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# Which War Stories Get Told? How The Identifiability of Villains And Victims Impacts Media Coverage of Conflicts

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# WHICH WAR STORIES GET TOLD?
# HOW THE IDENTIFIABILITY OF VILLAINS AND VICTIMS IMPACTS MEDIA COVERAGE OF CONFLICTS

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**Abstract:** In the last decade, armed conflicts have been proliferating around the world. While most conflicts still get covered in the mass media, some have received more international attention than others. This disparity in attention can affect the resolution of conflicts and the support victims can get to rebuild their lives. This study seeks to answer the question of why some armed conflicts receive more media coverage than others. I hypothesize that journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims and villains more than conflicts with more vague victims and villains, because clear victims and villains provide stronger narrative frames and fewer actors to cover, easing the cognitive and logistical burdens on journalists. I derive this hypothesis from an interdisciplinary theory-building exercise that draws on communication studies, psychology, and literary criticism, in addition to the conflict studies canon. Combining expert interviews with war journalists and an original survey experiment randomizing narrative frames on journalism students, I find no significant treatment effect on conflict coverage. However, the results still point to the importance of human stories in bringing readers to empathize with conflict victims even when they seem distant. This study enriches the conflict studies literature by analyzing war coverage from a perspective not explored yet: the narrative forms that emerge from different conflict environments.

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# 1  Research Question, Motivation, Contributions

In the last decade, armed conflicts have been proliferating around the world and they are fore-casted to keep increasing (see Figure 1).[1] Armed Conflicts contributed to 108.4 million forcibly displaced people by the end of 2022.[2] They also often lead to increased human rights abuses and subsequently more pronounced violations of International Humanitarian Law.[3] Conflicts "devas-tate life, health, and living standards" which in turn slow down economies (Blattman and Edward, 2010). One of the main factors in preventing the worst armed conflict outcomes is whether conflicts receive international attention, as the latter has a crucial impact in peacebuilding efforts (Spurk, 2002). The United States Institute of Peace concluded in one of their Peace briefs that "the me-dia can give voice to those who are advocating tolerance, peace, and negotiation," thus opening pathways for conflict resolution (Bajraktari and Parajon, 2007). Although international attention matters, some conflicts receive much more attention than others. For instance, in February 2022, more than a year into the Tigray Genocide, Russia invaded Ukraine (Davis, 2022). This invasion received significant media coverage and attention from the Western audience (Gharib, 2022). In-ternational institutions and sovereign states across the globe condemned Russia's acts and urged it to immediately withdraw from Ukraine (Hathaway, 2023) European countries devised plans to support Ukraine and its refugees.[4] Ukraine was receiving the attention and support that Tigrayans advocates yearned for, for more than a year, with hardly any response.[5]

The line graphs in Figure 2 plots web search interest trends for the terms 'Ukraine war' and

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[1]The conflict frequency includes ongoing and new conflicts each year.

[2]https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends. Syria, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of Congo conflicts led to a significant amount of the UNHCR recorded displacements.

[3]https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/armed-conflict/

[4]https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/timeline-eu-response-ukraine-invasion/

[5]https://www.thenation.com/article/world/genocide-in-tigray/

'Tigray War' between March 2022, the beginning of the Ukraine war, and July 2023 which was the latest available data point at the time of my search. Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term. Google Trends uses a large sample of billions of search requests made on Google per day, categorizes them by topic and aggregates them to show geographic and or global interest. Finally, they normalize the search data to make comparison between terms easier. The graphs in Figure 2 clearly show that globally, the Ukraine war received more attention than the Tigray war in any given period of time.

The disparity in the international community's attention with regards to Ukraine and Tigray inspired the main question of my research. Why do some armed conflicts receive more international attention than others? For the purposes of this thesis, I operationalize international attention as media coverage of conflicts. I argue that journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims/villains more than conflicts with more vague victims/villains. I test these hypotheses by designing an original randomized survey experiment inspired by expert interviews with conflict journalists and the current literature on journalism and conflict coverage. I find no significant treatment effect of the clarity of victims/villains on conflict coverage. However, the findings point to the centrality of telling human stories and finding the human angle in conflict narratives to bring readers to empathize and relate to far away conflicts. This study can help peace advocates across the globe devise efficient advocacy plans to garner broader media support as they raise awareness about some conflicts to reinstate peace. The findings also highlight changes in conflict journalism practices that can reduce bias in which war stories get told.

Figure 1: Armed Conflicts Trends Between 1946 and 2022
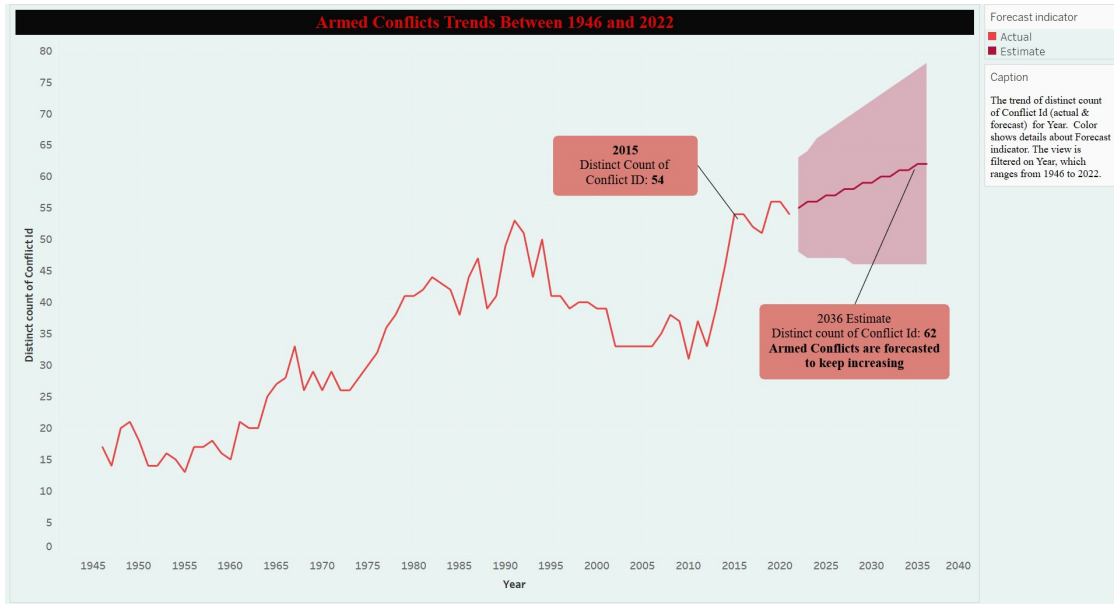


Original Graph built on Tableau Desktop. Armed Conflicts have been increasing over the past decade and are forecasted to follow this upward trend. Data Source: (**?**)

