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If it Bleeds, it Leads?
Distant Media Coverage of the Peace Process in Angola

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that when covering armed conflict, the news media have a tendency to focus on the violent phase (and acts of violence) and neglect the post-violence phase (and events surrounding conflict resolution), but few attempts to quantitatively test this assumption have been undertaken. This study examines this assumption, using the *New York Times*' coverage of the conflict in Angola preceding and following its final peace deal as a case study. It found that the conflict in Angola did not lead, whether in the violence phase or the post-violence phase, and that coverage was quantitatively low and sporadic. It did, however, find that neither the post-violence phase nor issues of conflict resolution in general were neglected when compared to the violence phase or acts of violence. It discusses the factors behind the quantitative findings.

Introduction: Media coverage of conflict and peace

'If it bleeds, it leads'. This is an oft-used axiom used to describe what is broadly seen as a tendency by the news media to attempt to attract and maintain an audience by focusing disproportionately on sensational news of violence, at the expense of less dramatic but equally important news. Evidence of the news media leading with coverage of such violence has been explored at a local level, most notably on issues of domestic crime (see, for example, Lowry et al. 2003, Dowler 2004). Similar accusations have been leveled at the news media based in countries and territories experiencing armed conflict. Studies have looked critically, for example, at how the tendency of the local news media to look for crisis and conflict, and exaggerate it, can have a disruptive influence on efforts to bring domestic conflicts to an end (Wolfsfeld 2004; Spencer 2005).

This tendency has also been identified in coverage of distant (foreign) conflict-related violence in the literature (Jakobsen 2000; Moeller 1999: 17-19). Gadi Wolfsfeld's classification of the editorial process of the news media, highlighting violence, crisis and conflict as being "news", and calm, cooperation and moderation as "not news", applies to news on both domestic and foreign issues (2004: 16). Journalists themselves write of a "coups and earthquakes" approach to the coverage of the world (Rosenblum 1979). The perceived tendency of the media to focus on the violent aspects of conflict (both in terms of domestic and foreign affairs), has led

to the development of the concept of "peace journalism", which is seen as representing a shift away from "war journalism" (see, for example, Lynch and Galtung 2010; and Hanitzsch 2007). Others see the push for peace-oriented journalism as a step too far, and argue that there is a need for a more nuanced and comprehensive coverage of the complexities of conflict – conflict-sensitive journalism (see Howard 2015).

The perception that the 'if it bleeds, it leads' formula generally holds true in situations of conflict and peace is strong, and as such, it is widely assumed that media coverage of the peace is insignificant when compared to the coverage of the violence. It is seen almost as a given, for example, that "when peace appears to be taking hold in a particular area, it is time for journalists to leave" (Wolfsfeld 2004:15). But the fact is that little research has been conducted to date on whether this is indeed the case. Peter Viggo Jakobsen rightly notes that "the media ignores most conflicts most of the time", and goes on to call coverage of the post-violence phases of conflicts "negligible at best" (2000: 131), but does not offer any quantitative evidence on just how negligible it may be. Beaudoin and Thorson (2002) using the *Los Angeles Times* as a case study, do attempt to quantitatively test the assumption that in conflict coverage, news of the violent conflict far outweighs coverage of conflict resolution, and found that this was not the case – "conflict resolution was only slightly less common than conflict coverage" (54). In another study by the author in which coverage of the violence and post-violence phases of three conflicts (Liberia, Israel-Lebanon and Sri Lanka) was examined, coverage in the post-violence phase dropped to one-third of that of the violence phase – a clear drop, certainly, but post-violence coverage was by no means negligible (Hawkins 2015: 54-56).

A slightly different angle also demands our attention. In a study of the coverage of crime in Canada, Kenneth Dowler finds that while the 'if it bleeds, it leads' formula generally has some truth to it, it is not entirely accurate, because of bias regarding the coverage of racial minorities – that it, "it really depends on who is bleeding" (2004: 94. See also Gilchrist 2010; and Entman and Rojecki 2001). This is an important caveat that also certainly applies to the coverage of distant armed conflict. Herman and Chomsky (1988), for example, compared the differences in US media coverage of "worthy" and "unworthy" victims in Latin America in the context of the Cold War. The notion that the news media adjust their coverage of violence depending on "who is bleeding" has particular weight when observing the coverage of conflicts in Africa. Africa remains a part of the world that is routinely marginalized by the mass media outside the continent, attracting relatively low levels of coverage, in terms of news of conflict, and of other events occurring on the continent in general (Hagos 2000; Franks 2005; Golan 2008). Relative to its counterparts elsewhere in the world, coverage of the violent phase of conflict in Africa is chronically neglected, particularly when the conflict scale (measured in terms of the death toll) is considered (Hawkins 2011). Furthermore, coverage of peace processes in Africa is proportionately smaller than that for conflicts elsewhere. Beaudoin and Thorson's study (2002) revealed, for example, that articles covering conflict in the Middle East were far more likely than those covering conflict in Africa to contain references to conflict resolution. One study conducted in the early (Cold War) years of African independence (when interest in African

politics was arguably higher than current levels) of *New York Times* coverage of equatorial and lower Africa is also worthy of mention. It found that while violent political events were, to a degree, given greater coverage than non-violent ones on the front page of the newspaper (roughly 37 percent of the total), the reverse was true for overall coverage, with violent political events making up 13 percent of the total (Charles, Shore and Todd 1979).

