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## Pro-conflict and pro-cooperation coverage: The San Juan River conflict<sup>1</sup>

*Kurzfassung:* Dieser Beitrag analysiert die Medienberichterstattung über den Rio-San-Juan-Konflikt zwischen Costa Rica und Nicaragua. Hierbei handelt es sich um einen lang andauernden Konflikt um die Verwaltung eines Flussbeckens, welches sich entlang der Grenze der beiden Länder erstreckt. Im März 2002 vereinbarten die Regierungen, von einer konfrontativen zu einer kooperativen Strategie überzuwechseln.

Das Ziel dieser Studie ist es, zu untersuchen, wie die costa-ricanische Presse über den Konflikt sowohl während der Konfrontationsphase als auch nach dem Wechsel zu einer kooperativen Strategie berichtete. Dabei ist das Augenmerk insbesondere auf die jeweilige Konflikt- bzw. Kooperationsorientierung der Berichterstattung gerichtet. Ausgewählt wurden zwei große Zeitungen: La Nación (LN) und La República (LR).

Inhaltsanalytisch ausgewertet wurden 81 Nachrichtenmeldungen aus zwei verschiedenen Zeiträumen:

- Juli 1998 – Phase der Konfrontation, und
- Juni 2002 – Phase der Kooperation.

In der Studie wurde eine zweidimensionale Skala angewendet, die 12 Sets von Indikatoren beinhaltet. Jeweils sechs Sets indizieren je eine konfliktorientierte bzw. eine kooperationsorientierte Berichterstattung über den Konflikt.

Die Ergebnisse der Analyse der Berichterstattung von 1998 weisen eher auf eine Unterstützung von Konflikt und Konfrontation hin als von Kooperation:

- In der Analyse der LN von 1998 ist die konflikt- und konfrontationsorientierte Berichterstattung im Vergleich zur kooperationsorientierten Berichterstattung stärker, sowohl bezüglich der Variable "Konzeptualisierung des Rio-San-Juan-Konflikts" als auch der Variable "negative Bewertung der nicaraguanischen Handlungen". Somit dominiert in dieser Zeitung eine konfliktorientierte Berichterstattung.
- Die Analyse der LR von 1998 zeigt die Dominanz einer konfliktorientierten Berichterstattung in drei Variablen: den höchsten Score weist die Variable "Bewertung der nicaraguanischen Handlungen" auf, gefolgt von "Bewertung der nicaraguanischen Rechte und Intentionen" und "negative Emotionen". Dagegen deutet die Variable "Konzeptualisierung des Rio-San-Juan-Konflikts" eher auf eine Kooperations- als auf eine Konfliktorientierung hin.

Insgesamt indizieren vier Variablen eine konfliktorientierte und eine Variable eine kooperationsorientierte Berichterstattung.

Die Ergebnisse der Analyse der Berichterstattung von 2002 offenbaren einen Rückgang der konfliktorientierten Berichterstattung zugunsten der kooperationsorientierten:

- In der LN zeigt sich dies in der Konzeptualisierung des Rio-San-Juan-Konflikts: Die Variable "Konzeptualisierung des Rio-San-Juan-Konflikts" indiziert überwiegend Kooperation. Im Jahr 2002 dominiert nach keiner Variable eine konfliktorientierte Berichterstattung. LN wechselt folglich von einer konfliktorientierten zu einer kooperationsorientierten Berichterstattung, nachdem sich die politische Agenda von Konfrontation zu Kooperation verschoben hat.
- In der LR manifestiert sich eine Dominanz der konfliktorientierten Berichterstattung in zwei Variablen und eine Kooperationsorientierung in der Variable "Konzeptualisierung des Rio-San-Juan-Konflikts".

Insgesamt zeigt sich in zwei Variablen noch immer ein Übergewicht einer konfliktorientierten Berichterstattung, während zwei Variablen eine Kooperationsorientierung aufweisen.

Im Ergebnis lassen sich zwei Tendenzen identifizieren:

1. ein Rückgang der konfliktorientierten zugunsten einer kooperationsorientierten Berichterstattung
  2. die Resistenz gegenüber einer kooperationsorientierten, obwohl sich die politische Agenda in Richtung Kooperation verändert hat.
- Die Ergebnisse sind hilfreich, um den Beitrag der costa-ricanischen Presse zur Förderung von Kooperation und zur Deeskalation von Konflikten zu bewerten. Frieden ist ein wichtiges Leitprinzip der Außenpolitik Costa Ricas. Im Unterschied zu Befunden, nach denen Medien

1. A preliminary version of this article: "Conflict escalation, negotiations and the press: The case of the Rio San Juan conflict", was presented at AIMCR's 23rd Conference and General Assembly, Barcelona, July 2002.

als Werkzeug für Politiker fungieren, bleiben die beiden Zeitungen LN und LR hinter der Politik, die Kooperation und Frieden befürwortet, zurück und statt dessen der medientypischen Präferenz für Konflikt, Konfrontation und Dramatik verhaftet. Ihre Resistenz gegenüber einer kooperationsorientierten Berichterstattung wird zudem durch ihre Beharrlichkeit, das Rio-San-Juan-Becken als ein Grenzflussbecken anzusehen, verdeutlicht: Die Region als Flussbecken zu konzeptualisieren, ist immer noch eine Innovation. Innovationen rufen normalerweise Widerstand hervor, und entsprechend reagierten beide Zeitungen mit Widerstand auf diese Innovation.

*Abstract:* This paper analyzes media coverage of the San Juan River conflict between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. It is a long-lasting conflict over the shared management of a river basin located along the border between the two countries. In March 2002, the governments of both countries agreed to change their approach from confrontation to co-operation.

The aim of this study is to see how the Costa Rican press covered the conflict during confrontation, and after its change to co-operation, in terms of pro-conflict versus pro-co-operation coverage. Two major newspapers were selected: La *Nación* (LN), and La *República* (LR). A total of 81 news stories were content analyzed in two different periods of time: July 1998, when the confrontation reignited, and June 2002, after the change to co-operation.

