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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Framing Events of Political Violence within Peace Journalism and Internet User-Generated Comments: Effects on Readers' Emotions and Contemplation of Broader Implications

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**ABSTRACT:** Emotion is theorized as profoundly related to ethics and moral decision-making, which makes it relevant for communication towards peace efforts. This experimental study examined the effects of conflict-sensitive framing in news stories and online user-generated comments (a form of UGC – user-generated content) that reflected on the events of political violence such as terrorism, as well as civil and international wars. The results showed an association of conflict-sensitive journalism (peace journalism) and negative emotions; decreasing hope and increasing anger and fear. However, the conflict-sensitive UGC showed some positive emotional effects. Empirical results provide an important context and useful evidence to enrich the normative discussions regarding peace journalism. Furthermore, this study is on the frontline of exploring conflict sensitivity in the environment of digital media and UGC. Such research is vital in specifying the potentials and limitations of conflict-sensitive communication in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts.

**KEYWORDS:** conflict, digital media, new media, online comments, peace journalism, political violence, readers' comments, UGC, user-generated content, war

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## 1. Introduction

The 21st century's digital media technologies allow fast information transmission as well as relatively readily available expression opportunities for people in many parts of the world. Yet, the epoch is still deeply impacted by long-lasting problems, such as the misery caused by political violence. This paper reflects on the reality of the contemporary world, which includes both prospective "new" technologies and debilitating "old" conflicts. The media content of today is composed of the two types of materials: the traditional content created by media professionals and the user-generated content (UGC) created by the members of the wide public. Studies on the effects of media have traditionally looked at either the impact of professional media or the impact of user-generated media. This project considers the combined effects of these two forms of content in the context of the impact it has on the audience's emotional processing in response to news about violent political conflicts. The study particularly assesses the impact of conflict-sensitive (peace journalistic) news stories when accompanied by congruent or incongruent user-generated comments. The implications of this study are relevant for discussions on (a) existing socio-political issues, (b) scholarly questions surrounding media and political communication, and (c) normative dimension of communication's role in the formation of the audience's perceptions of severe issues such as political violence.

Furthermore, until recently, the topic of peace journalism and conflict sensitivity was not empirically tested in the context of new media technologies, except for description-oriented content analyses (Katiambo, 2019; Tenenboim, 2017). Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2015) urged that it is necessary to examine the link between conflict sensitivity/peace journalism and contemporary media technologies and media landscapes. Hence, this study is on the frontier of novel exploration of the effects of conflict sensitivity in the traditional form of professional-media content as well as in the understudied form of UGC.

Conflict sensitivity in professional media coverage of political violence is encompassed in the concept of *peace journalism* (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lynch & Galtung, 2010). Peace journalism is also referred to as conflict-sensitive journalism (Rice & Taylor, 2020); hence this paper interchangeably uses the terms of *conflict sensitivity* and *peace journalistic* orientation. The peace-oriented type of coverage generally implies value on truth over propaganda, inclusive diverse perspectives over an oversimplified elite perspective, and explorations of peaceful solutions over a mere justification of violence. Peace journalism represents a specific type of media frame (Entman, 2003), with its particular tendencies of problem definition, cause attribution, moral evaluation, and solution recommendation. War journalism, on the other end, is the type of framing that includes propagandistic features, focuses on elites, favors violence, and essentially ignores potentials for peace. So both war and peace journalism may be and are applied to coverage of the same conflictual events (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018). The difference is the chosen frames of the coverage and possibly varied effects on media audiences that each framing causes (Kempf, 2019). Research suggests that certain features of war journalism tend to predominate conflict coverage (e.g., Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Katiambo, 2019). The key argument of the theory is that peace journalism is a normatively superior type of media coverage, as it is believed to co-create a more sustainable peace in societies. In a comparatively recent period, a few scholars initiated empirical media effects studies (Kempf, 2005; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013; Lynch, McGoldrick, & Heathers, 2015), and begun assessing the assertions of peace journalism/conflict sensitivity's normative superiority in causality toward positive social outcomes.

The initial endeavor, which imported the ideas of peace journalism into experimental evaluations was the study by Kempf (2005). From the theory, the author specifically extracted the notion of de-escalation-oriented framing of news about post-war Serbia. The results suggested that the subjects who read de-escalated stories

(peace journalism) were more likely to report less biased evaluation of new democratic tendencies in Serbia. Hence, Kempf provided the first set of empirical results to support claims of theoretical peace journalism, which predicted positive effects. However, Kempf (2008) showed that the effects of peace journalism are, in some cases, diminished by certain specific a priori mental models that are held by audience members. Similarly, Thiel and Kempf's (2014) experiment demonstrated an interaction effect between peace-journalism type of framing in media content and individual frames embraced by audience members.

Lynch and McGoldrick's (2013) study compared the effects of peace and war journalistic framing of stories on a few topics: the asylum seekers, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a natural disaster crisis, and the Communist New People's Army in the Philippines. The experiment yielded that peace journalism is associated with increased levels of hope, empathy, and happiness, while levels of anger and fear decreased in the emotions of the audience members. While all the previously mentioned studies applied survey-reports to detect outcome variables, Lynch, McGoldrick, and Heathers (2015) contributed to the diversity of their findings by using a physiological measure. The authors measured heart rate variability, which supported a previous study's findings that peace journalism is associated with higher empathy and hope, while war journalism is associated with higher anger and distress.

