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Reception and Acceptance of Constructive Coverage by the Audience: Design of an Experimental Study¹

Kurzfassung: Die experimentelle Studie, deren Design hier vorgestellt wird, ist Teil des Projektes „Medien als Mediatoren von Demokratisierung, Peace-Building und Versöhnung in Nachkriegsgesellschaften“ der Projektgruppe Friedensforschung an der Universität Konstanz. Die Studie wurde konzipiert um herauszufinden, wie weit das kognitive Framing von Zeitungstexten (in Richtung konstruktiver Berichterstattung) modifiziert werden kann, ohne bei einer potentiellen Leserschaft eine zu große Dissonanz zu bisherigen gesellschaftlichen Grundüberzeugungen zu erzeugen, woraus eine Ablehnung des Textmaterials resultieren könnte.

Die Ergebnisse der Studie sollen zum einen zeigen, ob konstruktiv veränderte Inhalte vom Leser wahrgenommen werden und bei ihm ein entsprechendes mentales Modell des dargestellten Konflikts bewirken. Dies wird gemessen, indem die Versuchspersonen verschiedene eskalations- und deeskalationsorientierte Varianten von Zeitungsartikeln lesen und den wahrgenommenen Inhalt in eigenen Worten schriftlich wiedergeben. Diese Textwiedergaben werden mit der Methode der Inhaltsanalyse quantitativ ausgewertet.

Zum anderen wird untersucht, ob und wie das konstruierte Textmaterial hinsichtlich der Kriterien Unterhaltungswert, Neuigkeitsgehalt, Glaubwürdigkeit und Ausgewogenheit akzeptiert und bewertet wird. Diese Aspekte werden mit Hilfe eines Fragebogens erhoben.

Das verwendete Textmaterial bezieht sich auf drei verschiedene Ereignisse im Nachkriegs-Jugoslawien. Jedes Ereignis wird in vier Varianten dargestellt, so dass insgesamt 12 verschiedene Texte präsentiert werden. Die Stichprobe ist repräsentativ für die typische Leserschaft dreier deutscher Qualitätszeitungen.

Abstract: This paper presents the design of an experimental study that is part of the project „Media as mediators of democratization, peace-building and reconciliation in post-war societies“ of the Peace Research Group at the University of Konstanz.

The study is intended to assess the extent to which it is possible to modify the cognitive framing of news text material (in the direction of constructive conflict-coverage) without being rejected by the recipient for reasons of cognitive dissonance in regard to social beliefs.

The results of the study are expected to show, on the one hand, whether text material developed according to previously worked-out strategies for de-escalation oriented reporting will arouse attention, and whether the reader will consequently develop the intended mental model of the presented conflict. This aspect will be measured by giving test subjects escalation- and de-escalation-oriented text material, which they are asked to read and then reproduce. The written reproductions will be analyzed using a quantitative coding schedule.

We will also investigate whether and how constructed text material is received and evaluated with regard to entertainment value, news content, credibility and balance. These aspects will be measured using a questionnaire.

The texts are related to three different events in post-war Yugoslavia. Each event is presented in four different versions, resulting in 12 different texts. The sample will be representative for the typical readership of three prestigious German newspapers.

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1. Introduction

Analysis of print media reports on former conflict situations such as the Gulf War and the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia has shown that conflict coverage is predominantly shaped by stylistic and systematic means of war propaganda that in various ways justify the violent escalation of conflict. Usually conflicts are presented as a competitive win-lose process, the use of military force is labeled an appropriate means of conflict resolution, the enemy side is demonized and/or one's own side's rights and intentions tend to be idealized (cf. Luostarinen & Kempf, 2000; Jaeger, 2000; ASPR, 2003). This is a fatal situation, since the media have a major impact on the construction of the political decision-making environment (Naveh, 2002).

In contrast to these findings, recent research has shown that journalists also have the ability to present conflict situations in a more constructive and de-escalation oriented way. German press coverage during the German-French reconciliation-process (Jaeger, 2003) and German press discourse about Yugoslavia after the fall of Milosevic (Annabring, Bläsi & Möckel, 2003) was analyzed. Several constructive elements were identified that support peaceful conflict resolution and help to prevent the violent escalation of conflict.

