

**Perception versus Reality:  
A Quantitative, Cross-National Analysis of Newspaper Framing  
Trends on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

Senior Honors Thesis

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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction</b>	1
Overview of the Project	1
Historical Background	4
One Land, Two Peoples	4
A History of War	4
1948: War of Independence	6
1967: Six Day War	9
2000 Camp David Accords	12
<b>II. Theory of Media Framing and Hypotheses</b>	
Introduction to Framing: Concrete and Narrow v. Conceptual and Broad	16
Basic Concept	16
Examples of Research and Implications	17
Variants	20
The Iyengar Model	21
Applying the Iyengar Model to the Middle East Conflict	24
Aspects in News Coverage	25
The Anti-Semitism Factor	25
The Religious Factor	27
The Bias Factor	29
Research Questions and Hypotheses	34
Research Question I	34
Hypothesis I	34
Research Question II	35
Hypothesis II	35
Research Question III	36
Hypothesis III	36
Research Question IV	37
Hypothesis IV	37
<b>III. Research Design and Methodology</b>	38
Time Frame	38
Countries	39
Identities of Newspapers	40
Events	42
LexisNexis Validation Test Run – Newspaper Article Selection Strategy	49
Time Frame	51
Intra-Event Framing Cycle	52
Coding Scheme	52
Pilot Test	55
Bivariate- and Multivariate Statistical Analyses	57

<b>IV. Bivariate and Multivariate Statistical Analyses</b>	58
Correlation of Dependent Variables	58
Research Question I and Analysis	61
Crosstabulations and Regressions on a Country Level	62
ANOVA and Regressions on a Newspaper Level	66
Research Question II and Analysis	70
Research Question III and Analysis	76
Peace Negotiations versus Violent Crises	76
Aggressor versus Victim Relationship	79
Research Question IV and Analysis	83
Summary of Hypotheses and Findings	87
Hypothesis I a	87
Finding I a	87
Hypothesis I b	88
Finding I b	89
Hypothesis II	89
Finding II	89
Hypothesis III a	90
Finding III a	90
Hypothesis III b	90
Finding III b	91
Hypothesis IV	91
Finding IV	91
<b>V. Conclusion</b>	92
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	95
<b>APPENDIX</b>	99

## **I. Introduction**

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

So begins Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens’ words also apply to the never ending Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where hope for peace continuously juxtaposes with despair, where people wake up in the morning to signs of spring but close their doors on an evening dark and cold.

Media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a never-ending struggle with complex historical twists, rapidly changing subtleties, and global significance, is oftentimes used as a symbol for the crisis of journalistic values.

### **Overview of the Project**

The media’s impact on people’s belief content, belief importance, and subsequently issue opinion, has been a topic of scholarly attention. Evidence suggests that the dominant contemporary news frames

trivialize public discourse, erode electoral accountability, and distort political realities, thus threatening and compromising the very principles and values that Western democracies are thought to embody. Research has shown that several empirically verifiable patterns in framing styles exist in news covering many kinds of issues. It is not merely that news is often trivial, but that the quality and type of news frames vary in systematic ways that can be measured and understood scientifically.

With respect to print media coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, little is known about how news is framed. Despite the enormous importance of this conflict for world affairs, just how media outlets cover it is not very well understood, especially in light of theories of news framing and effects. This project addresses that issue. It attempts to determine quantitatively the degree of variation among newspaper frames as a function of the following:

- ✓ Country (U.S., Germany, England, France, and Austria),
- ✓ Event typology
  - Are peace-negotiations portrayed differently in the news than violent events (peace vs. violence)?
  - Does media framing vary according to which party is the aggressor (aggressor vs. victim relationship)?
- ✓ Political orientation of the outlet, and

- ✓ Framing trends over the course of an event's coverage in the news.

The project draws on framing theory and a quantitative analysis of hundreds of news stories.

The thesis is structured as follows. The present chapter provides the reader with a historical background on the three events - two violent crisis events and one non-violent negotiations event - surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that were referenced most often in the international press during the content analysis phase of the project. Chapter II offers a theoretical background on the concept of framing and various theoretical interpretations. Chapter II also includes a brief overview of how the five countries' print media deal with various coverage issues, before concluding with the four research questions and corresponding hypotheses. Chapter III describes my methodology, explaining how I selected the dependent- and independent variables and parameters used in this project. Chapter IV, the statistical analysis of this project, features bivariate crosstabulations -and multivariate regression analyses based on the dataset that I constructed myself using a content analysis of 723 newspaper articles in the countries of interest. The results presented in this chapter allowed me to present strong evidence on the degree of variation among the independent variables.

## **Findings**

My main argument will be that the nature of news frames in stories about the conflict does indeed vary systematically. News coverage by the leading papers in some countries is of higher quality than that in others. Peaceful events, like negotiations, tend to produce more thematic and therefore higher quality stories than violent events. Moreover, in violent events, newspapers respond with different quality stories as a function of whether Israel or the Palestinians are the aggressor. In most cases, extended coverage of an event over multiple days does not grow in thematic quality, except in one notable exception, where the paper's stories about an event tend to improve with each passing day that the event is covered.