Schaefer (2006) demonstrated that the consumption of peace journalism was associated with lower acceptance of military measures. Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) affirmed that detected effects have very serious socio-political implications, as tendencies in public opinion have leverage on the decisions of the political elites. Military involvement is an example of such decisions. Hence, peace journalism can be envisioned as an important element that contributes to the creation of a broader societal conflict sensitivity. Such appreciation of conflicts' complexities is related to a greater appreciation of various approaches to dealing with conflicts, including non-violent approaches.

The mentioned authors tended to employ print news and television news stimulus materials. Student samples were used as subjects in the reviewed studies. Kempf (2005), Schaefer (2006), Kempf (2008), and Thiel and Kempf (2014) conducted studies in Germany with German student populations. Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) conducted experiments with Australian and Filipino subjects, while Lynch, McGoldrick, and Heathers (2015) reported data from Australia only.

To summarize, the up-to-date experimental findings partially support a deductive model of peace journalism, which expects pro-social and peace-facilitative effects on audiences. New studies are still necessary to identify important interaction effects. Also, an increased number of stimulus contexts is a trend that appears to gain momentum among experimental peace journalism studies. Such a trend is enhancing the rigor of the studies as it provides better control over unaccounted variables. Overall, additional experimental studies are still necessary, with special inclusion of the element of UGC, which is missing thus far.

Van Dijck (2009) specified that *UGC* is content that is produced by "active internet contributors, who put in a 'certain amount of creative effort' which is 'created outside of professional routines and platforms'" (p. 41). As Dylko and McCluskey (2012) outlined the phenomenon that they, among others, label as UGC is also overlapping some other concepts, which figure in the literature under various labels; for example, web 2.0, produsage, citizen journalism, and participatory news. Political UGC is defined as "information products that are published online and openly available, thematically focused on politics, to a significant degree shaped by active participation of the users, and where this participation occurred voluntarily outside of the user's professional routines and practices" (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 257). The authors also adopted a conception from Burns (2008) that characterizes production of a user-generated content as a process where "nobody who is willing to participate is excluded" (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 256). Holbert, Garret, and Gleason (2010) while talking about the political impacts that mass media potentially have within the reality of new media

technologies and UGC, mentioned that: “full range of effects is not only plausible, but distinctly probable, even amidst the extraordinary socio-technological change occurring in our media system and democracy” (p. 16).

## 2. Hypotheses

The following set of hypotheses tests the connection between peace journalism/ conflict sensitivity and emotional responses. Emotion is profoundly related to ethics and moral decision-making (Ess, 2014), and thus it is vital to explore effects on emotions to illuminate real impacts as outlined in a normative theoretical proposal. The experimental study by Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) demonstrated that the effects of peace journalism include changes across the spectrum of fundamental emotions. Their experiment was conducted using television material as the stimulus. This study contemplates replication of their test with the focus on textual news stories material.

Furthermore, the current study added the component of user-generated comments to expand the replication. Framing of professionally-generated media material has shown to have effects on the audience's emotions in numerous studies of the socio-psychological category (e.g., Balzarotti & Ciceri, 2014; Nabi & Keblusek, 2014). While some studies have explored the connection between the emotional appeal of the stimulus material and UGC-creation behaviors (e.g., Dafonte-Gomez, 2014), the emotional effects resulting from exposure to user-generated comments are not as thoroughly explored by scholars. Many authors have stated that a significant portion of user-generated comments tends to be racist, chauvinist, or politically problematic in other ways (e.g., Guo & Harlow, 2014; Kopacz & Lawton, 2013). This tendency suggests a considerable deficiency of conflict sensitivity in the framing of events as is expressed in a large number of user-generated comments. The logical question that emerges from this situation deals with the potential emotional effects of such content on audiences.

As Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) reported, the most pronounced effects of peace journalism can be found on the fundamental emotions of hope, anger, and fear. Therefore, this study also narrows down focus on these three emotions. The hypothesized predictions expect similar trends as those found by Lynch and McGoldrick. The proposed set of hypotheses states:

*H1: Conflict-sensitive framing in news stories as well as in user-generated comments predicts an increase in the emotion of hope.*

*H2: Conflict-sensitive framing in news stories as well as in user-generated comments predicts a decrease in the emotions of anger and fear.*

## 3. Method

This study intends to explore the effects of conflict-sensitive framing. The notion of conflict sensitivity determines the selection of particular frame elements that are employed in news stories and user-generated comments. The detection of the effects of such framing requires an experimental study. Experiments provide control over factors of time-order, manipulation of causal variables, and elimination of alternative explanations (Babbie, 2004; Campbell & Stanley, 1963). While this method might not incorporate all the complexities and nuances of real settings, it serves to isolate potential predictive links between variables.

News stories and user-generated comments were included in the experimental stimulus. Different framing of these materials corresponded to the independent variable of conflict sensitivity. The stimulus was presented to a student sample. Repeated measures design was employed in the experiment. Hence, subjects were exposed to all potential levels of the independent variable. Then outcome variables were measured using a questionnaire after each exposure. This approach permits within-subject as well as between-subject comparisons.

## 4. Sample

The research subjects were recruited among students from a large public university in the United States of America (USA). The students were recruited using a participant management system of the Department of Communication at the university. The participants were rewarded with extra credit in communication courses. The system allows rewards for students while protecting the confidentiality of the participants.