Figure 2: Web Search Interest Trends of the terms Ukraine War and Tigray War
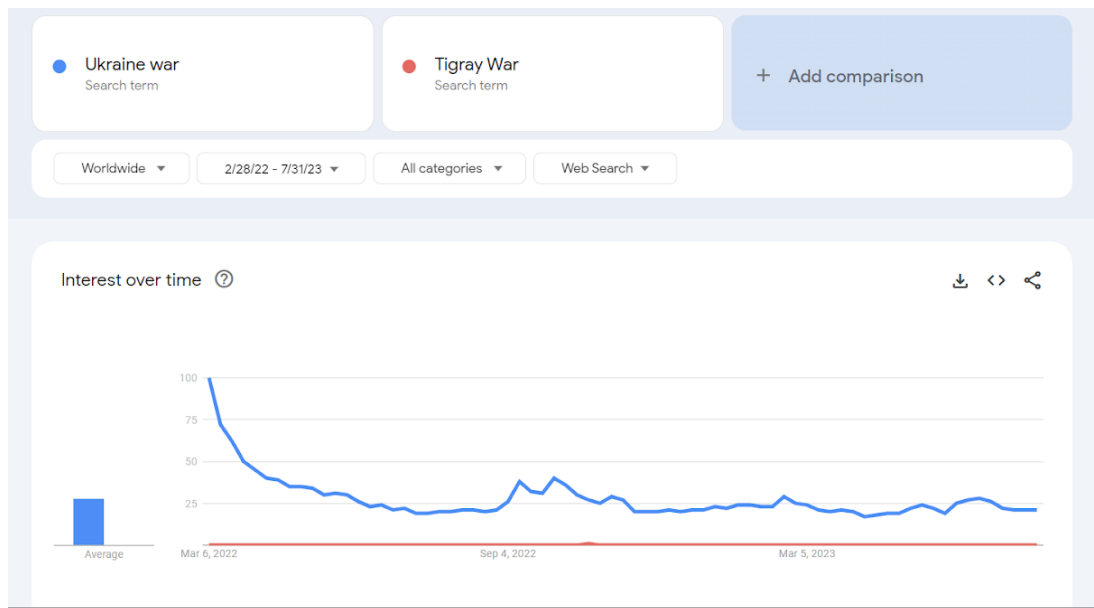


Web Search Interest Trends of the terms Ukraine War and Tigray War between March 2022, the beginning of the Ukraine War, and July, 2023. Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term. Source: Google Trends

# 2 Theoretical Foundations And Empirical Antecedents:

## 2.1 Armed Conflicts

The term conflict can be ambiguous. Mitchell (1981) argues that this ambiguity necessitates that scholars define conflict for any research in the field of Conflict Studies. He defines conflict situations as any situation in which two or more parties perceive that they have incompatible goals, often in a context of scarce positional or material goods (Mitchell, 1981). Mngomezulu and Fayayo (2019) argue that conflicts can take various shapes and differ in intensity depending on whether they take place between states, or rival factions within a county. Essentially though, their study defines conflict as a struggle between two or more parties "over values and claims to status, power, and resources."

Armed conflicts are a type of conflict. Idler (2024) generally defines armed conflicts as a setting of organized group violence, with a significant part of that violence being lethal. Pettersson and Wallensteen (2015) offer a more detailed conceptualization of armed conflict as the contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both, where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year with the condition that the government must be at least one of the two parties. A dyad, or a pair of primary warring parties, is the basic unit of any conflict (Harbom et al. 2008). The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) corroborates this definition in their glossary (Gleditsch et al. 2002). For the purposes of this thesis, I adopt UCDP's definition of armed conflict as a struggle between at least two parties, involving the use of weapons and ammunition, over scarce resources such as power or territory, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year. The government must be one of the parties in the dyad.

Over the past decade, UCDP data illustrates that armed conflicts have been increasing (Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015, see Figure 1), especially internationalized armed conflicts, whereby

one or more states contributes troops to one or more of the actors involved in the conflict. The increasing involvement of external state actors threatens conflict termination, making armed conflicts in the 21st century more protracted (Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015). While current data marks an uptick trend in armed conflicts, Lundgren and Svensson (2020) find that conflict mediation is in decline. Although conflict mediation capacities have expanded, the authors note that two-thirds of all conflicts around the world do not receive international mediation in any given year (2020). The media constitutes one of the main avenues that can bring attention to conflicts and increase opportunities of mediation.

## 2.2 Media and Conflict Coverage

Media's conflict coverage has the power to shape public opinion and mobilize mass actions (Gaye, 1978; Chiluwa, 2022), as well as influence responses from political elites to global events through a phenomenon known as the CNN effect (Robinson, 1999). Through reporting on armed conflicts, the media can bring distant suffering to people's attention, and bring to light forgotten crises (Jumbert, 2020). While many scholars have theorized about the CNN effect, it's important to note that the concept has also been criticized. Gilboa (2005) argues that the CNN effect has been exaggerated in many studies and has yet to be defined concisely. Robinson (2011) acknowledges that the media can have an influence on policies but is just one among many processes that shape political action and outcome. These critics call for more caution in how much influence we attribute to the media on policymaking but do not deny its impact. In fact, Wasow (2020) finds that media's sympapthetic framing of movements can influence public opinion to the point of tipping a presidential election. When the media frames conflicts around human rights abuses, it can provoke mass mobilizations and deter abusers from inflicting more pain (Burgoon et al. 2015). Thus, the media, in its ability to choose what political issues people pay attention to and frame them such that it provokes mobilization and sympathy towards a cause, represents an influential actor in conflict resolution. However, it does not just play this role.

The media constitutes a tool that political actors can use to advance their own agendas and strategies (Gilboa, 2016). The political elite has the power to influence the issues that the media covers prominently, how the stories are framed, and therefore dominates mass opinion (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010 qtd in Wasow, 2020). Governments, in many instances, have resorted to censorship to control, limit, or delay some types of content from production and circulation (Chiluwa, 2022). However, although many scholars rightfully emphasize how censorship can prevent the coverage of global conflicts (Høiby et al. 2019; Chiluwa 2022), Griffin (2010) underscores that important research overlooks journalists' agency in deciding what to cover.

The pursuit of profits drives modern media (Griffin, 2010). Its goal to make revenues leads the media to cover stories "interesting enough to maintain viewership and sales" (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010; Griffin, 2010), often through exploiting viewers' emotions (Griffin, 2010). Tarrow (2022) also agrees that in a capitalist society, the media are in business to report on the news, and the readers' interest or what the editor judges will interest the readers determines the business's growth. Journalists and editors, using criteria such as impact, proximity, prominence (if any famous names are involved), novelty, constantly judge the news value of a story, consequently determining whether they display a story as headlines, tuck it away next to the ads or don't cover it at all (Kennedy, 1988). While censorship is important in trying to understand media coverage, the research around profitability shows that the media constantly makes independent choices to sustain their business. My study adds to the literature in exploring why journalists, the suppliers of news to the media, even when free to cover a sensitive event, might choose not to.

The literature on the interactions of media and conflict is vast and rich with insights. Yet, although many authors have underscored the media's influence on conflicts (Zeitzoff, 2017; Savrum and Miller, 2015), there is a gap in conflict studies when it comes to why some conflicts seem to matter more than others, regardless of casualties or length of the conflict. This thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing research on conflicts by answering the question of why some armed conflicts receive more media coverage than others. Addressing this gap, could improve conflict journalism

by pushing journalists to re-assess any possible biases in reporting and continue to empower victims of all conflicts, as well as provide peacemakers with news avenues to garner international attention in their advocacy.