Why do journalists tend to present conflict situations in an escalation-oriented manner? Is it a simple reaction to institutional standards set by editors, like limitations on the size of texts or adaptations to political demands? Is the usual style of conflict coverage intended to satisfy readers who want sensationalistic reporting? Does the reader prefer easily digested bites of information as presented by simplifying slogans? Do readers want the news to give them simple answers to questions of who is good and who evil, as some editors want us to believe?

2. Journalistic preconditions

Disregarding undeniable political and military influences on the information accessible to journalists, there certainly are preconditions that restrict journalists in their stylistic and content-related freedom. Depending on the type of text they have to produce, these defined criteria will be more or less restricting: production rules for „news“, for example, demand conciseness which involves a priori the use of a compressed, easily understood style and simplifying slogans instead of explanations. But „news“ is only one of many different types of texts printed in newspapers.

Other types of articles, as for example „reports“, require different production guidelines. They are expected to present the complexity of the facts; the emphasis is on the description of political, economic or social backgrounds, and especially on contextual information about conflicts. The journalist's task is not only to organize the facts, but also to emphasize certain aspects and to decide which details should be mentioned or which perspectives should be excluded. A further criterion demanded of a „report“ is that it should attract the reader and be able to catch his attention for a period of time. Even more freedom than in producing a report is offered by „reportage“. (Klemm & Hähnel, 2003)

Hence, with increasing freedom, the demand for journalists to have a sense of responsibility rises as well. They are committed to the ethical standards of journalism, as well as to the interests of their employers, which in most cases are mainly of an economic nature. The decisive question is: Can the product be sold?

Two main question complexes arise from these reflections:

1. Alternative writing strategies for a more de-escalation oriented presentation of conflicts have already been developed. But would this kind of coverage leave a different mental representation of conflict in people's minds? Would it have an influence on readers' attitudes towards conflict and its solution?
2. Would a reader be interested in information that does not reproduce the enemy image he is used to, information that questions military values and/or offers peaceful alternatives for conflict resolution, etc.?

3. De-escalation and solution-oriented conflict coverage

If „reality“ is socially constructed (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1996), then the mass media serves as a mediator as well as a constructor of social reality (cf. Tuchman, 1978; Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Luostarinen & Ottosen, 1998). The events presented by the media are just raw material, which reflects the construction of reality by the sender. The recipient integrates this construction into his existing subjective reality by cognitive processing. If presented constructions are in conflict with recipients' subjective realities, they may be rejected or avoided in order to maintain mental balance (cf. Festinger, 1957).

A conflict between nations or ethnic groups is a complex construction of reality in which journalists and the media play a central role. We all are subject to the same social psychological mechanisms. The cognitive and emotional changes resulting from the logic of conflict and the dynamics of conflict escalation affect both journalists and their audiences.

In long-lasting, intractable conflicts the biases of conflict perception are especially likely to be consolidated into basic societal beliefs, which include, besides the delegitimation of the enemy, a positive self-image, belief in the justness of one's

own goals and one's own victim status, resulting (national) security needs and belief in peace as the ultimate goal of one's society. (cf. Bar-Tal, 1998)

These societal beliefs reduce the credibility of a realistic and less biased description of the conflict, because they are extremely resistant and hard to change. Even if peace is on the political agenda, the reduction of biases should thus be implemented step-by-step. If the implementation of unbiased and de-escalation oriented coverage is too rapid, cognitive dissonance can be too strong.

Kempf (in ASPR, 2003, 115ff) has therefore proposed „a two-step procedure for deconstructing war discourse, reducing war-caused distortions of conflict perception and transforming violence-oriented war journalism into conflict-oriented peace journalism“:

- The first step is called *de-escalation oriented conflict coverage* and broadly coincides with what is usually called quality journalism.
- The second step, which actively searches for peaceful alternatives, is called *solution-oriented conflict coverage*.

Because the present study focuses on the aforementioned first step, de-escalation-oriented conflict coverage should be defined more concretely:

„It is characterized by neutrality and critical distance from all conflict parties. De-escalation oriented conflict coverage goes beyond the professional norms of journalism only to the extent that journalists' competence in conflict theory bears fruit, and the conflict is kept open for peaceful alternatives: a win-win orientation as an option, questioning violence as a suitable means of conflict resolution, questioning military values and exploring conflict formation.“ (ASPR, 2003, 115-116)

According to Kempf, this kind of conflict coverage should strive for an exploration of conflict transformation, fairness to all sides (realistic evaluation of the conflict parties' rights, intentions and actions) and a reduction of the stress induced by threats.