The experiment was aimed to address differences based on multiple variables. To document links between multiple variables, random sampling from a general population is not necessary (Basil, Brown, & Bocarnea, 2002). Therefore, a student sample is appropriate for this study. The requirements of a true experiment were satisfied by the random assignment of subjects to conditions (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

## 5. Procedure

The study involved the participation of human subjects, and hence the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required under USA laws. A detailed description of the procedure was presented to the IRB with all mandatory documentation and materials. The IRB granted the approval of the study in October 2015. Data collection began in November 2015 and was completed in April 2016.

The experiment was conducted in a computer laboratory. Upon arrival, the subjects were randomly assigned a specific condition. The subjects were presented the information sheet, which outlined the basic features of the study as well as the aims of this inquiry. The subjects were encouraged to keep this document for their records. The sheet also included contact information of the researcher, as well as the contact information of the IRB for the occasion that the subjects wish to raise a concern to the higher overview body. The subjects were allowed to seek any additional clarifications before the start of the experiment, during the experiment, as well as after the experiment. The researcher was present during the entire course of the experiment to address the potential questions of subjects as well as to address any technical difficulties that could occur during the course of the experiment.

The entire experiment was administered by the computer program MediaLab (empirisoft.com). First, subjects were given the option to establish their consent for participation in the study by clicking on the "okay" tab to begin the experiment. As the initial part of the actual study, a survey with questions measuring the level of potential independent and confounding variables was administered. Next, subjects were presented eight stories accompanied by user-generated comments. After each story and each corresponding set of user comments, a survey with measures of outcome variables was administered. Finally, a survey of demographic information was administered. The demographic variables were measured after the experiment to decrease the potential of demographic identities acting as unaccounted extraneous variables.

## 6. Stimulus material and manipulation checks

### 6.1 Construction

The goal was to construct a set of news stories and comments that would serve as meaningful stimulus material. Constructing research material, rather than simply using existing news or UGC, introduces a level of control, which is a crucial facet in an experimental study (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). The researcher's control over the construction of stimulus material allowed to keep attributes of the material equivalent across different conditions, while properly manipulating the attributes of the stories that reflect the independent variables (Lecheler, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2014), and this procedure enhances the reliability of the experiment. The materials for the user-generated comments were constructed in a similar manner by reviewing multiple news articles and user-generated comments. The draft of the material was revised after consultation with academicians and media professionals to triangulate the check of the face validity of the stimulus.

### 6.2 Manipulation of the independent variable

The theoretical concept of framing significantly assisted in designing the stimulus material. Lynch and Galtung (2010) defined peace journalism as a form of framing, especially in terms of the definition forwarded by Entman (1993). For empirical research, Entman's take on framing is used by Matthes and Kohring (2008) in the construction of frame elements. Matthes and Kohring argued that Entman's widely used definition of framing, which includes (a) defining a problem, (b) its causes, (c) moral evaluation, and (d) solution recommendations, can be utilized to extract exactly the four listed frame elements as parameters to consistently identify frames in empirical studies. Thus, the approach of frame elements is also advantageous for the designing of stimulus for an experiment. While the application of framing to journalistic material is inherently rooted in the theory of peace journalism, the application of framing to user-generated material is arguably as intrinsic. Any unit of interpretation of events, whether professionally-generated or user-generated, represents some type of a frame. The notion that framing is essentially inevitable in describing any type of event is present since the early works on framing in the communication field (Gitlin, 1980). Hence, the frame element approach is appropriate and sound to design a stimulus material that mimics professional as well as user-generated media content.

The design required each story to be framed in two potential styles: one style resembling peace journalism and the other resembling war journalism. The basis of the stories was the same in both alternatives. Peace-journalism level was achieved by employing specific frame elements that are characteristic to conflict sensitivity, while war-journalism level included frame elements that lack conflict sensitivity. For instance, the '*definition of the problem*' frame element in the stimulus Story 1 about Afghanistan focuses on human suffering under the rule of anti-Taliban warlords when framed as peace journalism. When framed as war journalism, the frame element of defining the problem centers on the fight against the Taliban, while the possible abuse of civilians by anti-Taliban warlords is trivialized.

As another example takes on the '*moral evaluation*' frame element. Both versions of the Story 2 include a description of an event where pro-Russian separatist rebel commander known as "Givi" committed an abuse of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs):

"...One of the videos shows Givi using a knife to cut the military insignia off captives' jackets and stuffing

them into their mouths. Then the captives are blindfolded and driven to downtown Donetsk, where several elderly women are seen beating and throwing eggs at them...”

The second half of the story differs depending on the frame. While the core of the story is highlighting the morally-problematic wrongdoing of separatist rebels, the follow-up information about the incident is included, which gives a somewhat humanizing dimension to the different sides of the conflict. The moral evaluation becomes more nuanced. So the peace journalistic version addresses the release of the POWs as well as an explanation from the self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic separatists:

“...Few days after the videos were released, Donetsk People's Republic Prime Minister Alexander Zakharchenko handed the mistreated captives back to the Ukrainian military in exchange for captured rebels. The Ukrainian captives showed several bruises on their bodies but reported that the rebels provided basic medical treatment to them.

According to Zakharchenko: ‘We try hard to adhere to Geneva Conventions, but it is difficult to keep my soldiers calm when their relatives, civilians, are killed daily by Ukrainian artillery shelling.’”