## 2.3   Framing

Frames are patterns of interpretation, of making sense of the world, rooted in culture (Brueggemann,2014). Scholars have defined them as interpretive schemata that simplify the world out there (Tarrow, 2022). Framing refers to psychological, unconscious processes, that construct the ways in which individuals examine information, make judgments, draw inferences about the world (Hallahan, 1999), and consequently conceptualize particular issues based on available beliefs stored in their memory (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Journalists, like other human beings, experience the effects of framing, especially given that journalism involves interpreting the world (Brueggemann,2014). They constantly make framing judgments in the course to select news stories (Entman, 1993). They must judge items relevant both to themselves and their audience before deciding to cover them (Gaye, 1978) The readers' perceptions stemming from these frames are however less within journalists' control (Bargh, 2015; Entman, 1993). I argue that when journalists face villains and victims narratives in armed conflicts, they make conscious and unconscious framing judgments that culminate in their decisions to cover certain conflicts more than others.

Framing in news media extends beyond its definition of a strategy to construct and process news discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). The content of the news also involves framing processes. Journalists, rather than depicting, construct reality when covering news (Gaye, 1978) based on their frames of the world. News framing implies selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences (Entman, 1993). News framing consists of defining problems, diagnosing their causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). For instance, Entman (1993) illustrates that through the cold war frame, the media identified civil wars as problems, communist rebels as their source,

offered moral judgments, and commanded U.S. support as potential solution. Parallelly, Entman and Rojecki (1993) demonstrate that the media's framing of the nuclear freeze movement belittled public opinion, deeming the matter too complex for common people to understand, and gave more salience and credibility to the ruling elite's voice. Thus, journalists' framing of the world influence the stories they cover and the way they write about or frame the news make some outcomes more acceptable than others in public discourse.

In this thesis, I make a big assumption that more conflict coverage will lead to more opportunities for conflict resolution. However, this assumption has limitations. The media's framing of armed conflicts could lead to various outcomes. For instance, a humanitarian framing can generate empathy for victims and encourage people to donate to humanitarian relief, but would not necessarily lead to diplomatic talks to resolve conflicts. Similarly, a 'war is the only option' framing would also not lead to conflict resolution. The content of the narrative put forward matters significantly in conflict resolution outcomes. However, if anything, the literature on framing does show that the media holds power to not only cover stories but also frame them in a way conducive to peacebuilding.

## 2.4   Villains

Character theory categorizes villains as key players in political theory, including armed conflicts (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). Villains are strong but malevolent, often depicted in narratives as traitors, outside agitators, and foes (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). They inspire 'hatred', 'fear', and are 'secretive' (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). Some epithets likely to be applied to villains in political stories include 'bully', 'liar', 'traitor', 'rebel', or 'dictator' (Klapp, 1954, 56). Villains are perceived as "monsters at heart, hated and shunned as enemies of social organization, of the good, and of the weak" (Klapp,1954, 58). They are seen as perpetrators of violence (Franks, 2011). The villains acts "create a crisis from which society is saved by a hero" (Klapp, 1954, 58).

Cohen (1972), in his book *Folk Devils And Moral Panic*, argues that narratives that amount to

a successful moral panic (i.e. people's attention and reactions lead to conflict resolution), need, among other elements, a suitable villain. The villain must hold little power, represent a soft target and has preferably no access to the battlefields of cultural politics" (Cohen, 1972). Armed conflicts have been increasingly fragmented in the past decade (Mcquinn, 2021), implying the existence of more than one villain (armed actors) in the battlefield (Bakke et al. 2012). Those conflict villains are not easily denounced given the differences in levels of activity and share of power (Dowd, 2015). They also do not constitute a soft target with various armed actors collaborating with governments at different stages of conflicts, while being neither a whole part nor distinctly apart from the state (Staniland, 2012).

This increase in the presence of armed non-state actors in any given conflict, coupled with a rising involvement of foreign state sponsors that provide military, financial, intelligence, and or political support to armed groups, makes conflict resolution even more of a mirage (Berlin and Malone, 2023). Following Cohen's rationale (1972), conflict fragmentation thus leads to situations with no suitable villain element to stoke moral panic in individuals, including conflict journalists. The lack of moral panic stemming from the vagueness of villains can lead journalists not to cover a conflict.

## 2.5 Victims

Victims often suffer at the hands of villains. Just like a properly cast villain can cause moral panic, innocent and weak victims narratives can amount to moral anger and pity (Whittier qtd in Bergstrand and Jasper (2018). For instance, the abduction and sexual killing of children often lead to unanimous moral panic (Cohen, 1972). Emotionally, the public is able to relate to the narrative and react subsequently given that it could be their child too (Cohen, 1972). Children make the perfect victim group: too weak to save themselves (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018) and good enough, due to their innocence, to benefit from primary protection especially in conflict situations (Otunnu, 2000). However, although the identity of victim is important in making people act, the clarity of

victims is what I explore in this thesis.

Victims often provoke pity and reaction from observers but not always. Malala Yousafzai was one girl among many victims of the Taliban (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). Her story was widely received among western audiences. However, other victims' narratives, like the 132 schoolchildren killed in an attack in December 2014 in Pakistan, received less attention (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). The relatively lower attention of this second story could be attributed to the identifiability of the victims. Psychology theorists have argued that the identifiability of victims can provoke neural stimuli which move people to help (Genevsky et al. 2013). This phenomenon is commonly known as the identifiable victim effect. In the story of Malala, the victim's name and face were portrayed in the media. She was a clear victim. As research shows, simply adding a photograph instead of a silhouette can increase people's likelihood to give to a cause for instance (Genevsky et al. 2013). Jenni and Loewenstein (1997) have also argued that people are more willing to spend money to save the lives of identifiable victims than statistical ones. Identifiable victims, referred to in this thesis as clear victims, could neurally stimulate journalists and move them to cover some conflicts more than others, just like they move people to donate. My study adds a new perspective to the literature as it investigates how the identifiable victims effect can be applied to journalists' decisions to cover some conflicts more than others.

The preceding literature review points to several hypotheses and causal mechanisms that I test empirically in this thesis. Below I summarize each of them along with my theoretical rationale.

# 3   Hypotheses and Theoretical Rationale

I test two main hypotheses to answer my research question, layed out in Figure 3. First, I posit that journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims more than conflicts with more vague victims. Additionally, I advance that journalists cover conflicts with clearer villains more than conflicts with more vague villains. For both these hypotheses, I provide a cognitive and logistical mechanism

Figure 3: Causal Diagram laying out the causal mechanisms that will be empirically tested in this study.
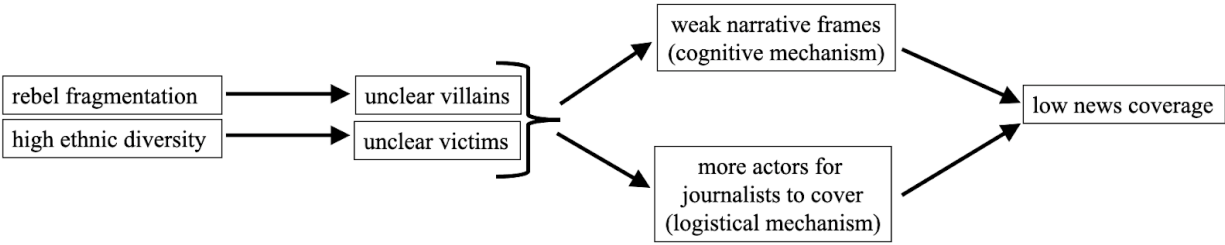


rationales. Although fragmentation constitutes a key aspect of the causal mechanism, due to the scope of this thesis, I focus on the victim and villain narratives' impact on news coverage.

