Introduction

Immigration has become one of the most contested political issues in many Western countries. It is fiercely debated among political elites and the general public alike. In this constellation, the role of mass media is widely discussed, both as a bounded arena in which certain actors can put forward claims on the issue, as well as an institution that actively participates and shapes the debate. Due to processes such as gatekeeping and framing, mass media determine to a considerable extent when and what citizens learn about the immigration issue.

In this chapter, I focus on the role of the media in the debate on immigration and integration and discuss various perspectives in the literature. The focus will be first of all on the content of media coverage, how it can be analysed and what features seem to be most prominent. Second, it looks at the causes of (variation in) coverage – describing the attempts made by various actors to influence the media debate, as well as more structural factors and journalistic routines that constrain those actors in their attempts. And third, it discusses the consequences of the coverage, both for politics (and policy) as well as public opinion, employing a media effects perspective.

As will become clear throughout this chapter, media coverage is clearly an exponent of the cultural context in which it comes about – and effects depend on the (political) context as well. It is thus not surprising that both content and consequences are different in Europe compared to other parts of the world, and most notably the United States, though they differ across Europe a lot as well. While theories on causes, content and consequences of media effects are generic in nature and it might thus be an overstatement to talk about ‘a European perspective’ on immigration and media, we do see that some scientific questions get more attention in the European context than elsewhere. Foremost, the question of what impact media content characteristics have on support for anti-immigrant parties is often studied in the European context. Furthermore, also the political effects of immigration news (for example in terms of parliamentary response) are relatively well documented in the European context.

A political communication perspective

Political communication essentially deals with the interactions between politics, media and the public. It is the communication and behaviour of those three entities that is key in understanding
the evolvement of key political issues in current mediatized societies. A central role can be attributed to mass media: it is the most important source of information for the general public and its opinions, attitudes and (electoral) behaviour is strongly affected by it. And while the rise of the Internet and in particular social media is altering the interactions between politicians, journalists and citizens, traditional media keep playing a key role in opinion formation and political decision making processes. It is not hard to think of examples where images of immigrants in traditional media, either as victims of wars abroad or as rational fortune hunters, have moved public opinion – directly, but also indirectly, by being shared widely on social media.

Taking a functional perspective, the role of media can be considered two fold (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016): on the one hand, they have an information function, providing other actors with facts, opinions and background stories that affect opinion formation. On the other hand, media can be considered an arena that offers other actors, such as politicians, pressure groups, social movements, experts and ordinary citizens a platform. In both instances, the ‘carrying capacity’ of media is limited (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988): not every fact and opinion can and will be published. Selection and gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) determine the actual content, favouring certain events and sources over others. Since this content can affect both politicians and citizens alike, it assigns a certain degree of influence, and thus responsibility, to the individual journalist as well. Especially when it comes to politically contested issues, such as immigration, the struggle for attention is fierce and editorial and journalistic choices matter.

Methodologically, studies of immigration and media rely on a content analysis most of the time, which is not surprising, given the centrality of content characteristics in media effects research. A huge variation in approaches towards content analysis exists – ranging from more qualitative discourse analysis to large-scale, quantitative approaches. Here, I will not go into the discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of each type of study, but focus on key analytical concepts that are used, as well as the main findings. In general, these different types of studies yield overlapping or complementary outcomes.

**Analysing media content**

The content of media can be analysed in many different ways and analyses focus on a wide variety of content characteristics. In the European literature on immigrants and immigration in the news, two approaches can be considered dominant. The first one is a combination of *issue attention* and *framing*. The second is *political claims making*.