„De-escalation oriented conflict coverage does not free society from the burden of a war culture, nor can it transform conflict into a cooperative process. But it is a first step away from seeing ‚them‘ as the problem and from focusing on the question of who will prevail in war. If the media successfully create such a less biased perception of conflict, it will be less important for society to cope with conflict by maintaining beliefs about the justness of its goals, the rightness of its self-image, its victimization and the illegitimacy of the enemy.“ (ASPR, 2003, 118)

In the following experimental study we will investigate how readers of the German quality press perceive and respond to escalation- and de-escalation oriented newspaper articles. Based on a catalogue of constructive aspects of coverage designed by Bläsi & Jaeger (2004), we rewrote various press articles about events during the post-war period in former Yugoslavia on different levels of escalation and de-escalation oriented framing. These scenarios will be presented to an experimental sample of readers, asking them (1) to write a re-narration of each presented text and (2) to fill out a questionnaire concerning their perception and response to the articles.

Our first question is: Will a more open-minded, less biased and more pluralistic style of coverage have an impact on the cognitive framing of the re-narrations?

The second question is: will it be accepted by the audience?

The results will hopefully support the further development of concrete tools and guidelines to help journalists contribute to the constructive transformation of conflicts.

4. Media functions

In a world where the ethics of journalism and commercial profit-seeking are caught up in a daily struggle to get ahead, the question must be posed as to whether peace journalism would be accepted or even be preferred to escalation-oriented reporting, or if it would be rejected by the audience. Because circulation and sales dominate everyday journalistic work, we have to assess whether there might possibly be a demand for peace journalism in the public market.

What causes a reader to start reading a text in general or specifically a newspaper article and what makes him continue reading it right to the end? What functions do media fulfill for the members of society?

Katz and Blumler's Uses and Gratifications Approach (1974) stresses that audiences use media in a variety of ways to gratify personal needs. Their theory is based on four major assumptions:

1. *The active audience*, assuming that the individual reader or viewer reacts to media actively with purposeful, goal-oriented and motivated behavior.

2. *Media use for gratification*, assuming that the audience views/reads media specifically to satisfy personal needs and interests.
3. *Social and psychological factors*, assuming that personality differences have an influence on media selection by the members of the audience.
4. *Competition and Mediation*, assuming that readers or viewers have alternative ways to satisfy their needs and that the media strive to attract the interest of audience members.

To put „needs“ in a more concrete form, it is useful to consider the reasons why people choose to pay attention to media in general and what satisfaction they obtain from the media.

According to McQuail (1972), we can differentiate four different categories of gratification and satisfaction that the media provide to the individual media consumer:

1. *Information*: The potential media recipient wants to be informed about events, possible dangers and conditions in his environment and the world at large. Besides this, the individual strives to satisfy his curiosity and interests.
2. *Personal identity*: People try to find reinforcement for personal values and want to identify with valued others in the media.
3. *Integration and social interaction*: Media consumers want to gain insight into the circumstances of others. They try to identify with others and gain a sense of belonging.
4. *Entertainment*: Media offer a possibility to escape from our everyday life or to be diverted from our problems. Watching a movie or reading a newspaper helps us to pass time enjoyably.

Furthermore, we can specify some principal functions of mass media for society.

Lasswell (1948) describes three main social functions of media use. These functions are:

1. *Surveillance of the environment*, which means that media provide news and information;
2. *Correlation of environmental segments*, helping audience members to interpret and understand the world;
3. *Transmission of social norms and customs*, meaning that the media reflect societal beliefs, values and norms.

C.R. Wright (1960) added a further function:

4. *Entertainment*, by providing amusement, diversion and reducing social tension

A fifth function was identified by McQuail (1972):

5. *Mobilization*, referring to campaigns in the spheres of politics, religion, war and work

All these media functions need to be taken into account when asking under what circumstances constructive coverage might be desirable for the potential reader.