### 3.0.1 Hypothesis 1 Rationale

**Cognitive mechanism:** journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims more than conflicts with more vague victims because clearer victims provide more resonant narrative frames for media coverage. As explained earlier in the theory section, journalists perceive stories through their framed lenses of the world to decide what to cover. Scholars have also shown that narratives involving good and weak characters, victims, push people to take action. Furthermore, psychologists find that the more identifiable a victim is, meaning the clearer a victim is in our heads, the more likely people will experience affect, also known as anything emotional (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau, 2009), and take action (Genevsky et al. 2013). Journalists, like other people, are not exempt to these findings. I hypothesize that clearer victims provoke neural reactions which push journalists to want to help, and thus cover the conflict that is harming people.

**Logistical mechanism:** Clearer victims usually means fewer distinct victim groups, reducing the logistical challenges of reporting on a conflict. Still relying on the identifiable victim effect, conflicts involving more distinct victim groups should require less effort to identify the victims, whether by image, name, age, etc. The media also wants to make profits and is interested in covering stories that captivate and can sell (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010). For-profit media cor-

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porations also have an interest in producing stories with the least overhead costs. Conflicts that need more resources to cover can get in the way of profitability. Thus conflict with clearer victims where it can be easier to identify victims and gather sources for a story will be covered more than those with more unclear victims.

### 3.0.2 Hypothesis 2 Rationale

**Cognitive mechanism:** Journalists cover conflicts with clearer villains more than conflicts with more vague villains because clearer villains provide more resonant narrative frames for media coverage. As developed in the theory section, villains are perceived as strong and malevolent. Their actions are deemed evil and push people to act in order to maintain meaning in their perceptions of how the world should work. Affect control theory reasons that people are constantly maintaining meaning in their world. Consequently, when an event challenges their perception and expectations of what life should be, like a child killing another child, individuals' motivation to maintain meaning pushes them to react and restore 'order' (Bergstrand and Jasper, 2018). The audience perceives villains as strong, malevolent troublemakers who threaten the order and need to be stopped, hence they react. However, being a villain alone is not enough to provoke a reaction. As Cohen (1972) writes, people need identifiable villains who are a "soft target, easily denounced, with little power, and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics". Following this logic, conflicts with clearer villains provide journalists and their audience a narrative that calls for moral panic and action, thus prompting coverage.

**Logistical mechanism:** Clearer villains usually means fewer distinct villains, reducing the logistical challenges of reporting on a conflict. A recent article from the International Peace Institute detailed the impact of the presence of modern mercenaries in conflicts on the efficiency of peace operations (Druet, 2023). Private Military and Security Companies especially limit the freedom of movement of peace operations and subsequently the investigation and reporting about the events on the ground. The increased fragmentation of armed conflicts makes the mainstream media reluc-

tant to send their staff to conflict zones for both financial and safety reasons (Høiby and Ottosen, 2019). The reduction of access to first hand information, stemming from the increase in actors which limits movement and spreads insecurity, complicates the logistical challenges of reporting on armed conflicts. My expert interviews also support this rationale. Journalists often named how expensive covering conflicts are, the shifting frontlines when many actors are involved, and governments blocking access to battlefields as some of the big challenges they face when deciding to cover conflicts.

# 4   Research Design and Methods

## 4.1   Survey Experiment

I designed a randomized survey experiment to test my hypotheses. Given my limited background knowledge about journalism and news coverage of conflicts, I decided to first conduct expert interviews to help me craft realistic vignettes. Between October and November 2023, I led three expert interviews lasting between 20 minutes to one hour with conflict journalists from the U.S., Ethiopia, and the Netherlands. These journalists have years of experience covering hidden and known conflicts around the globe such as the 1980 Iraq invasion, the South Sudan war, or the Tigray war. In the interviews, I asked questions such as "how do you learn about new conflicts?", "What are some challenges you have faced when covering conflicts?","What are common characteristics of conflicts that receive a lot of attention?". I followed up with other questions based on interviewees' responses. I then used journalists' answers from the interviews to design the survey experiment on Qualtrics. I created four vignettes narrating conflict scenarios and set up Qualtrics to randomly assign each participant with a clear victim or vague victim vignette, and then a clear villain or vague villain vignette. I randomized twice per respondent, so it was possible to see a vague victim and then clear villain vignette. I presented each participant with two treatments but did not cluster

the hypothesis tests at the respondent level. Table 1 summarizes the sample size for each treatment arm. Overall, 210 students participated in the survey. After filtering out all students not studying journalism or without any journalism experiences, I had a final sample of 131 respondents. I ran all my analyses on that sample.

Table 1: **Survey Treatment Arms and Size**

| Victim Treatment | |
|---|---|
| **Treatment** | **N** |
| Clear Victim | 68 |
| Vague Victim | 63 |
| **Villain Treatment** | |
| **Treatment** | **N** |
| Clear Villain | 63 |
| Vague Villain | 68 |

### 4.1.1 Survey Recruitment

Ideally, I would have surveyed professional journalists in order to increase external validity. However, I needed a larger sample to be able to detect significant treatment effects. Given the difficulties I faced to find journalists for my expert interviews, I decided that I would get a larger sample size if I worked with a proxy, in this case journalism students. For the purpose of the survey, I define journalism students as students who are currently pursuing a journalism, media studies, or communication studies degree, students with experiences in news writing (typically writing for school newspapers), and or students taking classes about journalism. The data collection lasted about three months, between January and March 2022. I recruited some students from visiting university classes in journalism and media studies departments, such as "Local News Media Institutions," "Texts and Power," or "Global Media Industries." I also got help from professors who agreed to share the survey with their students. I recruited the bulk of participants through the University of Minnesota's survey participant pool. The survey pool allowed students to get extra credit for filling out the survey. To increase the sample size towards the end of the data collection, I shared the

survey link on my social media profiles on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. I also reached out to students personally who write for students newspapers and others based on recommendations from my network. All participants could opt in to enter a raffle to win one of five Amazon gift cards worth 25 US Dollars. Macalester's Political Science department provided the funds to buy the gift cards. Macalester College's institutional review board reviewed and approved this survey experiment.

### 4.1.2 Sample Representativeness

Table 2 summarizes the main demographics data collected from the survey experiment. The median respondent age in this sample is 21, likely owing to the fact that most of the survey participants currently pursue undergraduate degrees. The maximum respondent age is 38. Most respondents attend a school located in the U.S. and a few others go to schools located in Colombia, Nigeria, Senegal, and the United Kingdom, respectively. Respondents identify diverse home countries around the world, notably Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Czech Republic, India, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Morocco, Palestine, Russia, Thailand, and the United States.

