where active military involvement is an everyday occurrence, it is difficult to say something about peaceful periods or non-involvement (an argument that also applies for countries that do not engage in armed conflicts). Also, although there are differences across countries according to the structure of foreign news, some basic structural features can be found all over the world, for example, the significance of regionalism, the dominance of superpower, and the attention for regions where crises go on (Wilke et al., 2012).

### *Identification of armed conflicts*

To identify armed conflicts, we used the database provided by the UCDP (2014b). From 1946 until today, the program keeps track of armed conflicts worldwide and their key traits on a yearly basis. The UCDP is considered one of the most reliable sources on conflict data and it defines an armed conflict as a 'contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year' (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 2001: 643). During the period investigated in this study (1992–2013), the UCDP lists 119 armed conflicts, with an average conflict duration of 27.3 years (standard deviation (*SD*)=16.9). Adding up all the years of every single conflict results in a total of  $N=809$  years of armed conflicts, which serve as the basis for our analysis. In the following, we will refer to those cases as 'conflict years'.

For every conflict, we identified the two main state actors<sup>3</sup> involved. Actors in our study are identical to those identified by the UCDP ('primary parties'). Primary parties are defined as the parties that have formed the incompatibility underlying the conflict. An incompatibility can be either over government or territory. Only 53 of the 809 conflict years involved more than two state actors. In these cases, the two main state actors were determined according to their total troop force, that is, the total number of troops at their disposal.

### *Media visibility of armed conflicts*

Data on the visibility of armed conflicts in news coverage was derived by searching the electronic archives of two German high-quality newspapers, namely, the SZ and the FAZ. There were several reasons to concentrate on these two papers. First, both are considered elite newspapers and function as inter-media agenda-setters in the German media landscape (Reinemann, 2003). Second, they are comparable in terms of economic power and newsroom staff, which is important in order to avoid biases due to a difference in the general resources provided to cover foreign affairs. Third, as a more general argument, newspapers represent a very tough test to identify a lack of coverage on conflicts because they have more capacity to report on them compared to, for example, television news. In other words, if newspapers do not cover a certain conflict, then it is likely to be off the screen as well. Fourth, both newspapers operate a relatively large network of foreign correspondents, which gives them more freedom to decide which conflicts they cover, compared to media that rely more heavily on external news sources.

To identify articles relating to a conflict, we followed a procedure commonly applied in studies of news geography: based on the conflicts listed in the UCDP dataset, we searched for the name of the respective country (e.g. 'India') and the exact region where the conflict took place (e.g. 'Bodoland') (both variables are provided by the UCDP) and combined them with term 'war' (complete search term: 'country' AND 'region' AND 'war'). In terms of journalistic language, the term 'war' turned out to be the most adequate expression to identify armed conflicts. Related search terms like 'conflict' or 'crisis' combined with the country's name and conflict region resulted in a relatively high number of non-relevant articles, dealing, for example, with conflicts between political parties in the country, economic crisis, or even film reviews. To enhance the accuracy of the search, that is, the match between the conflict listed in the UCDP dataset and the conflict covered in a certain article, the search was further restricted to the political sections of the two newspapers and the time frame during which the conflict was active. Both parameters are also part of the UCDP dataset.

The search resulted in a total of 23,796 articles published between 1992 and 2013 that were almost equally distributed among the two newspapers (SZ: 12,383, 52%; FAZ: 11,413, 48%). Although this procedure has several limitations – for example, it yields no information on the character of the news stories – country-specific keyword searches have been shown to be a reliable indicator of general country visibility in empirical research (Jones et al., 2013; Sheafer et al., 2013).

### *Measurement of context-oriented factors*

Regarding the context in which a conflict took place, we determined the economic and military power of the two main actors involved. The *economic power* of a country was indicated by the gross domestic product (GDP in billion dollars) as reported by The World Bank (2015b). The World Bank (2015a) also provided data on a country's *military power*, more specifically the number of troops at its disposal. As military power is not only expressed by human resources, but also by the power of the weapons involved, we also checked whether one or both of the main conflict parties were in *possession of nuclear weapons*. Statistics provided by Kristensen and Norris (2013) offered detailed information on this aspect. For each conflict year, the figures of both main actors were summed up to determine overall military and economic power. The possession of nuclear weapons was treated separately as a dummy variable, indicating whether at least one of the two main actors had nuclear weapons at his disposal (=1) or not (=0).

