

## **What's New from the Middle East? Manual and Automatic Content Analysis of Foreign Coverage of the Israel/Palestine Conflict**

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The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians can be considered a regional conflict with a global impact. For decades both parties have been fighting each other for their claimed right on the holy land. Since its founding in 1948, Israel was involved in a number of wars with the surrounding Arab countries, and there have been periodic periods of intense violence between Israel and the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. For decades the international community is trying to find a solution for the conflict and many peace plans and proposals have been negotiated over the years. However, a true solution of the conflict seems as remote as ever and the upsurge of violence in Gaza conflict from December 2008 shows how easily the conflict can flare up and result in numerous civilian casualties. The Israel/Palestine problem is a high-profile conflict in international relations and the actions and international mediation of the US and European states is seen as vital in reaching a solution. Since the efforts and positions of these states are partly determined by their domestic politics and public opinion, it is interesting to investigate the media coverage of the conflict in these countries, as this can be expected to have an effect on, or at least reflect, the public opinion and political debate.

We investigate this international coverage of the conflict using a combination of automatic and manual content analysis. Starting with an automated analysis of news coverage from the past 10 years we see shifts in attention and framing within the conflict. Events like 9/11 and the Second Intifada only showed minor peaks in the attention for the conflict, but did show a major shift in the framing of the news. The Second Intifada caused a shift in the framing towards more *conflict* and *episodic* framing, while 9/11 caused a shift towards increased *terror* frame. The Israeli Operation Defensive Shield and the Lebanese War, on the other hand, caused a major peak in the news coverage but did not cause a major shift in the framing of the conflict.

Although automatic content analysis can show trends in news coverage over a longer time period, it is more difficult to investigate the precise content of these frames. For example, in the *fight* frame it was not possible to determine to what extent both protagonists were presented as culprit or victim in the news coverage: both parties are generally mentioned together in sentences describing the conflict and their role as victim or culprit could not be distinguished using co-occurrence. Additionally, we see some indication that American and Dutch news coverage is more favorable for Israel than the UK news coverage, but it is difficult to conclude this based on associations alone.

To overcome these problems we are also conducting a manual Semantic Network Analysis. This paper presents the first part of this analysis, namely the Dutch news coverage about the conflict in Gaza in December 2008 / January 2009. In the Semantic Network approach to framing we represent the articles as networks of (causal, affinitive, ..) relations between actors and issues. This allows us to distinguish the roles both parties play in the conflict according to the news and how the different frames are instantiated. Moreover, we can show whether the coverage portrays one side of the conflict more positively than the other, either by direct evaluations or by focusing more on the negative aspects or actions of one side than the other. This allows us to show in more detail how the coverage changes over time and whether the various newspapers differ in their coverage of the conflict.