About 90% of the respondents have some journalism experience. Those without experience have either taken journalism classes or are pursuing a journalism degree. Close to 50% of students surveyed have experience writing for a student newspaper, meaning that they have had to decide which stories to cover just like professional journalists. About 13% of the respondents have actually had some professional journalism experience, adding some external validity to this study's results. 17.6% of respondents have done a journalism internship. This experience has exposed them to the actual decision making processes that culminate into news coverage of a story. These characteristics of my sample increase the ecological validity of the survey experiment.

An interesting observation to note about the demographics is the gender imbalance. 75% of survey respondents identify as female, 21.1% as male, and 3.9% as non-binary or third gender. Given that most respondents are in the U.S., this imbalance does not reflect the distribution in

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the journalism profession. 2021 demographics data from the online job search platform Zippia estimated that 53.4% of all journalists employed in the U.S. are female and 46.6% are male.[6] While female journalists still were more represented, the gender gap was smaller.

Table 2: **Sample Demographics**

| Demographic | Proportion |
|---|---|
| **Sex** | |
| Female | 75.0% |
| Male | 21.1% |
| Non-binary/Third gender | 3.90% |
| **Ethnicity** | |
| White | 67.2% |
| East Asian / Chinese / Japanese etc | 14.5% |
| South Asian / Indian / Pakistani etc | 9.16% |
| Black | 8.40% |
| Arab/Central Asian | 5.34% |
| Other Response | 9.16% |
| **Political Ideology**[7] | |
| Left leaning | 68.7% |
| Centrist | 19.1% |
| Right leaning | 12.2% |
| **Journalism Experience** | |
| Student Newspaper | 44.3% |
| Journalism Internship | 17.6% |
| Professional Journalism | 12.9% |
| Other Experience | 14.5% |

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[6]https://www.zippia.com/journalist-jobs/demographics/

[7]Left leaning includes all respondents who gave a score between 1-4 when placing their views on political matters on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being extreme left and 10 being extreme right.

[7]Right leaning includes all respondents who gave a score between 6-10 when placing their views on political matters on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being extreme left and 10 being extreme right.

[7]Centrists includes all respondents who gave a score of 5 when placing their views on political matters on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being extreme left and 10 being extreme right.

### 4.1.3 Experimental Design

As explained in the "survey experiment" section above, the survey has four scenarios (see figures 4, 5, 6, and 7). For each one of them, I asked participants whether they would write a full story on the conflict presented to them and pitch it to a newspaper editor. Participants had the options to answer "Yes, I would write a full article on this conflict," "No, I would not write a full article on this conflict," or "Maybe, I would write a full article on this conflict," in this order (see figure 8). This question serves as a measure of the outcome variable, conflict coverage. In order to further understand their choice, I ask participants to provide a brief explanation of their answer (see figure 8). Additionally, I quantify the conflict coverage outcome variable with a budget estimation question. All respondents have to allocate between USD 0 and 1000 of their budget that they would be willing to spend to cover the conflict (see figure 9). I determined the various expenses from my expert interview questions about how much journalists spend to cover conflicts and in which areas they spend the most. Finally, the survey asks background questions such as home country, country where student studies, degree program, journalism experiences, age, sex, ethnicity, and political ideology. I ask questions about age, sex, ethnicity, and political ideology at the very end of the survey to not bias respondents' answers.

Figure 4: **Clear victims vignette as shown in the Qualtrics survey on a desktop and a phone.**
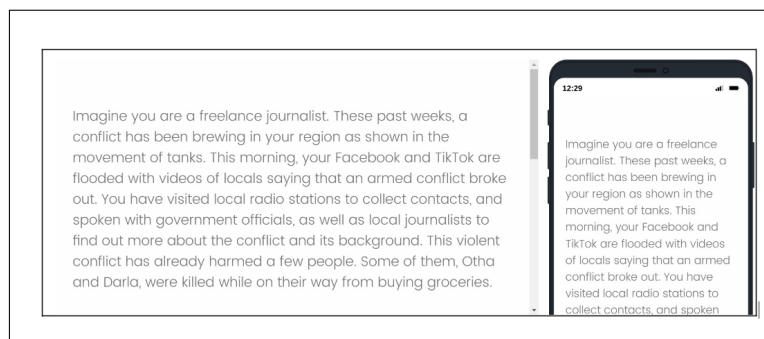
Figure 5: **Vague victims vignette as shown in the Qualtrics survey on a desktop and a phone.**
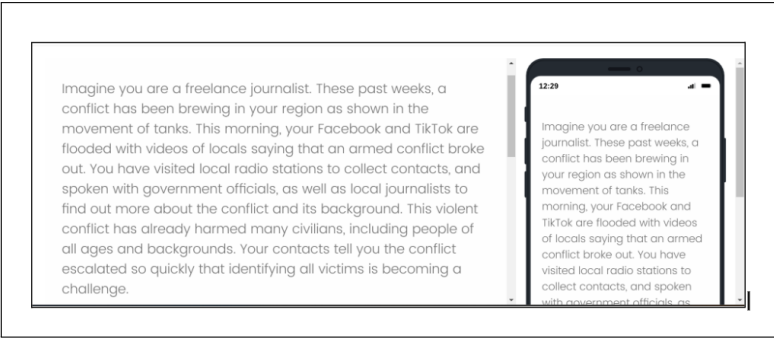


Figure 6: **Clear villains vignette as shown in the Qualtrics survey on a desktop and a phone.**
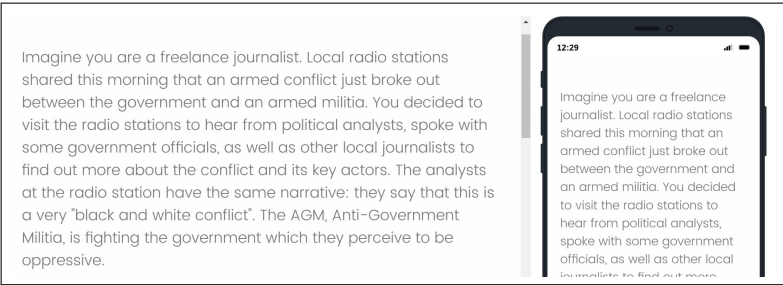


### 4.1.4   Operationalizing Clarity of Victims

I operationalize the clarity of victims by including the names of a few civilians that have been harmed in the conflict in the clear victims vignette (see Figure 4) and removing this element of identification in the vague victim vignette (see Figure 5). I base this choice off the identifiable victim effect theory and my expert interviews. The journalists I have interviewed have referred to the importance of human stories in conflict coverage. For instance, one of the interviewees highlighted that "people can't take 1000 people but they can take a person" to mean that people are more receptive to stories where victims are more easily identified. Another emphasized the importance of "finding a human angle, connecting to one person" and using simple language because people won't care when there is too much nuance. An expert interview I conducted post survey design also seems to confirm this approach. The journalist recalled a story during the Mozambique floods in 2000 and how "in the western media, there was a micro-story, a small story, a personal

