Framing Europe: television news and European integration

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Executive Summary

This book deals with the role of television news in the process of political and economic European integration. Citizens across Europe repeatedly identify television as the most important way of receiving information about European issues. Previous studies exploring antecedents of public opinion about European affairs have largely neglected the role of media in the process of opinion formation, but this study provides evidence that the information provided by television news is a key resource when citizens think about European integration.

The study investigates the production, contents, and effects of the television news coverage of European affairs. The project takes a cross-national comparative perspective and focuses on Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The design is multi-methodological, drawing on interviews with newsmakers, content analyses of news coverage, and experiments testing the effects of television news.

A key concept in the study is framing. Framing implies that journalists make choices in how to package political news and thereby endow some aspects of a topic with greater salience while excluding other information. The study proposes an integrated process model of news framing that investigates the framing process in its totality: the frame-building phase with interaction between newsmakers and sources, frames in the news, and the frame-setting phase assessing the influence of news.

Europe in the Newsroom. Based on interviews with journalists, editors, and Editors-in-Chiefs of the main evening television news programs in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, the organization of the coverage of European affairs, the perceived constraints and challenges in covering 'Europe', the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria were investigated. The most important constraints and challenges perceived by journalists and editors when covering European affairs fall into four areas.

The first ‘distance and time’ refers to the lack of proximity in the EU-decision making procedure where key decisions are taken in power centers such as Brussels, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg. The time span in which decisions are taken at the EU-level is considered a problem in terms of news reporting with
issues put on the agenda and decisions taken months or years later. Time is also considered a challenge with regard to the length of television news. European affairs are perceived to be abstract and complex and these characteristics are difficult to reconcile with the brevity of the television news format. The second challenge is labeled ‘access and terminology’ and relates to the institutions of the EU. These institutions are considered closed and bureaucratic. The terminology used by the Union is perceived as complex and incomprehensible and the access to top politicians and administrators is restricted in comparison with members of the domestic administrations.

The third challenge was identified within the news organizations and is labeled ‘internal disagreement’. Journalists assigned to ‘European’ stories experience editors in the central newsrooms to be critical and difficult to approach with ideas for European stories. This view was reflected in the interviews with editors who acknowledge being restrictive with regard to the volume of EU-stories. The fourth and final challenge emerged from a (perceived) lack of audience knowledge about and interest in European affairs. Audience competences are considerably lower than in the case of domestic politics, leaving journalists with the need to explain and provide additional information so that news stories become too ‘information dense’.

The editorial policy of the different news programs varied, but the approach of all programs was rather ‘pragmatic’ – implying that politics (including election campaigns) are not considered newsworthy per se but that political events and issues compete against other topics in the allocation of time in the news. During the 1999 European Parliament elections all the news programs were pragmatic, but this took different forms. Some news programs chose to (1) neglect the elections due to an editorial assessment of the event as non-newsworthy (e.g., Dutch NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws), or (2) to set their own agenda without paying attention to the political party agenda (e.g., Danish DR TV-Avisen) or (3) to make the anticipated voter apathy a key theme in the coverage (e.g., BBC, ITN, TV2). These findings are contrasted with previous research documenting European broadcasters’ ‘sacerdotal’ approach to politics in which political processes are considered crucial to democracy and therefore newsworthy per se.

Europe in the news. The analysis of news coverage of European affairs included more than 10,000 television news stories in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands and took place during the 1999 European election campaign, EU summits, the introduction of the euro, and a ‘routine’ news period sampled throughout 15 months.

The analysis suggested that the ‘European’ news story is essentially a domestic story. Not only is the majority of actors in European news from the country in
which the news is broadcast, most issues are covered from a domestic angle and focuses on implications of EU issues in the country of the news program. The study suggested that certain news selection criteria not only influenced the choice of topics in the news, but also provide a template for organizing and structuring news stories. In this vein, when European issues are covered in the news this often happens with a strong emphasis on conflict. This presence of the conflict frame suggests that the considerations made by journalists when choosing events and issues for the news are translated into how these are presented in the news. Emphasizing for example political disagreement by framing it in terms of conflict may justify the publication of a news story above and beyond its news value and at the same time provides journalists with a clear conception of how to package and present the news.

