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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Media bias during extreme intergroup conflict: the naming bias in reports of religious violence in Indonesia

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Although the media are regularly charged with bias, empirical evidence of media bias is variable. The aim of the current research was to explore the utility of an intergroup perspective to understanding media bias as it emerges in the context of intergroup conflict. Content analysis was conducted on accounts of ongoing Christian–Muslim conflict in Ambon, Indonesia, as reported in both Christian and Muslim newspapers. This revealed the operation of a ‘naming bias’, whereby both Christian and Muslim newspapers were more likely to explicitly name the religious outgroup as perpetrators of intergroup conflict than they were to attribute responsibility to their own group. The prevalence of this bias was, however, asymmetrical across the two groups: it was pronounced in the Muslim newspaper but minimised in the Christian one. This pattern was evident in a general sample of media reports, and in a sample of matched reports in which the same incident was covered by both papers. The naming bias and its variable operation is explained with reference to social psychological theorising about intergroup dynamics.

Keywords: media bias; intergroup relations; religious conflict

Survey research shows that only a minority of people believe in media impartiality (Stevenson & Greene, 1980; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). For example, in 1998 when the Pew Centre asked Americans to describe the national news media in one word, the most frequent response was ‘biased’. The Gallup survey in 2000 (Gallup Honest and Ethics in Professions Report, November 2000, at www.gallup.com/poll/findings/indhmsty_ethcs2asp) showed that people’s belief in the honesty and ethics of reporters was one-fifth of that of nursing, the most trusted profession. In 2002, the Pew Centre reported that 47\% of respondents believed that news organisations are politically biased in their reporting, while only 35\% disagreed with this notion. Furthermore, a number of media researchers have noted that media increasingly introduce a degree of selectivity, subjectivity and opinion to their analyses, as discussed by the growing literature on news framing (e.g. Keum et al., 2005; Shen & Edwards, 2005).
Although accusations of media bias are ever-present, the questions of whether the media are in reality biased, and what factors might account for this bias where it exists, remain poorly answered. Surveys in the US have found that journalists who cover political news are disproportionately liberal in their politics when compared to the population at large (e.g. Dautrich & Hartley, 1999; Povich, 1996) leading to the assumption that a politically biased population of journalists must lead to a biased news media. However, the necessity of this link has been questioned (e.g. Niven, 2003), and others have countered that impartiality is part of the journalistic culture (Gans, 1985). Journalists are faced with significant pressure to maintain their credibility and these external pressures might minimise journalists’ tendency to express their own political views (Reeves, 1997).

Consistent with the latter argument, research suggests that the content of political reporting is more often characterised by neutrality than bias. Content analysis of network news coverage of the 1972 US presidential election revealed similar patterns of reporting, in terms of amount of coverage and tone, for Republican and Democratic candidates (Hofstetter, 1976). Media neutrality was also evident in subsequent presidential campaigns (e.g. Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Watts et al., 1999) and a meta-analysis has confirmed this pattern of neutrality across US presidential elections from 1948 to 1996 (D’Allessio & Allen, 2000). Indeed, coverage of the problem of media bias may be more prevalent than media bias itself, at least within the confines of American politics (Watts et al., 1999).

Outside this particular context (i.e. North American domestic politics), evidence for media bias is more consistent. Commentators regularly charge the foreign press with distortions in the reporting of the Arab–Israeli conflict (e.g. Cohen & Wolsfeld, 1993; Collins & Clark, 1992; Liebes, 1992). For example, Zelizer, Park, and Gudelunas (2002) examined the US press for evidence of bias in reports of the conflict in the Middle East. Their analysis of a single 30-day period of Israeli–Palestinian violence in three major newspapers suggested that reports were never perfectly accurate, balanced, or comprehensive. When reporting on intergroup conflicts in which the home country is implicated, media bias is likely to be even more pronounced. For instance, in an examination of the news sources used in the New York Times’ coverage of the 1989 US invasion of Panama, Dickson (1994) noted that journalists relied heavily on US political elites and Latin American officials. In comparison, Panamanians themselves, who were the target of American actions, were rarely consulted for their perspective. Others have added that the influence of the government line on media reports might be particularly accentuated when the government is united around a particular position, for example, in times of international conflict.