To operationalize the relations between the reporting and the conflict countries, we employed two measures: like in previous studies, the *geographical distance* between Germany and the region where the conflict took place was determined. World regions were adopted from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2015) World Factbook. Following this classification, we distinguished four levels of geographical distance: (1) countries that share a border with Germany, (2) countries in the same world region as Germany (Europe) without sharing a border, (3) countries in regions that neighbor Germany's world region, and (4) countries that do not neighbor Germany's world region. To measure the *strength of political relations* between Germany and the main conflict parties, we determined the number of international political organizations in which



Germany and the other countries shared memberships. These data were derived from the Intergovernmental Organizations Dataset of the Correlates of War Project (COW) (Pevehouse et al., n.d.), which – among various other variables – reports national memberships in supranational organizations. Both counts were added up to determine the overall strength of political relations between the reporting country and the conflict parties. It is important to note that the respective figures (number of troops, GDP, possession of nuclear weapons, and common memberships in political organizations) varied not only across countries but also across time within countries. Therefore, every indicator was assigned for each single year of each conflict.

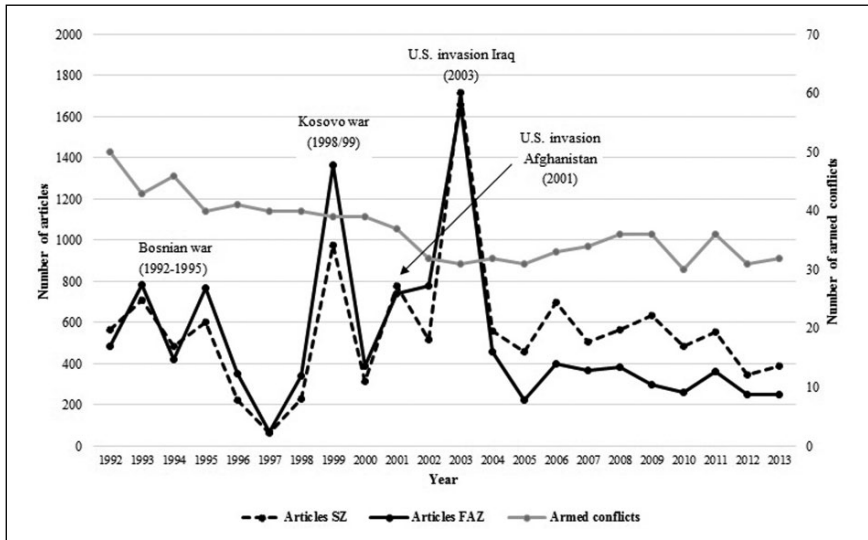
### *Measurement of event-oriented factors*

Data were collected for five event-related characteristics. The *number of battle-related deaths* and the *total number of parties involved in a conflict* were both derived from the UCDP dataset (2014a, 2014b). The data on *German military involvement* were kindly passed to the researchers by the Administrative Department of the German Army, consisting of a list which contained each case of Germany sending military personal to a foreign conflict during the period of investigation. For every conflict year, military engagement was dummy-coded (German military involvement=1; no German military involvement=0). Finally, we marked conflict years in which a *peace treaty* was achieved. These data were also provided by the UCDP (2015b) on a yearly and conflict-specific basis. Likewise, cases in which the UN or the EU *imposed sanctions* to one of the main conflict parties were documented by employing the Arms Embargoes Database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2015). Both indicators were dummy-coded for each conflict year (1=peace treaty achieved/sanctions imposed; 0=no peace treaty/sanctions).

## **Results**

### *Descriptive analysis*

Before we examine the factors influencing conflict visibility in the newspapers, it is worthwhile to look at how prevalent armed conflicts were during the period of investigation and how intensive they were covered. Figure 1 depicts the number of conflicts in each year and the amount of coverage devoted to them. Several patterns can be observed: the number of conflicts remains relatively constant. In an average year, 37 armed conflicts were documented around the world ( $SD=5.20$ ), with a maximum of 50 in 1992 and a minimum of 31 in 2010. It also shows that the number of conflicts has only slightly decreased throughout this period. Compared to that, the number of articles published on the conflicts is subject to considerable fluctuation in both newspapers (SZ:  $M=562.86$ ,  $SD=318.76$ ; FAZ:  $M=518.77$ ,  $SD=368.41$ ). This variation is mainly due to two extraordinary peaks, one during the time of the Kosovo war in 1998/1999 and a second one starting with the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and reaching its highest level in 2003 when the US army entered Iraq. Both newspapers were not only remarkably similar in their overall amount of coverage, they also clearly parallel throughout the entire period