This study applied a two-dimensional scale. It has 12 sets of indicators. Six sets indicate *pro-conflict coverage* of the conflict; the other six indicate *pro-cooperation coverage*.

The results for the 1998 coverage analysis show support for conflict and confrontation rather than co-operation:

- In the analysis of LN in 1998, pro-conflict and confrontation coverage is higher compared to pro-cooperation coverage regarding the variables "*conceptualization of the San Juan River conflict*" and "*negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions*." Thus pro-conflict coverage is dominant in this newspaper.
- The analysis of LR in 1998 shows a dominance of pro-conflict coverage in three variables: the "*evaluation of Nicaragua's actions*" has the highest score, followed by "*evaluation of Nicaragua's rights and intentions*" and "*negative emotions*." However, the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River conflict*" is oriented to co-operation rather than conflict.

In sum, four variables score *pro-conflict coverage*, versus one that scores *pro-cooperation*.

The results of the 2002 coverage analysis show a decrease of *pro-conflict coverage* and an increase in *pro-cooperation coverage*:

- LN presents a shift from *pro-conflict* to *pro-cooperation coverage* in its conceptualization of the San Juan River: the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River conflict*" is predominantly oriented to cooperation. There is no predominance of pro-conflict coverage in 2002. Thus, LN changes to pro-cooperation coverage after the political agenda changed from confrontation to co-operation.
- LR manifests a dominance of pro-conflict coverage in two variables, and the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River conflict*" as co-operation.

In sum, two variables still show the predominance of *pro-conflict coverage*, while two variables exhibit *pro-cooperation coverage*.

Altogether, the results allow us to identify two trends:

1. A decrease in pro-conflict coverage and an increase in pro-cooperation coverage.
2. A resistance to change to *pro-cooperation coverage* despite the change to cooperation in the political agenda.

The results are useful in assessing Costa Rican press support for cooperation and the de-escalation of conflict. Peace is an important axis in Costa Rican foreign policy. Contrary to findings about the media as policy makers' tools, the two newspapers LN and LR lag behind in favoring the policy that supports co-operation and peace. Thus, the two newspapers endorse media culture's preference for conflict, confrontation and drama. The two newspapers' resistance to change to *pro-cooperation coverage* also indicates their attachment to seeing the San Juan River basin as a border river. To think about the region as a river basin is still an innovation. Usually innovations generate resistance, so the two newspapers exhibited resistance to the innovation.

## 1. Introduction

The San Juan River is a basin that integrates a river-lake system. The system begins with Lake Nicaragua, near the Pacific coast, and continues towards the East along the San Juan River. It runs from West to East along the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua down to its delta in the Atlantic Ocean.

The San Juan basin is the second largest in Central America. It has an area of 38,500 km<sup>2</sup> (López, A., 2002; Jiménez, 2002). 24,500 km<sup>2</sup> (64% of its territory) belong to Nicaragua, 14,000 km<sup>2</sup> (36% of its territory) to Costa Rica. The region has been used for navigation purposes since colonial times.<sup>1</sup>



Several elements have contributed to transforming the region into a contested strategic zone (Rabella, 1995; Tarracena & Piel, 1995; Obregón, 2001):

1. The San Juan River runs through the Atlantic region, which constituted the margins of the Spanish Empire.
2. The British Empire expanded into the Atlantic region and used it for slave trade, logging, the black market, and piracy. A legacy of its presence is the English language and Protestantism.
3. The river basin later came under American geopolitical influence due to its potential to provide an alternative to Panama as a canal route<sup>2</sup>.
4. The region experienced a clash of interests manifested in different cultural uses of its space (Demyk, 1995.). For instance, the indigenous peoples applied a territorial logic different from the one applied by the colonial empires. For the indigenous peoples connecting the two Oceans did not have priority. They moved along the territories rather than across them. One example is "la Ruta del Cacao" (the Cocoa Route), which established a connection among territories rather than dividing them.
5. Under imperial territorial logic, the region and its basin were transformed into a strategic zone, similar to Panama or the Tehuantepec Gulf. From this perspective, the national borders' importance decreased every time the empires needed to act across national boundaries. An instance occurred when plans to build a canal became salient.
6. The territorial logic applied by the national governments of the Central American countries was also different from that applied by indigenous groups. The national governments made sovereignty a national issue because the territory created the nation. The nation's immediate delimitations were the national borders, usually demarcated by rivers.
7. The indigenous groups' territorial logic also conflicted with national sovereignty: their routes extended across national borders.

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1. For more historical details, see Rabella, 1995; Obregón, 2001; and the collection of essays published by Tarracena and Piel, 1995; and a debate in *De lo Jurídico*. These sources include Costa Rican and Nicaraguan perspectives on the issues.  
2. For a historical analysis of British and American conflicts and negotiations over the San Juan River, see Rabella, 1995.

The above-mentioned dynamics endowed the San Juan River basin with a potential for conflict. It also generated a history of negotiations and hostile interactions among the different actors.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Origins of the conflict

Costa Rica and Nicaragua have experienced a border conflict since 1821, when Spain granted both provinces their independence. According to Demyk (1995), after gaining independence from Spain, the new republics entered into a process similar to what happened in the Balkans: the new republics' fragmentation, contained under colonial rule, surfaced in a conflicting fashion after independence. In the Central American context, borders turned into major issues for disputes.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the San Juan River, which flows along the border between the two countries, has been part of the conflict since then (Obregón, 2001,<sup>3</sup> Carmak, R., 1993).