Causes of media bias

When attempting to explain the existence of news bias, most researchers still do so in terms of the attitudes and predispositions of individual journalists and editors (e.g. Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Starck & Soloski, 1977; Stocking & LaMarca, 1990). The dispositions of individuals undoubtedly do play a role in the production of news bias. However, if biases were only the product of individual differences then it would not be expected to be systematic. One journalist’s disposition to draw certain conclusions should be balanced by the opposing disposition of another. Further, it
seems unlikely that stable individual attitudes alone could account for the observed variability in media bias, from relative neutrality in one context to significant bias in another.

To produce systematic patterns of bias, social forces must play some role in effecting convergence between otherwise unique individuals. Surprisingly, however, the role of social factors in producing news bias is relatively underexplored. Recently, Donsbach (2004) attempted to fill this gap. His analysis started from the assumption that journalism is not merely a process through which individuals formulate and test their own hypotheses about events. Instead, it is a process through which individual journalists manage uncertainty in the face of pressures to make factual decisions under severe time constraints. Drawing on classic research in social psychology (e.g. Festinger, 1954; Sherif, 1966) Donsbach suggests that other journalists are likely to be instrumental in reducing uncertainty by defining social reality, and thus they constitute important sources of influence on individual decision-making. Ongoing interaction, both on and off the job, should lead communities of journalists to create a normative approach to reporting.

**Intergroup bias**

Exposure to the opinions of one's immediate peers might lead to convergence in reporting styles and systematic patterns of bias. An alternative social force that might underlie bias is the group allegiance of the media outlet. In many parts of the world (e.g. Europe and Asia), group allegiances of media are declared relatively openly. In other parts (e.g. US and Australia), mainstream mass media subscribe to an ethic of impartiality and try to hide or diminish their historical allegiances. Nevertheless, it can be argued that in every country media outlets harbour group allegiances, whether they be to a region, a political party, a religion, or to a nation. The question becomes: do these group allegiances produce systematic biases?

Social psychological research on intergroup behaviour suggests that they do. People are quick to categorise the world into ingroups and outgroups (e.g. Sherif, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and this categorisation process leads to evaluations of the social world that favour the ingroup over the outgroup. For example, people display greater affinity with ingroup members than with outgroup members (see Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002, for a review), allocate more rewards to ingroup than to outgroup members (Brewer, 1979; Diehl, 1990), presume greater similarity between themselves and others who share the same group membership (Brown & Abrams, 1986; Hogg & Turner, 1985; Wilder, 1984), feel less anxious when interacting with an ingroup member (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), and are more easily influenced by an ingroup than an outgroup member (Mackie & Queller, 2000; Turner, 1991). Positive orientations toward the ingroup can spill over into negative orientations and actions toward outgroups. We are less likely to trust outgroup members relative to ingroup members (Brewer, 1981; Worchel, 1979), perhaps accounting for the fact that we are also less willing to help outgroup members (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002) and less willing to cooperate with them (Kramer & Brewer, 1984). These kind of negative orientations toward outgroup members reveal themselves even on automatic tasks that are apparently beyond people’s conscious control (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983).
On this basis, ingroup favouring orientations toward the social world appear to be remarkably robust. Indeed, when such world views are challenged, people are apt to deploy a number of cognitive mechanisms to preserve their belief in relative ingroup superiority. For example, criticism of the group is likely to fall on deaf ears when it comes from outside (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Instead, people are more willing to consider reform, and to rethink intergroup hostilities (Maoz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2002), when the suggestion comes from within the group. People also explain intergroup actions in ways that minimise ingroup blame and project blame onto the outgroup. For instance, bad behaviour performed by outgroup members is likely to be attributed to dispositional factors (e.g. personality). Similarly negative actions by ingroup members are, instead, rationalised in terms of situational constraints (the intergroup attribution bias; Hewstone & Ward, 1985). Finally, people are prone to downgrade or forget their own group members’ shortcomings relative to intergroup transgressions (Howard & Rothbart, 1980). Perhaps this is one reason why protagonists of intergroup conflict regularly manage to hang on to the notion that they are the victims of the wanton aggression of the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1961). All of these biases are presumably useful in terms of minimising guilt (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004), helping the group succeed in its quest for resources (Sherif, 1966), and/or helping protect the (collective) self-esteem of members (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The fact that ingroup favouring biases are so ubiquitous suggests a fundamental, universal motivation for groups to engage in contests for power, status, and material rewards. However, it is also clear that individuals do not always express intergroup biases. More recently, research has pointed to the role of specific social contexts in determining the extent to which bias is expressed. In particular, ingroup favouritism and biased descriptions of events are likely to become exaggerated in situations of intergroup threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). At the same time, more strategic considerations might lead people to minimise certain forms of bias. Whether individuals act out negativity to an outgroup depends in part on the extent to which their behaviour is open to scrutiny and to whom. For example, when participants believe that their attitudes and actions are visible to a powerful outgroup, the expression of ingroup favouritism is attenuated relative to participants who believe that their attitudes and actions are anonymous (e.g. Reicher & Levine, 1994a,b; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998).

