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Loved and feared in fortress Europe: Framing the European refugee crisis

Abstract: The European refugee crisis is an important topic on media, political, and public agendas. Due to its scope and impact, its continuing prevalence on the media-agenda and the divisiveness of public debate, new research is needed to understand the media's framing of the issue. This study inductively analyzes framing of the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 by two Dutch newspapers. Portrayal of the refugee crisis consists of ten different frames and counter frames. The frames are communicated on the level of the refugee, on the level of the crisis as an event, and on a societal level. Results show that recent reporting on the refugee crisis is relatively nuanced and portrays the crisis from a variety of perspectives. Framing changes following certain transitory events, but only slight differences were found between popular and quality papers.

Keywords: framing, refugees, inductive framing analysis, newspapers, qualitative research, refugee crisis

Introduction

In 2015 and 2016, over 1.2 million refugees sought asylum in the EU, twice the number of the previous year (Eurostat, 2016). The problems were deemed so acute that media and politicians labeled it a 'refugee crisis'. Governments struggled to cope with the situation, resulting in social unrest and, sometimes violent, protest (Carrera, Blockmans, Gros, and Guild, 2015; Cats, 2015; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). Together with unprecedented media coverage this is thought to have increased popular support for far-right sentiments and political parties (Bernauer, 2017; Mudde, 2016).

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The question in the current study is how media coverage and social events interact to create a dynamic process of media coverage – public and political opinion formation and behavior towards the refugees. This study therefore investigates how 'the refugee crisis' of 2015 was framed in the Dutch media. Secondly, we address how media framing interacted with specific events during the period. Finally, we are interested in how framing in quality and popular newspapers of refugees and the 'crisis' changed in interaction with certain real-life events.

Framing refugees

Previous research has studied the framing of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers using a variety of methods and produced a large diversity in the results, ranging from negative portayals of asylum seekers and refugees as dangerous invaders or a criminal threat (Benson and Wood, 2015; Horsti, 2007; ter Wal, d'Haenens, and Koeman, 2005; Van Gorp, 2006) to positive coverage, oftentimes of refugees as victims (Dekker and Scholten, 2015; d'Haenens and de Lange, 2001; Van Gorp, 2006).

Additionally, research has revealed that the use of frames may fluctuate over time. Van Gorp's (2006) research revealed that the prevalence of more positive frames increased around Christmas time, and large news events (so-called *transitory events*, e. g., humanitarian disasters, terrorist attacks) may also impact the framing of issues (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Van Gorp, 2006, 2010).

Previous research has also revealed differences in framing between media outlets. Popular newspapers have been found to portray asylum seekers as intruders (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008; Van Gorp, 2006), whereas quality newspapers more often frame asylum seekers as victims (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, De Ridder, and Van Hoof, 2007; Van Gorp, 2006).

This study will focus on one year of reporting in Dutch newspapers to answer the question: *How do newspapers frame the refugee crisis in the period of April 2015 to March 2016?* Three sub-questions were formulated:

1. Which changes over time occur in the frames used in the reporting?
2. Do transitory (major) news events impact the frames used in the reporting?
3. What, if any, are the differences in the frames used in the way popular and quality newspapers report?

Method

Inductive Framing Analysis

In this study we follow the constructionist approach to inductive framing analysis as formulated by Van Gorp (2010). The outcome of an inductive framing analysis is an overview of *frame packages* in a frame matrix. Each of these forms an integrated structure consisting of a *core frame*, accompanying *framing devices*, and *reasoning devices*. "The core frame is the implicit cultural phenomenon that defines the package as a whole, for instance, a value or an archetype" (Van Gorp and Vercruysse, 2012, p. 1275). Framing devices are elements in a message that function as tangible, manifest indicators of the frame, such as word choices, metaphors, clichés, and illustrations. Reasoning devices are not explicitly part of the message but form "a route of causal reasoning which may be evoked when an issue is associated with a particular frame" (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 91).

Sample

A Boolean search of Lexis-Nexis was conducted with the terms "refugee" and "refugees" specified for the 'quality' (*De Volkskrant*) and 'popular' (*De Telegraaf*) newspaper that have the highest circulation in the Netherlands (Bakker and Scholten 2011). The sample was taken at the height of the refugee crisis, the period between April 2015 and March 2016.

Nine potential transitory events were selected that were considered major news events (by Dutch news organizations) during the refugee crisis at that specific moment (NU.nl, 2015). The search yielded 875 news, feature, editorial, and opinion articles. To narrow the sample a stratified sample of 268 articles was selected. The articles were evenly sampled from each month, and after exclusion of four articles due to irrelevance, the final sample consisted of 264 articles.