This study aims to add to this literature, quantitatively exploring the 'if it bleeds, it leads' claim, with regards to the coverage of distant conflict, focusing on the coverage in the *New York Times* of Angola in the one-year period before and after the signing of a final peace deal in April 2002. The violent and abrupt end to the conflict in Angola enables a clear distinction to be made between the violence and post-violence phases of the conflict, providing the suitable conditions for some clear-cut observations to be made in terms of the differences in the coverage of conflict-related violence and non-violent events in this case.

The case of Angola

Armed conflict plagued Angola in various forms for more than 40 years. Its war against Portuguese colonial rule ended with the attainment of independence in 1975 following Portugal's 1974 revolution. The Angolan forces that had waged that war – *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA, or People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), and *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA, National Front for the Liberation of Angola) – would then begin their battle against each other for control of the government. Both the movement for independence and the post-independence battle for power took place in the context of the Cold War, with both the future of Angola and neighbouring Namibia (then under apartheid South African rule) at stake. Military assistance poured in from the superpowers and their allies, with the USSR and Cuba supporting the MPLA, and the USA, apartheid South Africa, the Peoples Republic of China, Zaire and Israel being among the supporters of UNITA and the FNLA. The FNLA was defeated military early in the post-independence conflict, but the battle between the MNLA and UNITA would continue for decades. The MPLA formed a government in Luanda, with José Eduardo dos Santos serving as president since 1979, and UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi, become the country's largest rebel group. An additional rebel group, *Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda* (FLEC, Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda) remains active to this day, although to a limited extent.

The end of the Cold War saw a rapid decline in interest by the USA and USSR in continuing to support the conflict, and led to a number of solid moves towards peace. In exchange for the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, South Africa agreed to the independence of Namibia – the 1988 New York Accords. The Bicesse Accords in 1991 paved the way for UN supervised elections held in 1992. The elections and their aftermath were plagued by violence, and the conflict resumed before the second round of elections could be held (for a description of this period, see, for example, Brittain 1998; and Pereira 1994). Without its traditional patrons,

high-value natural resources increasingly became the prime means of sustaining the fight – oil for the MPLA, and diamonds for UNITA. A new peace deal signed in 1994, the Lusaka Protocol, also failed to hold, and full-scale conflict resumed in 1998. With its external support base diminished, and stricter measures being put in place against the trade in conflict diamonds, however, UNITA rapidly weakened and lost the bulk of its territory, shifting primarily to guerrilla tactics. On 22 February 2002, Jonas Savimbi was killed in battle in Moxico province by government forces, which quickly brought the conflict to its final conclusion. On 4 April in Luena, the remainder of UNITA's military command signed an addendum to the Lusaka Protocol in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding.

One year after the conflict finally came to an end, the International Crisis Group rightly lamented that "few countries in the world have experienced as sustained and violent a conflict as Angola" (ICG 2003: 2). The final years of the war (particularly from 2001), resulted in the displacement of millions of people – more than 4.7 million people (40 percent of the population) would be counted as being displaced when the war ended (Guha-Sapir and Gomez 2006: 8). UNITA had fought brutally against the government, and targeted large numbers of civilians, both directly and indirectly. The Angolan government, for its part, displaced a huge number of people in an attempt to deny support and sustenance to UNITA, and at the same time prevented access by humanitarian organizations to areas outside its control, which included three million people in areas under UNITA control, and many more in what effectively became no man's land (Messiant 2003). Humanitarian conditions at the end of the conflict were horrendous (Guha-Sapir and Gomez 2006), and Angola to this day remains "riddled with landmines" (Iob 2012).