1. The functions *surveillance* (for society) and *information* (for the individual) require almost identical features in a newspaper article: The text material has to be informative to guarantee surveillance of the environment and satisfaction of the reader's curiosity.
2. The *correlational* function requires characteristics similar to those of the function of *personal identity*. Information has to correlate with the audience's existing knowledge, to aid in understanding and interpreting the environment and to offer reinforcement for personal values.
3. The functions *transmission of social norms* and *integration and social interaction* have a lot in common with regard to the requirements of a text: The content has to reflect the beliefs, values and norms of the society and culture the reader lives in and offer information about the circumstances of other members of the society to give the reader an opportunity to identify with others and feel a sense of belonging.
4. The *entertainment* function applies to both individual and society. Texts should be entertaining in the sense of being interesting and exciting to read. They should not be boring, but rather should allow readers to escape from everyday routines and problems.
5. The *mobilization* function: Text material should have a mobilizing function in the sense of asking readers to actively take part in societal life and information seeking.

5. Design of the study

5.1 Text material

The aim of the experiment is to assess whether de-escalation oriented conflict coverage (1) has an impact on the recipients' mental models of the conflict and (2) whether it would be accepted by the audience.

In order to answer these questions, we produced four variants of three articles from the German quality press concerning

different events during the first 30 month after the democratic revolution in former Yugoslavia:

- The conflict in Southern Serbia (*Die Welt*, 19.12.2000)
- The handover of Milosevic to The Hague (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29/6/2001)
- The treaty between Serbia and Montenegro (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15/3/2003)

All of the original articles are rather moderate with respect to escalation-oriented framing of the events reported, and each of the three articles was rewritten in three different forms, representing different levels of escalation vs. de-escalation oriented coverage. Accordingly, four different variants of the reports on each of the three events were used in the study:

- The first variant (o) is the original article, medium in its escalation orientation, functioning as a linchpin for the other variants.
- Taking the worst edges off, but leaving the article as original as possible, we come to the next variant, with a reduced escalation orientation (d1).
- Keeping the same theme, but completely changing the structure of the article results in the most constructive version, with a de-escalation orientation and additional constructive information (d2).
- On the opposite pole we produced a text version with increased escalation-oriented framing (e) by using methods of propaganda, win-lose constructions, focusing on (additional) negative aspects and so on.

The articles were rewritten in a more constructive and/or escalation-oriented form based on existing information from other newspapers or articles. None of the information included in the rewritten articles was made up.

None of the variants exceeds the length of one page, and the texts are formatted like real articles, with dates, fictive journalists' initials, but without naming the newspaper where the original article appeared.

The headline of the article from the German newspaper the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* may serve as an example of how the articles were to be rewritten (cf. Table 1).

o original article moderately escalation oriented	„The Slobo-Factor“ This expression dehumanizes Milosevic as a person and implies a rather cynical evaluation of the handover process.
d1 slightly de-escalation oriented	„Support for economic reconstruction in exchange for handover“ This kind of headline aims at a balanced description of the situation, keeping both sides (international and Serbian points of view) in mind.
d2 de-escalation oriented	„Success for International Law“ A positive focus is placed on Human Rights, International Law and common interests.
e escalation oriented	„Purchased Rights“ This headline emphasizes in a negative way that the handover of Milosevic is only an exchange of money for compliance with International Law.

Table 1: Rewriting the headline of the article from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

5.2 Experimental setting

These texts were administered to a quota sample of 128 subjects, representative of the typical readership of three selected newspapers with respect to age and educational level.

Each subject received one text about each of the three events in chronological sequence. The variants of the texts were systematically rotated. With three events and four variants this makes a total of $4^3 = 64$ combinations of events and escalation vs. de-escalation level of the text. Each of these combinations was administered to a male and to a female subject.

In order to prevent the subjects from thinking too much about the goals of the experiment and to disguise our research aims, we used a cover story telling the subjects that the results of the PISA study had shown that the students in many other countries performed better in text comprehension than German students. We wanted to investigate whether these differences were due more to the use of the media or to the educational system. In order to make the cover story credible, the subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their media habits and provide some personal data.

The texts were presented in chronological order, and the subjects did not know there were different variants of the texts. Having read and understood a text, they were not allowed to look at it again.