**Figure 1.** Number of armed conflicts and amount of coverage in the SZ and FAZ from 1992 to 2013.

of investigation ( $r = .88, p < .001$ ). This partly supports our initial assumption that they do not differ considerably regarding the principal selection of armed conflicts, which is why we will collapse both newspapers for further analyses.

The aggregated data shown in Figure 1 mask some important aspects, which can be revealed when looking at single conflicts or single conflict years. To find out which conflicts received the most coverage, Table 2 (Appendix 1) lists the top 30 conflicts according to the number of articles. The most extensively covered armed conflict was the Iraq war, which took place between 2003 and 2013, followed by the Afghanistan war, the war in Kosovo, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Bosnian war, and the first and second Chechen war. These seven conflicts (out of 119 in total) accounted for 66 percent of the overall article amount in the two newspapers. In contrast, 14 percent of the conflicts (not included in Table 2) received no coverage and almost half (44%) were mentioned in only 10 articles or less. The less attended conflicts were mostly located in Africa and South-East Asia and lasted only for 1 year or less. However, two of them (the Oromia uprising in Ethiopia and the Patani insurgency in South Thailand) lasted, respectively, 11 and 19 years without being mentioned.

The absolute amount of coverage a conflict receives can be somewhat distracting, as conflicts differ in the time they are actually active. A conflict is considered active if it involves at least 25 battle-related deaths per calendar year (UCDP, 2015a). Hence, sometimes rather short conflicts receive a huge amount of coverage, whereas others get a similar amount only within a much longer period of time. Therefore, it is interesting to look at conflict coverage intensity, indicated by the ratio of articles per active conflict year (Table 2, Appendix 1). From this perspective, the picture changes considerably: now, the Kosovo war is by far the most visible, followed by the war in Iraq and that in

Bosnia. The most significant change can be observed regarding the Afghanistan war, which drops to rank 8 due to its longer duration. Similar shifts can be observed for the Chechen wars and the Israel-Palestine conflict, which also covered longer time intervals. One reason why some of the longer conflicts are less visible in terms of coverage intensity may be that they get most of the media's attention during their first years and then become increasingly less visible.

Covering conflicts is not just a matter of reporting on them in a particular point in time (e.g. in their beginning), but keeping up coverage as they go on. This is important because otherwise they are likely to disappear out of the public sphere. As mentioned above, our dataset consists of single conflict years so we are able to identify years where a certain conflict receives no coverage. It shows that of the 809 conflict years, 27.8 percent fall in this category, which confirms the notion that a considerable part of what actually happens in the world of armed conflicts is not visible in the news media.

### *Associations between context- and event-oriented factors and conflict visibility*

In a final step, we will determine whether and how event- and context-oriented factors are associated with the amount of coverage conflicts receive. But before we do that, two important characteristics of our data have to be pointed out. First, we are dealing with a count variable as a dependent (the number of articles in a given year on a given conflict) which shows a moderate level of zero-inflation, that is, in 27.8 percent of all conflict years, no articles were published by the two newspapers. Because ordinary linear regression is not suitable in such a case, we apply a negative binomial regression model to determine the effects of the explanatory factors<sup>4</sup> (Gardner et al., 1995). Second, our data are of hierarchical nature as the single cases (conflict years) belong to certain conflicts. When data are hierarchically structured, the standard errors of regression coefficients are likely to be underestimated and tests of significance tend to be biased (Kish and Frankel, 1974). To achieve reliable significance tests, we employ a cluster-robust procedure proposed by Rogers (1994).

Table 1 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients for all context- and event-oriented factors. We also included the variable 'year' as a control to rule out the possibility that the amount of newspaper coverage is a product of a more general trend taking place over time (e.g. a general increase of conflict coverage).

