

# Effects of Crisis News on Intercultural Tolerance: An International Comparative Study

Anthony Eseke, Ph.D.

Messiah College  
Pennsylvania, Mechanicsburg USA

**Abstract:** Human beings are “cultural animals who know and see and hear the world through socially constructed filters.” [1]. Fundamental to these filters are identities. Through the frames of identity, people often negotiate the dialectics of the ‘self’ with/against ‘the other’. The media in their reportage of conflicts and crisis produce and reinforce these dialectics. However, to what extent and directions do these reports influence social tolerance in the audience? This study therefore examined the effects of crisis/conflict news on otherness. The study defined otherness as the appraisal attitudes of tolerance, apathy, or intolerance towards other bodies based on identity categories. Consistent with media effects literature, the assumption was that the frames of crisis news were capable of stimulating measurable dissonances that influence tolerance/intolerance. The effects of two news reporting approaches were tested, ‘violence frames’ and ‘peace frames’. ‘Violence frame’ described news reporting styles that emphasize overt features of conflict such as the conflict arena – who threw the first stone; the fatalities; and the physical and human losses of the conflict. ‘Peace frame’, on the other hand, described news reportage that emphasize the roots and contexts of the conflict; and the constructive outcomes of the conflict by giving voice to all parties in the conflict. A 2 X 2 X 2 between-subjects factorial design surveyed the effects of religious crisis news story frames, victims’ religious identities, and the effects newspaper types on intercultural tolerance. The study found that in religious crisis news, the religious identity of victims significantly influenced the tolerance measures of the participants ( $F(4,722) = 14.505, p < .05$ ). The religious identity ( $F(4,722) = 14.505, p < .05$ ) and religiosity ( $F(8,657) = 3.340, p < .05$ ) of the readers of the crisis news significantly moderated their measures of intercultural othering (tolerance). It was also found that the credibility perceptions towards the newspaper had significant effects on the tolerance levels of the readers ( $F(11,528) = 2.085, p < .05$ ). The nationality ( $F(2,726) = 16.051, p < .05$ ) and gender ( $F(3,719) = 3.037, p < .05$ ) of readers of religious crisis news all had significant effects on intercultural othering. Crisis news frames had no significant effects on the intercultural othering of the participants. The findings of this study underscore the need for understanding the dynamic of crisis news in peace building and social tolerance.

**Keywords** — Crisis, Tolerance, Frames, Identity, Effects

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## INTRODUCTION

Crises are essential dynamics of social and human interactions. However, the perceptions, articulations and influences of crises vary from culture to culture. Given these cultural variations on one hand, and the fact that crisis and conflict are the bread and butter of news production and distribution, how do media news frames of crisis create tolerance or intolerance? This study examines this fundamental question. It investigates whether story frames, type of medium, and conflict victims’ social identity have any effects on intercultural tolerance. Since news media shape cultures as they influence audience perceptions of reality, it is necessary to assess the social realities of the media and their impact on audience worldviews. It also anticipated that the findings of this study are beneficial to crisis management and crisis journalism. Insights from this study shed light on effective uses of editorial decisions, frames and layout with regard to conflict news. Operative concepts in this study include media effects, crisis news (religious), frames (story, victim, and source frames) and tolerance (othering).

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Perse [2] identified four schools of media effects: direct effects, conditional effects, cumulative effects, and the cognitive-transactional effects. Direct effects examine the ability of media contents to “arouse and command attention” [2] in a short-term period. The classical “magic bullet” and “hypodermic needle” models fall into this category. Conditional effects maintain that the effects of the media are conditional to the selective attention of the audience. The cumulative model proposes the long-term effects of the media. The cognitive-transactional effects model emphasizes the mental engagement of the audience with the media content. Frames are the schemata by which people interpret events, locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences [3]. Vreese [4] identified two forms of journalistic framing: Frame-building (that is how frames emerge), and frame-setting (that is the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories that underpin this study include framing, priming, agenda setting and social identity. McLeod [5] found that a social protest framed as a deviant occurrence had a significantly different effect than when the protest was framed otherwise. Price and Tewksbury [6] opined that the effects of frames are related to the perceptual lenses, and strong feelings of the audience. These perceptions interact with the surface and latent meanings of frames to produce effects. Gamson [7] previously suggested that the latent meanings of frames are enhanced by framing devices such as catchphrases, metaphors, sound bites, graphics, and allusions to history, culture or literature. It is therefore believed that narratives and pictures jointly produce strong effects in audiences, effects that Lippmann phrased as “the pictures in our heads”, which he argued can simplify, distort, or do injury to meaning. Priming theory states that there is an implicit memory effect, in which exposure to one stimulus affects the response to another stimulus. Mundorf, Drew, Zillmann, and Weaver [8] in their experimental study; first exposed all participants to a pre-test news story; then they randomly exposed some participants to a very disturbing news story and others to an unemotional one. They found that participants exposed to the arousing news story were more impaired in recalling the pre-test news than those who read the unemotional news story. Baumgartner and Wirth [9] equally found that news messages have affective valences that trigger various moods and emotions in users. Agenda setting theory maintains that the media can orient what the audience thinks and how the audience thinks about it. The influence occurs because the audience uses the various cues of salience suggested by the media to organize their (audience) opinions. McCombs [10] opined that the media not only sets the agenda of what the audience thinks but also equally influences the feelings and behaviours of the audience towards the issue. Framing, priming and agenda setting theories support the notion that content, style, and emphases in news stories are capable of influencing audience attitudes to othering. Tajfel and Turner’s [11] social identity theory contends that the more intense an intergroup conflict is, the more likely individual members of the opposing groups will behave towards each through the collective perspectives of their various groups rather than from their individual characteristics or from independent inter-individual relationships. As readers engage with media reports, their degrees of identification to their various groups interact with the emotive cues of the media coverage. From the literature review, these hypotheses were posited:

H1: There is significant difference in effects on tolerance between crisis news in violence frames and peace frames.

H2: Crisis victims’ religious identities influence intercultural othering.

H3: A reader’s level of religiosity moderates crisis news effects.

H4: Cultural Proximity to location of crisis moderate tolerance.

H5: Gender will moderate the effects of crisis news on tolerance.

## METHODS

With a 2 X 2 X 2 between subjects factorial design, this study examined the effects of crisis news on othering (tolerance). Three independent variables, news frame, source frame and victims’ religious identity were tested. As a 2 X 2 X 2 design, each of the independent variables had two levels: news frame (violence vs. peace frames), source frame (The London Times vs. The Nigeria Times), and victims’ frame (s. Muslim victims). Attitudes of othering was measured with a scale adapted from previously tested intercultural and intolerance scales and schema. Participants were first exposed to newspapers that had manipulations of the three independent variables. After participants had read the newspapers, they took the intercultural tolerance questionnaire. The statistical differences on the measures of the dependent variable were the basis for hypotheses testing. Differences that support or fail to support the hypotheses provided the insights to the possible effects of conflict news on intercultural tolerance. Crisis news stories used as stimuli were adapted from actual events in Nigeria.

In constructing the experimental newspapers, first, actual Nigeria newspaper news stories of violence in Nigeria were used as models for constructing the base newspaper in the study experiments. The base newspaper was used as the ‘violence’ journalism frame. Aspects of the base news stories were then manipulated along the prescriptions of the peace journalism. Other manipulations included the names of the newspapers, The London Times and The Nigeria Times. Although the names were fictitious, it was anticipated that they would trigger sentiments that influence the responses of the readers. The pictures in the ‘violence’ and ‘peace’ journalism stimuli were selected based on the conceptual thrusts of

the two types of journalisms investigated. The names of people and places in the stories were fictitious but were randomly generated by African names generators software on the internet. The conceptual differences between the 'violence' and 'peace' journalisms guided the composition of the news stories. The stories were all maintained at the same length of 199 words.

Intercultural othering/tolerance was the dependent variable of study. The variable was measured with an adaptation of the Intercultural Tolerance Scale (ITS) of Mendleson, Bures, Champion, and Lott [12], and the Intolerant Schema Measure (ISM) of Aosved, Long, and Voller [13]. The reconstructed scale for this study was divided up into a 4-item Anti-Muslim bias scale; and a 4-item Anti-Christian bias scale. The statements were scored on a 5-point reverse coded scale of 1 strongly disagree, and 5 strongly agree. There were 749 participants in the study. The age range was 15-70. Christians (78.1%), Muslims (15.4%) and Non-religious (5.2%). For nationality, Nigeria (80.9%); U.S.A (16.8%).

## RESULTS

H1: There is significant difference in effects on tolerance between crisis news in violence frames and peace frames. A 2 (news frames) x 2 (victims' religion) x 2 (newspaper type) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was calculated comparing the mean scores of the Anti-Muslim bias of participants. No significant effects of news frames in peace journalism frame and violence journalism frame was found ( $F(2, 738) = 2.248, p > .05$ ). The scores of the participants in the Anti-Christian bias scale equally had no significant effects in the peace journalism and violence journalism frames ( $F(2, 738) = .754, p > .05$ ).

H2: Crisis victims' religious identities influence intercultural othering. A 2 (news frames) x 2 (victims' religion) x 2 (newspaper type) x 2 (reader's religion) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was calculated comparing the mean scores of the Anti-Muslim bias of participants. Significant interactions were found between the victims' religion and the religion of the readers ( $F(4,722) = 14.505, p < .05$ ); and between the news frames and victims' and readers' religions ( $F(4,722) = 2.682, p < .05$ ). On the Anti-Christian bias, significant interaction was found between the reader's religion and the victims' religion ( $F(4,722) = 2.382, p = .05$ ).

H3: A reader's level of religiosity moderates crisis news effects. A between-subjects factorial ANOVA was calculated examining the effects of participants' religiosity with their Anti-Muslim and Anti-Christian bias attitudes. A significant effect of religiosity was found on the Anti-Muslim bias of participants ( $F(8,657) = 3.340, p < .05$ ); and a significant effect of religiosity was equally found on the Anti-Christian bias ( $F(8,657) = 2.534, p < .05$ ).

