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Framing Theory in Syrian Conflict Coverage in Foreign Media

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The present article focuses on the application of the framing theory to the Syrian conflict media coverage in foreign news outlets. With events such as the Syrian conflict, it is crucial to pay close attention not only to what information gets published in media sources, but also to the way it is presented. With the audience being generally distant from the action without a possibility to check the facts physically, media outlets get a better chance to shape the information in a way which would benefit them. The method used for this study is the theory of frames. The aim of this research is to determine the frames which are preferred by the American, French and Russian media outlets when reporting on the Syrian conflict.

The idea of framing is generally attributed to the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman states that individuals cannot understand the world fully, so they apply primary frameworks to classify information and interpret it meaningfully. He claims that frames are the instruments for presenting more complicated issues efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to the reader because they appeal to the pre-existing cognitive schemas [4]. The framing theory is associated with the agenda-setting, yet it broadens the study in a way which allows the researchers to focus on the given issues rather than on the specific topics.

Framing is a concept that is difficult to define, yet most scholars agree that the definition given by Robert Entman is the most accurate one. He claims that framing involves «selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described» [Entman, 2004, p. 51].

According to Semetko and Valkenburg [5], there are certain pre-assigned frames that appear on the news more often, and these are:

- 1) conflict frame;
- 2) human interest frame;
- 3) economic consequences frame;
- 4) morality frame;
- 5) responsibility frame;

Each one of them possesses a distinguishable set of characteristics, making specific aspects of the story more salient than others, aiming at creating a certain effect on the audience.

For this study thirty-five articles from the American, French, and Russian news outlets were chosen and analyzed regarding content and language to determine the frame used by the authors of the articles. All the chosen articles engaged with the Syrian conflict, particularly the three topics which were widely discussed in media - the volunteer organization called White Helmets, the situation in Aleppo in 2016 and the events happening in Douma in 2018. The purpose of such juxtaposition in this research is to determine the difference between the narrative and the frames applied to this narrative in the Russian, French and American media resources.

When talking about the White Helmets, the French newspaper often draws the attention of the reader to the personal stories of people involved in said organization. The Russian news outlet refers to the White Helmets not as the volunteers, but as a group of people with anti-government views, emphasizing the fact that it is sponsored by western governments. The American newspaper presents the White Helmets as victims of the situation. Since the French and American newspapers talk specifically about the White Helmets' personal stories, according to the framing theory, they use the human interest frame. It is chosen to demonstrate the human characteristics of the White Helmets and to provide the reader with something they can sympathize with. The Russian newspaper uses the conflict frame, accentuating their negative attitude towards the White Helmets.

The next issue extensively covered in media is Aleppo in 2016. When talking about these events, the American and French newspapers claim that Russia and Syria targeted areas of Aleppo deliberately. The Russian newspaper, however, states that there is no proof to support such accusations. They also mention that Russia had no other choice than to intervene, not agreeing to be considered responsible for what action has been taken. The conflict frame is used by the Russian newspaper where their intention is to demonstrate the differences in understanding of the situation by the sides of the conflict, and the responsibility frame is chosen by all when it is necessary to associate the blame for the events with the opposing party.

Another topic of utmost importance is a chain of events in Douma. In this case, both the American and Russian newspapers opt for a similar strategy - they claim the opposing party to be responsible. The French newspaper chooses the human interest frame again when telling a story of a Syrian refugee. The American newspaper expresses concern that Russia is preventing the team of chemical weapon specialists from accessing Douma, and they apply the responsibility frame in this article. The Russian newspaper emphasizes that the western countries including the US are to blame for the consequences as they did not provide any proof of their accusations, drawing the reader's attention to the fact of intervention not based on solid facts.

As the analyses of the sample articles shows, the conflict frame is commonly used when the aim of the article is to present the conflict itself as the central value of the story. The responsibility frame is adopted when the intention is to associate the blame for individual situations with the specific groups of people. The human interest frame is employed when the objective of the article is to draw the attention of the audience to personal stories and to appeal to the emotion of the public. All of the frames mentioned above are commonly used when covering conflicts as they do not require deeper and more analytical reportage.

Predominately, such theoretical tool as framing is very practical, especially when analyzing an event which is presented in media outlets through two or more different frames. Framing theory can be applied when examining how media administers the narrative of the news, and what influence preferential news representation can have on the audience and on the international politics.

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