**Attention and framing**

Issue attention is the key (independent) variable in agenda setting research. It can be traced back to the sixties, when Cohen (1963, p. 13) captured the essence by stating: ‘the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about’. This indicates that the attention that is devoted to the issue of immigration (compared to other political issues) is a relevant characteristic to investigate. For example for the Dutch situation, Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden (2007) show that attention for immigration and integration in national newspapers increased significantly during the late nineties and early years of this century. This rise of attention is not caused by figures on immigration or asylum seekers, but rather by key events such as 9/11. Also in other European countries, we see an increase in attention for the immigration issue, for example in coverage in the weeks preceding European parliamentary elections (e.g. McLaren *et al.*, 2017; Schlueter and Davidov, 2011).
General media attention to the immigration issue does not tell anything about questions such as how immigrant groups are portrayed, or which elements are central in the media coverage. If we focus on the salience of specific aspects, or interpretations, of topics, the concept of framing is often used. In communication science, but also in other social science areas, framing has become a tremendously popular concept to analyse the communication on a wide variety of political and societal issues. Immigration is no exception. In the seminal definition of Robert Entman (1993, p. 53), framing entails ‘the selection of 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 for the item described’. While this definition is widely cited, the actual conceptualization and operationalization differs considerably across different studies. Most studies relating to immigration take an ‘issue specific’ approach (De Vreese, 2005), which means that they identify and study frames that are unique for the topic at hand. One of the first studies that describes media debates on the issue of immigration and minority integration is by Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007) who analyse the coverage in Dutch national newspapers from 1995 until 2004. They identify five frames, including an emancipation frame that focuses on the empowerment of minorities through education and labour and the Islam-as-a-threat frame. They show that the latter dominates in coverage and especially after 9/11 a majority of articles contains this frame. Also other studies find that negatively valenced frames dominate coverage, for example in single-country studies of the United Kingdom (McLaren et al., 2017) and Belgium (Jacobs et al., 2016), in which immigrants are presented as a threat to the host society or related to issues such as crime and unemployment. The cross-national study of Helbling (2014) provides a somewhat different picture. In a content analysis of quality newspapers in six countries for the period 1999–2006, he reveals that the most dominant frame present is a moral-universal one, focusing on aspects such as fairness, equality and human rights. Differences in those findings compared to other studies might be traced back, at least partly, to different methodological choices as how to measure frames and also to material selection and what outlets are included. Additionally, Helbling focuses on actor-level statements to determine the framing, while most other studies take the whole article as their point of reference.

The studies discussed above all make a quantitative analysis of media content, covering periods of several years in the past decades and demonstrating considerable changes. In (often) more qualitative research the idea of discourse is used as a guiding principle to provide a deeper understanding into (media) debates. Clearly overlapping with framing, (critical) discourse analysis seeks to provide a (even more) detailed account of the debate and the multiple interpretations that can be attributed to it. In relation to the immigration topic, studies focus for example on differential expressions of denial of racism in press reports (Van Dijk, 1992), (negative) categories of representation of asylum seekers (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008) and the (re)definition of national identity in times of increasing influx of immigrants (Triandafyllidou, 1999). For Italy, Sciortino and Colombo (2004) show that during the period 1969–2001 the press focused mainly on the economic participation of illegal immigrants, more than on criminalization.

In a qualitative account of family migration in the Netherlands, Bonjour and Schrover (2015) reveal that media debates from the sixties until the nineties of the previous century throughout time contain ‘drama scenarios’ as well as ‘crisis scenarios’. In the first case, the emphasis is on individuals and the personal consequences they suffer from certain policies, while in the latter case, attention shifts to the (high) numbers, illegality and crime. There is no systematic trend in one scenario becoming more dominant over the other – it seems rather a case-specific affair.


**Political claims making**

The second approach to analyse media content is political claims making, as has been proposed by Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (1999). While many attention and framing studies (though not all) consider media to be an institution that follows routines and also has an independent influence on politics and public opinion (in line with the earlier information function), the claims making approach puts more emphasis on the media as a platform, or arena, in which political and societal actors put forward their opinions and views. Key concepts in the claims making framework are visibility, resonance and legitimacy. Visibility deals with how often a certain claim can be found in media coverage, resonance with the degree to which other actors respond to that claim and legitimacy with the extent to which they do so in a supportive manner. While the political claims making approach is not confined to immigration and immigrants, it has been widely applied to this issue (see e.g. Statham and Geddes, 2006; van der Brug et al., 2015). Most notably, the book *Contested citizenship* (Koopmans et al., 2005) provides an elaborate account of the debates on immigration and citizenship in several Western-European countries in the nineties. The analysis reveals considerable differences in the presence and types of claims of the general debate on the immigration issue, as well as those that specific immigrants and immigrant groups make. For example, in Germany, a lot more claims relating to the connection to the homeland are brought forward, compared to Great Britain and the Netherlands.