Many factors intervened to keep the disputes alive according to these authors. As we can see from the following list, some of them were local and some global.<sup>4</sup>

1. In 1850, the British and the Americans signed the Clayton-Bulwer treaty to build a canal along the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua (Rabella, 1995; and Obregón, op. cit., includes the treaty's full text).
2. In 1856, Costa Rica defeated the U.S. invader William Walker<sup>5</sup> and his army. Advancing from North to South, he had conquered the Central American countries north of Costa Rica, including Nicaragua and the San Juan River (Arroyo, 1983).
3. Two years later, in 1858, Costa Rica and Nicaragua signed a border treaty which assigned the San Juan River to Nicaragua but gave navigation rights to Costa Rica (*De lo Jurídico*, 1999).
4. In 1871, Nicaragua demanded that the treaty be voided (*De lo Jurídico*, op.cit.).
5. In 1888, the treaty was submitted for arbitration to U. S. President Grover Cleveland. President Cleveland ruled that Costa Rica had the right to navigate the river for commercial rather than military purposes (*De lo Jurídico*, op cit.).
6. After the arbitration, the dispute lingered on and off for over a century (*De lo Jurídico*, op cit.; Tarracena & Piel, 1995). For instance, in 1915, Costa Rica took Nicaragua to the Central American Court of Justice because of the Bryan-Chamorro treaty signed between Nicaragua and the U.S. Costa Rica opposed both countries' agreement to build a canal. In 1916, the Court ruled that:
  - The San Juan River's shore on the Costa Rican side is Costa Rican territory.
  - Both countries have rights over the San Juan del Norte harbor on the Atlantic coast, and Salinas Bay on the Pacific coast.
7. Since the 1940s, relationships between the Somoza dictatorship of Nicaragua and most Costa Rican governments

1. A conflictive interaction characterizes not only the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. It also characterizes the Nicaraguan borders with Honduras and Colombia as well. El Salvador and Honduras have gone to war over border disputes. Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador have confronted each other about the Fonseca Gulf.
2. During colonial rule, the territory that is now Central America was divided into provinces, and unified under colonial rule with Guatemala as the *Capitanía General*. After independence from the Spanish Empire in 1821, the provinces were turned into separate countries. This fragmentation into independent republics generated conflicts and wars to define borders among themselves. The San Juan basin conflict is one of the surviving conflicts, aggravated by the interest the U. S. had until recently in building a canal along the San Juan River.
3. This author offers an abundant bibliography about borders and the San Juan River's past and current history.
4. The journal *De lo Jurídico*, Volumes 17 and 18, published a debate on these issues, including Costa Rican and Nicaraguan perspectives.
5. The official U.S. version is that William Walker was an adventurer. The official Costa Rican version is that Walker, with his army of mercenaries, had enslaved the Central American countries north of Costa Rica. More critical historians regard him as a conqueror struggling to introduce the U.S. Southern plantation system into Central America, thus transforming peasants into slaves.

From a political point of view, he embodied the Monroe Doctrine: America for the Americans. Thus his occupation furthered U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America.

On April 11, 1856 Costa Rica defeated Walker near the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. According to some historians, British military intelligence was key in helping Costa Rica to defeat Walker. April 11th is Costa Rica's major national holiday after Independence Day.

To some historians, foreign occupations need national support. For instance, they mention the fact that Nicaraguan liberals and conservatives were struggling against each other. One part called on Walker to help them defeat the other fraction. Walker took advantage of the situation and ended up becoming the "president" of Nicaragua.

Unfortunately, defeating Walker and his mercenaries did not save Central America from the plantation system. It was introduced some decades later by U.S. multinational companies such as the United Fruit Co. These corporations also managed to change governments they didn't like. Thus Walker's occupation was just another means to accomplish the same goals.

For more details on these issues, see this article's bibliography.

were often unfriendly.

8. During the 1980s, Central America experienced revolutions and counterrevolutions. The border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua played a key role in harboring the Contras, a guerrilla organization trained and supported by the Reagan administration to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. This situation brought the region international news coverage again (UPAZ, 1999). Finally, the Central American countries signed several peace treaties: one regional and two at the national level (Gutiérrez, S., 2002; UPAZ, op cit.).
9. During the 1990s, the conflict surfaced again over Costa Rica using the river for activities such as tourism, fishing and hunting. This time environmental and immigration issues contributed to the confrontation.<sup>1</sup> Environmental issues generated conflict whenever they were framed within a nationalistic perspective, more specifically, within the sovereignty issue. For example, according to Nicaraguan officials, Costa Rica's agricultural activities pollute the San Juan River. Since it is Nicaraguan territory, they considered pollution to be an invasion. Immigration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica contributed to provoking confrontation when Costa Rica repatriated Nicaraguan immigrants.
10. In July 1998, Nicaraguan military officials forbade Costa Rican police to navigate the river carrying arms<sup>2</sup> (see a debate in *De lo Jurídico*, op cit.). The Nicaraguan government and military officials considered this act to be not only a violation of the treaty and their national sovereignty by the Costa Rican government, but also an attempt at expansionism.  
The Costa Rican government reacted to the prohibition by threatening to take Nicaragua to The Hague International Court. The Nicaraguan government responded by charging fees to navigate the river.

However, in 2002 this historical confrontation changed to co-operation. Newly elected presidents in both countries decided to follow a policy of good neighborliness and support regional integration.

- Already at the Lima Summit between the Central American Republics and Spain, on November 24, 2001, the Central American Republics had agreed to take steps toward resolving their conflicts in order to strengthen integration.
- The agreements at the summit between the European Union and SICA members,<sup>3</sup> on May 18, 2002, finally, led the Central American countries to take concrete steps to remove obstacles to their regional integration.
- In June 2002, the newly elected Costa Rican president decided to write the San Juan River conflict off his agenda. The new Nicaraguan president joined the initiative, and Costa Rica abandoned the project of bringing Nicaragua before the Hague International Court.

Also, the environmental approach supported cooperation between the two countries and among several actors, local and international. Researchers on both sides produced insights on the basin's depletion: that an emergency could easily arise. The evidence they brought to the situation affected decision-making at the national, bi-national, and international levels.

