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Epistemic Evidence in Strategic-Persuasive Communication: On the Effects of Investing in the Truthfulness of NGOs' Strategic Crisis and Conflict Communications

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Against the backdrop of declining confidence in epistemological instances like journalism or science, this study investigates the effects of evidence in strategic-persuasive communication. Using the example of NGO communication on six violent conflicts, it aims to unravel (RQ1) how evidence-based the strategic-persuasive communication efforts by different NGOs are and (RQ2) whether there is a relationship between NGOs' reliance on evidence and their media visibility. The study uses an automated multilingual content analysis of 11,815 press releases by 54 different NGOs and 109,468 news items from 9 international news organizations. Overall, results indicate that more than 50% of NGOs' press releases make use of some form of evidence, while there are significant differences across conflicts and between types of NGOs. Moreover, results show that, in general, relying on evidence-based communication significantly increases an NGO's media visibility, while conflict context and organizational characteristics are relevant conditional factors.

Keywords: evidence-based communication, NGOs, conflict communication, strategic communication, media visibility

Facts do not have it easy in contemporary public discourses. The public's trust in the truthfulness of formerly recognized epistemic authorities such as journalism or science seems to be declining in the postfactual age of modern society (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017, p. 353), and persuasive messages from strategic communicators achieve high virality regardless of the actual quality of their truthfulness (e.g., Rochlin, 2017; Thompson, 2020). Neuberger and colleagues (2019) describe this process as a fundamental change in the classical knowledge order:

> Current debates about critical developments in the media and in public discourse, connected to keywords such as "fake news," "alternative facts," as well as the controversial thesis of the dawn of a "postfactual age," highlight underlying profound long-term processes of change in the knowledge order in modern society, especially in liberal

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> democracies. The question of who can claim knowledge, truth, and rationality in public discourse, and based on which practices, has become more than ever an object of heated social disputes. (p. 167; translated from German by the authors)

Understanding strategic-persuasive communication as "management of credibility" (Stacks, 2002, p. 22) leads to the crucial question of whether and how PR can assume the role of a serious epistemic entity by providing evidence for the information it conveys. In the context of the changes to our current knowledge order described by Neuberger and associates (2019), this question has become highly relevant because strategic-persuasive communication (public relations/PR)[1] itself is today more than ever an authority of knowledge production, testing and distribution. Particularly in crisis and conflict situations, it therefore must define or redefine and justify its legitimacy as an epistemic authority in the knowledge generation process. In part, this is because the pressure on the legitimacy of evidence-based information is particularly high during conflicts.

In addition to providing organizational legitimacy, epistemic quality also seems to affect PR's influence in public debates, as previous research provides numerous indications that the persuasive effects of evidence-based information are generally stronger than those of evidence-free information. For example, O'Keefe (1998) found that messages supported by evidence are perceived as more credible, while other findings show that evidence-based information tends to promote the persuasive effect of a message (Cathcart, 1955; Perloff, 2010).

When the postfactual age was just beginning to cast its shadow, Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010) called for a rethinking of the differentiation management of PR: "We call for an honest redefinition of public relations . . . perhaps it is now all about the messages and not about the publics" (pp. 123–124). Overall, it is more important than ever for strategic-persuasive communications/communicators to ensure their PR messages include evidence; this is especially true with regard to journalism, which rightly places high demands on the quality of PR verification procedures and PR's evidence provided in press releases. This applies above all to the media relations facet of public relations, which we consider a strategic function of public relations, following Zoch and Molleda (2006). However, one question has garnered almost no scientific attention to date: Is it worthwhile for strategic-persuasive communication to ensure truthfulness by investing in verification procedures and providing evidence, as is assumed by these theories?

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to examine the provision of evidence in PR material as a measurable determinant for the success of strategic communication, whereby we measure "success" in terms of media resonance. With this approach, our study contributes to research on the significance and impact of evidence-based strategic-persuasive communication in the media relations facet of PR. In the following, we will outline our theoretical foundation and derive the research questions for our study. Using the example of media relations by NGOs during armed conflicts, we will investigate whether and under which

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[1] We consider the term "strategic communication" a synonym for public relations. On the basis of a combination of two existing definitions, we define the term as the purposeful and deliberate use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission and/or to reach set goals (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 74).

conditions evidence-based press work is a significant predictor of an increased level of NGOs' media visibility. We thereby demonstrate that using evidence-based strategic-persuasive communication generally benefits NGOs, but there are conditions such as the conflict context, conflict characteristics and organizational differences that influence the extent of these benefits. In conclusion, we will outline the implications for the practice of media relations, present the limitations of our study and provide an outlook on future research on this complex of questions.

Theoretical Foundation and Research Questions

For PR, being perceived as a trustworthy and credible journalistic source has always been a cornerstone of successful media relations. As Motion and Weaver (2005) point out, however, maintaining close and trusting relationships with journalists is not sufficient, as "relationships need to be complemented by media strategies with carefully crafted key messages" (p. 251). In this context, persuasion research suggests that the credibility, trust, and thereby persuasiveness of a source depends on the plausibility and authenticity of its messages (cf. Baekgaard, Christensen, Dahlmann, Mathiasen, & Petersen, 2019; Majone, 1992; Morley & Walker, 1987; Petraglia, 2009).

