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Senior Thesis Proposal

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**Introduction**

Politicians use mass media as a tool for framing public’s perception in order to gain public’s support for their policies. As media outlets are the primary sources of delivering information, they shape the reader’s knowledge and, thereby they can manipulate and influence public opinion. This study will focus on the Syrian conflict, mainly on the press coverage of the use of chemical weapons. It will compare how this issue was framed by the media in two global powers, the US and Russia, who are playing an important role in the resolution of this conflict. While the US media tends to blame and criticize Bashar al-Assad for the use of the weapons of mass destruction, the Russian press places responsibility with the rebels. Previous studies have examined how media frames an issue, which frames are favored and why, and the extent to which political actors influence media framing, concentrating mainly on the coverage of the Iraq War or the Global War on Terrorism. However, there is a lack of literature that compares framing patterns in two different national media outlets. This study aims to address this gap, both by comparing media frames across national boundaries and by engaging new frames. Comparison of the coverage of similar news stories in the media of two different countries, will allow the identification of concrete relevant frames. This study applies media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005) and generates an original database of primary data, collected from the online archives of selected media outlets. My database relies upon the top nationwide US and Russian newspapers with highest circulation, such as The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, USA Today and Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovskij Komsomolets and Argumenty and Facty. The analysis covers the period between August, 21 of 2013 (Syrian chemical weapon attack) and September, 27 of 2013 (adoption of the U.S./Russian plan for Syrian chemical weapons’ destruction by OPCW).

**Literature review**

Mass media plays a crucial role in the political life of a democratic society. It reports the views and positions of politicians, but, at the same time, it can challenge them. In democratic regimes, citizens are informed through the media of both the ruling party and the opposition position, allowing them to engage in public debates and staying politically active (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). However, to explain the political agenda to average citizens, who do not hold a degree in political science, politicians and journalists frame issues in ways that echo with their audience (D’angelo & Kuypers, 2010). In this research, I will follow the Entman’s definition of “framing”, who argues that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in which a way is to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and /or treatment recommendation for an item described” (Entman, 1999, p.55).

Frames are more likely to be adopted by the public if they resonate with the reader’s own feelings and/or personal values, such as religious beliefs, political partisanship or ideology (D’angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 1999; Scheufule, 1999). The researchers found that following the events of 9/11 the “war” frame towards terroristic groups was more successful than the “crime” frame (Edy & Meirick, 2007), and that this frame transferred across borders. In this frame the Americans saw the support for the military actions in Afghanistan, the Israelis – for their dealing with the Palestinians, the Russians connected it to their strategy towards Chechnya and the Chinese thought of the Falun Gong (D’angelo & Kuypers, 2010). Although cultural, historical and social resonance plays an important role in the public’s perception, the audience adopts portions of the media frames and combines framing elements in unexpected ways (Edy & Meirick, 2007). Lewis and Reese (conducting a study on the journalist’s own perspective) found that journalists have difficulties, defining what the war against terrorism is about (Lewis and Reese 2009). My research will examine the content of the mainstream media outlets and identify which frames were successful and more frequent in the reports, covering the Syrian chemical weapons use, in the US and the Russian mass media.

Callaghan and Schnell (2001, p. 185) emphasize that the political process “has often been defined as the struggle over whose definition will prevail”. For politicians, framing is a possibility to gain public’s support for their policies (Callaghan & Schnell 2001). As public opinion differs with the frame elites choose (Druckman, 2001), the media can influence not only what the audience thinks about the issue but how it thinks about it (Kuypers, 2009). For example, right after 9/11 the newspapers were trying to improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and were often assuring their readers that most Muslims have nothing to do with terrorism (Nacos, 2002). Moreover, they were supporting the protection of rights and civil liberties of Arabs and American Muslims (Nacos, 2002). This framing explains why, according to the surveys, the attacks on 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in London, were followed initially “by sympathy for innocent Muslims defamed by the actions of extremists and targeted by retaliatory hate crimes” (Smith, 2013, p 2). However, later, public’s the public’s views of Muslims have changed and “unfavorable attitudes toward Islam decoupled from the perception that Islam encourages violence in mid - 2006, as right wing media increasingly emphasized aspects of Islam thought to pose a cultural threat” (Smith, 2013, p 2).

The media coverage of the Iraq war raises the question of media dependence. The events in Iraq were reported by the press as scripted by the administration, although the media had conditions for challenging the official position, and “that script seemed bizarrely out of line with observable events” convoluted (Benett et al., 2007; as well as McLeod, 2009, Kamalipour, 2003). Often the issues are presented to the public in episodic, decontextualized and ahistorical ways (Mcleod, 2009), and their coverage is subjected to the influence of the power within the social system (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). The reason why the media fails to challenge government’s position and meet the norms of democratic regimes in which the media should offer equal weight to government and opposition views is partially explained by the fact that media corporations are profit oriented (Gentzkov & Shapiro, 2006, Kamalipour, 2003). Gentzkov and Shapiro argue that firms tend to frame the issue, by distorting the information, so that it coincides with the beliefs of the readers. Gentzkov and Shapiro (2006) explain it by an example of a Bayesian consumer “who is uncertain about the quality of an information source will infer that the source is of higher quality when its reports conform to the consumer's prior expectations.” Kamalipour (2003) adds that the major media in the U.S. is controlled by six massive media conglomerates who seek to maintain their power and domination, as well as satisfy the stock market, increasing the value of its shares by any means. When it comes to Russia, Jonathan Becker (2004) claims that this is a “neo-authoritarian media system”, where main newspapers belong to the government and the Putin administration directly challenges independent media and eliminates any opposition views. This research will examine how the Syrian events were covered in the press of both countries and whether the press challenged the official position or limited itself to shadow the established official line.