### 3. Method

The aim of the present study is to investigate how the Costa Rican press covered the conflict during confrontation, and after its change to cooperation, in terms of *pro-conflict* versus *pro-cooperation coverage*.

Some 81 news stories were content analyzed for two different periods of time: July 1998, the entire month of re-ignition of confrontation, and June 2002, after the change to cooperation.

The study applied a two-dimensional scale that has twelve sets of indicators.<sup>4</sup> Six sets register *pro-conflict coverage*; the other six record *pro-cooperation coverage*. The twelve sets are summarized below.

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1. Although the environmental perspective is predominantly oriented towards cooperation, it can also be used to intensity conflict and enmity between the two countries. The 1993 special report published by *Panorama Internacional* (issue No. 164) is a good example: It uses criminological terminology to report on the pollution that affects the San Juan River.
  2. For a debate among representatives from Costa Rica and Nicaragua, see *De lo Jurídico*, 1999 issue.
  3. SICA stands for *Central American Integration System*. The Conference (*XVIII Conferencia Ministerial del Diálogo de San José*) took place in Madrid, Spain, on May 18th, 2002. Consult their *Comunicado Conjunto* for more details.
  4. These indicators have been developed in a joint project of the Universities of Örebro (Sweden), Kostanz (Germany), Tampere (Finland) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway) on "Journalism and the New World Order". A first version was published in Kempf, Reimann & Luostarinen (1996). The present version was first published in Kempf & Gutiérrez (2001). An English translation is available in ASPR (2003). In the present paper the sets of indicators are applied to study *pro-conflict* and *pro-cooperation coverage* rather than *pro-escalation* and *de-escalation*. This is due to the nature of the conflict and its change to cooperation.

### 3.1 Pro-conflict variables and indicators

1. **Conceptualization of the conflict (E1 in Charts):** This set looks at how the conflict is created so that it supports confrontation and the zero-sum game of military and war logic. This set registers preferences for military values and force, and rejection of peaceful alternatives.  
Specifically for our analysis, this set deals with the process that constructs the conflict for public consumption. To construct the San Juan River conflict, the press highlights past and present confrontations between the two countries.
2. **Negative evaluation of the opponent's rights and intentions (E2 in Charts).** The evaluation is based on antagonism: one party idealizes its rights and intentions while demonizing the opponent's. Thus, the evaluation eliminates any space for joint action.  
In the case analyzed here, the news stories present the reader with Nicaragua accusing Costa Rica of violating its sovereignty by using the river, or present Costa Rica's claims to its navigation rights, and so on.
3. **Negative evaluation of the opponent's actions (E3 in Charts).** The evaluation is based on antagonism: one part justifies its own actions while condemning and mistrusting the opponent's. The evaluation rejects mediation and cooperation leading to a win-win situation. It prefers actions that lead to win-lose results.  
This evaluation leads to characterizing the opponent as the enemy. For instance, the news stories tell about the Nicaraguan official's arrogant behavior and declarations.
4. **Destructive emotions (E4 in Charts).** This set deals with emotions such as confrontation, trust in military values, dehumanizing the other party and mediators, disregard for destruction and suffering, and negation of cooperation. The news stories support mistrust of the opponent and mediators. The emotions undervalue common grounds for cooperation.  
The news stories provide the population with clues as to how to face the enemy: with indignation, mistrust, malignancy, and violence.  
In the case presented here, the news stories encourage readers to view each other as enemies: Nicaraguan actions are portrayed as arrogant, rude, and against the law, because they violate the treaties. Thus, the Costa Rican government's response should be harsher: taking them to the International Court to show them we are not weak.
5. **Social and individual identification with confrontation and destruction (E5 in Charts).** This set refers to disregard for a peaceful, conflict-free, and reconciled future and world.  
The news stories in the Costa Rican press emphasized self-righteousness in first place, followed by nationalism and sovereignty. Self-righteousness gives the Costa Rican public a sense of superiority to those who used military force. In this connection, the press stressed nationalism's concept of personal and national identity in order to support confrontation. It stressed sovereignty over self-righteousness. The lawyers and courts (or the army for the Nicaraguan press) emerged ready to defend national sovereignty.
6. **Motivation to support war and confrontation (E6 in Charts).** This set deals with news stories according to which war protects against destruction and brings about a better future.

### 3.2 Pro-cooperation variables and indicators

1. **Questions the conflict and redirects it to cooperation (D1 in Charts).** This set registers a win-win situation in which both parties benefit. There is a demand for cooperation and peaceful solutions while abandoning antagonism.  
In the San Juan River case, both governments ended the conflict when they removed it from their agendas. Instead, they included dialogue and regional integration.  
The news stories covered integration and the beauty of the region. The Costa Rican president was quoted as saying that the river (San Juan) was drying out. Thus, no one in his right frame of mind would ever fight over something that might not even be there in the near future (La República, July 20, 2002).
2. **Fair evaluation of the parties' rights and intentions (D2 in Charts).** News stories based on this type of evaluation highlight common interests and *win-win* results of ending the conflict.  
For instance, the news stories gave voice to good neighborliness and integration goals. They told the public that the Costa Rican president had Nicaraguan ancestors. This brotherhood approach fostered respect for each other's rights and intentions.
3. **Fair evaluation of the parties' actions (D3 in Charts).** The evaluation assesses the need for mediation and cooperative actions. For the San Juan River conflict, the news items stressed good neighborliness, brotherhood, and bi-national approaches at all levels, as well as future plans for development.
4. **Constructive emotions (D4 in Charts).** This refers to emotions such as respect and trust for the opponent's rights and actions; the suffering and destruction for both parties generated by war and conflict; the need to end the conflict in order to enter the reconciliation and cooperation stages.  
In the San Juan River, the news stories reminded the public about unsolved issues while presenting it with emotions of brotherhood, common interests, and dialogue between the two countries.
5. **Social and individual identification with cooperation and reconciliation (D5 in Table 1, and Charts).** This set refers to

positive reactions and initiatives oriented to ending violence and confrontation, and to constructing a world based on cooperation and tolerant values.