We argue that the plausibility and authenticity of messages are again largely determined by their epistemological evidence qualities. Against this background, we consider evidence to be a key construct that PR (and journalism) use to distinguish facts from factoids and that thereby differentiates successful from unsuccessful persuasive communication. In this, we rely on the definition of evidence suggested by the *Oxford Dictionary* ("Evidence," n.d.) as an "available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid." (para. 1) As such, evidence does not refer to the presence of seemingly factual statements (e.g., "It will rain tomorrow"). Instead, evidence-based communication can be understood as using factual statements that are backed by some kind of evidential reference (e.g., "The weather forecast states that it will rain tomorrow"). The evidential reference then in turn can relate to various sources such as experts (e.g., "The national weather service predicts that it will rain tomorrow"), eyewitnesses (e.g., "The local forecast says that it will rain tomorrow"), or own observations if they are qualified as such (e.g., "Based on our observation of cloud patterns, we believe that it will rain tomorrow"). At the same time, it is important to explicitly point out that the evidence provided need not necessarily be true or truthful per se. Instead, its truthfulness is tested in the "competitive evidence environments" of public discourse (Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2018, p. 87). In such competition-oriented communication environments—at least this is the case in liberal democracies—claims rival one another for truthfulness by using evidence and showing proof. This is the space within which strategic communicators fight for definitional sovereignty when it comes to problem definitions and solutions, and in the long-run, the communicators are also fighting for their own credibility and trustworthiness.

The competitiveness of public communication is especially grave and relevant in scenarios in which there is much at stake and that are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and a large diversity of partially conflicting news sources. Such scenarios have always included classic crisis and conflict situations (Cottle, 2006). As a rule, they are characterized by controversial discourse and a high degree of skepticism on all sides (controversial issues), as they are often accompanied by impeded access to sources and more difficult conditions for primary observations (cf. Jungblut, 2020). PR is thus also confronted here with journalists who, as epistemic authorities, expend considerable effort to secure evidence.[2]

Overall, our theoretical framework thereby follows Motion and Weaver (2005), who suggest that

> during a public controversy, media relations may develop into an epistemic struggle to circulate critical knowledge in the form of public information and advocacy. Conceptualizing media relations as an epistemic struggle shifts the emphasis from relationship building to knowledge production and circulation, thereby highlighting the importance of gaining epistemic authority, understanding media expectations, and the need for strategic duality to comply with the news values criteria. (p. 254)

Because the media's attention threshold for crisis and conflict topics is comparatively low, and the topics and events concerned are reported on precisely because of their conflict and crisis potential, journalistic ideas of news value play a subordinate role as a criterion for successful media relations by strategic communicators (Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2018). This is in vast contrast to other PR situations in which strategic communicators first need to emphasize the newsworthiness of a topic to gain the media's attention and to influence the media agenda. Consequently, during conflicts, PR is considered successful if an organization receives media visibility and is thus able to influence public debates.

Against this theoretical background, we therefore assume that providing evidence is a central indicator for the construction of a convincing version of social reality through strategic communication and thus for the effectiveness of strategic-persuasive messages in crisis and conflict scenarios. The goal of the present study is therefore to empirically examine whether and under what conditions evidence-based persuasive communication "pays off" in crisis and conflict scenarios, measured by a communicator's media visibility.

Taking one type of conflict and crisis scenario, the current study focuses on wars and armed conflicts. These scenarios are characterized by a very high overall news value, while journalists increasingly struggle to collect reliable information due to their shrinking networks of news correspondents and the increasing danger these conflicts pose to journalists (cf. Jungblut, 2020). Consequently, and in line with our theoretical framework, we thus expect evidence-based communication to play a crucial role for the success of strategic-persuasive communication efforts.

Moreover, the study focuses on strategic communication by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). While journalists oftentimes struggle to get relevant information and conduct independent research, studies indicate that NGOs are an increasingly important and influential conflict actor as they are able to provide sophisticated and in-depth reports about ongoing conflict events even if conflicts escalate and become more dangerous (Powers, 2018; Sangar & Meyer, 2018). Analyzing NGOs' strategic-persuasive communication and their influence on news coverage is therefore especially relevant because NGOs lack the authoritative status

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[2] Examples include so-called fact-checks (cf. Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016) and new journalistic verification practices specifically for information in social media (cf. Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, & Følstad, 2016).

of political actors and thus have to approach and convince journalists actively to open their news gates for the NGOs (Jungblut, 2020; Leuven & Joye, 2014). As such, it appears to be relevant to investigate if and under what conditions NGOs can influence conflict news coverage with strategic communication. In this, evidence-based communication might be a cornerstone for NGOs' successful media strategy.