War journalistic framing fails to report on any perspective or acts of benevolence from the separatists, and only includes loyalist Ukrainian perspective that further morally vilifies the rebels by labeling them terrorists:

“Oleksandra Matviychuk... calls what appears in the videos ‘terrorists’ flagrant violations of the Geneva Conventions.’...Givi expresses allegiance to the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic – break-away Ukrainian region. Ukrainian authorities consider Donetsk People’s Republic’s supporters a terrorist group.”

An individual in the study might have personal background knowledge and bias about a specific conflict in the stimulus material. By including eight different stories with varied contexts, the impact of an individual subject's preconception towards a specific context is statistically neutralized.

For the user-generated comments that corresponded to the stories, the main distinction of the framing was focused on the elements of ‘*moral evaluation*’ and ‘*solution recommendation*’. This approach was chosen after reviewing a considerable number of online comment forums discussing international politics and violence. Specifically, comments tend to frequently offer moral evaluation and solution recommendations. Furthermore, whenever appropriate, other frame elements were also incorporated into the framing of the comments in the stimulus material.

One of the main distinctions between conflict-sensitive and conflict-insensitive framing is rooted in humanization versus demonization of one of the conflicting parties. The frame element of ‘*moral evaluation*’ is a key aspect of either humanization or demonization. For instance, the conflict-sensitive (peace-oriented) comments about Story 3 (Kosovo) acknowledge the number of victims on all involved sides of the past conflict. It may also add more nuance and remind of additional groups and factions within the context:

“UGC comment:

What makes horrible incidents like this even more complicated is that criminal groups abuse the fact that they can blame their violence on some politically rooted actions.”

This type of framing contextualizes and frequently also humanizes suffering and supports further calls for

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sustainable peace in the region, which is part of the ‘*solution recommendation*’ frame element. Conflict insensitive (war-oriented) comments tend to determine one group as the problem and point to the alleged immorality of the group and thus, the illegitimacy of their claim. Another illustration of this violence escalating tendency is in Ukraine incident-related comment:

“UGC comment:

When you lose friends every day, seeing them with their heads blown off, come here and talk about what's acceptable....he (Givi) didn't kill them, they can consider themselves lucky.”

Such charged comments reiterate divisions and hostilities. Possibly, comments might even further contribute to exacerbating the tensions with their oft raw or even abusive language, which normally does not occur in professional news texts.

The corresponding set of comments for each of the eight stories was developed. Each story and each set of comments were written with various alternatives to reach combinations of the four possible levels of conflict-sensitivity (more information on the manipulation is provided in the next section). It is important to note that no identifiers of the comment authors were provided to accompany the stimulus comments. This was a deliberate choice to guarantee that the perceptions of the author's identity are not acting as an unaccounted intervening variable, as research shows that demographic identity perceptions have impacts on the audience's reception of UGC (Spence et al., 2013).

## 7. Measures

### 7.1 Independent variables

The main independent variable of the study is conflict sensitivity. This is a nominal variable where a low level of conflict sensitivity is captured in the characteristics of a war-journalistic frame, while the high level is captured in the characteristics of a peace-journalistic frame. The experiment considers the four different levels of conflict sensitivity: (1) peace-journalism–framed story with peace-oriented comments, (2) peace-journalism–framed story with war-oriented comments, (3) war-journalism–framed story with peace-oriented comments, and (4) war-journalism story with war-oriented comments. The short labels for these four levels are: (1) PP, (2) PW, (3) WP, and (4) WW.

Each subject was exposed to each level twice within different story context to minimize the potential extraneous effect of the unaccounted confounding variables, which might occur due to, for instance, a subject's biased position on one specific story. This procedure allows for within-the-subjects comparison besides between-the-subjects comparison, which is a given in the experimental design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Furthermore, the random assignment to one of the four possible conditions decreased the conceivable impact of unaccounted confounding variables (the conditions are depicted in Figure 1).



## 7.2 Dependent variables

The set of key dependent variables reflects on the *fundamental emotions*, which have been documented as outcome variables of peace journalism by Lynch and McGoldrick (2013). The prediction expects conflict sensitivity to be associated with lower levels of anger and fear and higher levels of hope. The following survey items were used: (a) *Reading this story I felt angry*. (b) *Reading this story I felt fearful*. (c) *Reading this story I felt hopeful*. The 7-point Likert scale was used to capture the interval level of measurement of each item.

## 8. Results

### 8.1 Sample description

The final number of enrolled research participants was 125. One of the participants was dropped from the analyses as the individual had not followed directions and had completed the study within an unrealistic segment of time, suggesting that the participant was not reading the material. Hence, the final-tested aggregate of participants was 124. This is a sufficient number of subjects for an experiment with a between-within-subjects design, where all participants are exposed to each possible combination of the independent variables (e.g., Hong & Len-Rios, 2015; Tokunaga, 2013).

As the descriptive statistics reveal, the mean age was 23 years ( $SD = 6$ ). The youngest participants were 18 years of age, and the eldest participant was 55 years old. 63% of the participants were female, and 37% were male. Two participants declined to identify their racial/ethnic background. Approximately 38% of the participants identified themselves as white or Caucasian; about 20% as Middle Eastern or Arab American; 19% as black or African American; 15% as Asian, South Asian, or Asian American; approximately 5% as Latino or Native American; and approximately 4% identified themselves as mixed-race or biracial.