Analysis procedures

Data analysis consisted of three types of coding – open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). First, we coded the manifest textual elements that related to the topic of the refugee crisis, such as metaphors, argumentative structures, slogans, and visual imagery to establish *framing devices*. In the second phase, axial coding focused on reducing the multitude of in vivo codes

to significant codes and relating them to latent structures within the message that pertained to problem definitions, causes, consequences, moral judgments, and solutions (i. e., to establish the *reasoning devices*). In the third phase framing packages were created, each package containing reasoning devices and framing devices that were related to one another substantively[1].

Results

The analysis generated seven dominant problematizing frames and three related counter frames (i. e., reasoning from more positive or neutral vantage points) about the refugee crisis. In structuring the frames, the idea that frames can relate to certain levels was applied (cf. Van Gorp and Gourdin, 2015). As such, the frames were ordered in three distinct levels (Table 1):

1. The level of the *refugee*: Frames on this level focus on the refugee as an individual.
2. The level of the refugee crisis as *event*: Frames on this level discuss the crisis as a phenomenon.
3. The level of *society*: Frames on this level discuss how the crisis impacts society.

Table 1: Levels of frames and counter frames.

Level	Problematizing frames	Counter frames
Focus on the *refugee*	Feared intruder frame Economic fortune-hunter frame	Innocent victim frame
Focus on the *phenomenon*	Epidemic frame	Manageable problem frame
Focus on *society*	Societal and cultural threat Polarization frame Institutional distrust frame	Opportunities frame Solidarity frame

1 The complete frame matrix (cf. Van Gorp, 2010) as well as more *thick description* from the results can be consulted via https://osf.io/evhty/?view_only=ce43729e2479423db5d53b1c0c8cab14. The full frame matrix consists of ten frame packages, and each is composed of a central cultural theme (i. e., the frame), a specific definition of the problem of refugees/refugee crisis, its causes and consequences, the moral values that are involved, the possible actions that can be taken, and examples of manifest framing devices that may trigger the latent causal reasoning in the people's minds. The last column lists visual illustrations that belong to the frame.

Framing the refugee

The feared intruder

The *Feared Intruder Frame* portrays the refugee from a threatening and negative vantage point. The refugee is the cause of unrest and insecurity when she or he settles somewhere new, due to the violent criminal acts she or he commits. The frame is centered on the notion of premeditated criminality perpetrated by the refugees (i.e., they are portrayed as terrorist travelers, criminals and potential rapists), as well as refugees who become violent due to traumas or cultural differences. The *Feared Intruder Frame* is enacted textually and visually, although the former is more dominant. Images show male refugees with visible wounds or in the act of committing a criminal act.

The fortune-hunter

The refugee is portrayed within this frame as someone who is fortune-hunting, that is looking for a more advantageous economic climate to settle in and profit from. The goal of this refugee is to move as quickly as possible to a country that gives him or her these opportunities. Their motives are not tied to life-threatening situations in their homeland, which results in the categorization of this refugee as insincere, or 'fake'. The *Fortune-Hunter Frame* is enacted both textually and visually.

The innocent victim (counter frame)

The *Innocent Victim Frame* portrays the refugee as a desperate victim in need of help. The reasoning within this frame is built on the idea that refugees are victims of persecution, war, famine, corruption, and other kinds of harm and were therefore forced to leave their country. It is seen as the humanitarian duty of western democracies to shelter and aid these refugees. Within this frame the refugee is represented as a 'real' or 'legal' refugee. The frame is expressed both visually and textually. Pictures show sad refugee children and women, or the bodies of perished refugees.

Framing the event

The epidemic

The refugee crisis is framed as an epidemic washing over Europe in this frame. European countries are being flooded by refugees, and are unable to prevent the stream from coming in. The flood is caused by both push factors in the countries of origin and pull factors in European countries combined with lax asylum and return policies. To temper the flood and diminish the number of refugee deaths, member states of the EU should cooperate to improve asylum policies and discourage immigration. The *Epidemic Frame* is enacted both textually and visually.

> Never before in European history have we seen such a mass migration from the Middle East. The immense flood of migration is insusceptible to the Schengen treaty and other restrictive policies of the countries it passes. (De Telegraaf, 18 September 2015)

Images stress the immense influx of refugees by showing overflowing refugee centers and long lines of waiting refugees. Reporting in this frame is contextualized with concrete statistics from reputable sources.

The manageable problem (counter frame)

The *Manageable Problem Frame* counters the reasoning within the Epidemic Frame. This counter frame portrays the crisis as a manageable problem, and argues that Europe is not being flooded, that the influx is not sudden but was to be expected. It is only due to indecisiveness of, and lack of, preparation by European leaders that the influx seems sudden and enormous. Communication about the issue should be more realistic and contextualized, and thereby give a representative image of the situation.