NGOs' increased media visibility, however, is not spread evenly across all types of organizations. While larger transnational NGOs with many more resources appear to profit enormously, smaller local NGOs remain mostly unnoticed (Sangar & Meyer, 2018; Thrall, Stecula, & Sweet, 2014). This is surprising given the democratization of access to means of communication that came with the prevalence of the Internet, which should have lowered the number of resources necessary to conduct successful media relations (Thrall et al., 2014). This raises the question of whether the impact of NGOs' strategic communication on the media can be explained with factors that go beyond the available resources and that can be identified within the distributed press releases. The study therefore seeks to unravel whether evidence-based communication is crucial for all types of NGOs, or whether, for instance, solely larger transnational NGOs with more professionalized communication departments can benefit from relying on evidence. The answer to this question should also provide indications of how NGOs can professionalize their press work, bearing in mind that the strategic communication of NGOs in general must fulfill two functions: They need to convince the public and political decision makers of their main grievances and mission—be it humanitarian, religious, or otherwise—while also appealing to potential donors to raise funds and secure the organization's existence (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2014).

Finally, it is also necessary to analyze NGOs' reliance on evidence-based communication across different conflicts. Conflicts differ in the number of strategic communicators that are interested in shaping public discourse and thus in the amount of competition in the communication environment (Jungblut, 2020). Moreover, they vary in the amount of media attention they receive (Zerback & Holzleitner, 2018), the activeness of the civil society on the ground, the number of involved and active NGOs that compete for media visibility, and the degree of uncertainty and necessity of valid evidential information (Fröhlich, 2018). As a result, specific conflict settings might increase the pressure to engage in evidence-based communication and might thus explain variation in NGOs' reliance on such a communication strategy.

Drawing on the ideas expressed above, the current study suggests that NGOs make use of evidence-based strategic communication and that their reliance on such a communication strategy varies across different conflicts and different types of NGOs. Moreover, we seek to determine whether providing evidence in strategic communication increases an NGO's overall media visibility. Against the theoretical background outlined above, we thus derive the following research questions:

RQ1a: *How evidence-based are the strategic-persuasive communication efforts by NGOs during armed conflicts?*

RQ1b: *Does reliance on evidence-based strategic-persuasive communication during armed conflicts differ between transnational and local NGOs?*

RQ1c: *Does NGOs' reliance on evidence-based strategic-persuasive communication differ between various conflicts?*

RQ2: Is there a relationship between the NGOs' reliance on evidence in their strategic-persuasive communication and their media visibility during conflicts?

Methodological Approach

Our study seeks to investigate the visibility of NGOs during armed conflicts and aims to analyze whether evidence-based communication (media relations/press releases) can increase an NGO's media visibility. To do so, the study relies on data from an EU-funded project.[3] In this project, we conducted an automated content analysis of NGO press releases and news items on six armed conflicts expressing a variance in relevant conflict characteristics (see Jungblut, 2020) such as conflict region, level of conflict violence, attention of international media, and conflict type. The study is focused on the following conflict cases: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kosovo, Macedonia, Israel/Palestine, and Syria. For each of these conflicts, we analyzed at least three full conflict years to include phases of relative escalation and de-escalation into the sample (see Table 1).

The NGO sample used consists of a total of 54 different NGOs that work in various fields and that have been identified as relevant for the respective conflict by a set of conflict experts. Of those 54 NGOs, 29 operate only locally, whereas the remaining 25 are transnationally operating NGOs. The full list of NGOs is part of this article's appendix (available at https://osf.io/bm7ac/?view_only=82610b6f784041c6b8757c44e94bd7a9).

To analyze NGOs' media visibility during conflicts, we created a sample of nine international media organizations. Media organizations were selected for three main reasons. First, it was our goal to get a diverse sample that represented a wide array of conflict views and political orientations within the international news market. Second, we wanted to include various influential media outlets that either have a large audience or that can be called opinion-leading media outlets. Finally, we also followed pragmatic considerations as we only selected outlets whose coverage was digitally available in textual from (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018). Following these criteria, the sample consists of five print media, two of which are based in Germany, two in the UK, and one in the United States (*Die WELT*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung, The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*). Moreover, we sampled news items from four transnational broadcasters—namely, *Al-Jazeera English*, *BBC*, *CNN*, and *Radio France Internationale*.

As a result, the automated content analysis follows a multilingual approach and relies on English, French, and German text material. For the respective time lines, we identified and scraped all publicly available press releases from the NGOs' websites. A text was considered relevant if it mentioned the country or region in which a conflict took place while simultaneously using relevant conflict vocabulary.[4] Overall, we

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[3] INFOCORE—funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration under Grant Agreement No. 613308; duration: 1-1-2014–12-31-2016.

[4] To identify relevant texts, we collected a list of conflict terminology for each of the analyzed conflicts. These lists consist of relevant conflict events (e.g., "Operation Protective Edge"), conflict parties (e.g., "M23"), and other relevant conflict terminology (e.g., "terror attack," "autonomy," "Hutu," "peace talks"). As such, they reflect the idiosyncrasies of each analyzed conflict. For each conflict, we thereby created lists of more than 300 case-specific search terms. Texts that feature these keywords have a high probability of

created a sample of 11,815 press releases. Similarly, all media items that deal with the respective conflicts were identified and downloaded from available archives using the same search strings. This created a subsample of 109,468 texts. Table 1 provides an overview of the complete sample and the distribution of texts across the conflicts.