Among the participants, 78% reported that their primary language used at home is English, while 22% reported using a language other than English at home. It was also found that 52% of the participants speak only English, while 48% reported that they also speak other languages. In total, 18 different foreign languages were reported by the participants, which are: Arabic, Aramaic, Bangla/Bengali, Chaldean, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Korean, Punjabi, Serbian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Telugu, and Urdu.

Among the participants, 2 students reported undeclared or undecided majors. About 38% of participants were majoring in an area in the communication field, such as public relations, journalism, or communication studies. Approximately 27% of the participants were majoring in natural sciences, medical field-related areas, or engineering. Approximately 21% of participants were majoring in business or finance-related fields and approximately, 12% of them were majoring in social sciences or humanities.

The respondents reflected on their political views by answering questions regarding their position on a political spectrum through a 7-point scale, with 1 corresponding to "very conservative" and 7 corresponding to "very liberal". Just 5% of the participants selected 1 or 2, which suggests conservative leanings; 60% of the participants selected 3, 4, or 5 suggesting the centrist type of leanings; and 35% selected 6 or 7, which corresponds to liberal political leaning.

Also, 78% of the participants indicated that they obtain a large or a considerable portion of news from online sources; 63% suggested that they pay some degree of attention to international news coverage; 69% of the participants reflected that they do not tend to post online comments about international events and politics, while 15% indicated that they tend to comment on these types of matters; 34% of the participants tend to not

read, while 48% tend to read other people's online comments about international events and politics; and 62% of the participants agreed with the statement that online-news platforms should always allow sections for readers' comments, while 15% of the participants showed disagreement towards this trend.

## 8.2 Hypothesis-testing results

The hypotheses stated; H1: Conflict-sensitive framing in news stories as well as in user-generated comments predicts an increase in the emotion of hope; H2: Conflict-sensitive framing in news stories as well as in user-generated comments predicts a decrease in the emotions of anger and fear. The set of dependent variables (DVs) was collected and analyzed to address the predictions.

### *Hope*

DV (Hope) means were as follows: PP  $m = 5.6371$ ,  $SD = 2.4506$ ; PW  $m = 4.8790$ ,  $SD = 2.0226$ ; WP  $m = 6.0565$ ,  $SD = 2.3661$ ; WW  $m = 5.2097$ ,  $SD = 2.1080$  (see Table 1 and Table 2). Repeated measures ANOVA was performed to test the hypothesis.

Journalism shows a significant effect in decreasing hope, despite the opposite prediction of the hypothesis,  $F(1, 124) = 6.149$ ,  $p = 0.015$ , which suggests peace journalism is associated with lower emotion of hope than war journalism (see Table 3). Supporting the prediction of the hypothesis is the main effect of user-generated comments, which is both significant and high, thus showing that peace-oriented user-generated comments are associated with increased hope  $F(1,124) = 23.030$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table 4). The interaction effects between journalism and user-generated comments is insignificant at  $F(1, 124) = 0.081$ ,  $p = 0.777$  (see Table 5). Therefore, the aggregate results partially support the H1.

Between-the-subjects comparisons were performed addressing H1. Neither of these tests yielded any significant interactions. Therefore, the results found for the aggregate sample replicate among different groups of subjects.

### *Anger*

DV (Anger) means were as follows: PP  $m = 7.8871$ ,  $SD = 2.8831$ ; PW  $m = 7.9597$ ,  $SD = 2.7301$ ; WP  $m = 7.4032$ ,  $SD = 2.4724$ ; WW  $m = 7.7097$ ,  $SD = 2.9598$  (see Table 1 and Table 2). Repeated measures ANOVA test suggested that in divergence from the hypothesis, anger was significantly higher in response to peace journalism, with main effect of  $F(1, 124) = 4.645$ ,  $p = 0.033$  (see Table 3). Main effect of user-generated comments was insignificant,  $F(1, 124) = 1.008$ ,  $p = 0.317$  (see Table 4). The interaction effect was also insignificant,  $F(1, 124) = 0.393$ ,  $p = 0.532$  (see Table 5). Hence, the H2 is not supported by the aggregate data on the emotion of anger.

Between-subjects tests showed no significant interactions in impacting the levels of anger when considering gender, frequency of commenting on political/international issues, and political views. However, interaction of native language and framing of user-generated comments had a significant effect on anger,  $F(1,124) = 9.565$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.073$ . While the level of anger is consistently higher among non-native speakers, a particularly steep difference occurs with a significant increase of anger when non-native speakers are exposed to war-oriented–user-generated comments. For example, for non-native speakers, exposure to WP showed mean of  $m = 7.4444$ ,  $SD = 2.0817$ , with increase of mean for WW exposure to  $m = 9.4444$ ,  $SD = 2.2246$ . In comparison, the mean of anger for native English speakers is significantly lower for WW exposure at  $m = 7.2268$ ,  $SD = 2.9669$ .