> The number of refugees coming into the Netherlands annually is not that high. In the nineties we saw similar numbers of refugees entering the country. (De Volkskrant, 24 October 2015)

The *Manageable Problem Frame* is enacted textually and illustrated visually. Visuals showcase empty spots in refugee centers, to stress that the are not insurmountable.

Framing society

Societal and cultural threat

The refugee crisis is framed as a threat to local life and culture in Dutch society, fanning societal fears. The fears are tied to differing areas, of which three are recurring: fear of unsafety (tied to fear of terrorism), fear of the negative impact the situation will have on the economy, and fear of a citizen's position. The fear grows in strength when the issue is physically near – that is, the opening of a refugee center in a municipality or a growing number of refugees settling in a certain community. To maintain order, citizens should be adequately informed about the issue, and the asylum and return policy should be adapted. The *Societal and Culural Threat Frame* is enacted both textually and visually. Images of protesting citizens are used to visualize the core issues of this frame.

Opportunities (counter frame)

The *Opportunities Frame* portrays the refugee crisis from a positive vantage point, and thereby counters the reasoning put forth in the *Societal and Cultural Threat Frame*. The arrival of refugees is considered to be a unique opportunity for Dutch society. As refugees are often highly educated, they are good additions to the labor market. Moreover, the dangerous journey these people were willing to make shows that these are courageous people with tremendous perseverance.

> He who risks his life to journey to Europe is not only desperate but also courageous and ambitious. (De Volkskrant, 26 May 2015)

The reasoning in this frame is based on the ideal of equal opportunities and fair treatment for all people. The *Opportunities Frame* is enacted both textually and visually. Images show refugees at work, for example, in refugee centers or in Dutch companies.

Polarization

The refugee crisis is portrayed as the cause of the ever-increasing polarization, in Dutch society as well as in the world at large, in this frame. Opposing views, ideals and interests create polarization, which in turn results in a strong feeling of us versus them. To prevent complete polarization of society on all fronts, Europe

should work together as a united front. The government and policymakers should have an ear for needs and wishes of the local population. The *Polarization Frame* is enacted textually. When images are used, they are contrasting images of protesting and helping civilians placed side by side. Textually there is a negative connotation to almost all keywords and metaphors used, such as "a division between good and bad", "misunderstanding and chagrin", and "the cleaving of societies and countries".

Solidarity (counter frame)

The *Solidarity Frame* counters the reasoning employed in the *Polarization Frame*. The refugee crisis is framed as the cause of an increasing sense of solidarity and empathy both in civilians as well as in politics. The frame stresses the integration of civilians and refugees. It puts forth the ideal that through solidarity and working together the us-versus-them feelings may be diminished and broad support can be garnered. Reporting also uses locals to stress the importance of the issue in their own words:

> He really likes Resa and Ali. He likes it when they join him for a beer after soccer practice. And hopefully this will help them get a job or an internship, or maybe their neighbors will help them with that. That is how it is supposed to go. (De Volkskrant, 28 December 2015)

The *Solidarity Frame* is enacted both textually and visually. Images show refugees who have integrated in society, such as a classroom full of Dutch and refugee children.

Institutional distrust

The final frame is negative in intonation. The reasoning within the *Institutional Distrust Frame* stresses that indecisiveness and the lack of clear communication about the refugee crisis impacts Dutch society, particularly by creating societal distrust and cynicism regarding government officials, policymakers and aid organizers. Party politics, the violations of law and agreements, the lack of decisiveness and a focus on individual interests disrupt possible clear and decisive action in the matter. Government officials, policymakers, and aid organizations should operate to the best interest of the common good, to lessen the overall level of cynicism in society and to re-establish trust. The institutional distrust frame is only enacted textually; for example, key words and metaphors focus on unproffesionalism and ignorance, such as 'failures', 'democratic deceit', and 'a stingy attitude'.

Who uses what frame and when?