The news items distance themselves from those identified with confrontation.

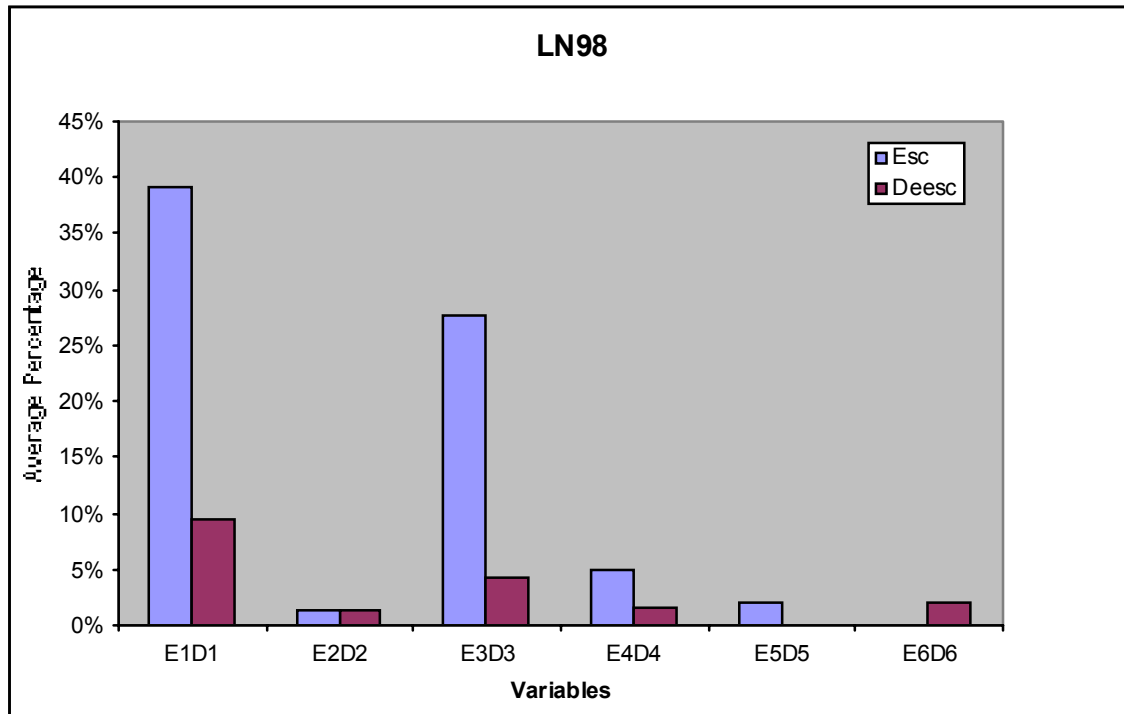
6. *Motivation to support peace and cooperation* (D6 in the Table and Charts). This set points to news stories in which cooperation and peaceful relationships are valid alternatives to war, and to assuring a better future.

#### 4. Results

Average Percentages	E1D1		E2D2		E3D3		E4D4		E5D5		E6D6	
	Conf	Coop	Conf	Coop	Conf	Coop	Conf	Coop	Conf	Coop	Conf	Coop
<b>La Nación 98 (LN98)</b> n=24	39.17	14.17	1.39	1.39	27.78	4.17	5.00	1.67	2.08	0	0	2.00
<b>La República 98 (LR98)</b> n=22	18.00	40.00	60.00	6.67	86.67	23.33	32.00	22.00	13.33	21.67	0	0
<b>La Nación 02 (LN02)</b> n=19	20.00	29.23	7.69	7.69	20.51	20.51	4.62	6.15	0	0	0	3.5
<b>La República 02 (LR02)</b> n=16	20.00	50.00	48.15	18.52	70.37	40.74	20.00	26.67	5.56	18.52	0	0

Table 1: Percentage of pro-conflict and pro-cooperation coverage

##### 4.1 1998 results, newspaper La Nación (LN)



The results (Chart LN98) show *pro-conflict coverage* dominance in two variables:<sup>1</sup>

*"Conceptualization of the conflict"*: 39.17% of the news items conceptualize the Río San Juan as a conflict, versus 14.17%

1. For the other variables the percentages are too low (cf. Table 1) and, therefore, not discussed in the following.

that question this.

The news stories conceptualize the San Juan River as a conflict when they present it as a border endowed with border disputes. Thus, the issues are which country has rights over the river, which one owns it, which has rights to navigate it, which pollutes it, and so on.

Some news stories turn the situation into a "conflict of declarations." News items create this when they quote government officials who make contradictory statements on issues.

This mechanism is farther-reaching than contradictory information about events, because the "conflict of declarations" is embodied by government officials from each party to the conflict. Thus, the *conflict of declarations* not only adds more drama, but also more credibility to the contradictory information.

In *La Nación* of July 17, 1998, a news item quotes the Costa Rican minister stating that the problem between the two countries had been resolved. Prior to the Foreign Ministers' meeting, *La Nación* (July 21, 1998) quotes the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* as saying that according to a Nicaraguan army officer, nothing had been resolved.