Both in the past and present, Angola has generally not been considered a newsworthy country by the English-language media, certainly when compared to the world beyond Africa, and even within (southern) Africa. Its independence struggle garnered it little coverage in the *New York Times*, for example, and even in the turbulent times of its realization of independence in 1975, it was receiving less coverage than South Africa or Rhodesia (Charles, Shore and Todd 1979: 151). Historical, linguistic and cultural ties have, after all, been identified in the literature as a determinant of media coverage of foreign countries (Tai 2000). When Angola was covered by the US press, it was often in the context of the Cold War, with a bias in favour of UNITA and against the MPLA government (Windrich 1992). The end of the Cold War appeared to remove much of what little attention the conflict had been able to attract (both for foreign governments and foreign media). The conflict was soon being described as an "orphan of the Cold War" (Anstee 1996), and a "forgotten" (Pycroft 1994) and "neglected" (Pereira 1994) tragedy. This tendency, needless to say, extended into the post-conflict period. Lara Pawson, who reported from Angola for the BBC, contrasted the coverage of two somewhat similar events that occurred within two weeks of one another in southern Africa in 2007. The beating by the authorities in Zimbabwe of the opposition leader, Moran Tsviangirai, was heavily covered by the BBC, but the broadcaster failed to report on an alleged attempt on the life of the head of UNITA (by that time the largest opposition party) in Angola. When she attempted to push the issue with the editors at the BBC, one replied that the issue would need to be covered only if the situation became "substantially

worse" (Pawson 2007). The overall lack of coverage (violent or non-violent) can therefore expected to be one of the limitations of this study.

Methodology

In order to examine and compare media coverage of the violence and post-violence phases of the Angolan conflict, as well as violent and non-violent incidents and issues, this study quantitatively analyzed all coverage of Angola in the *New York Times* one year preceding, and one year following, the formal end to hostilities in the form of a ceasefire agreement signed by the Angolan government and the UNITA rebels on 4 April 2002. The *New York Times* was selected as a media source that can be considered somewhat representative of the English-language press. It is the US newspaper of record and it exerts an unparalleled level of influence on other media sources throughout the world (McCombs 2004: 113-4). A search for articles containing the word "Angola" in the headline or first paragraph in the world news section of that newspaper was conducted using the Lexis-Nexis database. The articles were manually filtered to eliminate articles that did not primarily cover issues associated with Angola, and articles contained in the business/financial or cultural section of the newspaper. A total of 44 relevant articles (with a total of 21,113 words) were found for the period between 4 April 2001 and 4 April 2003.

The study divided the articles into the violence (pre-ceasefire period) and non-violence (post-ceasefire) phases, conducted a word count, and graphed the coverage (by word count) over time on a monthly basis. Word count was considered a better reflection of the overall quantity of coverage than article count. This was particularly considered important given the large gap between full-length articles (several of which exceeded 1,000 words), and news briefs of less than 100 words, which accounted for 19 or the 44 articles (43 percent) counted. It then classified each of the articles according to their primary content into six categories: violence, humanitarian, peacemaking, peacebuilding, history and non-conflict. Articles primarily covering violent incidents associated with the conflict were classified as belonging to the 'violence' category. The 'humanitarian' category contained articles that focused on humanitarian suffering associated with the conflict and/or humanitarian assistance efforts. The 'peacemaking' category was made up of articles focusing on efforts to attain a peace agreement, including peace talks (or the possibility thereof) and the work of intermediaries. Reporting on short- and long-term infrastructural, social and economic rebuilding associated with bolstering the peace process, meanwhile, was included in the 'peacebuilding' category. Historical reflection and analysis on past events and background associated with the conflict (including the obituary of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbia) was assigned to the 'history' category. Finally, the 'non-conflict' category was used for coverage of events in Angola that were not associated with the conflict, including political wrangling, corruption and foreign relations. These categories were also quantitatively assessed based on the total word count.

A comparison of violence and post-violence phases

It is important to begin this analysis by noting that the total amount of coverage over the two-year period examined is rather small, paling in comparison to high-profile conflicts in the Middle East or Europe. As seen in the aforementioned 2006 Israel-Hezbollah example, for example, two weeks of coverage in the *New York Times* in the post-violence phase is easily sufficient to surpass the two years of coverage of Angola (both violence and post-violence phases). If we exclude the short news briefs, we are left with just 25 substantive articles in total. Within the limited data (including the news briefs), this section attempts to reveal and discuss some possible trends in violence and post-violence phases of the conflict.

Figure 1. Coverage of violence and post-violence phases of the Angolan conflict in the *New York Times*, April 2001-April 2003 (word count)