**Media content as a dependent variable**

While descriptions of media content might be interesting as such, understanding variation in coverage, as well as its impact on politics, policy and public are key. When it comes to explaining the content of immigration coverage, it is useful to first of all identify structural characteristics of the news making process that have an impact on the coverage and have a wider, more general application beyond the immigration issue. Here, gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013) and news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) play an important role. For example, negativity and conflict are important news values. It does not come as a surprise that frames that include those aspects are likely to receive more attention, as for example the ‘Islam-as-a-threat’ frame in the Roggeband and Vliegenthart study. Additionally, when it comes to the question of who is allowed to bring forward his or her perspective on the issue, mechanisms such as indexing (Bennett, 1990) play an important role: the more political power an actor has, the easier it is to access the media arena and bring forward his or her point of view. This might for example explain the relatively small presence of minorities themselves in many of the debates, especially in those countries where they are weakly organized and/or less-well represented in politics (Koopmans et al., 2005).

While general news selection processes are important to keep in mind when trying to understand the nature of coverage, it is in many instances more interesting to look at factors that help to account for differences in coverage. Here, it is useful to distinguish in differences occurring due to (1) temporal variation, (2) structural characteristics (i.e. cross-national differences) of the context in which reporting takes place, as well as (3) cross-outlet differences: not all media report in a similar way about political issues. Finally, also (4) attempts by politicians and other actors to influence the debate are worth considering.

Starting with over-time dynamics, the past two decades have shown considerable variation. Empirical results show that both the attention for and the framing of the issue is not so much affected by immigration numbers (Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2007), but to some extent
by policy changes (Bonjour and Schrover, 2015). More clearly, however, it seems that events have played a key role in the shaping of the media debate. As Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden (2007) and Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007) show, the 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in London and Madrid increased the attention to the issue, and shifted the framing in the direction of threat-framing.

Second, structural characteristics also matter. In their claims making analysis, Koopmans and colleagues (2005) argue that national citizen policies and configurations to a large extent determine the discursive opportunity structure, and ultimately the content of the coverage. They show that, for example, the German immigrant policies that emphasized it not to be an immigrant country, resulted in minorities that made considerably more claims relating to connection to the home country, compared to, for example, the Netherlands and France.

Third, it is attractive to talk about ‘the’ media, as if it is a homogeneous, singular entity that has no variation across different channels. While many of the selection mechanisms work similarly for different outlets and channels, this does not mean that coverage is homogeneous. Different media can differ substantially in their coverage of politics in general, and immigration in particular. Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007), for example, show that popular newspaper Algemeen Dagblad uses the ‘Islam-as-a-threat’ frame most frequently compared to other newspapers, while the progressive quality newspaper de Volkskrant employs the multicultural frame more often than its competitors. Overall, however, in absolute terms differences in framing across outlets are limited. This is in line with the findings of Lawlor (2015), who demonstrates that framing in local newspapers in the United Kingdom and Canada is largely in line with those in national newspapers.

Matthews and Brown (2012) demonstrate that, in 2003, the British tabloid newspaper the Sun systematically and deliberately connected asylum seekers to all kind of negative issues, including terrorism and crime. In that sense, the coverage of immigration and related issues very much follows general patterns of differences across outlets: in countries with a liberal media system such as the United Kingdom (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), commercial pressures urge especially tabloid newspapers to take a negative approach to politics and political issues. The commercial logic has dominated media markets in liberal countries such as the UK for longer periods in time already, while in Democratic-corporatist systems this commercial logic is less widespread and has a shorter history, resulting in coverage of politics and political issues that is more positive and less polarized (see Vliegenthart et al., 2011).

Finally, politicians, but also other societal actors, such as social movements and advocacy groups, try to impact the media debate by bringing forward claims and framing the immigration issue in a certain way. As mentioned, institutional political actors with actual decision power have a larger chance to get their views into the news, as they are preferred by journalists as sources. When applied in a framing context, we see that media indeed follow the debate that takes place in parliament – but according to a particular mechanism: those frames that are already used in the media are the ones that get even more amplified when parliamentarians also use them (Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007).

