

# The Gaza War: another episode in a deadlocked conflict?

*"A third factor making the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so annoying, is the predictable parade of Dutch opinion leaders."  
(Trouw, February 5, 2009)*

## Introduction

The recent outbreak of violence in Gaza showed how the situation between Israel and the Palestinians can easily flare up into a violent conflict. With every new episode of bloodshed the mutual hatred increases and a solution seems further away. In a far away country as the Netherlands, the majority of the public follows the happenings through the news coverage in the media making it important to study the way newspapers present this conflict. In order to study the way media cover this conflict during the last ten years we started a large research project, including both automatic and manual content analysis to get both an overall and detailed image of the news content. In a recent paper presented at the annual conference of the *International Studies Association* we presented an automatic content analysis of news coverage from the last 10 years as published in the Washington Post, the Guardian and NRC Handelsblad (see Ruigrok et al. 2009). In this report, using manual content analysis, we provide a more in depth overview of the news coverage as found in seven Dutch newspapers - three 'quality' newspapers, two 'popular' newspapers and 2 free dailies - during a month of violence in the Gaza Strip.

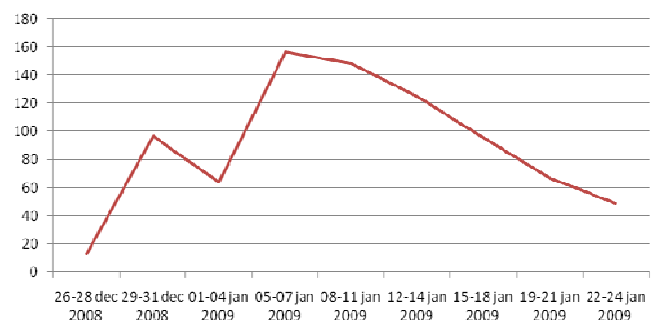
## Method

We selected from the seven newspapers every article mentioning either Israel or Palestine/Palestinians and coded all articles that were related to the conflict. In total we included 817 articles in the dataset. The headline and lead of these articles were coded using the NET (Network of Evaluative Texts) method, a semantic network analysis method, stemming from Evaluative Assertion Analysis (Osgood et al., 1956) and developed by Van Cuilenburg et al. (1986). The NET method divides a text into a number of so-called Nuclear Statements, describing the relations between objects such as actors and issues in the form of 'Source: Subject / Predicate /direction of the predicate / Object'. The coding resulted in 5.471 statements.

## Frequency and framing of the news

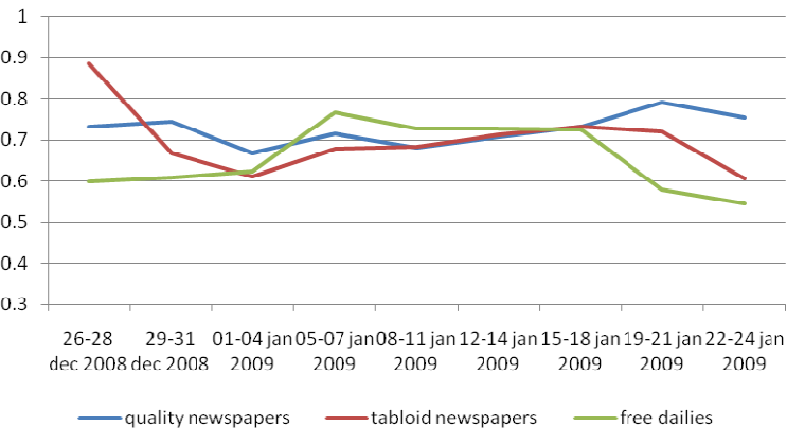
The figure shows the amount of news coverage. **We see a first peak when Israel launches the first bombardments on Gaza, 27 December 2008, and is followed by a peak when Israel starts a ground invasion into Gaza.** After that we see a slow decline of attention in the following weeks.

Besides the question about the amount of newspaper articles about the conflict can be found in the news, we are interested in *how* the conflict is presented in the news substantively. In line with our research project into automatic content analysis and the conflict we will distinguish first two types of frames, episodic and thematic. Moreover, we are interested in more specific, substantive frames that can be found in the news coverage. Also, we are interested in how the protagonists of the conflict are presented in the news, as attackers or as victims of the conflict. In line with this presentation we are interested in who is to blame or in other words who is criticizing who. Finally we will look into labels that are given to the protagonists, indicating characteristics of the belligerent parties involved.