RQ1 and 2: Changes in framing over time

The analysis revealed that the use of frames was not uniform across the measurement period. The *Innocent Victim Frame*, the *Epidemic Frame* and the *Institutional Distrust Frame* were dominant in the first period, while in the final months the *Societal and Cultural Threat* was used most often. Most notably the dominance of frames changed following important news events. Of the selected nine potential transitory events (see Figure 1), three were found to impact the usage of dominant frames in reporting: the two shipwrecks in April 2015, the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, and the large-scale sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015.
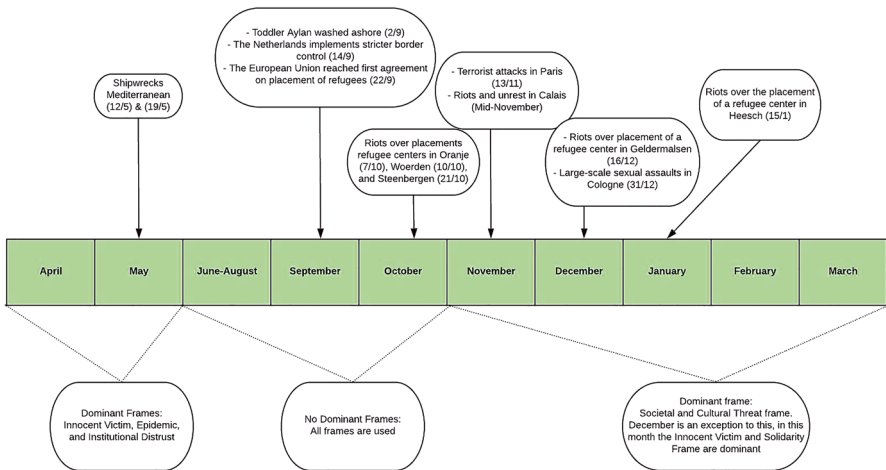
Figure 1: Timeline of framing: Dominant frames and transitory events.

After the shipwrecks in April 2015, news concerning the refugee crimes is framed from the vantage point of the *Innocent Victim*, the crisis as *Epidemic* and *Institutional Distrust Frame*. In the months that follow, all frames are again used with, and in contrast to, each other. From the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015 onward, a drastic shift in framing occurred, with the *Societal and Cultural Threat* dominating almost all reporting from that moment on. The refugee crisis is more often than not linked to terrorism, and this only intensifies after the mass sexual assaults in Cologne on New Years Eve. December was an exception, with the *Societal and Cultural Threat* partly disbanded, and the *Innocent Victim Frame* and the

Solidarity Frame becoming prominent once more. This is in line with findings by Van Gorp (2006), who argued that the Christmas period invokes cultural motives of solidarity, sympathy, and peace. Even though, overall, all frames were used in the reporting, and the dominance of certain frames was tied to transitory events, there were three frames that dominate the reporting overall: *Societal and Cultural Threat*, the *Epidemic Frame*, and the *Innocent Victim Frame*.

RQ3: Framing differences and similarities between popular and quality newspapers

Overall, *De Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf* used a total of ten different frames and counter frames. In *De Volkskrant* the use of positive counter frames was much more prevalent than in *De Telegraaf*. The papers differed in their usage of the counter frames. *De Volkskrant* used all four counter frames regularly, while *De Telegraaf* used frames that focus on problematizing the issue and painting it from a predominantly negative vantage point. *De Telegraaf* used the *Opportunities* and *Manageable Problem Frames* very sparingly. Of the counter frames the *Solidarity Frame* is most prevalent in *De Telegraaf*, and much less so in *De Volkskrant*.

Conclusion and discussion

This study contributes a number of new frames to current research, in addition to confirming frames from previous research. It also provides insight into the way framing changes related to transitory events, and how framing has changed compared to previous similar phenomena.

The analysis revealed ten (counter) frames on three different levels, of which the *Innocent Victim*, *Fortune Hunter*, *Manageable Problem*, *Societal and Cultural Threat*, *Opportunities*, *Polarization*, *Solidarity*, and *Institutional Distrust Frames* were either newly formulated in this study, or much more prominent than in previous analyses. In sum, reporting about the issue as a societal problem is predominantly negative in intonation, whereas when news focuses on the individual refugee, a more nuanced and understanding position is created.

Second, we conclude that framing of an event or a series of related events can indeed change over time. Our study indicates that even over a relatively short period of one year, media frames shifted in content and valence, and that these changes are related to key events as defined by the media. One remaining question for future research is whether these changes are robust over a longer

period. As seen, the 'normal order of things' seems to return in terms of news framing. Nevertheless, from our study we can conclude that framing is a temporally dynamic and interactive (i. e., media-events-public) process.

Lastly, the current study found only subtle differences in framing between the 'quality' newspaper *De Volkskrant* and the 'popular newspaper *De Telegraaf*. The fact that multiple frames are used by both papers is in contrast with previous findings, where 'quality' newspapers reported on refugees as innocent victims and 'popular' newspapers reported about refugees as intruders (Van Gorp, 2006). However, in *De Volkskrant* the more 'positive' counter frames are somewhat more prevalent than in *De Telegraaf*.

Whereas critics often posit that the reporting on the refugee crisis is unbalanced and without nuance (Van Teeffelen, 2016), the reporting analyzed in this study paints a more multifaceted picture of the framing of the crisis. The intensely negative tone of the societal discussion about the refugee crisis is reflected in several frames. When citizens are continuously exposed to media content in which these predominantly negatively formulated frames dominate, this may lead to similar attitudes and beliefs (De Vreese, 2005). However, alternative perspectives are not lost. According to framing theory this would mean that readers are (theoretically) also exposed to alternative perspectives (Entman, 2007).

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