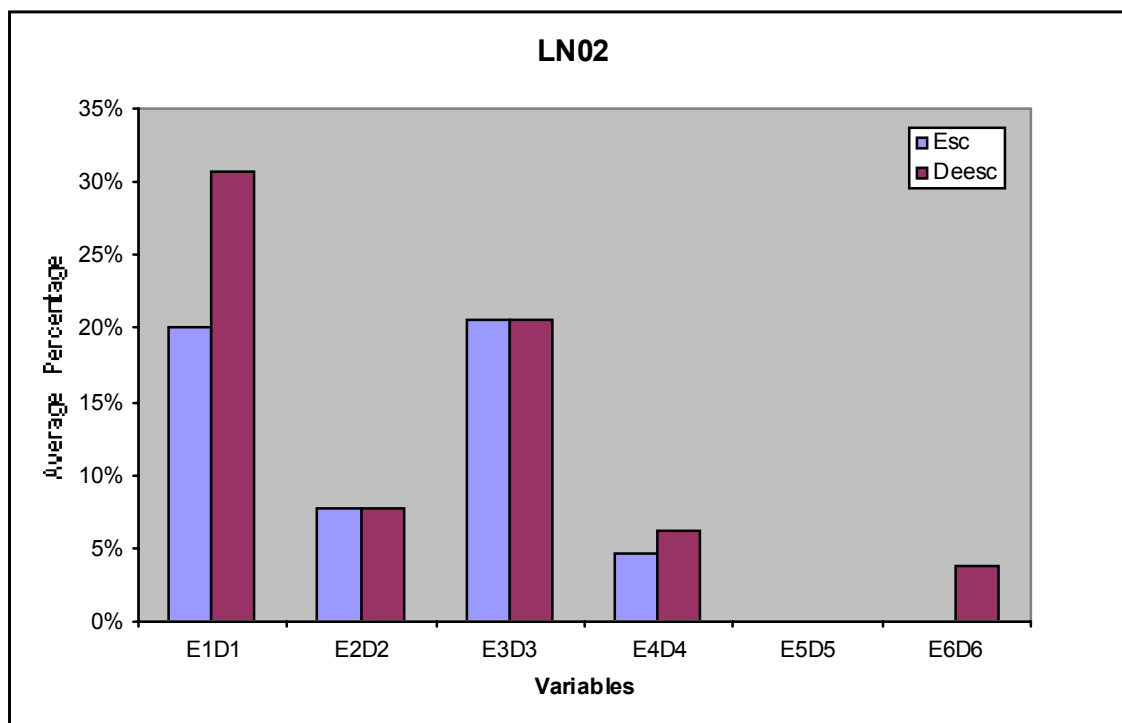
The news story (LN, July 26, 1998) questions the conflict based on several journalists' tour of the region. After interviewing some residents, they concluded that there was no conflict locally, and that the conflict existed only at the national and international levels. The finding created a new contradiction.

*"Negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions":* 27.78% of the news items expressed negative evaluations of Nicaraguan actions versus a fair evaluation: 4.17%.

The news-items based their conceptualization of the conflict on sovereignty: each nation has rights over the San Juan River. The news stories create antagonism with negative evaluations of Nicaraguan political and military actions against Costa Rican rights: banning navigation on the river, charging fees and using the conflict for internal political purposes.

The negative evaluation affects actions that happened in the past as well. This newspaper created a "pseudo dialogue" with the past when a news item reproduced a verbal exchange between Tomás Borge and the Costa Rican foreign minister. Both government officials acrimoniously discussed sovereignty issues and navigation rights. Their dialogue took place in 1983. The news item in 1998 (LN, July 26) reproduces a news story published fifteen years before. The revival of the dialogue strengthened confrontation rather than understanding because of the negative evaluation.

#### 4.2 2002 results, newspaper La Nación (LN):



The results (Chart LN02) show *pro-cooperation coverage* dominance in one variable:

*"Questioning the conflict":* 29.23% of the news items conceive the San Juan River in terms of cooperation versus 20% that conceptualize it as a source of conflict.

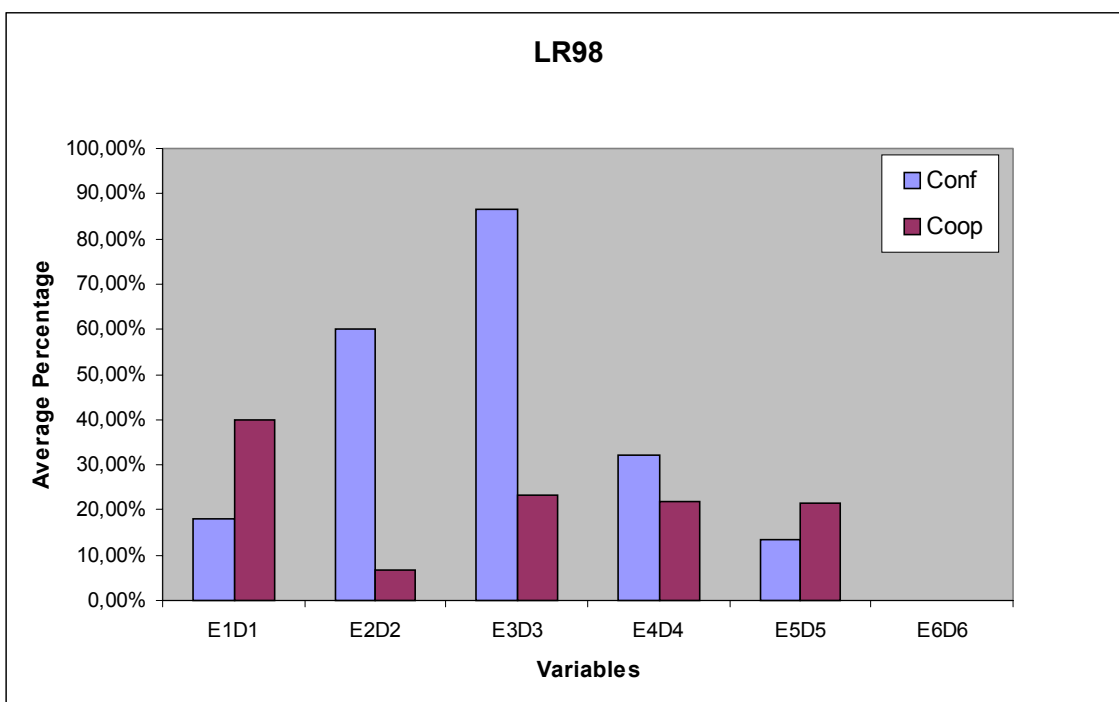


The change from confrontation to cooperation follows the logic of cooperation: undoing the polarization of national identities, stressing dialogue and brotherhood, opportunities to cooperate, and integration issues.