**The current research: examining media bias in an intergroup context**

In summary, theorising about media bias to date has emphasised fairly static individual differences as the primary cause. The aim of the current research was to adopt an intergroup perspective to understanding media bias by considering the group memberships with which news outlets are engaged, and the context of power relationships between those groups within the broader society. Perhaps because many media outlets claim independence from group allegiances, there are limited studies examining the role of group allegiance in producing bias in the mainstream media. One exception, however, was Rivenburgh (2000), who showed that newspapers in Argentina, the US, and Denmark tended to engage in news treatments that reflected positively on their nation and that helped protect national identity when compatriots acted negatively.
The current research examined media reports of Christian–Muslim conflict in the island of Ambon, Indonesia.\(^1\) For a number of reasons, this setting is an interesting one in which to study media bias. First, most previous studies on media bias have been conducted in Western countries, and the US in particular. Although there is an assumption that western media outlets have subtle political allegiances, within the Indonesian media such allegiances are more up-front and less subtle. In particular, there is a clear and visible religious divide between newspapers: certain media outlets are owned by Christians and primarily play to a Christian audience, whereas other media outlets are owned by Muslims and primarily play to a Muslim audience.

Second, the intergroup context is governed by a clear power differential. In most parts of Indonesia – including the capital Jakarta – Muslims are a clear majority in terms of population, political representation, and political influence. Furthermore, the political elites have used their power in the past to suppress or even close down media outlets. Although Indonesia’s 1966 Act (No. 11) declares that the national press should not be subject to censorship, in reality the application of these principles has required an unspecified transition period, during which every newspaper publisher must get two permits before being allowed to publish. Since 1966, many print media have had permits withdrawn, either because they were associated with the student movement, were critical of the President, or were perceived to be anti-Muslim. Some of the newspapers have later received permission to reappear, but with different management and a more moderate voice. Since 1998, when President Suharto was toppled from power, Indonesian journalists and newspapers have acquired greater autonomy. However, because there are still unclear boundaries about what is accepted in reporting and what is not, suspicions remain about the government’s commitment to free speech. Given the power differential between Muslims and Christians, it is reasonable to expect that Christian media would need to be particularly careful and strategic in how they reported the news.

The ‘naming bias’

A perennial challenge for research on media bias is how to operationalise ‘bias’. The difficulty of doing this is underscored by research showing that when partisans view standardised reports of an intergroup conflict, both sides typically claim that the reporting was biased against their own side (the ‘hostile media bias’: Arpan & Raney, 2003; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). This perception of a hostile media might be partly a function of the fact that negative information is processed, interpreted, and remembered through a biased lens. It might also be a function of the fact that partisans tend to have an inflated view of the integrity of their group relative to the rival group, so when they are presented with an objective and balanced view of events they feel aggrieved because the media coverage does not converge with their own biased perception of their group’s superiority (the ‘different standards’ explanation). Furthermore, recent evidence shows that perceptions of bias can be sharply affected by the presumed group allegiances of the media (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2007).