Among the *context-oriented factors*, two are positively and significantly associated to conflict visibility: the amount of newspaper coverage decreases, the more distant a conflict is from Germany (H3 supported) and in cases where one of the conflict parties has nuclear weapons. However, the number of troops has no significant effect (H2 partly supported). The economic power of the parties involved seems to be irrelevant for conflict visibility (H1 rejected), as it is the case for political relations with them (H4 rejected).

Among the *event-oriented factors*, a German military involvement in a conflict significantly fostered the attention paid by the newspapers (H6 supported). Also, political sanctions imposed by the UN or EU to one of the conflict parties lead to more extensive coverage (H8 supported). Unlike previous studies have argued, there seems to be at least a slight tendency that a higher death tolls are associated with more conflict coverage

**Table 1.** Relations between context-, relational-, and event-oriented factors and visibility.

|                                    | Unstandardized coefficients <sup>a</sup> | Robust standard errors <sup>b</sup> | z-value | p    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------|------|
| Year                               | -.0215                                   | .0147                               | -1.46   | .145 |
| Context-oriented factors           |                                          |                                     |         |      |
| Economic power (GDP)               | .0001                                    | .0001                               | 1.21    | .121 |
| Number of troops                   | .0000                                    | .0000                               | -1.42   | .155 |
| Nuclear weapons (1 = yes)          | <b>1.6456***</b>                         | .3380                               | 4.87    | .000 |
| Geographical distance <sup>c</sup> |                                          |                                     |         |      |
| Neighboring world region           | <b>.9206***</b>                          | .2598                               | 3.54    | .000 |
| Same world region                  | <b>3.3218***</b>                         | .3859                               | 8.61    | .000 |
| Political relations                | -.00132                                  | .0072                               | -0.18   | .854 |
| Event-oriented factors             |                                          |                                     |         |      |
| Number of deaths (in 1.000)        | .00025                                   | .0001                               | 1.77    | .077 |
| Number of nations involved         | .0104                                    | .0218                               | 0.48    | .633 |
| German involvement (1 = yes)       | <b>1.2070***</b>                         | .2336                               | 5.17    | .000 |
| Political sanctions (1 = yes)      | <b>.8882**</b>                           | .3465                               | 2.56    | .010 |
| Peace treaties                     | .0355                                    | .2366                               | 0.15    | .881 |
| McFadden Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>     | <b>.101***</b>                           |                                     |         |      |

GDP: gross domestic product.

N = 673 conflict years embedded in 103 conflicts; 16 conflicts had to be eliminated due to missing values.

<sup>a</sup>Unstandardized negative binomial regression coefficients.

<sup>b</sup>Cluster robust estimators according to the procedure proposed by Rogers (1994).

<sup>c</sup>Within the period of analysis, no armed conflicts took place in countries sharing a border with Germany.

Therefore, this category is skipped from the analysis.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

( $p = .077$ ). Our analysis offers no support for the assumptions that the number of nations involved (H5 rejected) or peace treaties (H9 rejected) lead to more journalistic attention. Furthermore, all else equal, conflict coverage was not a result of a merely time-related trend. The year in which the conflict took place has no significant effect on visibility.

The interpretation of coefficients in negative binomial regression models is not as intuitive as in ordinary linear regression. Therefore, we will have an additional and more illustrative look at the factors that are significantly associated with visibility. We do so by comparing the values of conflict visibility across different levels of each independent factor. The article counts that are reported in the following therefore represent the expected amounts of articles (based on the model), while all other factors are fixed to their mean values. We begin with conflicts where Germany's military was involved. The number of articles predicted by the model for conflict years without German military involvement is 9.34, compared to 31.25 for those with German involvement. Both means as well as their difference are significant ( $p < .001$ ). Regarding political sanctions, one would expect 9.68 articles in a year where no sanctions were imposed compared to 23.52 articles if this was the case ( $p < .001$ ). Geographical distance has the most profound effect on visibility: if the conflict is situated in the same world region as Germany (Europe), an average of 208.13 articles is predicted, whereas in a neighboring world region, the

number would be much lower (18.86), and in regions even more distant, an average of only 7.51 would be expected (all intergroup differences are significant,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, conflicts involving nuclear weapons would receive an average of 32.86 articles – substantially more than those without a nuclear threat (6.33) ( $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