## Episodic versus thematic framing

Episodic framing focuses on specific events, describing the actual happenings, while thematic framing puts these event in a context, referring to the past, describing the causes or consequences of the actual events. Research shows that conflict coverage is often more episodic than thematic, focussing heavily on events instead

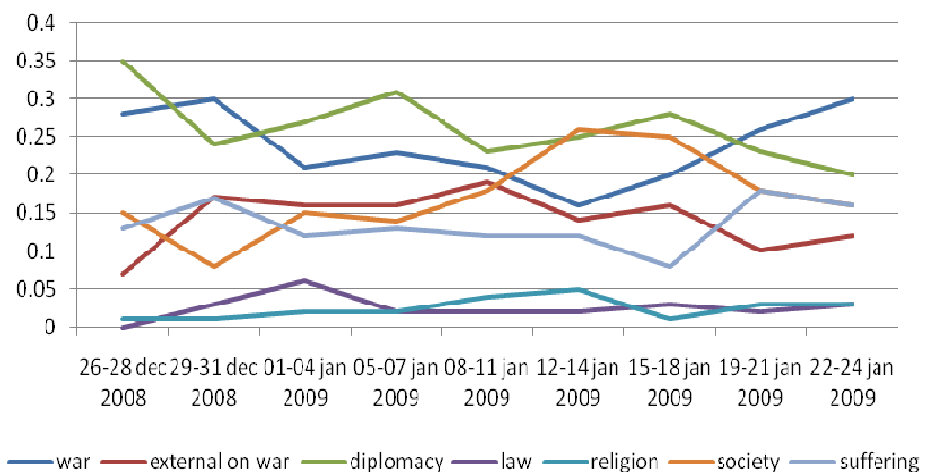


of background and context (Dimitrova 2006, Papacharissi, Fatima Oliveira 2008, Ruigrok 2005). The figure shows the ratio of episodic news versus episodic + thematic news coverage. **We see that the episodic news is dominating the news coverage in the Dutch newspapers.** With an average of .70 the news is far more episodic than thematic. The news becomes less episodic over time and more space is reserved for context information. Interesting point is that this tendency appears in both free dailies and

## Topics in the news

tabloid newspapers while the episodic news coverage increases in the quality newspapers in the last period of the conflict. Besides episodic and thematic framing of news coverage we also distinguish a number of topics that can be focused on while covering the conflict. These topics include - besides the actual *war* issues, and the *external actors commenting on the war* - the *diplomatic* efforts, issues concerning international *law* and *religion*. Finally we also focus on the *society* in which the conflict occurs and the *suffering* of the population. In the figure presented below the ratio that each topic represents in the news coverage. In the news coverage we see that with the attention for the *war* issues also the attention for the *suffering* of the population increases and decreases.

In the second week the primary focus of attention shifts towards diplomacy issues and also external actors put forward their opinions about the war. Also the attention for the societal aspects of the conflict increases when the conflict lingers on. **The issues dealing with religion and international law only represent a small part of the news coverage.** The newspapers do not show big differences with respect to the different topics.



## News about Support and Criticism

During a conflict the news about support and criticism is of importance for the support that the belligerent parties may receive from international allies. Especially in the conflict in the Middle East the news coverage about support and criticism is of importance since it indicates the positions of the international community on the negotiation table. In the table we present the support and criticism as found in the news coverage towards

both belligerent parties. Moreover we enclose the other countries, including the international organisations such as the UN. The Dutch politics are considered as a separate actor since we investigate the Dutch newspapers. Finally we include the general public, consisting of all civilians outside the conflict, as an actor. In the columns we present the actors putting forward their statements and in the rows the actors receiving the support or criticism.

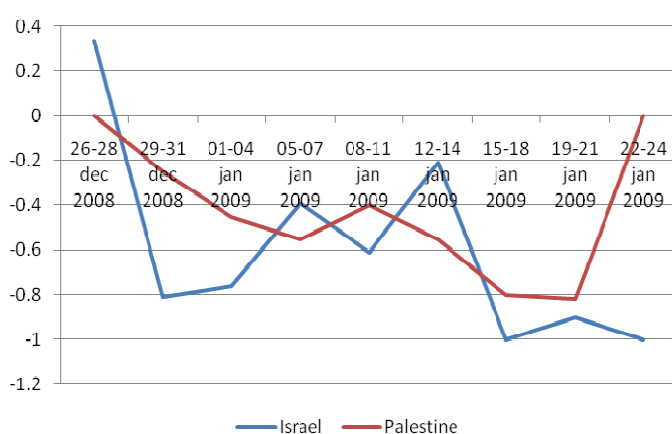
**Table 1. Support and Criticism in the news**

	Israel		Palestine		Other Countries		Dutch government		Dutch opposition		Public		Total	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
Israel	86	-0.08	137	-0.76	111	-0.36	94	0.22	46	-0.16	127	-0.18	601	-0.27
Palestine	306	-0.72	94	-0.18	80	0.16	29	-0.48	10	0.40	77	0.66	596	-0.31
Other countries	89	-0.56	26	-0.31	40	0.00	12	1.00	4	1.00	18	0.36	189	-0.19
Dutch govern.	7	-0.29		.	2	-1.00	4	0.50	10	0.15	13	-0.62	36	-0.24
Dutch oppos.	1	-1.00		.		.	5	0.20	23	0.04	32	0.02	61	0.02
Public	26	-0.23	11	-0.45	2	0.00	4	0.75	16	0.28	39	0.00	98	-0.04
Total	515	-0.55	268	-0.50	235	-0.13	148	0.17	109	0.07	306	0.09	1581	-0.25