Moreover, between-subjects test also showed a significant interaction of age group and framing of user-

generated comments on anger,  $F(1, 124) = 5.089$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.040$ . Younger adults responded to user-generated comments as hypothesized in H2, with increased anger to war-oriented comments. For instance, holding journalism at a constant war frame, the mean anger of young adults increased from WP at  $m = 7.4175$ ,  $SD = 2.4675$  to WW at  $m = 8.0291$ ,  $SD = 2.7563$ . However, among older adults, the emotion of anger increased as a response to peace-oriented–user-generated comments. The example means of anger among older adults showing this contrasting tendency are WP at  $m = 7.333$ ,  $SD = 2.5560$ , and WW at  $m = 6.1429$ ,  $SD = 3.4682$ . As the between-subjects comparisons suggest, there is partial support for some aspects of H2 under rather specific conditions.

### *Fear*

DV (Fear) means were as follows: PP  $m = 6.9435$ ,  $SD = 3.0022$ ; PW  $m = 6.9435$ ,  $SD = 2.8235$ ; WP  $m = 6.4355$ ,  $SD = 2.6511$ ; WW  $m = 6.5081$ ,  $SD = 3.0162$  (see Table 1 and Table 2). Repeated measures ANOVA showed that the main effect of journalism was significant, but contrary to the hypothesis, higher fear was shown to be associated with peace journalism,  $F(1, 124) = 7.938$ ,  $p = 0.006$  (see Table 3). The main effect of user-generated comments was insignificant:  $F(1, 124) = 0.063$ ,  $p = 0.803$  (see Table 4). The interaction was insignificant:  $F(1, 124) = 0.047$ ,  $p = 0.828$  (see Table 5). Hence, the aggregate results fail to support H2 regarding the emotion of fear.

Additionally, between-subjects tests were applied to results on the emotion of fear. Neither of the tested interactions showed any significant effects regarding fear. Hence, aggregate data tend to apply across different groups.

## **9. Discussion**

### ***9.1 Theoretical considerations: Conflict sensitivity and emotional responses***

The inquiry into emotional responses evoked by conflict-sensitive framing of news stories and user-generated comments brought unexpected and intriguing results. As all the emotional outcomes of peace journalism in this study are contradictory to the available findings from other research works, potential theoretical and empirical reasons for this discrepancy have to be discussed. Interestingly, peace-oriented UGC demonstrates some of the positive emotional effects that have been predicted. Thus, it appears that the emotional response to conflict-sensitive media content framing is a very complex process impacted by a multitude of factors.

Previous studies have detected an association between peace journalism and positive changes in fundamental emotions, specifically, decrease of fear and anger and increase of hope (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013; Lynch, McGoldrick, & Heathers, 2015). Those results were not aggregately replicated in this study, and they showed a consistently significant association of peace journalism and negative emotional impacts with decreasing hope and increasing anger and fear. From the theoretical perspective, this discrepancy in findings suggests that peace journalism, or the type of content that possesses peace journalism's characteristics, is affecting emotional responses in a more complicated fashion than hypothesized and detected thus far.

Conflict-sensitive framing is not a simple tendency in news reporting, instead, it incorporates a complex and intricate set of framing decisions, which creates an integrated peace-oriented discourse (Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2015). Some authors warn about oversimplifying the dichotomy between war and peace journalism and prefer to characterize the conflict-sensitive style of journalism as a fluid tendency, which is “one step ahead of ruling social discourse in the direction of de-escalation, conflict resolution and reconciliation” (Kempf, 2003, p. 9). Within such understanding, it is foreseeable that emotional responses to conflict sensitivity will not be uniform

and consistent in all instances as different types of peace journalism vary more or less from war journalism. Hence, emotional reactions to these different types would vary as well, specifically when interacting with other relevant variables, which can temper or exacerbate effects.

Recent theoretical discussions problematized some universalist assumptions about peace journalism's characteristics and manifestations (Kempf, 2019; Mitra, 2018; Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2015). The early Galtung's articulation of what exactly serves as peace journalistic content may not exactly translate to each situation, so a more nuanced reflection on social, cultural, political, and other relevant aspects of the scene is indispensable. The negative emotional responses to peace journalism detected in this experiment provide empirical grounding for continuing the philosophical discussions that call for more careful, nuanced, and culturalized conceptualization and operationalization of a valid conflict-sensitive communication in a given situation.

The fact that emotional responses to conflict-sensitive framing of journalistic content were consistently negative in this experiment suggests that some aspects of this specific study might help to explain this tendency. One possible explanation is that the choices of particular frame elements associated with war or peace journalism might have a strong impact on emotional outcomes. For example, a conflict-sensitive frame element of *problem causes*, which examines the deep roots of the conflict is less likely to increase hope than a frame element that explores potential non-violent *solutions* to the problem. Also, the in-depth analysis of conflict-sensitive framing can be disheartening in comparison to oversimplified framing of war journalism. The selection of stimulus is essentially a methodological choice that then in turn has implications for the empirical findings. Hence, it is further discussed in the following sub-section.

Regarding UGC, conflict-sensitive framing did not impact fear nor anger. However, hope has significantly increased in the audience after exposure to peace-oriented comments. This was the only instance when the hypothesis was supported, yet, the support was rather strong. Conflict sensitivity in user generated-comments appears to be very important in impacting the overall perception of hope toward reaching higher levels. Hence, it appears that conflict-sensitive framing in UGC can have important positive impacts on the overall perception of the problem. Previous studies addressed how social media function as resources of information for journalists who are, to a degree, attempting to report according to peace journalism (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019). Previous studies also tracked peace journalistic features of professional journalists' material on Twitter (Tenenboim, 2017) and of genuine nonprofessional UGC on Facebook (Katiambo, 2019). The findings of the experiment in this article are advancing theory and knowledge by providing actual evidence that peace journalistic/conflict sensitive features of UGC trigger some clearly positive effects on readers.