Table 1. Sample for the Automated Text Analysis.

Conflict	Time frame	Number of press releases	Number of media items
Burundi	2010–14	372	2,048
DRC	2012–14	1,297	5,717
Kosovo	2010–14	633	4,438
Macedonia	2011–14	217	1,950
Israel/Palestine	2006–14	5,168	40,240
Syria	2011–14	4,128	55,075
Total		11,815	109,468

To account for variations in the frequency of press releases and media reports on the different conflicts and to overcome the challenge that many press releases did not contain the exact day of publication, we decided to aggregate media and NGO texts to quarterly data. As a result, one case in the aggregated data frame represents the strategic communication of one specific NGO on one of the analyzed conflict cases in one quarter of the analyzed time frame, as well as its reflection in the news coverage (i.e. media visibility and number of news items), resulting in a number of n = 1,828 cases. Moreover, the decision to aggregate on a quarterly basis instead of more fine-grained temporal units helps to balance out short-term variations in conflict developments. Finally, this decision was also necessary for pragmatic reasons (i.e., to be able to compute an interpretable and concise model and avoid having to include 108 dummy variables for the analyzed conflict months; see below).

To measure media visibility—our dependent variable—we relied on a large multilingual dictionary that was created as part of an EU-funded project and that consists of 3,739 unique terminological concepts. Among those concepts, there are categories that represent each NGO, making it possible to measure whether an NGO was named in a given news item. The overall dictionary was validated based on a sample of 3,000 sentences per language, providing satisfying results for the three languages used here.[5]

Moreover, we measured whether a press release contained evidence-based communication. To do so, we created a Python script that searched for language patterns signaling that a claim is backed by some form of evidence (e.g., "according to," "as reported by," "found out that"). Moreover, we compiled a list of nouns that indicate the presence of evidence-based communication (e.g., "study," "evidence," "report," "research"). These expressions were collected based on an annotated corpus and supplemented with the help of professional

being (at least partly) about the respective conflict. Afterward, various data cleaning procedures were applied (e.g., duplications, irrelevant texts; cf. Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2015, p. 9; Jungblut, 2020).

[5] English: precision = .94, recall = .96; French: precision = .86, recall = .96; German: precision = .93, recall = .92.

translators.[6] In doing so and in line with our understanding of evidence-based communication outlined in the theoretical framework, the script thus aims to identify evidence-based communication as statements that are connected to some form of proof. Moreover, we decided to operationalize evidence-based communication as a binary category (i.e., measuring whether a text contains any evidence-based communication at all) because measurements normalized over the number of words or characters might be skewed when comparing different languages (see the discussion for ideas on how future research might improve this measure).

To validate this script, we analyzed 100 texts in each language, 50 of which were classified as containing evidence-based communication, while 50 were classified as not containing such communication. The 300 texts were distributed equally across the six analyzed conflicts, meaning that for each conflict we validated 25 texts that were classified as containing evidence-based communication and 25 texts that were classified as not containing it. Overall, the validation thereby suggests that the script performs the classification task with satisfactory precision and recall.[7] The final script can be provided on request (for more information, see Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2018).

In addition, we measured a set of control variables which we believe shape NGOs' role in conflict discourses. First, we operationalized whether an NGO operates in several conflicts (transnational NGO [TNGO] e.g., "Amnesty International") or whether it predominantly acts in one conflict (local NGO, e.g., "Breaking the Silence"). Second, we measured the number of media items and the number of press releases by an NGO in a given quarter on a given conflict. Third, we included dummy variables for the different conflict cases. These dummy variables in turn express the respective combinations of conflict characteristics that are unique to each of the analyzed conflicts.[8] Fourth, to understand the role of evidence-based communication in different conflict phases, we gathered data on the number of deaths in each conflict for each quarter from the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (Pettersson & Eck, 2018). Finally, to account for temporal variations and influences of the overall global situation, we also created dummy variables for each of the quarters in our analyzed time frame. As such, while conflict dummy variables account for variation in the role of evidence-based communication based on conflict characteristics, the number of casualties as well as the quarterly dummy variables account for variation based on conflict context and temporal variations.

Because the dependent variable (DV)—media visibility—is a zero-inflated count variable that is also overdispersed (58% of values in the DV are 0, Mean number of references to an NGO in a quarter = 5.30, Variance = 482.66), we computed a zero-inflated negative binominal regression model to examine the influence

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[6] Interestingly, while creating the annotated corpus for the development of the script, we realized that NGOs use the same language patterns when they use evidence that they created themselves (e.g., observations of NGO employees or a report released by an NGO) as when they refer to third-party evidence (e.g., scientific report, eyewitness report).

[7] French: precision = .8, recall = .75; English: precision = .84, recall = .78; German: precision = .88, recall = .77.