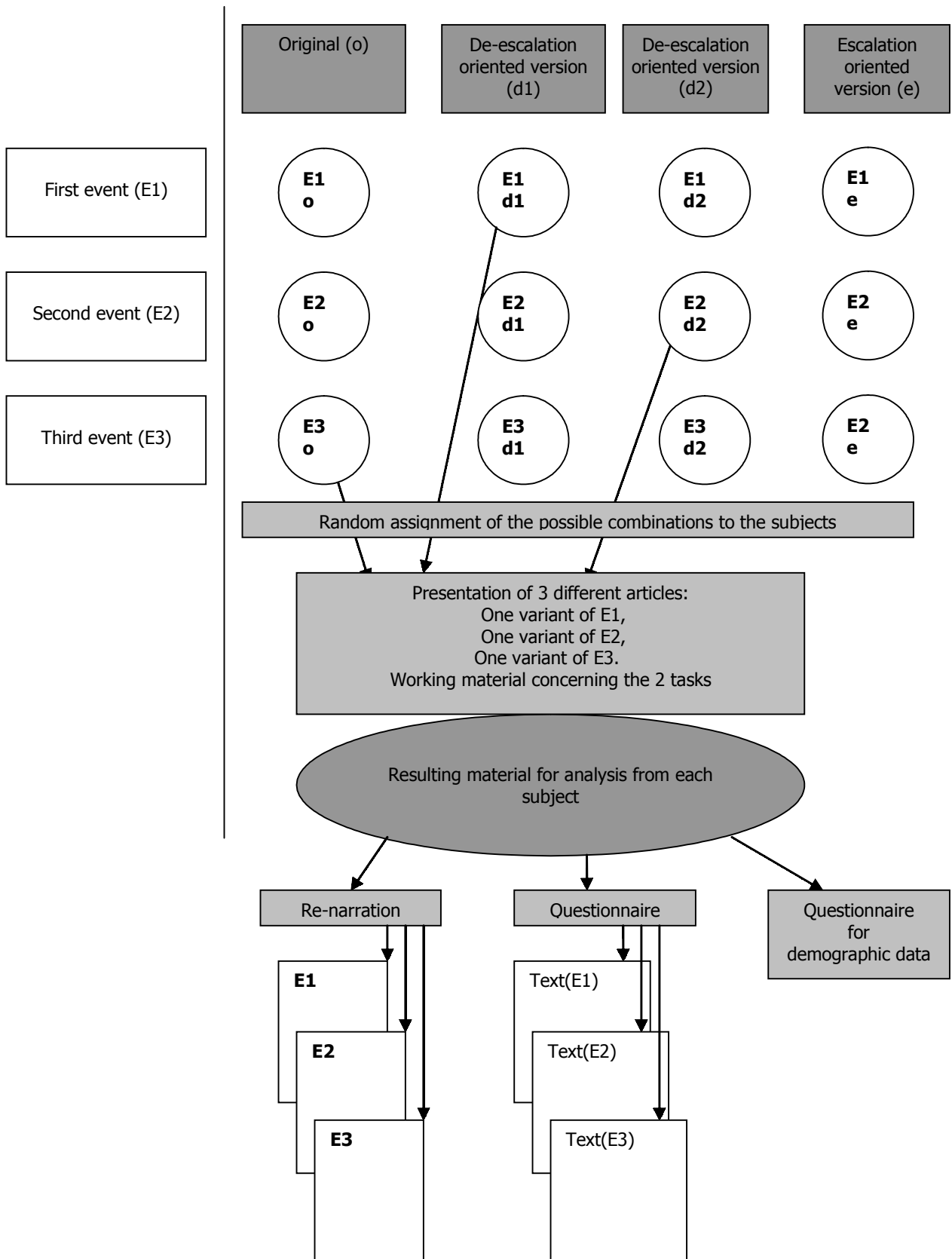


Figure1: Experimental material

After reading a text, the subjects were asked

1. to write down in their own words what they remembered of the content of the article and
2. to fill out a questionnaire about the text.

After this, the next text was presented.

With 128 subjects and 3 texts per subject, the total data set includes 384 re-narrations and completed questionnaires.

5.3 Content analysis

In order to assess whether escalation vs. de-escalation oriented framing of the events has an impact on the mental models with which subjects frame events, a quantitative content analysis of the re-narrations will be carried out.

For this purpose, a coding schedule was designed, which consists of 6 dimensions (cf. Table 2) and a total of 27 variables.

I.	Confrontation versus Cooperation
II.	Intention and Aims
III.	Democratization
IV.	Evaluation of Actions
V.	Social Identification versus Social Distance
VI.	Wording and Manner of Expression

Table 2: The six dimensions of the coding schedule

This coding schedule will be used to analyze the description of each of the six parties involved in the events that the articles dealt with (cf. Table 3), and the underlying mental models will be inferred from the data by means of Latent Class Analysis.