A lesson stemming from this research is that measuring bias is in itself vulnerable to bias, and needs to be done in a way that minimises the risk of subjectivity. There are three broad ways in which media bias has been examined in the past, each with
strengths and weaknesses. ‘Gatekeeping bias’ involves editors and journalists choosing selectively from a pool of possible stories to prosecute one cause over another. Although there is some case study evidence for a gatekeeping bias (e.g. White, 1950), D’Allessio and Allen (2000) describe this form of bias as ‘oftentimes unknowable’ (p. 135) because it is not possible to collect population data on the total pool of potential stories. ‘Coverage bias’ occurs if one side of an argument receives more coverage than the opposing side. This can be operationalised in terms of column inches, amount of airplay, or the number and size of photographs and headlines. Although reassuringly objective, this method is best suited to situations where there are clearly two ‘sides’ to each issue, as in two-party electoral systems. It is also flawed in the sense that it focuses on the content of coverage without reference to the tone of the content. The third type of media bias – ‘statement bias’ – involves isolating text where opinions have been interjected and coding whether they are broadly favourable or unfavourable. Descriptive research that attempts to divine levels of bias through the tone of reports and the valence of language is clearly valuable, although it will always be vulnerable to the criticism that it partly reflects the subjectivities of the researchers.

In this paper we devised a new method of measuring bias, which is tailored to capture bias in reporting of high-level intergroup conflicts. Specifically, we examined the way in which protagonists of the Christian–Muslim conflict were identified in newspaper reports in Indonesia. When reporting conflict, newspapers have a choice about whether to directly identify the group membership of the protagonists. If we are to assume that media are inclined to prosecute the interests of the group to which they are aligned, then we might expect the existence of a ‘naming bias’ such that when outgroup members initiate violence or commit atrocities, media are more likely to identify the group membership of the offenders than when similar actions are committed by ingroup members.

Hypotheses

Articles on the Muslim–Christian conflict in Ambon were examined in two newspapers: one Christian, one Muslim. Articles were categorised in terms of who they identified as the protagonists of the conflict (i.e. how they described events and attributed responsibility). From an intergroup perspective, it is argued that groups are motivated to protect and maintain a positive impression of their group to themselves and to others, and this motivation is stronger when intergroup threat is high (as it is in this context). Thus, newspapers should use relatively clear and bold language when identifying the group membership of outgroup members performing negative acts, and use relatively obscure and ambiguous language when referring to ingroup members performing negative acts. However, the findings mentioned above that people are likely to attenuate overt intergroup bias under the scrutiny of powerful others (Reicher & Levine, 1994a,b; Reicher et al., 1998) may also apply to the media, at least to some extent. Because Christianity is a minority religion in Indonesia, it was expected that the levels of explicit bias in naming the outgroup as protagonists would be greater in the Muslim newspapers than in the Christian newspapers.
Method

Materials and procedure

Newspaper articles from the newspapers Republika and Suara Pembaruan were the key materials used in the study. Republika is a Muslim-operated newspaper that caters to Muslim readers. Suara Pembaruan, on the other hand, is known as a Christian newspaper that primarily targets Christian readers. The newspapers target readers across a range of educational levels.

Articles on the Ambon conflicts that appeared in Suara Pembaruan and Republika between January 1999 and December 2001 were collected. This two-year period was chosen because the conflicts that occurred during this time were especially frequent and intense. Consequently, most Indonesian newspapers covered the incidents extensively. Overall, 480 articles mentioning the Ambon conflict were collected. These articles consisted of comment, analysis, features, and formal news stories.