Compared to 1998, LN's 2002 results present:

- A shift from *pro-conflict* to *pro-cooperation* coverage: the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River as a source of conflict*" changes to "*conceptualization of the San Juan River as cooperation*". The news items changed the San Juan River portrayal from conflict to cooperation. However, the San Juan River is not yet regarded as a basin.
- There is no predominance of *pro-conflict* coverage in any variable.

#### 4.3 1998 results, newspaper La República (LR):



The 1998 results (see Chart LR98) show three variables dominated by *pro-conflict coverage*:

*"Negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions"*: The news items' negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions is 86.67% versus a *"fair evaluation"*: 23.33%.

The news items support Costa Rica's defense of its rights against the Nicaraguan government's actions. This generates a negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions.

For instance, an interview with historians and lawyers (LR, July 25, 1998) offers several arguments against Nicaraguan actions and intentions. The news story argues that the Nicaraguan government is putting pressure on the Costa Rican government to accept more Nicaraguan immigrants. Another argument blames the Nicaraguan President for creating the conflict: he incited nationalistic sentiments against Costa Rica to reverse his popularity decline. The article quotes historical arguments that polarize national identities and support confrontation as well.

*"Negative evaluation of Nicaraguan rights and intentions"*: This is present in 60% of the news items versus a *"fair evaluation"*: 6.67%.

Rather than a negative evaluation, the news items demand Nicaraguan recognition of and respect for Costa Rican rights to the San Juan River. The news stories refer to treaties, arbitrations, and taking Nicaragua to international courts.

*"Destructive emotions"*: 32% of the news items present *"negative emotions"* versus *"constructive emotions"*: 22%. The news items portray a belligerent, militaristic Nicaraguan identity against civilian Costa Ricans.

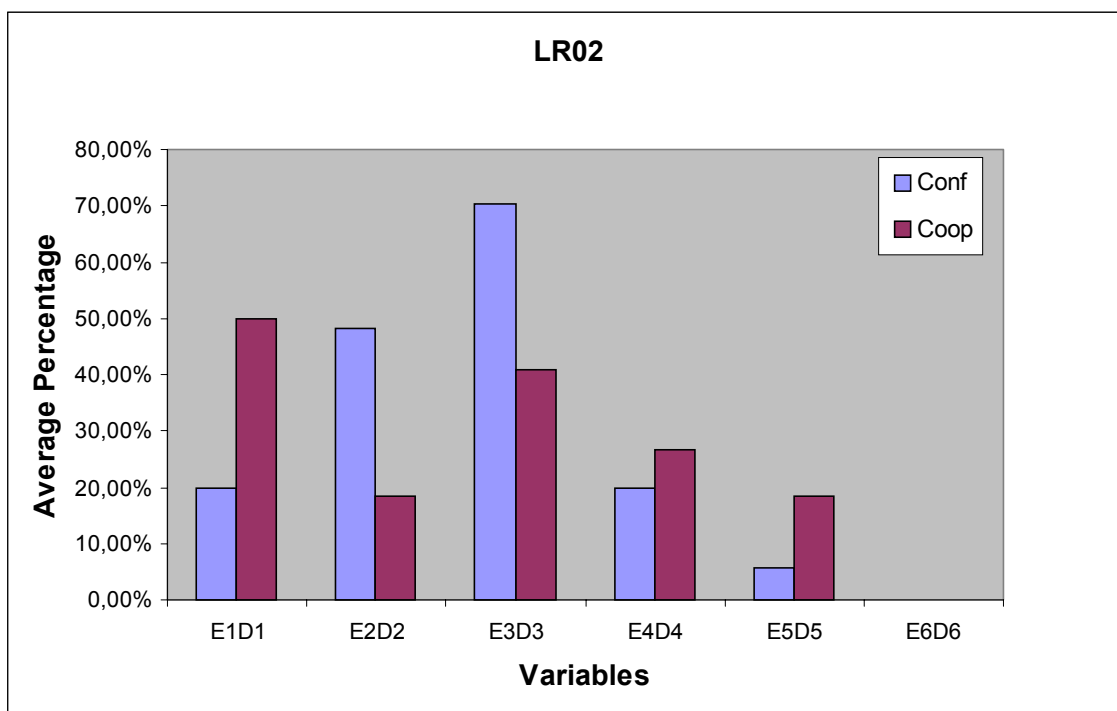
The 1998 results show the dominance of *pro-cooperation coverage* in one variable:

*"Questions the conflict and redirects it to cooperation"*: The news items conceive the San Juan River in terms of cooperation: 40%, versus *"confrontation"*: 18%.

An editorial supports this transformation and calls for mediation or third party arbitration (LR, July 25, 1998). It warns about the danger of poisoning the relationships between the two countries.

Another editorial (LR, July 30, 1998) calls for negotiations between the two countries. It argues in favor of bi-national agreements regarding development while urging the governments to put aside confrontation on issues such as immigration and integration. The editorial accentuates the beauty of the San Juan River region and its potential for business as well.

#### 4.4 2002 results, newspaper La República (LR):



The 2002 results (see Chart LR02) show *pro-conflict coverage* in two variables:

*"Evaluation of Nicaragua's actions"*: The negative evaluation is higher than the positive: 70.37% versus 40.74%, although its 2002 score is lower than the one in 1998: 86.67%.

*"Evaluation of Nicaragua's rights and intentions"*: The negative evaluation is 48.15% versus the positive evaluation: 18.52%.

