NEWS FRAMES, INTER-MEDIA FRAME TRANSFER AND THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

News frames, inter-media frame transfer and financial crisis

This paper examines the economic coverage of German newspapers at the onset of the financial crisis with the help of framing theory. It has three basic objectives. The first, to identify the frames in the news coverage. The second, the documentation of these frames and their occurrence as well as their distribution in different media outlets. The third, the examination of inter-media influences, exerted by different media outlets upon each other. The authors introduce the concept of Inter-Media Frame Transfer and apply a multi-method-design composed of a qualitative and quantitative content analysis as well as an ARIMA-time-series analysis. Eight frames are identified. The representation of the crisis as a systemic threat can be seen as the dominant interpretation. Inter-media influences can explain some of the dynamics of media framing. Yet, media framing of the financial crisis appears to be mainly contingent on extra media influences.

Key words: framing theory, media frames, media influence, financial crisis, representation, Inter-Media Frame Transfer

Introduction

Economics is a central and very specific field in journalistic work. Economic processes are often perceived as far more complex than other social or political issues. Accordingly, comprehending and evaluating the state of the economy is a rather difficult task for large parts of the population. At the same time, every citizen of modern states is an immediate subject to economic developments – locally as well as globally. Hence, it is plausible to assume that economic news coverage is an indispensable basis for understanding and interpreting economic processes.

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Especially during periods of economic crisis, when the economic development is perceived as unpredictable and threatening, the media should assume the tasks of reducing the complexity of economic realities and offering appropriate interpretative tools to the recipients (Doyle 2006; Gavin & Sanders 1997; Parker 1997).

Framing theory deals with one possibility to reduce complexity in a news text. Framing describes, simply put, the organization of information according to an organizing and interpretative frame, the “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani 1987, p. 143). In the case of the financial crisis the question arises which organizing and interpretative frames the media provided for the public in order to interpret economic processes and the resulting political decisions. The manner in which the crisis was framed potentially had a major impact on the development of the political debate, but also on the economic development itself. Whether or not a new car will be bought, a house built, or money withdrawn from a bank, all depends on what people expect from the future. And these expectations (partially) depend on the structure of economic media coverage (Boomgaarden, Van Spanje, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese 2011; Goidel, Procopio, Terrell, & Wu 2010; Pruitt, Reilly, & Hoffer 1988; Quiring 2004; Quiring & Weber 2012).

The aim of this study therefore is an accurate analysis of the frames in the economic news coverage at the onset of the financial crisis in 2008.

– Research question 1. In which frames has the media coverage of the financial crisis been embedded? I.e.: How does the media evaluate the consequences of the crisis? How did the crisis even occur? How is crisis management to be carried out? How can future crises be prevented?

However, the examination of the crisis’ media interpretation should not end by simply identifying the existing frames. We are also interested in the temporal dynamics of news frames.

– Research question 2. How did the individual frames develop over time? Which frames have become predominant? Which of them turned out to be marginal? In which parts has the debate changed?

And finally, we examine to which extent inter-media influences can be identified in the coverage.

– Research question 3: How do the individual media outlets influence each other in their interpretation of the crisis? I.e.: Which media outlets actively introduce frames into the media discourse, and which media outlets adapt frames from others?

Framing. Framing as a concept of production and reception of journalistic content

A frame is not only an organizational element for media conveyed information (see Gamson & Modigliani 1987). For journalists and recipients alike, frames
constitute complex cognitive constructs which connect knowledge, and thus have consequences for information transmission and reception: “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion […]” (Gitlin 1980, p. 7). The journalistic technique, which establishes frames as cognitive constructs, is described as follows by Entman: “Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make 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” (Entman 1993, p. 53). However, it should not be forgotten that establishing a frame represents a process which should be considered less as a characteristic of individual articles or news items, but more as something which unfolds in the course of a journalistic discourse as a whole. The entire process uniting the separate components of framing research can be described with Pan and Kosicki: “Framing, therefore, may be studied as a strategy of constructing and processing news discourse or as a characteristic of the discourse itself” (Pan & Kosicki 1993, p. 57).

This process encompasses the media sphere as well as that of the audience. The phenomenon is usually examined on the level of media content, but media content is only a material effect. This is due to the fact that a frame not only has intra-cognitive effects on recipients, but also on journalists. In the latter case, the reception of media content as well as the production of news content is guided by the frames which journalists cognitively apply to decode events and other journalists’ output. The systematic investigation of different research subjects within the framing theory has been considerably facilitated by the process model of framing research (D. Scheufele 1999).

The different stages of the study at hand are situated at different points in the model (Figure 1). At first, the qualitative frame-identification examines the respective frames on the level of journalistic output. Second, the quantitative part of the content analysis delivers insights in the frame building process within the media system. Part of this is the observation in which media these frames have occurred and how their occurrence has changed over time. The third part of the study can be placed in the process model at the stage, which Scheufele vaguely describes as “journalists as audiences” (D. Scheufele 1999). Within the process model, this describes the stage of inter-media feedback. The focus of interest is thus directed at effects which occur when journalists (as recipients of media content) include the intra-cognitive effects of this reception into the media production process (i.e. their own journalistic work), be it deliberately or unintentionally. Thus, it is a process of transferring media frames via cognitive processing of news content by journalists into new media content. We propose to call this mechanism inter-media frame transfer. Despite the rather sizeable amount of research on different aspects of framing, the inter-media frame transfer has hardly been examined at all. The relevant data and the only study exclusively and directly focused