## **9.2 Methodological considerations, limitations, and future research suggestions**

Further attention to the methodological differences between the previous studies and this experiment might serve as a source for a possible explanation of the findings-related discrepancies. The studies by Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) and Lynch, McGoldrick, and Heathers (2015) applied the classic experimental design in which randomly selected groups were exposed to just one type of framing, either war journalism or peace journalism. This experiment used a model where each subject was exposed to each type of framing with different stimulus stories. This design choice could have played a role in impacting empirical results. However, the theory does not provide a specific explanation justifying such an impact. Thus, additional theorizing based on inductive empirical comparisons should be done to explore such options and draw expanded theory based on more data.

Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) and Lynch, McGoldrick, and Heathers (2015) used broadcast video content as the stimulus material. This study used textual journalistic materials as the stimulus. The particular theory of peace journalism does not contain any suggestions on how and why the modality of journalism can impact the effects. Nevertheless, video material is by default richer in certain information with audio and pictorial components that are not present with just a print news story. Hence, a video can provide a more complex conflict-sensitive–discursive narrative (Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2015). Perhaps, such a complex narrative inspires positive emotions, while a simpler take on peace journalism in a brief story has the opposite effect. Future studies should examine this potentiality.

Looking at the emotional effects of conflict sensitivity in user-generated comments, demographic variables of the audience played a role to a degree. Only for the emotion of hope, conflict sensitivity was associated with an increase of hope across all groups. As far as the other emotions are concerned, conflict sensitivity was associated with a decrease in anger only within two groups. Younger adults and people whose native language was not English tend to respond with increased anger to war-oriented user-generated comments. Thus, close attention should be paid to demographic characteristics of the audience in future studies, as empirical research can provide additional information, while critical analysis can illuminate why different demographic-group-related experiences might impact differing emotional responses to conflict sensitivity or lack of conflict sensitivity.

A worthwhile course of future research should deliberately recruit human subjects with a more diverse set of characteristics than the present sample. For instance, it will be very valuable to compare the impacts of the same or similar stimuli on various generations of participants. As the student samples are utilized in numerous studies, the overall findings tend to over-represent tendencies among young adults, which may or may not reflect general tendencies in important aspects (Meltzer, Naab, & Daschmann, 2012). Particularly, researchers ought to be careful before making overarching generalizations based on data from people, who are still undergoing formative phases, which leave ramifications on numerous dimensions including media literacy (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019), emotional maturity (Stewart, 2012), or moral-reasoning-related development (Bowen, 2013a). Due to the skewed political preference that is common among students at the university where recruitment occurred, the current sample leaned very liberally in terms of the traditional US political spectrum. Political leaning signifies a type of tendency that has been linked to different patterns of media selection (e.g., Bou-Hamad & Yehya, 2020) as well as different spectrum of stimuli responses, including ones that are linked to emotions (e.g., Jost, 2017; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018).

In this specific study, the identity of the alleged comment contributors was cloaked on purpose to eliminate the impacts of preconceived responses that the study subjects may have towards perceived members of specific groups. To address the ecological validity of the experience that readers have with a lot of UGC that exists online, future research will benefit from incorporating additional variables that address interactivity, contributor identity, and a multitude of relational factors, which arguably and demonstrably influence experiences and effects of UGC exposure (e.g., Kim et al, 2016; Mangat, 2018; Spence et al., 2013).

Another type of useful future findings is likely to result from studies that will explore conflict sensitivity and de-escalation-oriented communication in connection to other crucial global topics in addition to political violence. For instance, Hackett (2017) proposed that some tenets of peace journalism might be useful for the news coverage of the climate crisis. The addition of new contexts will allow for wider discussion and subsequent development of theory.

Essentially, follow-up empirical studies are necessary to explicate varying emotional responses to peace journalism as well as peace-oriented UGC. Likewise, further normative and critical works are vital for advancing knowledge of the capacities of conflict-sensitive communication.

### ***9.3 Broader normative implications***

Mass communication has been profoundly altered by the rise of digital media technologies and the ensuing emergence of new platforms, among which are UGC platforms. This transformation necessitates a radical re-envisioning of media ethics (Ward, 2014; Ward & Wasserman, 2010; 2014). Hence, it is vital to discuss the normative implications of the intersectional focus on emotions, empirical data, and the context of political violence.

Peace journalism contains a clear normative proposal of what journalism about conflict ought to look like and ought to do. Digital media technologies enable citizens a possibility to contribute to the mediated narrative on issues. The experiment introduced in this paper shows that the emotions of the audience are somewhat stirred when exposed to either peace or war journalism, or peace- or war-oriented UGC. The question that should be pondered is what this means in terms of normative and moral implications. According to modern empirical research as well as several significant ethics theories that date as far back as antiquity such Aristotle's or Confucius's works, ethics and emotions have rather closely acquainted relationship, as a combination of rational and emotional reasoning contributes to moral judgment, to the notion of phronesis (Ess, 2014).