[8] It is thereby noteworthy that the number of conflicts analyzed here was too small to systematically analyze the impact of conflict characteristics such as the conflict type or the issue of dispute. As such, the conflict dummy variables are used to analyze the influence of the distinct combinations of conflict characteristics on evidence-based communication.

of evidence-based communication on media visibility.[9] This regression model is a combination of a logistic regression that seeks to explain the occurrence of excessive zeros in the dependent variable and a count model that tries to find influences beyond excessive zeros (Cameron & Trivedi, 2013). As a result, we decided to use the number of press releases in a given quarter by an NGO on a given conflict as the model's inflate. The "inflate" explains the occurrence of an excessive zero in the logistic regression model within a negative binomial regression. Finally, because the model suffered from a substantial degree of autocorrelation, we included a lagged dependent variable (media visibility in the previous quarter).

Results

To answer the first research question, we ran descriptive analyses of the share of press releases that contain evidence-based communication in general (RQ1a), across the different types of organizations (RQ1b), and across conflicts (RQ1c). Overall, of the 11,815 NGO texts, 6,694 contained some form of evidential statement (57%). Conversely, this means that 43% of the press releases did not use any form of evidence. In this, larger TNGOs differed significantly from local NGOs in their reliance on evidence-based communication: From the 5,736 texts that stem from TNGOs 3,419 (60%) contain some form of evidence, whereas from the 6,079 texts that originate from local NGOs, 3,275 (54%) refer to evidence ($\chi^2 = 39.49$, $p < .001$). The effect size, however, indicates that differences between both types of organizations are significant yet nearly negligible (phi = .06). As a result, differences in the media visibility of both types of organizations that have been found in prior research (e.g., Thrall et al., 2014) seem at first glance not to be the consequence of variation in the reliance on an evidence-based strategic communication approach, but might mainly be the result of differences in organizational size and reputation.

There are also differences between the use of evidence across the analyzed conflicts (see Table 2). These differences, however, do not correspond to any patterns such as conflict region, level of violence, or other conflict characteristics and are thus not easy to explain. Once more, except for the conflict in the DRC, TNGOs tend to provide evidence in their communication more often than local NGOs.

Table 2. Share of Press Releases That Refer to Evidence Across Countries and Different Types of NGOs.

Conflict	Local NGO messages with evidence	TNGO messages with evidence	NGO messages with evidence
Burundi	99 (52%)	115 (64%)	214 (58%)
DRC	144 (59%)	512 (49%)	656 (51%)
Kosovo	129 (53%)	229 (59%)	358 (57%)
Macedonia	97 (63%)	54 (84%)	151 (70%)
Israel/Palestine	1,469 (61%)	1,752 (63%)	3,221 (62%)
Syria	1,337 (47%)	757 (59%)	2,094 (51%)
Total	3,275 (54%)	3,419 (60%)	6,694 (57%)

[9] This decision was also supported by comparing the AIC and BIC for zero-inflated versus non-zero-inflated models and with the help of the likelihood-ratio test of alpha = 0 for overdispersion.

Turning to possible differences in the media visibility of both types of NGOs and how those differences can be explained, we compare the degree to which NGOs rely on evidence-based communication to their visibility in the international news discourse. On average, an NGO is referenced in five news items per quarter (M = 5.30). The average share of news items that refer to an NGO, however, is only 1%. Our results thus indicate that NGOs overall only play a minor role as journalistic sources in conflict news coverage. In addition, as described in the method section, in 58% of all cases, an NGO is not mentioned at all. To answer the second research question, the above described zero-inflated negative binomial regression model was computed (see Table 3). Overall, the model has a satisfying model fit (Nagelkerke's R^2 = .42).

Table 3. Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Regression Model With Number of References to an NGO in a Quarter as Dependent Variable.

	B	IRR	*SE*
Constant	−.44	.64	.39
Share of press releases with reference to evidence	**.46*****	**1.59**	**.12**
Type of NGO: Transnational	**.43*****	**1.54**	**.09**
Number of references to NGO in news coverage (lagged)	**.04*****	**1.04**	**.00**
Number of news items	**.00***	**1.00**	**.00**
Number of press releases	.01$^+$	1.01	.00
Number of conflict deaths (in 10 thousand)	**−.83****	**.44**	**.29**
Conflict: Syria	.56$^+$	1.76	.32
Conflict: Kosovo	**−.97*****	**.38**	**.20**
Conflict: Macedonia	**−2.08*****	**.12**	**.35**
Conflict: DRC	.08	1.08	.18
Conflict: Burundi	**−.59***	**.55**	**.26**
Quarter: 2/2006	.51	1.67	.50
Quarter: 3/2006	.60	1.82	.49
Quarter: 4/2006	−.09	.92	.51
Quarter: 1/2007	.10	1.10	.51
Quarter: 2/2007	−.13	.88	.50
Quarter: 3/2007	.66	1.93	.50
Quarter: 4/2007	.03	1.03	.51
Quarter: 1/2008	.29	1.34	.51
Quarter: 2/2008	.36	1.43	.52
Quarter: 3/2008	.47	1.60	.52
Quarter: 4/2008	−.08	.93	.51
Quarter: 1/2009	**1.22***	**3.40**	**.47**
Quarter: 2/2009	−.22	.80	.49
Quarter: 3/2009	.74	2.11	.49
Quarter: 4/2009	.39	1.48	.49