Figure 7: **Vague villains vignette as shown in the Qualtrics survey on a desktop and a phone.**
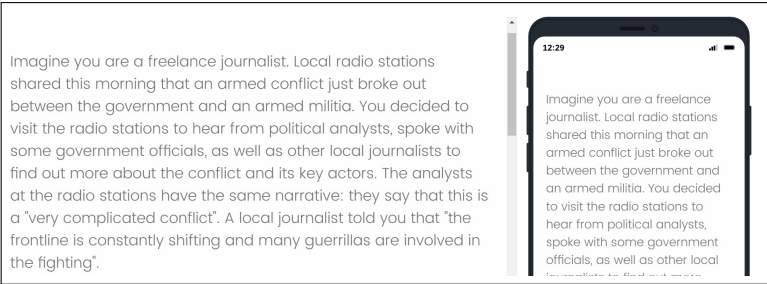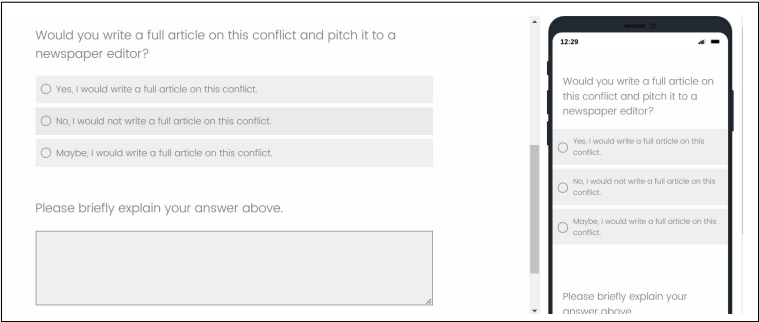


Imagine you are a freelance journalist. Local radio stations shared this morning that an armed conflict just broke out between the government and an armed militia. You decided to visit the radio stations to hear from political analysts, spoke with some government officials, as well as other local journalists to find out more about the conflict and its key actors. The analysts at the radio stations have the same narrative: they say that this is a "very complicated conflict". A local journalist told you that "the frontline is constantly shifting and many guerrillas are involved in the fighting".

Figure 8: **Outcome question and rationale as shown in the Qualtrics survey.**



Would you write a full article on this conflict and pitch it to a newspaper editor?

○ Yes, I would write a full article on this conflict.

○ No, I would not write a full article on this conflict.

○ Maybe, I would write a full article on this conflict.

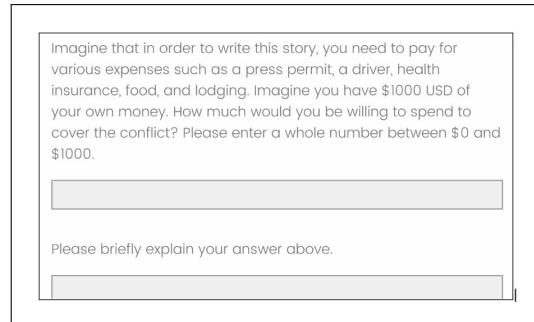Please briefly explain your answer above.

story, of a woman who had given birth in a tree, and that was the thing that suddenly [...] "Who is this woman? Did the baby survive?" "All of the story shrunk to this minor story." The victims' names in the clear victims vignette humanize the conflict and can prompt journalists to cover it as there are specific victims they can identify. In order to convey vagueness of victims, I remove any identification element, and just tell respondents that "This violent conflict has already harmed many civilians, including people of all ages and backgrounds." instead of "This violent conflict has already harmed a few people. Some of them, Otha and Darla, were killed while on their way from buying groceries." The names of victims are derived from an online random name generator [8].

### 4.1.5 Operationalizing Clarity of Villains

To operationalize the clarity of villains, I also rely heavily on my findings from the literature review and expert interviews. The journalists I interviewed, in response to the question of what

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[8]https://randomwordgenerator.com/name.php

Figure 9: **Budget estimation question as shown in the Qualtrics survey.**



challenges they face to cover conflicts, talked about how shifting frontlines makes conflicts "very complicated". When many actors are involved, covering a story that makes sense to the audience gets harder. On the opposite end, "black and white conflicts", as one interviewee says, are more easily covered. Audiences understand more easily conflicts where the main opponents seem clear. I designed my villains vignette with this information in mind. Respondents who were randomly assigned to the clear villain vignette read about a conflict opposing the government and an Anti-Government Militia (AGM) (see figure 6). Respondents assigned to the vague villain vignette read about a "very complicated conflict" with a constantly shifting frontline, and that many guerillas are involved in the fighting (see figure 7). It's essential to note that respondents might suffer from post-treatment bias by the time they get to the villains vignette. After being treated with a clear or vague victim story, they might get a hint of what the study is exploring and fall into social desirability bias.

# 5  Results

### 5.0.1  Victim Treatment Results

Table 3 reports the main effects of the victim treatment on the dependent variable conflict coverage. Vague victims represent the base category, so I coded vague victim treatment as 0 and clear victim treatment as 1 for the purpose of the regression analysis. I measure the dependent variable, conflict

coverage, using respondents' answers to the question of whether they would cover the conflict presented to them (see Figure 8). Then I made a dummy outcome variable for which I code all "Yes" answers as 1 and all "No" and "Maybe" answers as 0. There were not many "Maybe" answers, hence my decision to code them with 0. The regression shows that there is no significant difference in conflict coverage between the clear victim and vague victim group. These results echo the findings in Table 4. For this second regression, I measure the outcome variable using how much respondents are willing to pay to cover the conflict. The victim treatment also shows no significant effect. While these results do not provide evidence for the hypothesis that journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims more than conflicts with more vague victims, it's important to note that the sample size of this study might not be big enough to detect significant treatment effect. To supplement the regression results, I analyze respondents' rationales in the mechanisms section.

Table 3: **Victim Treatment And Conflict Coverage Regression**

| Model | Victim Treatment Conflict Coverage |
|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.62$^*$ |
| | (0.26) |
| | |
| Clear Victim | 0.049 |
| | (0.37) |
| Observations | 131 |

$*p < 0.01; \ **p < 0.001; \ ***p < 0$

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[9]I measured the dependent variable using respondents' answers to the question of whether they would cover the conflict presented to them (see figure 8). I made a dummy variable for which I code all "Yes" answers as 1 and all "No"'s as 0. There were not many maybe answers so I did not code for them.