The scholars of communication ethics as well as scholars of media engage with dynamic and fast-paced phenomena of interest. The quality of intellectual conversation on the normative matters of contemporary media acutely depends on the approach that is theoretically-sound (Bowen, 2013b) and informed by broad global conversations (Ward, 2014; Ward & Wasserman, 2010; 2014). The empirical results that are presented in this paper serve as one example of information that should be factored into theoretically-driven conversations on matters of media ethics. Furthermore, the fluidity of the studied phenomenon requires that scholars put aside some paradigmatic differences. Normative and empirical scholars should find a joint way of productive dialogue, especially in cases where a broader public good is at stake (Craig, 1999). For example, empirical research can determine the types and magnitude of impacts of peace-oriented communication in its user-generated or journalistic materializations. Then, ethics theorists can weigh the soundness of the normative argument as well as a measurable degree of outcomes of the communication that is inspired by this argument. Therefore, a more efficient course of action can be recommended to journalists, internet-savvy communicators among citizens, and other relevant publics.

Events of political violence range from terrorism to state-sponsored violence, and from international to civil armed conflicts. Political violence causes an immeasurable degree of human suffering through destructions of lives, health, liberty, property, and environment. It is a global problem, which is perceived by the majority of the global public via contemporary media. Mass communication scholars have demonstrated that media messages around political violence have certain effects on audiences (e.g., Schaefer, 2006). This study shows that not just journalistic but also user-generated media material impacts emotions. Emotional reactions to news-media content are related to information retention and opinion formation (Bas & Grabe, 2015; Kuhne & Schemer, 2015). In democratic societies, echelons of executive and legislative power should pay attention to public opinion. Hence, the pressure of public opinion has, or at a minimum should have, some sway in impacting the way that democratic power elites react to domestic and international instances of political violence.



## 10. Conclusion

This study addresses the calls of scholars such Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2015): “the multimedia landscape, with its different discursive spaces, should also have a place in the future debate on peace journalism” (p. 232). Emotional reactions to news-media content are related to information retention and opinion formation (Bas & Grabe, 2015; Kuhne & Schemer, 2015). Furthermore, empirical research as well as many global normative philosophies suggest that emotion plays a substantial role in ethical decision-making (Ess, 2014). Thus, the fact that conflict-sensitive framing of professional and non-professional media content affects emotional responses is in itself a very important finding. This study serves to outline more detailed and unexpected results on the ways the audience reacts to news as channeled through articles and accompanying user-generated comments. The current article also outlines fruitful directions for future research inquiries, which will speak to noteworthy social issues. Ethicists, media professionals, and digital media users must reflect on boarder-reaching impacts that conflict-sensitive framing has on the perceptions of the problematic global phenomenon of political violence.

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## Appendix

**Figure 1 - Dependent Variable Exposure in the Conditions**

	<i>Condition 1</i>	<i>Condition 2</i>	<i>Condition 3</i>	<i>Condition 4</i>
Story 1: <i>Afghanistan</i>	PP	PW	WP	WW
Story 2: <i>Ukraine</i>	PW	WP	WW	PP
Story 3: <i>Kosovo</i>	WP	WW	PP	PW
Story 4: <i>Tajikistan</i>	WW	PP	PW	WP
Story 5: <i>Colombia</i>	PP	PW	WP	WW
Story 6: <i>Ivory Coast</i>	PW	WP	WW	PP
Story 7: <i>Hungary</i>	WP	WW	PP	PW
Story 8: <i>Nagorno-Karabakh</i>	WW	PP	PW	WP

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

**Table 1 - Means and Standard Deviations of the Main Study Variables – Part 1 (Peace Journalism)**

	<i>Peace Journalism Stories</i>	<i>Peace Journalism Stories</i>
	<i>Peace-Oriented UGC</i>	<i>War-Oriented UGC</i>
<i>Variable</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
DV (anger)	7.89 (2.88)	7.96 (2.73)
DV (fear)	6.94 (3.00)	6.94 (2.82)
DV (hope)	5.64 (2.45)	4.88 (2.02)

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

**Table 2 - Means and Standard Deviations of the Main Study Variables – Part 2 (War Journalism)**

	<i>War Journalism Stories</i>	<i>War Journalism Stories</i>
	<i>Peace-Oriented UGC</i>	<i>War-Oriented UGC</i>
<i>Variable</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
DV (anger)	7.40 (2.47)	7.71 (2.96)
DV (fear)	6.44 (2.65)	6.51 (3.02)
DV (hope)	6.06 (2.37)	5.21 (2.11)

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

**Table 3 - Analysis of Variance Results Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 for Effects of Journalism**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>η<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>P</i>
DV (anger)	4.645*	0.036	0.033
DV (fear)	7.938*	0.061	0.006
DV (hope)	6.149*	0.048	0.015

Note. Star symbol (\*) signifies statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

**Table 4 - Analysis of Variance Results Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 for Effects of User-Generated Comments**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>η<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>P</i>
DV (anger)	1.008	0.008	0.317
DV (fear)	0.063	0.001	0.803
DV (hope)	23.030*	0.158	<0.001

Note. Star symbol (\*) signifies statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

**Table 5 - Analysis of Variance Results Testing Interaction Effects between Journalism and User-Generated Comments**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>η<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>P</i>
DV (anger)	0.393	0.003	0.532
DV (fear)	0.047	0.000	0.828
DV (hope)	0.081	0.001	0.777

Note. Star symbol (\*) signifies statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Marta N. Lukacovic

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