Overall, the news tends towards criticism (-0.25). Both Israel and Palestinians receive most support and criticism, 601 statements towards Israel, 596 statements towards the Palestinians. The tendency of the statements is rather negative (-.27 and -.31 respectively). As expected both Israel and Palestine are very negative towards each other. However, in the news coverage the Israeli actors are covered more extensively when saying something about the Palestinians (306) than the Palestinians putting forward their opinion on Israeli actors (137). Interestingly, also the internal conflicts within both parties are covered more extensively in the news than their internal support. "Other countries" in the news coverage focus their opinions more extensively on the Israeli actors than the Palestinians actors and are critical towards the Israeli and supportive towards the Palestinians. The same is true for the public. A different picture can be seen looking at the Dutch politicians. **Whereas the opposition is also critical towards Israel and supportive towards the Palestinians, the Dutch government takes the opposite position.** They are supportive towards Israel (.22) and critical towards the Palestinians (-0.48).

### Evaluations in the news

A special form of support and criticism are coded as evaluations. Hereby the evaluation does not stem from a specific source and therefore can be attributed to the newspapers itself. In the figure we present the general opinion of the newspapers during the conflict. **It shows that from the start of the conflict the Israeli actors are criticised more harshly than the Palestinian actors.** Only in two periods the newspapers are more critical towards Palestinians than towards the Israeli actors. The newspapers do not differ among themselves. The free dailies are most critical towards Israeli actors, while the tabloid newspapers are least critical. Towards the Palestinians all newspapers show similar criticism.



### Sources in the news

As a final aspect, we will look at the different roles the belligerent parties played in the news coverage. To make your position clear in a conflict it is important to be quoted in the news. This is true for politicians trying to convince the public for their policies or to vote for them, but this is also true for belligerent parties during conflict. When able to explain your position it is easier to gain public support for your actions.

**Table 2. Actors as source in the news coverage**

	Quality newspapers		Popular newspapers		Free dailies		Total	
	N	Col %	N	Col %	N	Col %	N	Col %
Israel	23	3.9	19	7.6	21	6.7	63	5.4
Army Israel	19	3.2	20	8.0	24	7.7	63	5.4
Politics Israel	25	4.2	16	6.4	18	5.8	59	5.1
Civilians Israel	24	4.0	5	2.0			29	2.5
Palestine	8	1.3	3	1.2	3	1.0	14	1.2
Hamas	19	3.2	1	0.4	14	4.5	34	2.9
Politics Palestinians	31	5.2	4	1.6	7	2.2	42	3.6
Civilians Palestina	32	5.4	11	4.4	4	1.3	47	4.1
Int. organisations	75	12.6	26	10.4	38	12.2	139	12.0
Europe	10	1.7	8	3.2	15	4.8	33	2.8
Other countries	43	7.2	9	3.6	33	10.6	85	7.3
Dutch government	52	8.7	12	4.8	22	7.1	86	7.4
Dutch opposition	55	9.2	27	10.8	33	10.6	115	9.9
Public	179	30.1	90	35.9	80	25.6	349	30.1
Total	595	100	251	100	312	100	1158	100

The table shows the clear distinction between the belligerent parties. The Israeli actors are more often quoted in the newspapers than the Palestinians. In total, the Israeli actors represent over 18% of the sources quoted, while the Palestinians represent 11.8% of the sources. Only the Palestinian civilians are quoted more often than the Israeli civilians. However, an interesting difference can be seen between the newspapers. **The quality newspapers quote the Israeli actors as often as the Palestinian actors, while the free dailies and tabloid newspapers focus more heavily on the Israeli actors.** Besides the belligerent parties we see that international organisations are quoted often in the Dutch news as well as the Dutch politicians. The Dutch opposition is quoted more often in the news than the Dutch government, especially in the tabloid newspapers. Also striking is the number of civilians quoted in the news. This is caused by news coverage on demonstrations against the War in Gaza all around the world and especially in the Netherlands. Moreover, the conflict triggered a lot of readers to write a letter to the editors.

## Conclusions

This study shows the additional possibilities of manual content analysis on the automatic content analysis as discussed in Ruigrok et al. (2009). The co-occurrences that can be found with automatic content analysis get more meaning when coded manually. In this study we saw for example that Israeli actors are more often quoted in the news coverage, especially in the free dailies and tabloid newspapers. Also **the Israeli actors are more harshly criticized in the news coverage than the Palestinians. Only the Dutch government is supportive towards the Israeli actors, and critical towards Palestinian actors.** In conclusion we can say that the automatic content analysis provides us insights in general tendencies in the coverage while manual coding of articles can provide additional meaning to the tendencies. That is why we argue for a combination of both automatic and manual content analysis in order to research framing of conflict news coverage both in depth and over a longer period of time.

## References

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