An initial screening procedure was conducted to remove articles that did not refer to a specific incident. For example, an article might report an interview with an army general calling for calm or a speech made by a politician discussing the future of Ambon. Because these articles did not refer to a specific incident, and often did not refer to the protagonists of a violent act, they could not be analysed with respect to the current research question. After removing these articles, 235 articles remained for analysis (136 articles from Republika and 99 from Suara Pembaruan).

One feature of many of the articles is that they referred to more than one incident. For example, a single article might report an attack on a Christian village and then an attack on a Muslim village several hours later. Rather than using articles as the unit of analysis, then, it made sense to break down articles into discrete ‘units’, with each unit reporting or commenting on a single conflict. Based on this categorisation, a total of 417 units were derived (275 units in Republika, and 142 units in Suara Pembaruan).

Each unit was categorised to reflect the language used to identify the perpetrators of violence. Units were categorised as identifying Muslims or Christians if they directly referred to religious identities or if they used language that indirectly identified the religious identities of the attackers (e.g. white or red group, acang or obet, the use of us or them when referring to the attackers). Units were categorised as Muslim–Christian if both Muslims and Christians were identified but it was not clear which was the perpetrator of the violence and which was the victim (e.g. ‘Muslim and Christian groups clashed’). Units were categorised as ambiguous if it was impossible to know what the religion of the perpetrators was or if the religion of the perpetrators was ambiguous in the context. This category covered a wide range of terms, such as provocateurs, snipers, mass groups, rioters, a person, certain groups, or elite political groups. Finally, units were categorised as agents of government if the perpetrators were identified as official agents of the government, such as the police, the mariners, or the army.

To help locate the precise nature of the bias, we felt it would be useful to conduct our analyses not just on the full sample of units but also on a subset of units in which the newspapers were referring to the same incident. Incidents reported in both newspapers were categorised as matched, and those that only were reported in one of
the newspapers were categorised as not matched. There were 75 units that could be clearly identified as matched and 342 units that were not matched.

Results

Analysis of full sample

Initial analyses were conducted on the full sample of 417 units (275 units in Republika and 142 in Suara Pembaruan), both matched and non-matched. A contingency chi-square analysis revealed significant differences in the Muslim and Christian newspapers’ overall reports on the conflict, $\chi^2(4) = 51.93$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 1). The significant chi-square indicates that the distribution of the naming categories was significantly different for the Christian and Muslim newspapers. We followed up this omnibus test with more targeted contingency chi-square analyses, to see precisely which naming categories were distributed differently between the newspapers. Significant effects emerged only for the ‘Christian’, $\chi^2(1) = 41.31$, $p < 0.001$, and ‘ambiguous’ naming categories, $\chi^2(1) = 27.72$, $p < 0.001$. This means that one newspaper was disproportionately more likely than the other to use ambiguous language or to name the Christians as provocateurs. No differences emerged across the other three naming categories (all $\chi^2 < 3.31$, $ps > 0.05$). Below, we describe these effects in more detail.

As can be seen in Table 1, the dominant strategy for both newspapers was to obscure the religious identity of the proponents of violence. In the Christian newspaper, for example, more than half of the units used ambiguous language when referring to attackers (e.g. provocateurs, elite political groups, or mass groups). For the Muslim newspaper, the most frequent option was to use ambiguous language in relation to the identity of the attackers, but the prevalence of this option was less than for the Christian newspaper (29.82% versus 56.34%). A sizable discrepancy also appeared in the extent to which the two newspapers directly identified Christians as the attackers. Whereas approximately one-third (33.09%) of units in Republika (the Muslim newspaper) used words or phrases that directly identified Christians as the attackers, only 4.93% of references in Suara Pembaruan (the Christian newspaper) did the same.

