

CHATting about Conflict Coverage

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Since the Vietnam War era, the media has influenced how information about conflicts and the truth is presented to citizens. Lily Linden's article deals with how media tools are used and how the reaction to them in relation to conflict influences both the American government and citizens' actions and opinions.

The Beginning of Media Coverage of Wars

Up until 1965 and the Vietnam War, most American citizens had never seen the reality of combat. Throughout World Wars I and II, newspapers, articles, and eventually newsreels—that came many days and weeks after the events they were covering—were the only way noncombatants received information about wars. With the invention and increase in availability of televisions to the average citizen around the time of the Vietnam War (Figure 1), however, this all changed, and Americans would never think of or respond to war in the same ways they had in the past.



Figure 1: This is a screenshot of a 1967 CBS Television News Report giving updates on the Vietnam War for the American public (“The Ordeal of Con Thien”).

Vietnam as the “First Televised War”

There is still a lot of debate about the impact that American news coverage of the Vietnam War had on the way Americans perceived the war, and even on the way policies related to the war were decided. But one thing that we know is true is that television coverage of the war, which often included “live” broadcasts from combat zones and was less firmly controlled by the government than media coverage in World War II (such as newsreels), was an entirely different genre. The immediacy and the visceral quality of TV war coverage was certainly different, even if the impact of that difference is disputed (Huebner 150; Kratz).

Television coverage of the war allowed Americans to have a firsthand look into the harsh reality of wars. Although photography and film were certainly a big part of the US’s news coverage of World War II and the Korean War, the prevalence of television by the time of the Vietnam War changed the way that Americans were able to visualize what was happening in a war taking place far from US territory. According to a page on the US Library of Congress website, from 1950 to 1960, the number of Americans who had a television in their homes went from five percent to ninety percent (“Television”). Having

a visualization they knew was accurate and that they didn’t have to imagine for themselves was impactful for Americans and changed how they responded to the news they received. As Ryan Singsank explains in his article for the *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*, “As compared to words describing an event in a printed publication, an image, especially in the context of war, is much more powerful as one is able to shape their own opinions without having to create a visualization.”

Figure 2: For more information about the Tet Offensive, check out this resource from the Office of the Historian (“US Involvement in the Vietnam War”).



Having access to television coverage of key battles in the Vietnam War, such as the Tet Offensive (Figure 2), provided Americans with a different version of the events occurring across the sea than the one the government had been offering. The US government maintained that

American soldiers were extremely successful in their battles and getting close to winning, but because reporters were recording the actual events, the US military had less control over what was recorded and reported. As a result of this coverage, Americans were able to see and hear about negative views of the American progress in the war. Seeing the reality of what was happening to soldiers in Vietnam impacted opposition to the war, and this impact would not have been possible in a pre-television America. Singsank again provides a summary of this when he states, “Never before had the American people seen coverage of the war to this level, indicating a change in the perception of news and combat footage to viewers in the years to come.”

The Evolution of Media

Since the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the types of media outlets and different ways people can now access information has further expanded. Whereas in the past, newspapers, televisions, and radio broadcasts were the primary sources for news, the general population now also has access to social media apps and websites, blogs and reporters, and an increased amount of news channels and stations. This range of choice has had an impact of where people in the US get their news. For example, according to reports on the Pew Research Center website, the percentage of Americans who use TV as their primary source of news has been steadily declining since 2000 (Forman-Katz and Matsa). In September of 2022, the Pew Research Center published a study that indicated that only thirty-three percent of Americans now prefer TV as their primary source of news, while only seven percent say they prefer radio broadcasts, and fifty-three percent say they prefer a digital device (Forman-Katz and Matsa). This growth and change in mass media is also creating changes in the way we find, understand, and use information, and these changes can be understood using elements of the ISU Writing Program’s model for understanding people’s activities and literacies—the framework of P-CHAT. P-CHAT stands for pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory and, as the ISU Writing Program explains on their website, the seven concepts in P-CHAT can “help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world . . . CHAT allows us to focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production, so it is more robust than these other methods for investigating texts.” The P-CHAT terms production, reception, distribution, and socialization can all be used to highlight the changing ways information circulates within our culture.