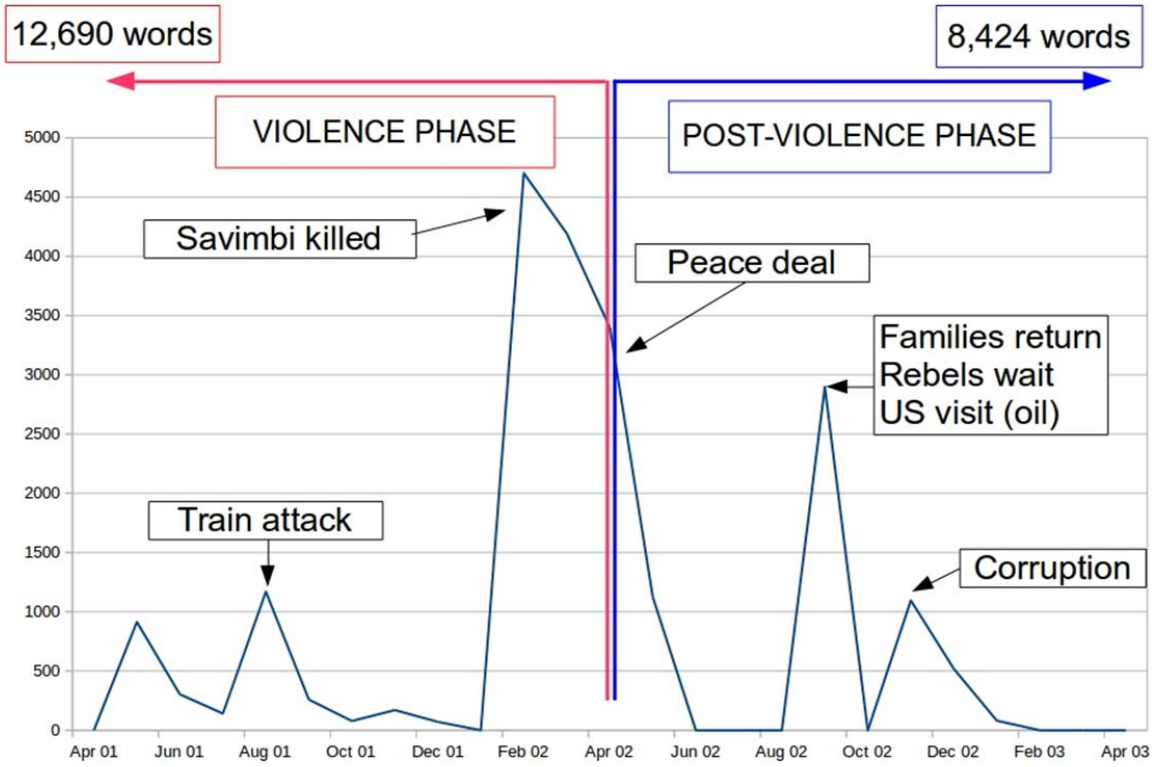


Figure 1 shows the quantity of coverage (in words) of articles over the period studied. The most prominent spike appears (predictably) between late February and early April 2002, during which time Jonas Savimbi was killed and the final peace deal was signed. These one-and-a-half months account for more than half the total coverage of Angola during the two years studied. It is interesting to note that while other spikes in coverage are apparent, they do not represent any meaningful cluster of events. The second largest spike, for example, of just under 3,000 words (three articles), seen in September 2002, is what can be considered largely coincidental, with one

article covering the visit of the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to Angola (Dao 2002), followed by another on displaced families returning to their homes (Cauvin 2002b), and a third on rebel demobilization and reintegration (Cauvin 2002c). The articles are more than ten days apart. Similarly, the smaller spike of just over 1,000 words in August 2001 is a combination of two substantive articles – one on UNITA's attack on a train resulting in more than 250 deaths (Cauvin 2001b), and the second reporting on Eduardo dos Santos' announcement that he would not run in presidential elections (Cauvin 2001c). The spike in November 2002, is essentially one substantive article, on corruption in Angola (Cauvin 2002d).

A simple comparison of the quantity of coverage of the violence phase (12,690 words) and post-violence phase (8,424 words), with the cut-off point being the date the peace deal was signed, reveals a decrease, but only by one-third. While we must be careful making comparisons, particularly given the small sample size that the Angolan case offers, this is a considerably smaller drop in coverage than the Liberia (2003), Israel-Hezbollah (2006) and Sri Lanka (2009) cases mentioned above. But perhaps the particular circumstances of the Angolan case necessitate a rethink in terms of how we should view the data. The killing in battle of Jonas Savimbi certainly belongs to the violence phase, but the widely held (albeit cautious) expectations immediately following this event were that it represented the effective end of the armed conflict, and that peace would follow. The IRIN news agency, for example, stated that Savimbi's death "added new impetus" to the peace process (Anon. 2002a). The *Guardian* newspaper reported that Savimbi's death meant the end of UNITA, and that the Angolan government "would prepare for an end" to the conflict (Siona and Brittain 2002). This is indeed what transpired. UNITA quickly moved to the negotiating table and within 40 days of Savimbi's death, a peace deal had been reached.