Quarter: 1/2010	−.04	.96	.46
Quarter: 2/2010	.46	1.59	.45
Quarter: 3/2010	.25	1.29	.45
Quarter: 4/2010	.03	1.03	.46
Quarter: 1/2011	−.21	.81	.44
Quarter: 2/2011	.76^{+}	2.13	.45
Quarter: 3/2011	−.25	.78	.44
Quarter: 4/2011	.26	1.29	.43
Quarter: 1/2012	**.99***	**2.69**	**.41**
Quarter: 2/2012	.52	1.68	.41
Quarter: 3/2012	.47	1.60	.42
Quarter: 4/2012	.52	1.68	.41
Quarter: 1/2013	.51	1.67	.41
Quarter: 2/2013	.38	1.47	.41
Quarter: 3/2013	.36	1.44	.41
Quarter: 4/2013	.44	1.56	.41
Quarter: 1/2014	.29	1.33	.41
Quarter: 2/2014	.40	1.49	.41
Quarter: 3/2014	.78^{+}	2.18	.42
Quarter: 4/2014	.31	1.36	.41
Inflate			
Number of press releases	**−.23*** **		**.07**
Constant	**−.56*** **		**.21**
Ln(Alpha)	**.54*** **		**.11**
Alpha	1.74		.18

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficients, IRR = incidence rate ratio, SE = standard error, Ln(Alpha) = natural log of alpha (the dispersion parameter). Significant predictors are printed in bold. N = 1,828; log pseudolikelihood = −3,098.92, LR $\chi^2(46)$ = 922.37, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke's R^2 = .42; conflict included as dummy variables with Israel as baseline comparison; quarter included as dummy variables with 01/2006 as baseline comparison; Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are all below 5; Durbin-Watson = 1.80, based on visual inspection no indication of heteroscedasticity; Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) = 6,297.84; Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) = 6,573.39; Likelihood-ratio (LR) test for alpha (0): $\bar{\chi}^2(01)$ = 5,318.83, $p < .001$. +$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

The first part of the model—the inflate model—explains the occurrence of excessive zeros in the dependent variable (i.e., is an NGO mentioned or not). It shows that with an increasing number of press releases distributed in a given quarter, the probability of not being referenced in the international news coverage at all decreases significantly—or, to put it differently, NGOs that circulate press releases to the press have a significantly higher probability of receiving media visibility. Overall, this result is not surprising, because it is likely that an organization that does not distribute any press releases at all is also not part of the media discourse.

The second part of the model identifies variables that impact on the *number* of references to an NGO in the international news coverage. First of all, the model shows that evidence-based communication significantly increases an NGO's media visibility even if one controls for organizational type, conflict, conflict death, the number of references in the prior quarter, and temporal variations. Consequently, evidence-based communication is a key criterion for successful media relations that shapes NGOs' media visibility independently of all other factors mentioned above. The data therefore support our initial assumption that epistemic evidence is highly relevant in our current postfactual age.

Turning to the different control variables, the model shows that the type of organization (TNGO vs. local NGO) has a significant positive impact on NGOs' media visibility. This means that larger NGOs are mentioned more often in the media than are smaller, local organizations, independently of their overall reliance on evidence-based communication. This might be a result of larger NGOs' advantages in terms of available resources, credibility, connections to journalists, and prominence among journalists as well as the general public (Thrall et al., 2014). Overall, evidence-based strategic communication can thus increase an NGO's visibility, but it is not able to fully balance out the organizational disadvantages of smaller local NGOs.

Moreover, the significant influence of the lagged dependent variable indicates that there is a spillover effect in media visibility. This means that NGOs which managed to receive media visibility in the previous quarter have a higher chance of being visible in the news coverage again. This might indicate a tendency among journalists to frequently rely on the same sources, something that is in line with ideas of news value theory, which suggest that continuity and consonance shape journalistic news production (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Simultaneously, it emphasizes how important it is for strategic communicators to build and maintain relationships with journalists. In this, being perceived as a trustworthy source (for instance, through a reliance on evidence-based strategic communication) might lead to a close and enduring mutually beneficial relationship between NGOs and journalists.

Unsurprisingly, the number of media items on a conflict in a given quarter has a significant positive effect on the number of media items that refer to a specific NGO. This means that the more news items exist on a conflict, the greater the probability that an NGO will be mentioned. On the one hand, this might be due to a larger quantity of text increasing the chances of more organizations receiving media visibility. On the other hand, however, it could also be an indication of the effectiveness of professional public relations, because press releases often also *initiate* journalistic news coverage (see Reich, 2009). Interestingly, the number of press releases by an NGO has no significant effect on the number of references to an NGO in the international news coverage. Combined with the results from the inflate model described above, this means that a higher number of press releases distributed by an NGO in a given quarter significantly increases the probability of that NGO is mentioned at all in news coverage (because it decreases the probability of excessive zeroes in the dependent variable), whereas the number of press releases distributed by an NGO in a given quarter has no direct effect on the *number* of references to an NGO. Or phrased differently: While distributing many press releases will increase an NGO's probability of being referred to at least once in the news, it does not affect the number of media items that refer to an NGO beyond that one media item. While the sheer quantity of press releases will get you in the news once, it is the epistemic evidence of strategic communication that will turn you into an enduring and established news source.