**Theoretical Framework**

Most of the studies on media framing and media bias follow a positivist research design. However, there are studies that follow the interpretivist or pragmatic research designs (Norris et al., 2003). While positivist studies examine the way media framing influences public’s perception design (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Edy & Meirick, 2007; Entman, 2004, Gentzkov & Shapiro, 2006; Druckman, 2001), interpretivist studies the way the media chooses to cover and, thereby, frame a certain issue (Barnhizer, 2013; Benett et al., 2007; Lewis & Reese, 2009; McLeod, 2009).

The methodology used in examining the influence of media frames on public perception shows the scholars’ preference for quantitative approach. They focus on the way the frequency of the different frames in the media corresponds to the frequency of their adoption in the public (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Edy & Meirick, 2007; Smith, 2013). Some scholars follow the rational choice approach, claiming that media framing and bias is explained by the tendency of firms to distort information to make it conform with consumers’ prior beliefs, depending on a cost-benefit analysis (Gentzkov & Shapiro, 2006; Kamalipour, 2003), or institutionalist approach, examining how the government passes down the issues to news organizations and public (Druckman, 2001; Entman, 2004; Benett et al., 2007; Kamalipour, 2003). Constructivists, argue that the adoption of specific frames depends on historical and social resonance (D’angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Edy & Meirick, 2007; Kuypers, 2003; Norris et al., 2003).

The scholars that follow a quantitative approach use content analysis examine the dynamics of issue framing (Callaghan & Schnell 2001) as well as descriptive statistics (Edy & Meirick, 2007), while the studies that follow rational choice approach are based on mathematical models and regressions that test consumer’s evaluations of the reports and their prior beliefs (Gentzkov & Shapiro, 2006). Qualitativists either pursue theory building, conceptualizing terms such as “frame”, “propaganda” and “bias” (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; D’angelo & Kuypers, 2010) or use classical qualitative comparative method to examine the extent to which different source of media provide countervailing viewpoints and evidence (McLeod, 2009; Adkins, and Wasburn 2009; Norris et al. 2003). These studies rely mostly on primary data, collected through surveys (Edy & Meirick, 2007; Gentzkov & Shapiro, 2006; Smith, 2013), interviews (Lewis & Reese, 2009) and documents review (Kellner, 2005). Secondary data is less frequent, such as the Vanderbilt Television News Archives Indexes (Entman, 2004).

**Methodology**

This research aims to examine which new frames occurred in the US and the Russian media coverage of the chemical use in Syria. To examine the characteristics of the framing patterns, my study will apply media content analysis, as it allows the examination and identification of meanings of popular discourses. Harold Lassell introduced this specialized sub-set of content analysis to study propaganda and mass media in 1927 (Macnamara, 2005). In order to identify the variables for the coding scheme, I will conduct preliminary readings of texts related to this topic. This exploratory work will help to identify the messages, expressed as words or phrases, and to construct the Coding List (Macnamara, 2005). During the coding I will identify the messages by the presence of similar phrases or symbols. To avoid the distortion of the study, it will include an equally balanced number of messages that support Assad’s responsibility for the attack and that blame the rebels. That will also allow the examination of whether opposition views were reported, as the frequency of appearance of both types of messages in the media will be comparable.

However, this research is subjected to several limitations. The first limitation is that the online media editions may differ from the printed versions and may not contain all the articles. The second limitation is that English versions of Russian newspapers are selective to the content and not all articles, printed in Russian version, are translated. Moreover, the results of the content analysis, conducted on the translations, are not reliable, because Russian words can be translated into English differently. That is why translation can distort the Coding List, and can result in both missing or unrelated synonyms and phrases. To deal with the second limitation, I will provide the coding in English for the articles in the US media and, as a Russian speaker, I will also prepare the coding in Russian for the articles in the Russian press. Then, I will conduct two separate media content analyses, in English and Russian, with detailed translation and explanation of the Russian Coding List.

**Data Collection**

The research will generate an original database of a primary data. It will rely on the articles of the online mainstream media: The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, USA Today, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovskij Komsomolets and Argumenty and Facty . The sampling for the media content analysis in this study will be purposive (Macnamara, 2005) and will include all reports that cover the use of chemical weapons. The research will limit the data to the time period between August, 21 of 2013 (Syrian chemical weapon attack) and September, 27 of 2013 (adoption of the U.S./Russian plan for Syrian chemical weapons’ destruction by OPCW).

**Structure and Timeline**

The research will be divided into 8 chapters. The first chapter, Introduction, will justify the importance of the research and explain the selection of a case study. The second chapter will contain analysis of the relevant literature and theoretical concepts. The third chapter will explain how the media content analysis method is conducted and data collection. Chapters five and six will be devoted to a detailed explanation of the identified messages and the coding scheme for the US press and the Russian press respectively. The findings will be analyzed, compared and discussed in chapter seven. Conclusion will be the last chapter, where the findings will be summarized and the contribution will be stressed. The thesis will be written in the spring semester of 2014. The exploratory work will be done by the second week of February. The Coding List will be constructed by the second week of March and the media content analysis will be performed by the end of March. The findings will be analyzed, discussed and compared by the middle of April. The final draft will be written by the end of April.

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