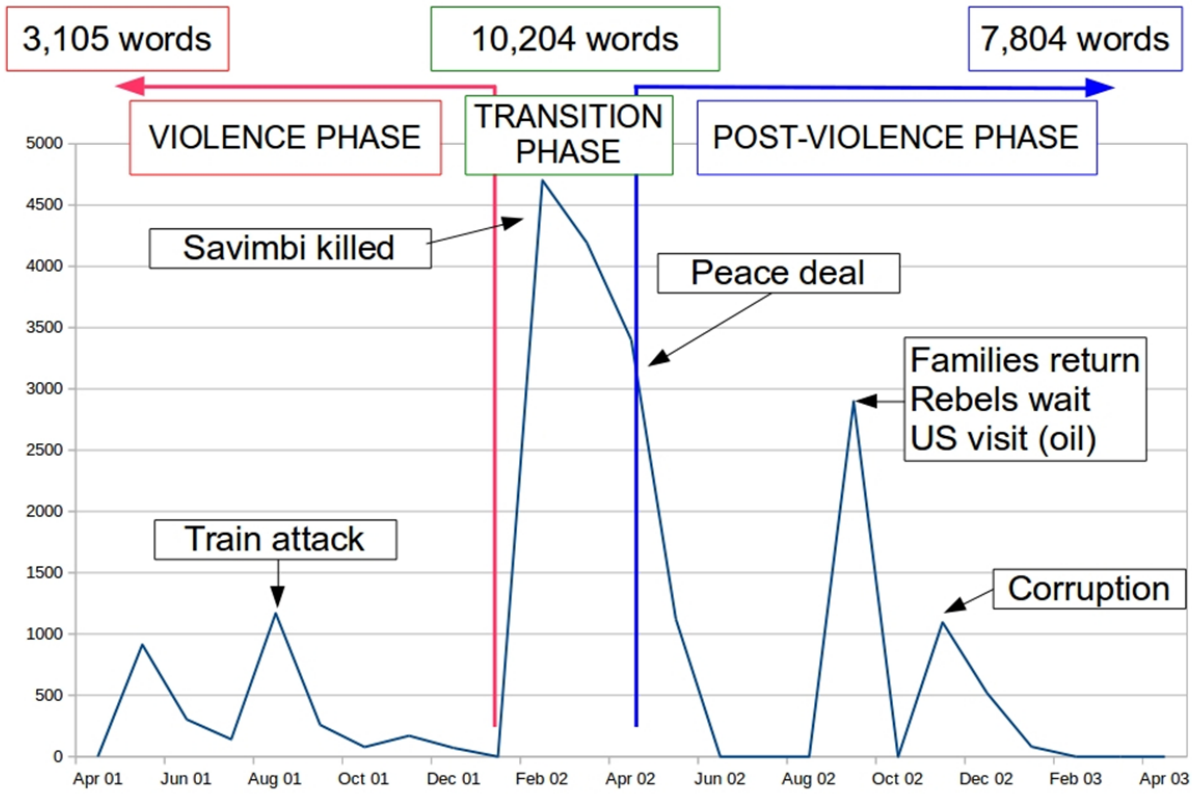
In this sense, it may be best to consider this 40-day period as a transition phase, separate from the violence and post-violence phases. The reconsidered phases of the conflict and the levels of coverage are represented in figure 2. Roughly half of the coverage is now occupied by the transition phase, and of the coverage that remains, the post-violence phase (7,804 words) is much greater than that of the violence phase (3,105 words) – more than double in fact. The data from this perspective goes completely against the 'if it bleeds, it leads' expectations.

A comparison of violent and non-violent incidents and issues

As already noted, peace efforts and other non-violent events occur during the violence phase of a conflict, and violence does not necessarily limit itself entirely to the violence phase of a conflict. Thus, with a view to obtaining a better understanding of the issue of media interest in violence in the context of a conflict, in addition to comparing the violence and non-violence phases of the conflict, it is necessary to ascertain how much of the coverage during the period in question (as a whole) focused on the violence.

Having classified each of the articles according to their primary content into one of six categories (violence, humanitarian, peace-making, peacebuilding, history and non-conflict) and measuring the total word count, it became clear that the violence category was one of the least

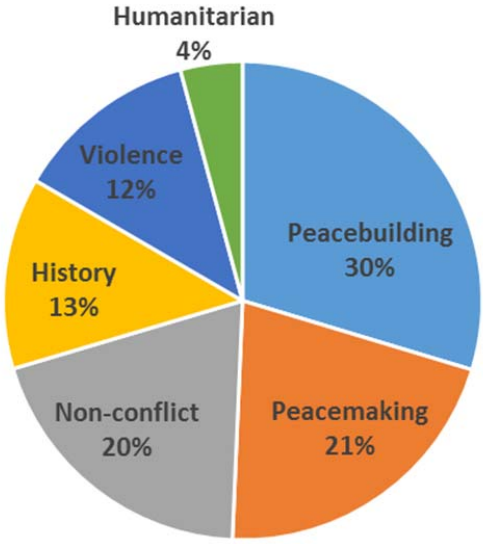
Figure 2. Coverage of violence, transition and post-violence phases, of the Angolan conflict in the *New York Times*, April 2001-April 2003 (word count)