Table 1. Naming category as a function of newspaper religion: all units.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naming category</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th></th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim–Christian</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>23.63</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>33.09 <em>b</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.93 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agents of government</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.82</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>29.82 <em>a</em></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>56.34 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Examples of references that were interpreted as ‘ambiguous’ included provocateurs, snipers, mass groups, rioters, a person, certain groups, or elite political groups. ‘Agents of government’ included the police, the army and the mariners. $\chi^2(4) = 51.93$, $p < 0.001$. Naming categories with different subscripts are distributed disproportionately across levels of newspaper religion, according to chi-square ($p < 0.001$).
This could reflect a greater willingness for the Muslim newspaper to identify the religion of the protagonists of violence than the Christian newspaper. Importantly, however, this same discrepancy did not emerge when Muslims were the protagonists, suggesting a degree of intergroup bias. Specifically, only a small minority of units identified Muslims as the attackers in either the Muslim (3.64%) and Christian (7.75%) newspapers. In short, it was rare for either newspaper to attribute conflict incidences to Muslim groups alone. Where Muslims were mentioned in connection with the conflict, it was more often in terms of Muslim–Christian conflict in which both parties were reported to be perpetrators of violence (23.63% and 22.53% of references in the Muslim and Christian newspaper, respectively, implicated both Muslim and Christian groups). Agents of government were implicated in less than 10% of the units in both the Muslim and Christian newspapers (9.82% and 8.45%, respectively).

In summary, the Muslim newspaper was more likely to identify Christians as perpetrators of violence than was the Christian newspaper, which primarily used ambiguous language when referring to the attackers. It remains unclear, however, whether this reflects a bias in the attribution of blame per se, or rather a tendency for the Muslim newspaper to file more articles on Christian aggression than the Christian newspaper. To help disentangle these two interpretations, a follow-up analysis was conducted on the 75 matched units in the two newspapers (i.e. articles that referred to the same incidents).

**Analysis of matched sample**

Despite the marked reduction in power brought about by selecting a small sub-sample of the total number of units, a contingency chi-square test again revealed significant differences in the pattern of reporting across the Muslim and Christian newspapers, $\chi^2(4) = 51.93$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 2). Again, follow-up chi-square analyses revealed significant effects only for the ‘Christian’, $\chi^2(1) = 14.31$, $p < 0.001$, and ‘ambiguous’ naming categories, $\chi^2(1) = 5.77$, $p < 0.025$. No differences emerged across the other three naming categories (all $\chi^2 < 2.33$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 2. Naming category as a function of newspaper religion: matched units.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naming category</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>$%$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim–Christian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36.36&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agents of government</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36.36&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Examples of references that were interpreted as ‘ambiguous’ included provocateurs, snipers, mass groups, rioters, a person, certain groups, or elite political groups. ‘Agents of government’ included the police, the army and the mariners. $\chi^2(4) = 51.93$, $p < 0.001$. Naming categories with different subscripts are distributed disproportionately across levels of newspaper religion, according to chi-square ($p < 0.025$).
In this case, 36.36% of words and phrases in *Republika* (the Muslim newspaper) directly or indirectly connected the conflict to Christians. In contrast, not one unit in *Suara Pembaruan* (the Christian newspaper) implicated Christians as protagonists of the conflict. Although both newspapers frequently used disguised or ambiguous language when referring to the protagonists, *Suara Pembaruan* was more likely to use this type of language in the matched reports (64.50%) than was *Republika* (36.36%). Articles in *Suara Pembaruan* contained a few phrases (6.45%) relating Muslims to specific conflict events, while *Republika* made no mention of Muslim participation in provoking hostilities. Replicating previous results, regardless of time and location of the incidents, both newspapers used many phrases and words that related the incidents to both Muslim and Christian groups (13.64% in *Republika* and 22.58% in *Suara Pembaruan*). Again, the police and army were mentioned by both newspapers as agents of violence (13.64% in *Republika* and 6.45% in *Suara Pembaruan*).

Discussion

These findings suggest the existence of some bias in how Christian and Muslim newspapers report the Ambon conflict. When reporting on incidents of intergroup violence, both Christian and Muslim newspapers tended not to name their own groups as sole initiators of the violence. However, the extent to which they were more inclined to attribute responsibility for violence to the other group varied across the two groups.