Finally, the analysis suggested that EU-related actors in the news are most often not evaluated, but if evaluated then this is consistently negative. The study shows that the evaluation of EU actors is not different from but indeed rather comparable to the evaluation that national politicians receive in the news. The conclusion from previous research that EU news is modestly negatively slanted is sustained, but the important perspective is added that this 'bias' is not structural towards EU actors as an exception, but applies to the evaluation of political actors in the news in general.

Europe in Public Opinion. Experiments were used to address questions about the effects of television news frames. Experimentation is generally superior to other research methods when trying to establish the effect of a variable (e.g., exposure to a certain news frame) on another variable (e.g., interpretation and evaluation of an issue). To address shortcomings in research involving television news, the experiments in this study were conducted in cooperation with a national news program [NOS Journaal] in the Netherlands in order to make use of realistic and professional stimulus material and to be able to embed the experimentally manipulated news story in the natural context of an evening news bulletin.

The first study investigated the effects of the conflict and economic consequences frames, that is news focusing on either, for example, party disagreement on an issue or, for example, the economic implications of an issue. The results from the first experiment show that frames in television news have the ability to direct the thoughts of viewers when thinking about contemporary political issues, such as the enlargement of the EU. Participants who watched a story framed in terms of the potential economic consequences of the enlargement addressed costs, benefits, and financial implications of the enlargement of the EU. Participants who watched the story framed in terms of a conflict be-
tween political party positions expressed thoughts reflecting public and political friction over the issue.

The first experiment also found that a news frame plays an equally important role as core facts of a news story when individuals recap news in their own words. This in turn implies that a news frame, often present in specific textual elements, and often less prominent compared to factual information, carries great importance for the public understanding of political issues.

Analyses of journalism and news suggest an emphasis on the strategic aspects of in political reporting, that is news in which the actions of politicians are interpreted as a means of positioning themselves favorably in public opinion. A second experiment therefore investigated the effects of strategic news coverage of European politics. The study suggested that exposure to strategic news encourages political cynicism. Participants who watched a news story framed in terms of strategy were significantly more cynical in their responses compared to participants who watched a news story focusing on substantive elements of an issue. Politically efficacious individuals were less likely to express cynicism while political knowledge contributed to political cynicism.

The study also suggested that the effects of the strategic frame on political cynicism were not persistent and disappeared over time. However, this experiment is merely a first exploration of effects of strategic news in a temporal perspective and any firm conclusions about the longevity and robustness of effects on cynicism would require a more elaborate research design. Moreover, strategic news activates negative evaluations of a policy issue compared to issue-based news that renders more positive issue evaluations. Finally, strategic news was expected to reduce policy support and depress voter mobilization. However, strategic news did not affect the level of support for EU enlargement nor the intention to vote in, for example, a referendum on the enlargement of the EU.

Taken together, the findings suggest that news media may indeed contribute to political cynicism and negative evaluations of political and economic issues. However, these effects diminish over time in a situation where audiences are not exposed to any new information. The study does not provide any evidence to suggest that the strategic mode of news reporting influences the public support for policies on a routine political topic or that it depresses citizens’ intention to vote. The study suggests that knowledgeable citizens were both more likely to express political cynicism and to evaluate the enlargement issue negatively, but they were at the same time more supportive of EU enlargement plans.

These findings may be seen as an addition to the ‘spiral of cynicism’ argument. Knowledgeable citizens appear to rely more on a frame provided in the news when expressing reactions to an issue. However, this does not imply that a strong attitudinal change takes place. The results of the second experiment therefore suggest that strategic or negative news while increasing cynicism may
play little or no role in mobilizing or demobilizing electors. It also may very well be the case that (European) voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and their support for specific policies.

The concluding chapter discusses the contribution of the study to extant framing literature. The integrated process model of framing is reviewed in the light of pre-existing research, avenues for future framing research in political communication are suggested, and moderators of framing effects are specified. Finally, the conclusion offers some policy relevant comments on how journalism could be improved when reporting EU affairs and it is suggested that the media is a key component when making sense of public opinion about European integration.