**Effects of media content on citizens and politics**

Media effects are of key interest in the study of communication processes. These effects can be in multiple realms. Here, the focus is on both political effects – i.e. to what extent does media coverage impact political debates and decisions – as well as on public opinion and voting behaviour.
Starting with the latter, research has focused on effects both at the aggregate level (i.e. general developments in public opinion and electoral preferences), as well on the individual level. On the aggregate level, research has shown that the attention for immigration leads to increasing support for anti-immigrant parties, both in Belgium (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004), and in the Netherlands (Boomgaard and Vliegenthart, 2007). The underlying mechanism is driven by agenda setting and issue ownership: if an issue receives more media attention, it will be more salient among the public as well. In a second step, it becomes a more important consideration when having to decide which party to vote for. Parties who ‘own’ the issue, i.e. are associated with the issue, are the most likely to profit.

In a similar vein, aggregate-level attitudes towards immigrants are influenced by media coverage: in their study on German newspaper coverage, Boomgaard and Vliegenthart (2009) show that immigration problem perceptions are mainly driven by the tone of media coverage. The more positively immigrant actors are portrayed, the less people consider immigration a problem. This effect does depend on contextual factors: the higher the level of immigrants and asylum seekers, the larger the impact of evaluations in the news. Also Schlueter and Davidov (2011) find for Spain that negative media coverage has an impact on natives’ perceived group threat, but that this effect is especially prevalent for those regions in which the immigrant group size is small. The findings of a study by Van Klingeran and colleagues (2015) are partly in line with these findings: in the Netherlands a positive tone in news reports reduces anti-immigrant attitudes. In Denmark, however, such an effect was not found. The authors tentatively suggest that this is due to the larger number of immigrants in the Netherlands, making the Dutch public more sensitive to valenced news coverage. A recent study in the United Kingdom demonstrates a similar impact of media coverage on public concern about immigration (McLaren et al., 2017). McLaren and colleagues find that if immigration is connected to other specific political issues, such as education and the economy, more frequently, it raises public concerns. The authors explain this finding by mentioning the unobtrusive and concrete character of those issues. Attention for immigration in combination with more abstract issues such as legal processes does not evoke any responses from the British public. Media coverage is not only able to impact attitudes, but can also have an effect on behavioural outcomes. In Germany, for example, Koopmans and Olzak (2004) demonstrate that visibility of and support for right-wing violent claims actually increases the number of subsequent violent events targeting asylum seekers. A decade earlier, Brosius and Esser (1995) came to a similar conclusion: their book Eskalation durch Berichterstattung (‘Escalation due to media coverage’) reports how violence against asylum seekers can indeed escalate due to the way journalists report about those incidents. Overall, aggregate-level studies demonstrate a variety of media effects, on attitudes, opinions, as well as behaviour. These findings are collaborated in individual level studies, looking at anti-immigrant attitudes (Bos et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2016) and support for specific policy measures related to immigrants (Bos et al., 2016). The study of Bos and colleagues, for example, employs an experiment to test effects of framing and valence (tone) on support for measures that improve the position of immigrants on the labour market, as well as on more general anti-immigrant attitudes in the Netherlands. First, they demonstrate that valence has an impact on attitudes towards policies to help immigrants, with a positive tone lending more support for such measures. Second, they show that anti-immigrant attitudes are affected by frame use, rather than valence: the use of a multicultural frame decreases anti-immigrant attitudes, while the use of a victimization frame, which describes ethnic minorities by using arguments connected to inequality, disadvantage, foreigners and victims, increases anti-immigrant attitudes. These effects on anti-immigrant attitudes are mediated
by emotional responses of respondents: especially positive emotions such as enthusiasm are of importance in this process. Frames exert an influence on the presence of such emotions, which subsequently affect attitudes towards immigrants (Lecheler et al., 2015). Jacobs and colleagues (2016) find for Belgium that people who use more commercial television news have stronger anti-immigrant attitudes. This commercial news is, compared to the public broadcaster, characterized by more sensational and tabloid-style way of reporting.