covered categories, accounting for twelve percent of the total. This was a total of just over 2,600 words from nine articles, five of which were news briefs of less than 100 words. Articles covering the killing of Jonas Savimbi accounted for more than 60 percent of this coverage, with other articles in the category focusing on a UN plane being fired on by rebels, and the rebel attack on a train. All of the coverage of violence was contained within the violence phase, with the exception of one news brief covering Angola's conflict in the Cabinda exclave (a conflict that has continued beyond the peace deal with UNITA). This does not necessarily mean, of course, that violence only accounted for twelve percent of the coverage, given that this study used the newspaper article as its unit of analysis, and categorized these articles based only on the prime focus of each one. Needless to say, articles on peace-making and those offering historical reflection of the conflict included sections discussing the violent events of the conflict, just as sections of articles focusing on the violence included some sections on the progress of the peace process. But it would seem nonetheless that overall, at least during the period in question, non-violent aspects of the conflict accounted for the majority of the coverage. It may also be appropriate to remove the non-conflict articles from the equation, to focus solely on issues associated with the conflict. Having recalculated the categories in the absence of non-conflict

issues, however, articles focusing on the violence still account for just fifteen percent of the total remaining coverage.

Figure 3. ***New York Times*** **articles on Angola by primary topic (April 2001-April 2003)**



Articles focusing primarily on the peace process and subsequent efforts aimed at stabilizing and consolidating the peace, on the other hand, accounted for 51 percent of the total coverage of Angola, with coverage of peace-making making up 21 percent, and peacebuilding, 30 percent. In terms of peace-making, only five percent of the coverage occurred before the killing of Savimbia (three news briefs on mediation issues) – coverage on this issue was concentrated almost exclusively during the transition phase between the killing of Savimbi and the peace deal. Similarly, very little coverage of peacebuilding could be found before the killing of Savimbi (fourteen percent). It is worth noting that 59 percent of peacebuilding coverage was found after the transition period. This consisted of 3,703 words in three substantive articles (and four news briefs), two of which were published roughly six months after the peace deal was signed. One of these was a front-page story (Cauvin 2002b). With very few exceptions, the peacebuilding coverage was of the short-term variety, focusing on refugee returns and rebel demobilization. Only twelve percent of the peacebuilding coverage dealt with more long-term issues, most notably an editorial on the potential role of oil and diamond wealth in the reconstruction of the country (Anon. 2002b), plus a few news briefs covering issues of investment, lifting of sanctions, and landmines.

The category for historical reflection made up thirteen percent of the coverage, all of which (three substantive articles) was concentrated during the transition phase, including Savimbi's obituary, and a look back at the role of the US in the Angolan conflict. Humanitarian suffering and/or relief efforts were the prime focus for just one article (Cauvin 2002a), which focused on the suffering rather than on the relief in the immediate aftermath of the death of Savimbi. There

is, of course, considerable mention of the humanitarian suffering and relief efforts in subsequent articles focusing on the peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts, but given the massive levels of humanitarian suffering caused by the conflict at the time (perhaps rivalled only by that associated with the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo), the total lack of coverage of the issue of conflict-related humanitarian suffering in the eleven months prior to the death of Savimbi certainly requires needs to be questioned. Coverage of political and other issues not related to the conflict accounted for 20 percent of the total coverage. Some 58 percent of this was made up of articles discussing the issue of corruption in Angola, and a further 20 percent dealt with domestic political issues. The remainder of articles discussed foreign relations issues and government repression.

Discussion of the factors behind the coverage

The question of whether the 'bleeding' story was a 'leading' one in the strict sense (if we consider a leading story to be a front-page one) is somewhat a moot point, given that Angola only made the front page twice in the two-year period analysed: first with the report of the death of Savimbi (Swarns and Cauvin 2002), and second with a story on families trying to return (Cauvin 2002b) – one each for violent and non-violent issues. That is, whether violent or not, news of the conflict in Angola almost invariably did not lead. Overall, the coverage devoted by the *New York Times* to the conflict and peace process in Angola was small in quantity and sporadic in nature. This can largely be seen as part of the chronic lack of newsworthiness attributed to Africa in general, and Angola specifically (outlined in brief above). But it can also be seen as being related to the practicalities and routines of newsgathering (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Henri E. Cauvin, the *New York Times* journalist covering Angola at the time was charged with reporting on southern Africa and at times, central Africa, and during the period covered in this study was reporting far and wide throughout the region. In the lead-up to Angola's April 2002 ceasefire agreement, for example, he was reporting on presidential elections in Zimbabwe, and not long after the agreement, was in Madagascar as the political crisis worsened there. In the absence of what the *New York Times* would consider an event of major significance warranting a lengthy stay for a correspondent, sporadic coverage is largely inevitable.