Table 4: **Victim Treatment And Willingness to Cover Story Regression**

| Model | Victim Treatment Budget Estimation |
|---|---|
| Intercept | 528.57*** |
| | (56.36) |
| | |
| Clear Victim | −93.51 |
| | (0.23) |
| Observations | 131 |

$*p < 0.01; **p < 0.001; ***p < 0$

### 5.0.2 Victim Treatment Mechanisms

In the survey, all respondents were asked to briefly justify why they would cover the story presented to them or not. I analyze those open ended responses to identify the mechanisms underlying the observed results. Table 5 presents some of the rationales coming from respondents who said they would cover the conflict, others who are hesitant, and a few who would not cover the conflict presented to them. Besides each quote, I specify the respondent's decision about covering the conflict. "Yes" means they decided to cover it. "Maybe" indicates they are hesitant, and "No" signifies they decided not to cover the conflict. For respondents assigned to the clear victim treatment, civilian deaths, the context of the story and whether enough information is available, as well as relevance to country constitute recurrent themes among their rationales for why they would cover the story. Interestingly, respondents assigned to the vague victim vignette refer to "not being able to identify victims to get permission to share their stories" and "not being able to capture all perspectives, contacts, and stories" to justify why they would not cover the conflict or would be hesitant. Those rationales are closer to the hypothesis that coverage reduces as vagueness of victims increases. However individual rationale cannot be used as evidence for a hypothesis. On the other hand, for some respondents, their inability to identify the victims motivates them to cover the story because it indicates that the conflict is very serious. These rationales seem to indicate that even when iden-

tifying victims can be challenging, as long as the conflict has civilian casualties, journalists can feel motivated to get to the human stories.

In order to more clearly identify the big themes from all rationales, I created a word cloud (see Figure10). The word cloud identifies some common words across the rationales of respondents who said they will cover the clear victim conflict. "People," "Public," "story," and "Conflict" clearly stand out. Combining this word cloud with the rationales highlighted above, I conclude that victims' and human stories in general play an important role in journalists' decision to cover a conflict. However, they might not be a main deciding factor. Being able to collect stories about people, gather trustworthy information, while protecting the victims' privacy remain key in conflict coverage decision processes. Even when the victims do not seem clear, some respondents still refer back to "being able to put a name and face on the conflict" to justify why they would cover the conflict.

Figure 10: **Word Cloud Of Rationales for Covering Conflict in the Clear Victim Treatment Group**



Word cloud generated from R-studio.

Table 5: **Victim Treatment Rationales**

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### Clear Victim Rationales

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**Maybe:** "[...]If this is the first time armed conflict has broken out or the first time civilians have been hurt, the situation definitely warrants a story. But if armed conflict has been going on for a long time, or if Otha and Darla are among dozens or hundreds killed, I would need to think more carefully about whether the event demands its own individual story. My only hesitation would be that reporting with such specificity could create an unrealistic precedent for reporting with the same level of granularity in the future."

**Maybe:** "I do not know if it is ethical to mention specific names in this situation. However, if I can gather accurate information and protect the privacy of the individuals, then I might write a full article on this conflict."

**Yes:** "Because it is the beginning of an armed conflict, immediate public exposure is important to raise awareness and also warn the general public. 2 casualties is more than enough to report a crisis."

**Yes:** "I feel that since it is relevant to my home region, it is important to cover. I feel that since two civilians are already dead, it is extremely applicable to the public and relevant."

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### Vague Victim Rationales

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**Yes:** "A story is imminently needed in this scenario, because the conflict has broken out and the community should be informed and aware of what's going on, who at least some of the victims are (to put a name and face on the conflict) and what the reasons for the conflict are."

**Yes:** "I would because it's an issue that has gotten so bad that victims can't even be identified."

**No:** "I won't cover the story "because too many facts are slipping away and being able to identify victims to get permission to share their stories is also not possible"

**Maybe:** "As it is a fastly escalating scenario, it is a touchy subject as it forces a community to make quick judgments about it all. Readers would most likely be reading an article about the information to learn more about what is happening when I clearly may not be able to capture all perspectives, contacts, and stories necessary to publish with confidence."

### 5.0.3 Villain Treatment Results

Table 6 and Table 7 report the main effects of the villain treatment on the conflict coverage dependent variable. The vague villain group represents the baseline category, so I coded vague villain treatment as 0 and clear villain treatment as 1 for the purpose of the regression analysis. I use the same coding scheme for the outcome variables as in the victim treatment. Similar to the victim treatment, the regressions show no significant difference between the clear and vague villain treatment groups both in terms of conflict coverage (see Table 6) and how much they are willing to spend to cover the conflict (see Table 7). The lack of evidence for a significant relationship between the clarity of villains and conflict coverage could be partially attributed to the survey sample size. In order to present a more comprehensive picture of the mechanisms at play, I analyze respondents' rationales and identify common themes through building a word cloud.

Table 6: **Villain Treatment And Conflict Coverage Regression**

| Model | Villain Treatment Conflict Coverage |
|---|:---:|
| Intercept | $0.00^{*}$ |
| | $(0.24)$ |
| | |
| Clear Villain | $-0.49$ |
| | $(0.36)$ |
| Observations | 131 |

$*p < 0.01; \ **p < 0.001; \ ***p < 0$

### 5.0.4 Villain Treatment Mechanisms

Table 8 presents some of the rationales respondents provided to justify why they would cover a conflict, be hesitant to, or not cover it at all. Besides each quote, I specify the respondent's decision about covering the conflict. "Yes" means they decided to cover it. "Maybe" indicates they are hesitant, and "No" signifies they decided not to cover the conflict. Many respondents

Table 7: **Villain Treatment And Willingness to Cover Story Regression**

| Model | Villain Treatment Budget Estimation |
|---|---|
| Intercept | 395.07*** |
| | (38.92) |
| | |
| Clear Villain | −33.96 |
| | (56.13) |
| Observations | 131 |

$*p < 0.01; \ **p < 0.001; \ ***p < 0$

assigned to the clear villain treatment noted the possibility of biased information, wanting to get both sides of the story, and fear of repercussion to explain why they would be hesitant to or not cover the clear villain story. Many respondents felt like no conflict can be black and white and that the information they got from the radio and political analysts might be biased. So, they would need to do more research and gain more perspectives before they can write a full article. Respondents also emphasize that a perceived threat to their life would lead them to not cover the story.

On the vague villain treatment side, respondents approach the conflict coverage question from different angles. Some of them highlight that the journalist's role involves turning complex stories into digestible ones for the public. Those journalism students see the vagueness of villains as an opportunity to "offer new perspectives" and even "dig deeper into the history of the guerilla groups and to get key citizen group perspectives." Other respondents, however, reason more closely to the hypothesis that journalists cover conflicts with vague villain stories less than conflicts with clear villain stories. A respondent underscores how the story's complexity might mean not having "consistent accurate information", therefore they will not be able to write a full article on the conflict. Another respondent argues that "because it does not seem clear" which side is right, determining what exactly to cover becomes more challenging. Again, even though these rationales seem to echo the second hypothesis, they cannot be taken as evidence.

Table 8: **Villain Treatment Rationales**

**Clear Villain Rationales**

**Maybe:** "No conflict is really "Black and white". Whether I will be able to write a full article really depends on what additional sources I am getting for this story. Do the testimonies from other local journalists defy or support the radio station narrative? How are the government officials acting when giving you their information? Are the political analysts agreeing? Does the radio station have the reputation of being a trustworthy source? If all those conditions are met and answered in a manner that does not clash with ethical boundaries, maybe I will be able to write a full article on this conflict."

**Yes:** "I think I would. It would depend on how much danger I'd be putting myself into by writing this story, but that's kind of part of the job description for a journalist. I probably would write this story, and try to make it as unbiased as possible."