H4: Cultural Proximity to location of crisis moderate tolerance. A factorial ANOVA that included the nationality of the participants indicated that the location of the participants in Nigeria or in the U.S. had significant effects on the Anti-Muslim bias ( $F(2, 726) = 16.051, p < .05$ ); but it did not have significant effects on the Anti-Christian bias scale ( $F(1,726) = 2.454, p > .05$ ).

H5: Gender will moderate the effects of crisis news on tolerance. A factorial ANOVA indicated that there was a significant interaction between news frames and reader's gender on the Anti-Muslim bias scale ( $F(3, 719) = 3.037, p < .05$ ); and a significant interaction between victims' religion and reader's gender on Anti-Christian bias scale ( $F(2, 719) = 3.351, p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

H1: There is significant difference in effects on tolerance between crisis news in violence frames and peace frames. The hypothesis was tested with a factorial ANOVA on the Anti-Muslim bias scale ( $F(2, 738) = 2.248, p > .05$ ); and the Anti-Christian bias scale ( $F(2, 738) = .754, p > .05$ ), indicating that there were no significant effects of the journalism frames.

So why was this hypothesis not supported? There are three possible explanations. First, either, the manipulations were not effective, second, the scales did not validly measure the dependent variable, or third, there was actually small/no significant effect between the two groups. But there is high confidence in the experimental manipulations in the violence vs peace journalism newspapers; and there is high assurance that the scales for the dependent variable were valid and reliable [11] and [12]. The plausible explanation, therefore, is that the result indicates a theoretical reality of contingency effects theory, which states while journalistic literary devices may not have direct effects, other variables like religious identities imbedded in the news will intervene in the effects. Moreover, the absence of significant effects may be indicative of long term cultivation of the audience on the violence journalism frame such that a one-time exposure to the peace journalism may not produce significant effects just as a person on a weight loss program may not observe significant weight loss from a one day visit to the gym. The conceptual implication of the result of this hypothesis calls for a cumulative and longitudinal study of the phenomena.

H2: Crisis victims' religious identities influence intercultural othering, and H3: A reader's level of religiosity moderates crisis news effects. H2 was tested with a factorial ANOVA. The results indicated that on the Anti-Muslim bias, significant interactions were found between the victims' religion and the religion of the readers ( $F(4,722) = 14.505, p < .05$ ); and on the Anti-Christian bias, significant interaction was also found between reader's religion and the victims' religion ( $F(4,722) = 2.382, p = .05$ ). This hypothesis was informed by the Social Identity theory. The theory argues that audiences have internalized attitudes and beliefs that often flow from their social identities. Through the perspectives of

these internalized attitudes, they assess news narratives that trigger their engagement with the otherness of the actors in the news they consume. H3 also indicated that religiosity moderated tolerance. These findings indicate that the audience is not a 'mass' that is homogenous and thinks and reacts to the news in a uniform way. Aspects of the news trigger certain reactions in the audience, and conversely, certain identities of the audience dispose them to react in certain ways to some aspects of the news. There is the need for deconstructing hegemonic tendencies in international news flow.

H4: Cultural Proximity to location of crisis moderate tolerance; was based on the central theses of the Psychological Distance and Proximity theory, it was assumed that social conflicts that are culturally or psychologically close or distant to the audience's experiences will likely produce different affective valences in the audience. The significant results reaffirm the distance and proximity principles and they underpin the foundations of other cultural and hermeneutic theories that shape the understanding of the dynamics of conflict news and tolerance. The results further shed light on critical theories that seek to understand and transform social structures and value systems that are often at the root of the conflict events that the media reflect in their coverage. H5: Gender will moderate the effects of crisis news on tolerance. The significant result in this hypothesis is plausible because in most societies, women are socialized differently than men, and this plays out in their tolerance levels as they engage conflict news.

## CONCLUSION

The presence of indirect effects in this study are consistent with the corpus of media effects literature that explains that more often than not, media effects are indirect with significant influences via intervening variables. That, for instance, religious identities and religiosity significantly moderate conflict news and intercultural othering underscores means that crisis management and crisis journalism needs to pay close attention culturally sensitive crisis issues. Crisis communicators should be very attentive to journalistic practices such as fairness and objectivity as news can strongly influence tolerant and intolerant behaviours. It is therefore essential that crisis communication studies understand in what ways crisis news enrich or fail to enrich the cultural and intercultural attitudes of their audiences.

## Author Biography

Anthony Eseke, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Public Relations at Messiah College, Mechanicsburg PA. He teaches Crisis Communication & Media Relations; Business and Organizational Communication; Intercultural Communication; Relational Communication; and the Fundamentals of Oral Communication. His research interest is in Media effects; and Peace & Conflict Communication studies. Dr. Eseke is also a Catholic priest. He ministers at Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Mechanicsburg, PA.

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