Following research on the international flow of news, we investigated the relationships between event- and context-oriented factors and the visibility of armed conflicts in the news media. For the first time, this was done on a broad quantitative basis covering the last 22 years and 119 conflicts worldwide. Our results show that although the number of armed conflicts between 1992 and 2013 remained quite constant, their visibility in the media was remarkably volatile. Furthermore, we find that a relatively low number of conflicts dominates media coverage, compared to a majority that remains marginalized or invisible. This confirms Hawkins' (2002, 2011) earlier findings on the so-called 'stealth conflicts', also from a long-term quantitative perspective. The finding of invisible conflicts is relevant because media attention can trigger public and sometimes even political awareness. Even if this does not ultimately result in military interventions, other outcomes – like humanitarian support or a higher willingness to donate – may be possible consequences.

The geographical distance between the conflict and the reporting country is the most important factor creating conflict visibility: distant conflicts receive considerably less media attention than closer ones. Moreover, the media devote more coverage to conflicts involving nuclear weapons or the military forces of their home country. Also, sanctions imposed by international alliances draw more media attention to a conflict. Unlike Hawkins (2002), we find a weak, but positive, association between the number of deaths in a conflict and its visibility, although the level of statistical significance is only moderate.

Of course, our study has some limitations. First of all, although context- and event-related factors are relevant for the journalistic selection of conflicts, they are surely not the only forces behind it (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). Two additional aspects that could not be included here are probably relevant: the first is the influence of political elites. In his widely perceived approach to describe press-government relations, Bennett (1990) concludes that media professionals 'tend to "index" the range of voices and viewpoints [...] according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic' (p. 106). Although the aim of the study at hand was not to explain the diversity of viewpoints on conflicts in the media, Bennett's indexing hypothesis may also apply to conflict visibility. Conflicts that are subject to high-level political debate are probably more likely to find media attention than conflicts ignored by political elites. The second influence is the media's foreign correspondent networks or those of news agencies. Researchers particularly assume that regions that are difficult to reach (e.g. Congo) receive much less coverage simply because it is difficult for journalists to get into the conflict zone or even into the country itself (Hawkins, 2002). In some cases, high amounts of logistic planning, costs, and of course danger to life may keep some media from sending journalists and equipment to a certain conflict (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014).

However, it has also to be mentioned that according to some scholars, informational dependence or restrictions have recently lost some of their potential to determine conflict

coverage in the media. The rise of modern communication technologies – like, for example, smart phones, digital cameras, and online communication – has simplified and accelerated the ways by which information makes its way out of conflict zones (Robinson, 2014). This, on the one hand, is a good thing because it broadens the information potentially available for journalists, but it might also have some problematic consequences. As Robinson (2014) notes, the wide availability of conflict information might also lead to media lifespans, which are too short, to attract public or political attention.

Also, the definition of armed conflicts, which we adopted from the UCDP, differs somewhat from the definition used in the Geneva Conventions because it does only include armed conflicts that incorporate at least one state actor and at least 25 battle-related deaths per conflict year. Of course, this does not cover all conflicts worldwide, it excludes very small armed conflicts (with very few or no fatalities), conflicts that include only non-battle-related deaths (i.e. fatalities not due to the direct use of arms) and also such between ethnic groups, local militia, or criminal groups that do not represent the government or the state. Those conflicts can be very severe, for example, the drug wars in Mexico. However, conflicts with state intervention still are a relevant case to look at and scholars assume that they have a higher news value than conflicts between non-state actors (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014). Furthermore, when interpreting the data, it has to be remembered that the UCDP – besides using a broad array of sources – partly also relies on media reports to gain information on ongoing conflicts, so the two sources are not entirely independent from each other.

Finally, for some of the indicators employed to measure the variables in the regression model, there might be alternatives. One example is the strength of the political relations between Germany and the conflict parties, which is indicated by the number of shared memberships in international organizations. Political relations can be volatile and their improvement or detriment does not necessarily and immediately result in more or less international organizational memberships. A similar point can be made with regard to troop strength as an indicator for military power. However, in these cases, the longitudinal design of the study and the relatively high number of actors involved made it necessary to rely on these indicators because data were consistently available throughout the period of investigation. Regarding geographic proximity, there might also be alternative and more nuanced measures. Rather than merely capturing geographical distance, those measures could indicate more specific ties between two countries (e.g. the number of refugees fleeing from a conflict region into the country or tourist exchange).