There are, however, specific and lengthy periods during which coverage of Angola essentially disappeared. There is a period of almost six months, for example, between early September 2001 and the killing of Savimbi the following year, for example, during which not a single substantive article was published about Angola. One might suspect that the further drop in newsworthiness of Angola at this time occurs as a result of a shift of attention away from Africa following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the US on 11 September 2001, and the subsequent war waged by that country in Afghanistan. But while there was a lull in substantive articles from the region immediately following the attacks, it did not last long. In fact, if we compare the number of substantive articles published in the newspaper that were written by Henri E. Cauvin in the six months before and after 11 September, news about the region increased from 26 articles before to 35 after (one-third of which covered events in Zimbabwe). It

would appear that other events and issues in the region were seen as having greater newsworthiness than Angola. The events in the last days of the conflict in Angola were competing for coverage not with the aftermath of 911, but with presidential elections in Zimbabwe held in March 2002.

There were other periods after the peace deal in which there were gaps of more than three months each without substantive coverage. The first began in mid-May 2002, with the silence broken by an article about a visit to Angola by US Secretary of State, Colin Powell (Dao 2002). The second, began in mid-December 2002, continuing until the end of the period studied. Both can perhaps be explained by the drop-off in peace-related events after the peace deal was signed. Stories of rebel demobilization and returnees reaching their homes and trying to put their lives back together can only carry newsworthiness for so long. External factors aside (other domestic and international priorities), the fading of interest in the aftermath of the peace process can be considered perhaps not necessarily in terms not bleeding and therefore not leading, but simply in terms of a lack of prominent events (peaceful or violent) that would be considered to warrant coverage. But, the general lack of coverage of Africa notwithstanding, this still doesn't help to explain the small quantity of coverage of violent events in Angola. That is, why was there more coverage of issues of peace-making and peacebuilding after the transition phase than there was of the violence before it? A more nuanced discussion is required.

There was no shortage of potential war stories in Angola in 2001. UNITA had admittedly lost much of its territory (including access to diamond mines and airfields) and had been forced to adopt guerrilla tactics, but it was hardly insignificant as a fighting force, or unable to mount attacks of any significance. As of 2001, UNITA had an estimated strength of 8,000 fighters, and observers at the time thought it “unlikely” that the government would be able to defeat the rebels militarily (Seybolt 2001: 25). Numerous military events took place in 2001, including the infamous train attack, attacks by UNITA on many other towns (some quite near the capital), the abduction of 60 children from an orphanage by UNITA, and deadly clashes between Zambian and Angola troops (the latter had crossed into Zambia in hot pursuit of rebels). The train attack in particular was noteworthy as it was (and remains today) the world’s deadliest rail-related terrorist attack, with over 250 people killed. Yet the incident was covered by the *New York Times* with only one substantive article of 445 words and one follow-up news brief (Cauvin 2001b). It was also known in 2001 that military operations in pursuit of Savimbi were ongoing in Moxico Province, where he would indeed be found and killed the following year (Seybolt 2001: 26). Military secrecy was clearly not a barrier to a certain degree of newsgathering. While not necessarily easily marked by specific events, the horrendous humanitarian suffering should also have been newsworthy. As noted above, millions of people were displaced, and millions more were facing hunger and sickness.

Much of both the violence and the humanitarian suffering was, however, hidden from sight. Practical access to the affected areas was a major issue for journalists. For Justin Pearce, the BBC correspondent in Angola at the time, logistics was the greatest barrier to reporting on the conflict, and difficulties in communication meant that breaking news could not be filed from

outside the capital (correspondence with the author, May 2015). The fact that the conflict was being waged in rural areas, away from the capital city or other major urban centres, and had become a guerrilla war with no clear front lines was also a factor in this regard. At the same time, as part of its strategy to deny sustenance to the rebels, the Angolan government had essentially cut off access by UN agencies and other humanitarian relief organizations to large portions of the population (Messiant 2003). This in itself removed a key mode of transportation for journalists, who often relied on such aid agencies to move to gather stories (interview with Lara Pawson, correspondence with Justin Pearce, May 2015). But there were also government controls on the media. The state media was tightly controlled, the private media was repressed, and the activities of foreign correspondents were also restricted to a degree (Anon. 2002c). It was certainly known that the levels of violence were high, and that humanitarian conditions in those areas were dire, but much of this was not directly witnessed. The fact that so much of the country was to all intents and purposes inaccessible, may well have served to remove restraints by the parties in their use of violence. As Christine Messiant (2003: 118) points out, "without witnesses, the war could unfold at leisure with all the violence 'required' or authorised by the two sides".