One of the first P-CHAT terms we can use to analyze the spread of information through different media platforms and genres is **production**, which according to the ISU Writing Program is “the means through which text is produced . . . the genres and structures that can contribute to and even pre-shape our ability to produce text.” Over time, the way media coverage is produced has drastically changed. During the years when most news was produced by mass media outlets, fewer people were able to produce information, and sources for news were fairly centralized. As Coopersmith, a history professor at Texas A&M University, stated in his interview with Luke Henkhaus, a communications professor at Texas A&M, “Before, if you wanted to send out a false video or misleading claim or even something accurate, you really had to have the resources of a state or at least a powerful actor . . . Now, I can make a TikTok and send it out across the world.”

My Sense of Genre

When I refer to genre in this article, I'm not referring to literary genres like fiction or nonfiction, or styles of text like romance, horror, and so on. Instead, I use genre to describe all different kinds of formats, purposes, and modalities that can be produced. Genres are often identified by the purposes they are designed to serve and the characteristics they usually have (who uses them, how they are organized, etc.), but even examples of the same kinds of texts are unique in some ways, and categories of texts (like “news stories”) aren't stable. They change a lot over time or when they move into different settings (e.g., print newspaper, television news story, blog post, tweet, etc.).

Making mass media is easier now than ever. Anyone who has access to the Internet or a technical device can write an article and post it, create a tweet or Facebook post, or post a video on YouTube for the whole world to see. Even those who aren't journalists, reporters, or who possibly don't even have any credible sources or knowledge can have their text go viral and have thousands of people see and react to it. This can be a very positive aspect of social media coverage of world news, but it can also be very dangerous and tricky when war is the topic of coverage.

The way the media has evolved in the last century can also be looked at using the term **genre trajectory**, which the ISU Writing Program explains as, “how a text moves through a process of production, but even more importantly how texts move through institutions and spaces in relationships among different people.” Within the *Grassroots Writing*

Research Journal, the idea of genre trajectory is often used to focus on the ways that genres change—both over time, as the ways people use them change, and as they are remediated using different kinds of tools or systems of distribution. Years ago, reporters had to go to the location or have intelligence from that area, write or film their information, and distribute it to the public through a prominent media source or government institution. Although they still have to do this for television media coverage, other coverage options like social media do not always rely on traveling and working with credited sources to produce media coverage. Now, ordinary citizens can read an article or get information from almost anywhere on the Internet, and they also create and distribute content themselves, using tools as ubiquitous as a cell phone and access to a social media account. Unfortunately, this kind of access to information, both consuming and creating it, doesn't yet include many rules, and research and fact-checking aren't required to gain access to publication. So, while people have access to a large amount of content, produced by a wide range of people, it can be difficult to know whether information that is posted is credible, accurate, or adequately researched. This increased access to unreliable information sources is especially important when it comes to the dissemination of conflict information.

The Spread of Conflict Information

The ability to produce and consume information related to different conflicts across the world has also increased. As the number and usage of different media platforms has grown, the number of people who see information as it spreads through the media has drastically increased. Because most people in the US have access to the Internet and many devices that are used to spread information, such as televisions, computers, phones, and even smart watches, it is almost impossible to be oblivious or avoid seeing information about ongoing conflicts. Almost all mass media platforms, such as the radio, television channels, news sites, apps, and social media spread updates and constant information on world conflicts, especially those that affect the US in some way. If people are on any of these platforms or use any of these services, they are bound to stumble across conflict information because of its increased production.

The process through which this incredible volume of information makes its way onto the computers and cell phones of average Americans can be looked at through the P-CHAT lens by thinking about the term distribution. **Distribution**, as the ISU Writing Program explains, deals with “where texts go and who might take them up. It also considers the tools and methods that can be used to distribute text.” In the case of conflict media coverage, the amount of places texts go and who sees them has grown due to the evolution of tools and avenues for production, and therefore distribution, to occur. Because the means of production and distribution are different, and they allow both access to a wider range of people and access to a wider range of information—but with less oversight and control—it might not be wise, or even possible, for people to continue to think about the news information they consume in the same way they did during earlier eras.