As expected, the Muslim newspaper *Republika* referred to Christian groups explicitly and frequently in their coverage. Of the 275 units reported in *Republika*, 91 identified Christians as perpetrators of a violent event, while only 10 identified Muslims as the perpetrators. In contrast, the Christian newspaper *Suara Pembaruan* appeared reluctant to make reference to religious groups at all, unless it was in the context of implicating both groups in the violence. Of the 142 units analysed in *Suara Pembaruan*, there were only 18 cases where either the religious ingroup or outgroup were held solely responsible for an attack.

Across the events included for analysis in this study, Christians were more likely to be implicated in attacks than were Muslims. Thus, it is possible that Christians were simply committing more attacks than were Muslims. However, the discrepancy between the percentage of units that referred solely to Christian attackers in the Christian and Muslim newspapers demonstrates a systematic difference in reporting between the two newspapers, and one that happens to be an ingroup favouring one. Whereas the Muslim newspaper seemed relatively willing to identify Christian attackers, the Christian newspaper was careful not to.

This pattern of results could indicate a naming bias; that is, a tendency to explicitly name and blame the outgroup for instances of intergroup conflict. Alternatively, it could be that the newspapers are reporting different events in the first place. The Muslim newspaper may have been reporting more episodes of Christian violence than the Christian newspaper, and this may account for the observed results. The more focused analysis of the matched sample of stories revealed the same intergroup discrepancy, however, suggesting that this alternative explanation does not give a complete picture. Although the majority of units in the stories used veiled or ambiguous language, when one religion was specified as the sole agents of violence, it was always an outgroup religion. Put simply, in the
matched sample, there were no cases of a newspaper explicitly identifying the ingroup as solely responsible for an attack. In contrast, there were 18 examples of the outgroup being directly implicated and all but two of these involved the Muslim newspaper directly identifying Christian attackers. The overwhelming preference for the Christian newspaper was to use ambiguous language or to identify both groups as the source of the conflict.

Thus, there appears to be a naming bias in press reports of the Muslim–Christian conflict in Ambon, and it is worth considering how best to explain why it has emerged. In line with classic thinking about the causes of journalistic bias (e.g. Kepplinger et al., 1991; Starck & Soloski, 1977; Stocking & LaMarca, 1990), there may be stable attitudinal differences between the journalists working for each of these news outlets. For example, Muslim journalists may have stronger attitudes about the conflict than their Christian counterparts.

Although the present data do not allow for an examination of the thoughts and attitudes of individual journalists, we believe that the pattern revealed in the data points to an alternative interpretation of the causes of media bias, one based on an intergroup perspective. Journalists reporting on the Muslim–Christian conflict appear to be acting in accordance with their group identities as Muslims or Christians. By attributing intergroup conflict more to the outgroup while simultaneously minimising or obscuring the role of the ingroup, the reports reflect a motivation on the part of the journalists to maintain a positive image for their own group.

The diverging pattern of bias between Muslim and Christian newspapers is also consistent with an intergroup framework, provided the role of power is acknowledged. Muslim and Christian groups occupy different positions of power within Indonesian society. Muslims are the dominant majority, whereas Christians are a minority both numerically and in terms of political power. In this context, the role of the Christian media as disseminators of information about a violent conflict in which their group is a numerical and political minority is complex. If they implicate their own group in the violence, then they run the risk of hurting their group’s cause and alienating their readership. If they implicate the outgroup too clearly in the violence, then they run the risk of political pressure or persecution from the Muslim majority.

One explanation of the data is that Christian reporters were not inherently less biased than Muslim reporters; rather, they were responding to their different position in the intergroup dynamic. In this regard, the current data are consistent with the results of experimental research on the role of power in intergroup settings. Power places limits on the extent to which people are free to act out their identities and engage in overt forms of intergroup bias (Ng, 1982; Reicher & Levine, 1994a,b; Reicher et al., 1998). Given their lower power relative to the Muslim majority, it seems likely that the Christian newspaper sought to blur and soften potentially controversial information in order to circumvent wide public rejection and political pressure.