For the *New York Times*, such issues undoubtedly had an impact on decisions on whether to even visit the country to cover stories. The article on the train attack, for example, was written from Johannesburg, with quoted sources including Angola's state news agency, Angolan Roman Catholic radio network, and a BBC interview from Lisbon with a representative of UNITA (Cauvin 2001b). The signing of the peace deal allowed for much greater access to the country, not just for aid agencies, but also for journalists. Access thus played a considerable role in the lack of coverage during the violence phase, and the resumption of some degree of coverage in the post-violence phase. Although this did not necessarily make up for the paucity in terms of the willingness to report, it certainly made a difference in terms of the ability to report on the events on a country beginning to recover and rebuild.

Coverage of Angola as it moved towards peace can also be seen from the perspective of what this meant for the US, from which the *New York Times* was reporting. With Cold War-related interest long gone, its interest in the developments in Angola can be viewed in terms of business opportunities. A number of articles focused, for example, on the post-conflict issues and opportunities associated with the extraction of oil (Dao 2002), and diamonds (Anon. 2002b). Interestingly, the longest article about Angola over the two-year period studied covered the resumption of business in Angola by Coca-Cola bottling (Cauvin 2001a). Although the article was excluded from the study because it was in the business/financial section of the newspaper, at 3,198 words, it was almost triple the length of the longest articles counted in the study, and thus gives us a clear indication of the priorities of the newspaper with regard to the situation in Angola.

Finally, it is worth considering decisions regarding the newsworthiness of events in Angola in terms of notions of change. The dramatic events that were the death of Savimbi and the final signing of the peace deal aside, it is perhaps understandable that the events after the peace deal were considered by editors as being more newsworthy than those before. After some 40 years of

armed conflict, and as an old relic of the Cold War unable to draw substantive political interest in the US, Angola, from the perspective of media gatekeepers, was likely synonymous with endless humanitarian suffering. Events happening in the violence phase – a fresh attack by UNITA on a town, or the arrival of thousands more malnourished civilians in a provincial city – were repetitive, and were unlikely to signify a major change in the status quo. The return of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people to their homes, and the attempt to rebuild their shattered lives, in the aftermath of the peace deal, on the other hand, was certainly something new, something emblematic of change. At the end of the conflict, Justin Pearce of the BBC, for example, found himself "confronting a narrative (from London) of 'the war is over, so let's have some stories about the benefits of peace'," although this was "not consistent with what I was seeing", given the "massive problems around human rights in Angola" that remained (correspondence with the author, May 2015). Thus it can perhaps be said that the realization of 'peace' became, if only for a short moment, a novelty considered worthy of reporting.

Conclusion

Almost without exception, Angola did not 'lead' in the *New York time*s, whether in the violence phase or in the post-violence phase of the conflict. It is important to note, and indeed lamentable, that such a historically significant conflict, and one that caused some of the worst conflict-related death and suffering in recent history, could garner so little attention from the media as it ended. Such low levels of coverage could arguably be considered to detract from the usefulness of this study. But if we consider the overall volume of coverage as a proxy for leading, we can still observe whether or not the coverage by the *New York Times* rapidly ground to a halt when a peace deal was reached, and more generally, whether the newspaper showed a preference for news of violence over that of conflict resolution. The results showed that this was not the case on either count. Coverage after the peace deal did not drop to negligible levels compared to that before – if we exclude the transition period between the death of Jonas Savimbi and the peace deal, coverage of the post-violence phase was in fact far greater than that of the violence phase. Furthermore, there was far more coverage in articles focusing on peace-making and peacebuilding than there was in articles focusing on the violence.

By way of explanation, we must acknowledge that reality is far messier than simplistic (and largely untested) assumptions about news values. We can perhaps also acknowledge that the *New York Times* is, to a degree, able to approach issues of conflict and peace with some degree of balance between the two, although balance in terms of whose conflict and whose peace is covered is clearly lacking. At the same time, we can also identify a number of factors that contributed to the levels of coverage in this particular case. Such factors included competition with events in other countries in the region; access to the affected areas (which improved as the conflict ended); business interests in the US; and the 'novelty' of peace after decades of conflict.

It may well be that the 'if it bleeds, it leads' notion does apply to real-time (prime-time) coverage of high profile conflicts. TV news (particularly national broadcasters that allocate a very limited amount of broadcast time to foreign affairs issues) usually seems able to handle the

coverage of only one or two armed conflicts at a time, and thus a 'moving on' to the next conflict may well be observed. But even if such a tendency is confirmed in such cases, it should not necessarily be seen as being representative of the news media in general. In the case of *New York Times* coverage of Angola before and after its final peace deal, such a tendency was simply not found.

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