In an article for the Pew Research Center, Elisa Shearer states that “More than eight-in-ten US adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet . . . This is higher than the portion who get news from television.” Shearer goes on to explain that “Among digital platforms, the most preferred one for news is news websites or apps” (Figure 3).

Based on this, we can see that the majority of Americans get their news from at least semiregulated sources. Unlike social media platforms, professional news outlets are governed by rules and regulations under the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Additionally, if they report incorrect information, they can be subject to legal penalties of various kinds. While information from professional news outlets can still be biased or misleading in a range of ways, in contrast to nonprofessionals on social

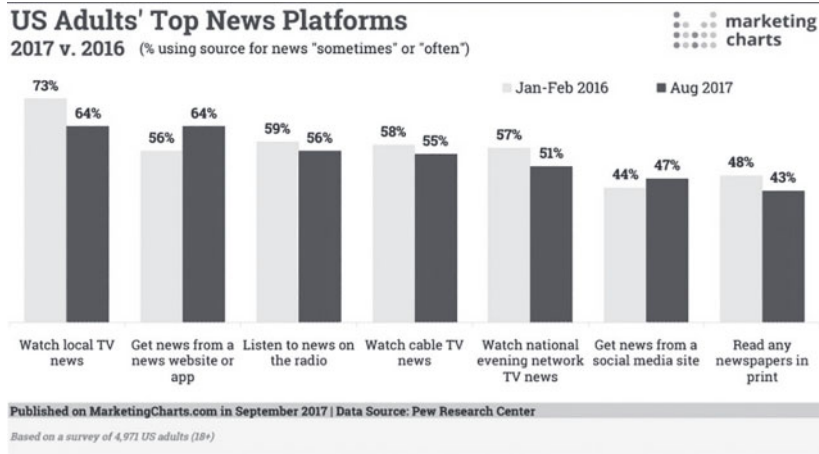


Figure 3: This graph of the change in Americans' top preferred news platforms shows a decline in traditional mass media and an increase in digital and social media sources ("Social Media Sees Some Gains").

media (who are not subject to regulation by the FCC), these sources have some incentive to report events with accuracy. In the reporting of conflict information, this has a particular importance, because political and diplomatic decision-making can be influenced by news reports and by citizens' opinions about news reporting. If citizens have few ways to determine whether the news they are consuming is accurate, then they may also have a difficult time understanding complex conflicts that take place around the world.

Does Media Coverage Influence Peoples' Opinions of Conflicts?

Arguably, media coverage does have an impact on world conflicts, because reports, whether from credible sources or not, can alter how people think of and respond to them. This P-CHAT concept is what the ISU Writing Program refers to as socialization. **Socialization** involves "the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts . . . When people engage with texts, they are also engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices" (ISU Writing Program). The ways people use conflict information they see varies greatly from person-to-person and can be heavily influenced by the information's source and bias as well as which parts of the conflict they highlight and ignore.

In general, most media outlets—even the most trustworthy and regulated ones—have a bias toward headlines that will draw peoples' attention. Media outlets, like all other businesses in competitive markets, must pay attention to

whether consumers choose them over other options, and this requires picking and choosing information that gets presented, which in turn, alters how people respond to conflicts. Topics such as violence and political scandals within conflicts are things that people are more likely to look at, in comparison to topics such as foreign aid (in most cases), so media outlets heavily favor showing that side of conflicts. In a summary of Christopher Young's work on media and international conflict, the Conflict Research Consortium stated "Visually dramatic, acute events (such as battles or bombings) receive more coverage, while longer-term, wide-spread situations (such as famine or poverty) get less." This focus on violence and acute events distorts how people think, and therefore act, in relation to conflicts. For example, during the Vietnam War, because media coverage was harder for the general public to produce, governments could prevent coverage of certain events, or at least diminish the perceived damage they caused. In current-day conflicts, almost every event that happens is filmed by someone and uploaded to the Internet for anyone to see, as with the war in Ukraine. Seeing every violent attack makes people realize how real the conflict is and the affect it is having on others, which usually makes them more empathetic and willing to push for change. Public response also alters government action, as the government tries to appeal to public opinion to stay in office and power. The Conflict Research Consortium goes on to explain that media sources can play a really important role in providing information:

Finally, the traditional role of the media as reporters of the truth can play an important role in international conflicts. As noted above, a key function of the media is to give the public the information necessary to make good decisions. The media can seek to confirm official accounts, reveal official deceit, and correct errors of omission.