**Effects on politics**

Next to effects on citizens, effects on politics are also often investigated. This happens largely from a political agenda setting perspective (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Here, the question is first of all how attention for issues in the media affects subsequent attention for the same issues in politics, for example in parliamentary questions. This topic has generated a lot of attention in recent scholarly work, with many studies focusing on a wide variety of political issues, often including, but without specific interest in, immigration. Several studies do focus specifically on immigration. Vliegenthart and Roggeband (2007) for example demonstrate that political agenda setting effects exist for the immigration issue: more attention for the immigration issue in Dutch newspapers results in more attention for the issue in Dutch parliament, but only to a limited extent. They extend their analysis to frames and find that for certain frames, a media effect exists: for the multicultural frame, for example, they find that increased use in the media arena results in increased presence in the parliamentary realm in the subsequent months. Also van der Pas (2014) focuses specifically on the immigration issue, in both the Netherlands and Sweden. She demonstrates that political parties only respond to media coverage when the ‘framing is right’ – in other words: when the coverage reflects the framing of the issue as brought forward by the party. In this case, that means that impact is present when media coverage of immigration overlaps with the way parties discuss the issue in their party questions and speeches.

In a more recent study, van der Pas and colleagues (2017) look at the extent to which political parties follow certain media while ignoring others, with according to their ideological backgrounds. For the immigration issue, they find that patterns of parallelism indeed still exist. Most notably, they show that the left-leaning newspaper *de Volkskrant* has a stronger impact on the parliamentary behaviour of MPs who belong to political parties that have an electorate that overlaps with the readers of the newspaper. Most of the existing studies focus on media impact on ‘symbolic’ political agenda’s – i.e. those that do not have direct consequences in terms of policy or legislation. An exception is the previously mentioned study by Bonjour and Schrover (2015) who show that the media impact on policy-making increases where there is controversy between decision makers, and decreases where civil servants play a larger role in the decision making process. Also Dekker and Scholten (2017) point to the importance of conflict: in their study of sixteen important events in recent Dutch immigration policies, they find that frame contestation is a necessary condition for media coverage to change immigration policies.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of European research into media content and effects relating to the issue of immigration. In many instances, scholars treat immigration as just an issue that is particularly suitable to test general theories on the causes and consequences of content. And indeed, many general theories such as news selection, gatekeeping, agenda setting and framing are confirmed and in some instances even extended based on those studies. Considering immigration as ‘just’ a political issue, however, glosses over the tremendous importance of the
issue in political and electoral settings across Europe. Fear of immigration was one of the key issues in the campaign leading up to the Brexit referendum in 2016. Furthermore, it accounts to a considerable extent for the rise of populist right-wing parties in many European countries. Migration is an issue where media content and effects matter, more so than with many other political issues. It is therefore all the more problematic that coverage is out of sink with ‘reality’: the attention and framing of the issue is merely a consequence of newsworthy events rather than a reflection of more systematic trends in immigration figures. Similarly, the emphasis on negativity and frames that contain elements such as threat and fear contribute to a view that integration of large groups of minorities has failed, while (statistical) evidence might suggest otherwise.

Future research should be aimed at scrutinizing this distortion further. Additionally, it might also take into account the role of social media, which is altering the media landscape and communication patterns in multiple ways. On the one hand, it might offer disadvantaged or minority groups opportunities to express themselves and reach audiences without the interference of journalists and news selection processes. On the other hand, anti-immigrant opinions and views find a fertile ground on all kind of social media, trickling down to other realms where public debates take place as well.

Finally, it is worth noting that existing research is biased in two respects. First, a vast majority of the research focuses on written texts and hardly on visuals. This often has a clear practical reason: written texts are more easily accessible and widely available in electronic archives, making large-scale longitudinal research a viable option. Still, given the perceived importance of (moving) visuals when it comes to for example refugee crises, they deserve a more prominent place in empirical investigations. Second, it largely focuses on findings from West-European countries. On the one hand, this is not a surprise: it might not only reflect a structural bias in academic research, but also the fact that these countries have in recent history faced a larger influx of immigrants than Eastern European countries. It is worthwhile to extend research to include more of those countries, to get a good grip of the impact of contextual factors on both news production and effects.

References


Media and immigration