Focusing on the influence of conflict context on NGOs' media visibility, the model shows that the number of conflict deaths in a given quarter significantly lowers NGOs' visibility in the news. Even though NGOs publish significantly more press releases in quarters with higher numbers of death (r = .19, p < .001), their overall media visibility decreases vastly during those quarters. A potential explanation for this might be that during phases of escalation, the conflict in itself has a higher news value, which may make it more difficult for NGOs to penetrate with their own specific news factors. We will expatiate on this later in the discussion.

The media visibility of different NGOs also varies across conflicts. In general, the model suggests that the conflicts can be sorted in two groups, with NGOs' media visibility being significantly higher in Syria, Israel/Palestine, and the DRC as compared with Kosovo, Macedonia, and Burundi. This grouping is in line with the overall level of violence in the given conflicts (high level: Syria, Israel/Palestine, and the DRC; low level: Kosovo, Macedonia, and Burundi). At first glance, this result seems confusing given the described significant negative impact of the number of conflict deaths on NGOs' media visibility. We will come back to this in detail later in the discussion.

Finally, NGOs' media visibility appears to be quite stable across time. After controlling for the influence of all other control variables, only two quarters show a significantly higher number of news items that refer to an NGO. First, NGOs had a significantly higher media visibility in the first quarter of 2009. Because data from 2009 only stems from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, this deviation can most likely be explained in relation to conflict events. More specifically, Operation Cast Lead took place in early 2009, during which the Israeli military conducted a series of airstrikes against targets in Gaza. Here, it is quite likely that NGOs were able to increase their media visibility because they reported on the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The other quarter with a significantly higher media visibility of NGOs is the first quarter of 2012. Here, data stems from all six conflicts, which makes it hard to connect the higher level of media visibility to specific conflict events. Still, despite those clear deviations from the overall pattern, NGOs' media visibility appears to be incredibly stable across time when all other control variables are considered.

Discussion, Future Research, and Practical Implications

The current study examined the role of evidence in strategic-persuasive communication. Using the case of NGO communication during armed conflicts, we analyzed to what degree NGOs rely on evidence in their strategic communication efforts and whether and under what conditions evidence-based communication can increase an NGO's media visibility in the international news discourse. First, the study shows that NGOs use some form of evidence in more than half of their press releases. There are, however, significant differences between transnational and local NGOs when it comes to their reliance on evidence-based strategic communication, with the former using slightly more evidence-based communication. This might be the result of differences in the professionalization of communication and/or in the number of resources that NGOs have at their disposal.

Second, our results thereby demonstrate that evidence-based communication significantly increases an NGO's media visibility during armed conflicts. This holds true even if one controls for the influence of relevant variables such as the number of distributed press releases, conflict context (i.e., number conflict deaths), or the type of NGO (i.e., local NGO vs. TNGO). As such, the study shows that across different conflicts and conflict situations and independently of the NGO type, NGOs receive higher media visibility if they rely on evidence-based communication. As such, our study suggests that strategic communication material that provides epistemic evidence facilitates the differentiation of serious PR from dubious, postfactual communication and propaganda.

Moreover, our results also show that in addition to evidence-based communication, NGOs' media visibility is significantly influenced by conflict characteristics and contexts, because it varies between the different analyzed conflicts and it is affected by the amount of conflict death—independently from the share of texts that rely on evidence-based communication. For instance, NGOs' media visibility is significantly higher in conflicts with a persisting high level of violence, whereas shorter violent outbreaks relatively reduce NGOs' media visibility. The significant negative impact of the number of conflict casualties on NGOs' media visibility seems confusing at first glance. Why might that nevertheless be quite expectable? One potential explanation for this might be that during phases of escalation, the conflict in itself has a higher news value, which may make it more difficult for NGOs to penetrate with their own specific news factors. As a result, their overall media visibility decreases.

Another possible explanation could be that while journalists leave conflict areas if they pose an enduring danger, NGOs "are often the last remaining actors in conflict zones that can provide timely firsthand or reliably researched accounts of local conflict events and dynamics" (Meyer, Sangar, & Michaels, 2018, p. 152). This represents a situation in which media/journalist lack expertise and T/NGOs gain in importance as expert sources. As a result, NGOs can potentially increase their media visibility if a conflict remains violent over longer periods of time. During short-term violent escalations, however, the news value of a conflict increases relatively, and more sources compete for access to the news. In these situations, journalists either collect firsthand information themselves or turn to political actors or conflict parties.