When the public receives problematically biased, or, worse yet, inaccurate information, people often don't understand the full truth and therefore aren't able to make informed decisions about how to try to influence their local, regional, or national governments.

Socialization can also be influenced by government and powerful institutions manipulating which media sources and information are allowed to be distributed to citizens, like we commonly see in less democratic countries such as Russia and North Korea. In cases like these, interactions between media outlets and the public are altered or not allowed to happen at all (Figure 4). Henkhaus explains how this is seen today in Russia: "Russian efforts to control and weaponize information about the conflict have been more centralized, as the Russian government seeks to limit the spread of information within its population and promote its official justifications for

	Trust in the President (4 pt)			Russia's influence on the world (6 pt)			
	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	
MEDIA SOURCES							
TV news	0.405	0.196	***	0.316	0.147	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Internet and social media	-0.334	-0.150	***	-0.383	-0.165	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Daily newspapers	0.327	0.064	**	-	-	-	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Radio	-	-	-	-0.256	-0.054	*	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)

Figure 4: Russians who consume more censored media, like TV news and newspapers, have higher trust in the president and his message than those who consume more free media sources, like those found on the Internet and social media (Kizlova and Norris).

the invasion.” Governments such as Russia can also use control of the media to spread false information to influence peoples’ perception of conflicts. Currently in Russia, “Russians who consume and trust state media may blame the US for the conflict” (Henkhaus). Scenarios like this disrupt how people use texts and often modify the message and reception in a way that the creator of the text didn’t intend or predict.

Ukrainians are using the increased availability and socialization of media in their own way. In his article, Henkhaus explains how Ukrainian citizens are using and sharing media about the conflict they are currently dealing with. Since the conflict began, Ukrainian citizens all over the country have been, “posting pictures, videos and stories of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians standing up to the invading Russian forces” (Henkhaus). This type of media socialization is helping to mobilize Ukrainians and provide a sense of hope. Watching average citizens stand up to Russian forces affects most people in a much stronger way than reading a story, as they get to see those similar to them being heroic. This sort of media coverage has the potential to encourage Ukrainian citizens to work together and stand up to Russian forces.

The Future of Conflict Media

The way that P-CHAT can help us to understand conflict reports is to help us map how changes in genres, platforms, and access can impact both the kinds of news that get produced and the ways that people find and make decisions based on their news consumption. Considering that every day our society as a whole is becoming more reliant on technology and the media, it is likely that conflict coverage as we know it will evolve in the near future. It is important that we hold our media sources—especially the larger ones such as Fox News, CNN, and NPR—accountable for providing factual information.

This kind of accountability might help to alleviate some of the problems we see now, such as unreliable sources spreading false information and government distortion of information. In addition, we might be able to focus more on conflict resolution and how average people can get involved in these processes and increase the potential of news media to influence conflicts in positive ways. As Bajraktari and Parajon explain in their article for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), with some research and effort, the media could be used as a method for conflict prevention in addition to providing information. Local and worldwide media can aid this effort in different ways. Global media outlets, such as BBC, have the potential to alter how an actor considers their next actions. For example, if a state feels that global news coverage of something they do will create a negative public opinion toward them, they may not follow through with this action. On the other hand, countries and citizens suffering during conflict may exaggerate and promote their struggle to global media outlets as a method of gaining support. Bajraktari and Parajon referred to this as the “agenda-setting effect” that global media sources have. Local media sources play a different but equally important role in conflict prevention and resolution. For example, local media sources tend to focus less on the political motives and actions behind conflict and instead focus more on smaller groups and the effects on local communities. Because local media sources are often talking to and working with average citizens and local organizations, they can help create a sense of trust in the media and help with community building during and after conflict. As things evolve, however, P-CHAT can still help us map out how tools and resources are being used to see who is producing news texts (and who is influencing these productions), how different methods of distribution and reception influence what people learn and what they do with that information, and how different patterns of socialization impact the way we participate in conflict or in conflict resolution.

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Notes