A.0	International System of States, including UN, US, KFOR and others
B.0	Albanian people in Serbia
C.0	Montenegro
D.0	Serbs in Serbia
E.0	Yugoslavia
F.0	Residual category

Table 3: The six parties involved into the events

5.4 Questionnaires

Two different types of questionnaires are used in the present experiment: one for measuring the acceptance and evaluation of the text material and one for collecting demographic data, including age, sex, educational level and habits of media consumption.

In order to assess the acceptance and evaluation of the text material, six different criteria were chosen:

1. *Acceptance*, which provides information about the correlation function (a text will only be accepted if the information fits into the reader's existing frameworks) and about the function of personal identity (because a lack of acceptance contradicts the identification with the valued other described in the text).
In order to measure the acceptance of the texts, the subjects were asked whether they agreed with the statements in the texts.
2. *Evaluation*, which indicates whether the text material presented reflects the subjects' own values and beliefs. This refers to the transmission of social norms and customs and the function of integration and social interaction. It is also related to the correlational function, in the sense that information which does not fit into one's own personal schemes is more difficult to understand and might appear distorted or wrong. In so far, it also refers to the personal identity function.
Evaluation will be measured by questions like: „Was the content of the text understandable?“; „Does it report the facts truthfully or in a distorted way?“ and „Was it hard to read the text right to the end?“
3. The *amount of entertainment*, which relates to the fourth function of media (for society, as well as for the individual)

and will be analyzed by asking the subjects to evaluate the text material in terms of the adjectives „boring“, „interesting“, „exciting“ and „informative“. The subjects can choose among the evaluation alternatives „very,“ „medium“ and „little“.

4. The *news content*, which relates to the functions of surveillance and information, since the quality of being something new is an essential characteristic of information, and according to Schicha (1999) a message becomes information only when its content is new to the recipient.
News content is operationalized by the questions: „Did you know about the reported events in advance?“ and “Are new aspects mentioned in the text?“
5. *Credibility* is a basis for the first three media functions of both society and individual. A text which is implausible or unreliable can neither help us to understand the world around us nor guarantee surveillance of or information about the environment or the transmission of social norms or the opportunity for identification with valued others.
Credibility will be measured by the questions: „How do you evaluate the journalists’ knowledge about the reported events?“ and „Are the reported events presented in a factually correct way?“
6. *Balance*. In order to find out whether the subjects notice any differences between the various text versions regarding the balance of the information given in the text, the subjects are asked to state whether the texts contain impartial information about all mentioned parties, or whether one of the parties has been favored. Previously existing beliefs, such as that one party has always been favored in the daily press, might possibly lead a reader to evaluate a truly neutral text as biased.

5.5 Pre-test

Preceding the main study, a pre-test with 16 subjects was conducted. The subjects varied in educational level, age and sex. The design of the pre-test was the same as in the main study, but different text material was used. The articles used for the pre-test dealt with the Middle-East conflict. The text material was presented in only two levels of variation: original versus de-escalation oriented. The cover story was identical with that of the main study.

In this pre-test, we examined the differences between group setting versus single person condition, and among other things we also inferred the suitable length of the texts to be used.

The results of the pre-test show (1) that all subjects without exception accepted the cover story (2), that it makes no difference whether a group or a single person setting is used, and (3) that the articles should not fill more than a single page.

Although only 16 subjects participated in the pre-test, some of the results were statistically significant at the 5% level.

For example, the news content of the rewritten text material was judged by the subjects to be significantly higher than that of the original texts (cf. Figure 2).