**Yes:** "Even with 'black and white' conflicts, there is always nuance to explore"

**No:** "It doesn't seem like I have the complete story here. Some narratives are missing, particular from key actors directly since I visited the radio station and they're all saying the same thing."

**Vague Villain Rationales**

**Yes:** "When someone tells me it is a "very complicated conflict", I am just more motivated to go and investigate, read different perspectives, old and new, so I can have a holistic understanding of the conflict. I also firmly believe that any article written is a plus because it reaches to more people and it offers new perspectives to some extent (depends on your investigation)"

**Maybe:** "I would maybe write about this conflict because while it is important, it said it was complicated and changing so I might not have consistent accurate information."

**No:** "I think since there is not enough information out right now I would leave it to the governments publicists to cover the topic when it is clear to do so."

**Yes:** "If the conflict is complicated, it would be my job as a journalist to uncomplicate it as much as possible for others to understand what is happening."

In order to more clearly identify the big themes from the villain treatment rationales, I created a word cloud (see Figure 11). The word cloud identifies some common themes across the rationales of respondents who said they will cover the clear villain conflict. This word cloud is less rich

Figure 11: **Word Cloud Of Rationales for Covering Conflict in the Clear Villain Treatment Group**
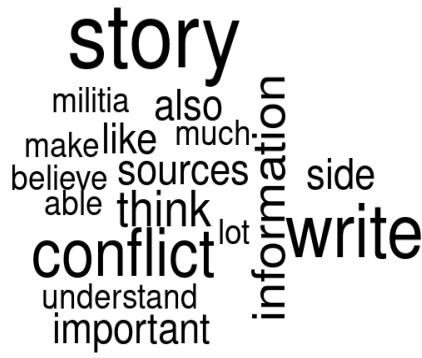
I generated this word cloud from R-studio.

compared to the victim treatment word cloud, potentially due to survey fatigue causing respondents to write less in their rationales. "Story", "Conflict", and "Information" stand out as key words used in the rationales. These words don't provide enough support for the clarity of villains as a main driver of conflict coverage. Combining this word cloud to the rationales highlighted above, I conclude that the clarity of villains does not necessarily play a key role in journalists decision to cover conflicts. When armed conflicts are complicated, journalists might still investigate the stories and look for more perspectives that allow them to cover the story.

# 6   Discussion and Future Research

The literature has determined the media's ability to influence conflict outcomes through their coverage. Authors have also discussed that the media writes stories that allow them to sell news and make profits. In this study, I go beyond these conversations and question how conflict narratives

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affect journalists' decision to cover an armed conflict or not. Previous findings in psychology that the more identifiable a victim is, the more likely people are to donate to support the victim, led me to theorize that journalists will cover conflicts with clearer victims more than conflicts with more vague victims. I argue that the same cognitive systems which push people to give also would incentivize journalists to cover a conflict where they can identify victims. Additionally, I hypothesized that journalists will cover conflicts with clearer villains more than conflicts with more vague villains. The rationale stems from literary studies and affect theory which supports that people constantly seek to maintain meaning in their perceptions of the world. This motivation pushes individuals to work towards restoring meaning whenever an event challenges their perceptions of reality. Thus, I argue that because villains are deemed evil, malevolent, and disturb life as we know it, journalists cover more conflicts where they can more easily identify the villains to re-establish order.

I test these hypotheses through an original randomized survey experiment built on Qualtrics, and inspired by my expert interviews with seasoned journalists. Using the survey data, I ran simple linear regression analyses. The results do not provide significant evidence that journalists cover conflicts with clearer victims/villains more than conflict with more vague victims/villains. Despite insignificant results, the five expert interviews I conducted and respondents' rationales to the conflict coverage question hint that there might be a relationship between the clarity of victims/villains and conflict coverage. Overall, this study's main finding is that humanizing conflicts remains central in conflict coverage decision making processes. Human stories increase the public's interest in a given conflict, and journalists seem to always be looking for ways to center such stories regardless of the conflict structure. Even when the story is presented through a vague victim lens, survey participants seem motivated to explore the individual stories they could cover to raise awareness about the conflict and get foreign audiences to relate.

This study serves as a proof of concept and holds promising avenues for future research. For example, increasing the survey sample size by ten-fold and recruiting actual journalists to take the

survey would allow researchers to detect significant treatment effect, if any, and increase external validity. The study can also be expanded through an observational analysis. The researcher would need to operationalize the clarity of victims/villains in a way applicable to conflicts around the world and then run a regression analysis that controls for factors such as national interest, country's wealth, conflict location, etc. Combining the survey experiment with this observational study will increase confidence in findings, as well as the study's external validity. Other potential avenues for research is how insurance companies and newspaper editors ultimately decide which stories make it to the front page. Journalists in my expert interviews raised concerns about how more and more insurance companies decide where journalists can go. This power dynamics can increase bias and substantially reduce conflict coverage in areas that the world does not give much attention to in the first place, like in the case of Tigray. Finally, while villains and victims tend to always capture our attention in narratives, heroes also play significant roles. A study investigating how the opportunity to cover heroes' stories in a given conflict impacts conflict coverage would also enrich this thesis, as well as give it a more hopeful tone.

# 7 Conclusion

The media world is complex and coverage of armed conflicts should certainly not be confined to only one explanation. As many respondents and journalists I interviewed emphasized, coverage of armed conflicts go beyond binaries of villains and victims, although that simplification helps us better understand news coverage mechanisms. The news industry's current structure exists such that news have a presence in some places more than others. The resulting nodes to center transmission of news also determines which war stories get told. For example, a freelance journalist from Ethiopia, needs to send their news to an editor in England who then gets to decide if the conflict story from some part of Africa is worth covering in international news. Therefore, many factors determine the stories we read about. From the ability to find human stories that resonate

with the readers, the threats one can face in choosing to cover certain conflicts, to the relevance to a country's national interest, or the freedom of movement an insurance company controls. Still, journalists as well as news readers should constantly check their biases when it comes to which stories are deemed important enough.

On one side, journalists must understand that even seemingly complex stories can be told. They should also reflect about why they would not cover a conflict, whenever they decide not to. Journalists also have the agency to advocate for some stories to be covered. Armed with the awareness that the current news systems prioritize profitability, journalists can present their stories to editors in a way that shows that people will be interested in reading them. On the readers' end, it's crucial that we understand that our interests drive news coverage. Therefore, when we make an effort to learn more about those "complicated" stories, the media will have an incentive to cover them more. Additionally, in a time when the news we see on our social media timelines stems from automated systems and algorithms, it's even more pressing to ask ourselves about the stories we do not see or read about. These exercises must be intentional and practised every day so that they can become a habit.

Finally, throughout this thesis, I make an assumption that more conflict coverage leads to conflict resolution. However, the framing of the stories in the coverage also matters. News framed through a humanitarian lens might drive people to donate but not end a conflict. So, news agencies have opportunities to cover stories through a conflict resolution frame. They can invite for dialogue and even cover stories about people asking for and wanting peace. The media holds enough influence that can shape peace making processes positively. They should leverage that power. We, the readers, can also push them towards making that change.

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