The 2002 results (see Chart LR02) for the following variable show *pro-cooperation coverage*:

*"Questions the conflict and redirects it to cooperation"*: As in 1998, the news items portray the San Juan River in terms of cooperation: 50% versus *"confrontation"*: 20%.

In sum:

- The 1998 results indicate that four variables show the predominance of *pro-conflict coverage* versus one that exhibits *pro-cooperation coverage*.
- The 2002 results indicate that two variables show the predominance of *pro-conflict coverage*, and one variable exhibits *pro-cooperation coverage*.

## 5. Conclusions

The coverage analysis suggests three main conclusions:

### 5.1 Support for conflict and confrontation in 1998

The results for the 1998 coverage analysis show support for conflict and confrontation rather than cooperation:

1. In LN's 1998 analysis, pro conflict and confrontation coverage is higher compared to pro-cooperation coverage regarding the variables "*conceptualization of the conflict*" and "*negative evaluation of Nicaraguan actions*." Thus, pro-conflict coverage is dominant for this newspaper.
2. LR's 1998 analysis shows a dominance of pro-conflict coverage in three variables: the "*evaluation of Nicaragua's actions*" shows the highest score, followed by "*evaluation of Nicaragua's rights and intentions*" and "*negative emotions*". However, the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River*" is in terms of cooperation rather than conflict.

In sum, four variables score *pro-conflict* coverage versus one that scores *pro-cooperation*.

## **5.2 The two newspapers decrease their pro-conflict coverage and increase their pro-cooperation coverage in 2002**

The results for the 2002 coverage analysis show a tendency to balance *pro-conflict* and *pro-cooperation* coverage:

1. LN presents a shift from *pro-conflict* to *pro-cooperation* coverage in its conceptualization of the San Juan River: the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River*" is predominantly in terms of cooperation. No predominance of pro-conflict coverage is found in 2002. Thus, LN changed to pro-cooperation coverage after the political agenda changed from confrontation to cooperation.
2. LR manifests a similar pattern in 1998 and 2002: a dominance of pro-conflict coverage in two variables, plus the "*conceptualization of the San Juan River*" in terms of cooperation.

In 2002, two variables show a predominance of *pro-conflict* coverage, and two variables exhibit *pro-cooperation* coverage.

## **5.3 Resistance to change to pro-cooperation coverage**

Following from the two previous conclusions, there is resistance to changing to *pro-cooperation* coverage, despite the change to cooperation in the political agenda.

Although both newspapers present a predominance of pro-cooperation coverage in one variable, cooperation is still under-reported. According to recent San Juan basin research (López, 2002a; López, 2002 b), there is a lot of cooperation in the San Juan basin, at both levels, governmental and non-governmental. Based on those findings it becomes clear that there are enough cooperation sources and voices which offer an opportunity for these newspapers to free themselves of pro-conflict and confrontation coverage.

For instance, a report by journalists who toured the San Juan River found no local conflict. The authors found that conflict was present only at the national and international levels (LN, July 26, 1998). Their finding was incomplete: they failed to find cooperation.

As was stated before, basin research shows that several local organizations, NGOs, GOs and international organizations manage several cooperation programs and projects in the region. These various organizations bring into the San Juan basin a plurality of cooperation agendas. Therefore, the San Juan River as a basin does offer the media an opportunity to report cooperation. However, the different organizations that work together in the San Juan River basin did not get their voice into the news stories analyzed here, because the journalists were looking for conflict rather than cooperation. They did so because they consider the region as a border rather than as a basin.

After the tour along the river, the journalists only found that there was no conflict in the border region. If they had considered the border region as a basin, it would have been easier to find cooperation. Thus, the news items neglected cooperation due to source shortage and a one-sided agenda. The question then is how to improve cooperation source recognition and acceptance in order to improve its coverage.

One more intervening factor is what Luostarinen (2002) identifies as the "polarization of identity indicators".

Regarding the San Juan River conflict, the polarization affects two national identities: Costa Rican and Nicaraguan. In this case, which is based on national identity, the two identities became salient after their polarization. Once polarized, the news stories incorporated them to incite antagonism among the public. However, there are several identities besides the national one. For instance, in Nicaragua regional identity is usually more important than national.

In the San Juan basin case, in order to polarize national identities, it was necessary to undergo a process that can be called "identity reduction". Identity reduction, when combined with polarization, suits a coverage held captive by the conflict's logic.

Once the national identities underwent reduction and polarization, they were applied to negatively evaluate Nicaraguan rights and actions, and activate destructive emotions. This procedure hindered *pro-cooperation* coverage.

The results for the 2002 coverage analysis show a tendency to balance *pro-conflict* and *pro-cooperation* coverage.

This tendency to balance pro-conflict and pro-cooperation coverage suggests that the two newspapers covered the change in the political agenda with resistance to transforming the pattern that had dominated the coverage of the San Juan River conflict for so many years.

Considering that media culture usually favors confrontation (Roach, 1993), the resistance to changing the *pro-conflict* coverage to *pro-cooperation* suggests that these two major Costa Rican newspapers followed the international media culture trend. Media culture prefers antagonism and its drama. This preference may have had a greater impact on these two newspapers than the Costa Rican civilian tradition.

Another factor may also have contributed to the resistance to abandoning *pro-conflict coverage* despite the change to cooperation in the political agenda:

The newspapers' resistance to change also indicates the papers' attachment to seeing the San Juan River basin as a border river. To think about the region as a river basin is still an innovation. Usually innovations generate resistance, so the two newspapers exhibited resistance to the innovation.

In conclusion, LN and LR not only resisted the change from pro-conflict to pro-cooperation, but also the change in the conceptualization of the San Juan River from a border to a basin.

These results are important for assessing the two newspapers' support for promoting cooperation and de-escalating conflicts. Peace is an important axis in Costa Rican foreign policy. Contrary to findings about media as policy makers' tools (cf. Gilboa, 2002), the two Costa Rican newspapers LN and LR lagged behind the policy change to supporting cooperation and peace.

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