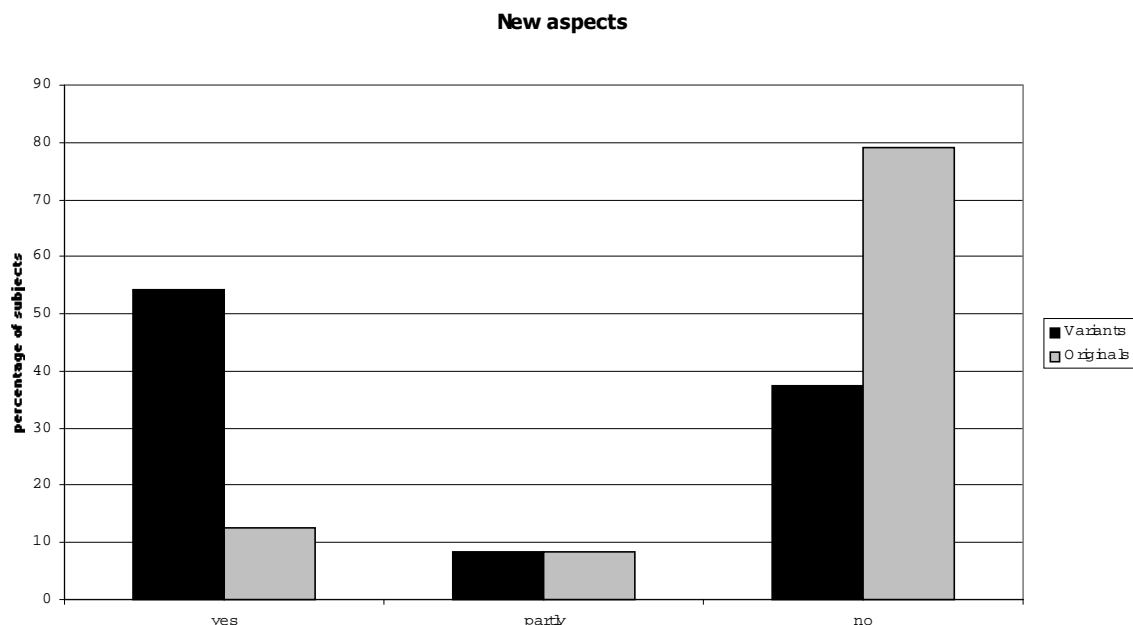


Figure 2: Evaluation of the news content

With respect to the acceptance of the articles, on the other hand, there was almost no difference between the original articles and their de-escalation oriented variants. (cf. Figure 3)

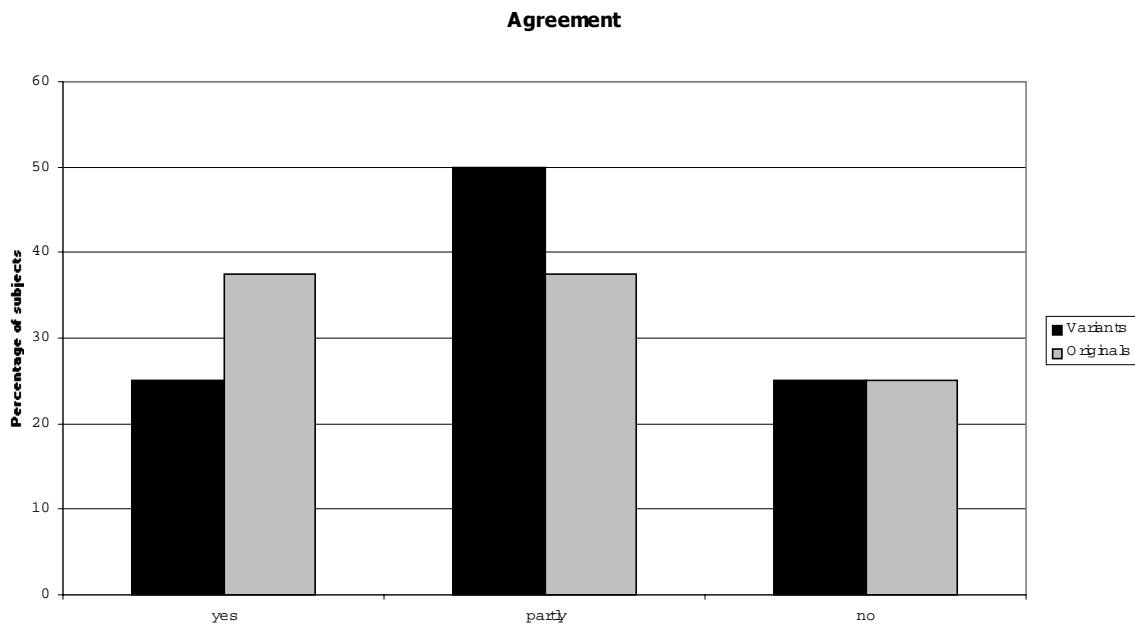


Figure 3: Agreement with the content of the article

This indicates that de-escalation oriented conflict coverage does in fact have the capacity to frame information in a more constructive way without creating too much cognitive dissonance in the reader.

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