Of course, future research is necessary to identify the exact role power plays in influencing responses to group criticism, and the boundary conditions of these effects. To provide definitive evidence that power plays a role in the expression of naming bias, one would need to design an experimental analogue and either manipulate the power of the outgroup or measure perceived power and see if it mediates obtained effects. In the absence of such a design, our power explanation is
necessarily tentative. It is also possible, for example, that the Christian newspaper is more likely to have acquired ‘Western’ values regarding value-free reporting, or that the discrepancy is due to marketing reflexes driven by economic rather than psychological processes. For now, it is sufficient to conclude that the way in which protagonists in conflict were identified shifted as a function of the group allegiances of the media outlet, and in a way that suggests an ingroup favouring bias.

It is interesting to consider whether the naming bias is specific to reporting of domestic conflict, or whether it can apply also to coverage of Christian–Muslim conflict overseas. One advantage of examining foreign conflicts is that the respective news outlets may be freed somewhat from the political, economic and military implications associated with reporting domestic conflicts. It is possible, for example, that the Christian outlet in the current analysis might feel less compulsion to use ambiguous language when it comes to foreign news coverage, because the fear of domestic reprisal is lower. An alternative hypothesis, however, is equally compelling; that naming bias would be lower in the reporting of foreign news because the intergroup dynamic would be less intense and immediate. The home versus foreign news distinction might be a useful focus for future research on the naming bias.

Implications

The aim of this paper was to examine the phenomenon of media bias, and the ‘naming bias’ in particular, from an intergroup perspective. The current research builds on recent work that has called for an integration of theoretical models of human social behaviour into accounts of the causes of media bias (e.g. Donsbach, 2004). Contrary to classic perspectives, which highlight the role of journalists’ attitudes and dispositions in producing media bias, the framework presented here calls attention to how media bias reflects broader intergroup dynamics within which individual journalists, and the media outlets for which they write, are embedded. From this perspective, the orientations of individual journalists, and the normative cultures that news organisations promote, are themselves likely to be products of the intergroup context.

To examine the role of intergroup dynamics in affecting media bias, the present research made use of a novel situation. The majority of research on media bias has focused on North American media. Although it is often assumed that these media outlets have allegiances, the link between media outlets and particular social groupings is rarely as explicit as is the case in Indonesia. Moreover, our analysis focused on the reporting of newspapers that were explicitly affiliated with each side of an ongoing and extreme intergroup conflict. This situation permitted an examination of the language used by these media outlets as they reported on identical events from their unique perspectives.

Although our findings suggest that there is some utility to thinking about media bias from an intergroup perspective, further research is needed to establish the psychological mechanisms implicated by this perspective. Even so, we believe that the data point to the role of group memberships in accentuating or minimising media bias. As such, this research underscores the need to consider the role of identity in shaping expressions of bias in the media, particularly when the identities of those who report the news are implicated in the news they report.
Notes

1. The island of Ambon was once a pluralist region where people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds coexisted amicably. However, for several years the island has been beset by civil war. This conflict began on 19 January 1999, triggered by a fight between adolescent gangs. This localised incident between specific gangs evolved into a protracted conflict between Muslim and Christian groups, leading to over 2000 deaths. Most of these deaths have occurred as a result of tit-for-tat raids led by small groups of villagers.

2. The most direct form of identification is to refer to Muslims or Christians. Slightly more indirect terms can be used that still serve to unambiguously identify the group memberships; for example, people who had just celebrated Christmas, members of a Christian village, people praying in the Mosque, or people who had just finished fasting. Other uses of language are relatively obscure to an external audience but relatively unambiguous to an internal Indonesian audience. For example, if a newspaper refers to the red group or people who wear red headbands it is clear to an Indonesian audience that they are talking about Christians. Alternatively, if a newspaper refers to the white group or people who wear white headbands it is clear they are talking about Muslims.

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References