Focusing on the aspects that gained less attention here is a promising perspective for future research. Especially, including other determinants of news coverage – like, for example, indicators of journalistic access or dependence on political elites – should result in a more complete picture of explaining conflict visibility. Nevertheless, we think that our study gave a first valuable insight and may inspire further investigations of the factors shaping the visibility of armed conflicts in the media.

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## Notes

1. Some of the factors mentioned are partly redundant; for example, population size, political power, and military power are also used to determine the 'elite status' of a nation. Therefore, we only include political and military power as variables in our statistical model. Also, no sufficient data were available regarding value-based similarities.
2. The tasks of the German military force in armed conflicts today mainly consist in peace-keeping activities, training of local executive forces, as well as medical, technical, or security assistance.
3. It was not possible to determine the effects of the *characteristics of non-state actors* because this kind of information is hardly available for the conflict years analyzed (e.g. troop strength) or does not apply (e.g. gross domestic product). Hence, our examination of actor characteristics is restricted to state actors. Nevertheless, conflicts involving non-state actors are still part of the sample.
4. A Pearson goodness-of-fit test ( $\chi^2(660)=36,337.56, p<.001$ ) and an alpha dispersion parameter that is greater than zero ( $\alpha=2.0071$ ) indicated that the distribution of the dependent variable differs from a Poisson distribution. In this case, negative binomial regression is more appropriate than a Poisson regression model.

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### Author biographies

Thomas Zerback, PhD, is an assistant professor at the Department of Communication Studies and Media Research at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany.

Johannes Holzleitner is a graduate Student at the Department of Communication Studies and Media Research at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany.

## Appendix I

**Table 2.** Top 30 conflicts according to the amount of newspaper coverage from 1992 to 2013 in the SZ and FAZ.

|                                | Absolute number of articles | Articles per active conflict year (Intensity) | Number of active conflict years (1992–2013) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Iraq war                       | 5.323                       | 483.9                                         | 11                                          |
| Afghanistan wars               | 3.812                       | 173.3                                         | 22                                          |
| Kosovo war                     | 1.829                       | 914.5                                         | 2                                           |
| Israel-Palestine war           | 1.649                       | 91.6                                          | 18                                          |
| Bosnian war                    | 1.607                       | 401.8                                         | 4                                           |
| Chechen war (first and second) | 1.541                       | 128.4                                         | 12                                          |
| Pakistan civil war             | 546                         | 54.6                                          | 10                                          |
| Croatian war                   | 536                         | 178.7                                         | 3                                           |
| Sudanese conflicts             | 490                         | 163.3                                         | 3                                           |
| Kashmir conflict               | 438                         | 19.9                                          | 22                                          |
| South Lebanon conflict         | 324                         | 36.0                                          | 9                                           |
| Russian constitutional crisis  | 320                         | 320.0                                         | 1                                           |
| Iraq civil war                 | 313                         | 62.6                                          | 5                                           |
| Algerian civil war             | 306                         | 13.9                                          | 22                                          |
| Somalian civil war             | 290                         | 19.3                                          | 15                                          |
| Rwandan civil war              | 284                         | 20.3                                          | 14                                          |
| Libyan civil war               | 272                         | 272.0                                         | 1                                           |
| Columbian civil war            | 252                         | 11.5                                          | 22                                          |
| South Ossetia conflict         | 243                         | 81.0                                          | 3                                           |
| Angolan civil war              | 171                         | 19.0                                          | 9                                           |
| Macedonian civil war           | 162                         | 162.0                                         | 1                                           |
| Nagorno-Karabakh-war           | 149                         | 29.8                                          | 5                                           |
| Ugandan civil war              | 143                         | 7.2                                           | 20                                          |
| Eritrean-Ethiopian war         | 134                         | 44.7                                          | 3                                           |
| Sri Lanka civil war            | 126                         | 7.9                                           | 16                                          |
| Kurdish uprising               | 116                         | 5.3                                           | 22                                          |
| Dagestan uprising              | 100                         | 100.0                                         | 1                                           |
| Mali civil war                 | 99                          | 33.0                                          | 3                                           |
| Yemeni civil war               | 99                          | 19.8                                          | 5                                           |
| Azerbaijan civil war           | 86                          | 43.0                                          | 2                                           |