The differences we found between conflict cases furthermore indicate that in situations in which media suffer from restricted access to information, journalists seemingly ascribe different roles to strategic communicators. We interpret in particular our findings on NGOs' media performance during escalating phases of armed conflicts as an indication that the NGOs examined here have difficulties asserting themselves as "epistemic authorities"—a role that journalists probably still ascribe to communicators of official political, legal, or military instances in times of conflict escalation. After all, it is these very bodies which, unlike NGOs, have the power to decide on the concrete development of armed crises. This is one of the reasons why, in contrast to NGOs, they are perceived and contacted by journalists as professionally necessary epistemic authorities in escalating conflict phases. Following findings from Motion and Weaver (2005) about the strategic communication of Greenpeace, we interpret this with great caution as an indication that in escalating phases of armed conflicts, journalists tend to perceive NGOs as more or less trustworthy "expert sources" (one agenda-setting stakeholder among many others to choose from) rather than as "epistemic authorities" and inevitable agenda-setting institutions (p. 252). As expert sources, NGOs become a thematic element of media coverage, are mentioned as sources, and are able to codetermine media agendas. In contrast to expert sources, epistemic authorities are considered necessary routine sources who must inevitably be contacted regularly by journalists during relevant incidents. This is likely to be all the more the case as during phases of escalation, more conflict actors seek to enter the news discourse ("competitive communication environments"; Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2018, p. 87). In this heterogeneous mix, journalists might favor official statements by epistemic authorities all the more (cf. Jungblut, 2020).

Neuberger and colleagues (2019), however, have recently suspected that the innovation potential of a new knowledge order might lie in refiguring partial services in the knowledge process. According to this, epistemic authority would no longer be based primarily on the formal professional (possibly elite) status of relevant actors, but rather on the legitimacy of the particular verification and evidence practices actually applied by them, the existence or degree of transparency in their specific verification and evidence-citing practices, and the opportunity they provide for critical discourse. Future research could verify this prognostic assumption.

The finding that evidence plays a varying role in different conflicts and conflict phases and that the differences between the usage of evidence across the analyzed conflicts do not correspond to any patterns such as conflict region, level of violence, or other conflict characteristics raises an important question that future research will have to address: Are these differences in the reliance on evidence-based communication the result of NGOs' conscious strategic decisions on particular patterns of actual, fluctuating provisions of evidence-based communication or rather an unavoidable outcome of practical/pragmatic considerations—simply because it is more difficult (and thus cost intensive or even dangerous) to collect sufficient and convincing evidence during some conflicts and phases? Survey studies might generate useful information here.

From the perspective of NGOs, the current study has some practical implications, as it suggests that relying on evidence cannot only boost their media visibility, but also offers them the opportunity to stand out from dubious communication and propaganda—an increasingly important concern of serious PR in the so-called postfactual age. Consequently, NGOs should build and maintain their networks of local expertise in conflict and postconflict countries. In doing so, they need to increasingly deliberate about whether and under what circumstances exactly this networking can be expanded in the future in the direction of political, legal, and military instances—the traditional epistemic authorities. Against the background of the prognosis by Neuberger and associates (2019), this strategy can be helpful in the long run if the NGOs wish to be perceived and contacted by conflict journalists as an epistemic authority. The chances of this are not bad: Because media organizations have substantially thinned out their network of correspondents and because they are also relying increasingly on so-called parachute journalists (cf. Fondren, Hamilton, & McCune, 2019) that fly from one hotspot to the next, conflict journalists increasingly struggle to collect all relevant information themselves and are thus highly dependent on credible sources (Jungblut, 2020). NGOs with a strong network of local expertise can fill this gap and become honest brokers of evidential information.

As all research, our study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, we rely solely on a cross-sectional analysis because of missing date information in the strategic communication material (see Method section). As such, our study is, strictly speaking, not able to show a causal relationship beyond a reasonable doubt. Future research should thus focus on a different subfield of strategic communication in which material without missing dates is available. Second, we decided to aggregate the data on a quarterly basis to balance out short-term variations in the different conflicts and to be able to compute a concise analytical model. Future research should focus on a more detailed account of the impact of conflict development and phases on the role of evidence-based communication. Third, we measured neither the quality of evidential information provided nor whether the respective evidential statement(s) is/are true. Future studies should look at the characteristics of evidence more closely and differentiate the effectiveness of various types of evidential claims. In this, we suggest differentiating among types of evidence provided by strategic communicators in their persuasive messages. Hornikx (2018) for instance, provides an interesting system for this purpose, distinguishing among (1) anecdotal or narrative evidence, (2) statistical evidence, (3) causal evidence, and (4) expert evidence. Another possible category is the (admittedly complex) analysis of "visual" evidence of audiovisual or photographic material. Furthermore, we solely analyzed whether the media refers to an NGO and ignored the content of the news coverage beyond this. Follow-up studies should investigate whether evidence is more (or less) relevant for certain topics. Connected to this, future research should also develop and test more fine-grained operationalizations of evidence-based communication. So far, our study only differentiated between texts with and without evidential statements. Future research endeavors might aim to overcome this limitation by analyzing the share of factual statements that is backed by evidence as a predictor of media visibility. Moreover, due to the number of analyzed conflicts, we were not able to systematically measure the impact of conflict characteristics (e.g., the issue of dispute or the conflict type) on the influence of evidence-based communication. Future research might thus focus on a larger set of conflicts, unlike the current study that aimed to analyze the influence of a diverse set of NGOs over a longer time span. Finally, all of our conflict cases represent a comparatively specific type of conflict (armed conflicts). This of course raises the question of the transferability of our findings to other conflict cases (e.g., classic corporate crises), which other studies must investigate.

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