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A comparative analysis of online newspaper articles

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ABSTRACT

In European Union citizens are expected to take responsibility and actions to limit the threat of climate change as well as authorities or corporations. However, while only 36 percent of citizens in Lithuania take personal action, 75 percent of British do. In light of framing as media effects theory media coverage can be considered as an explanation for different levels of personal contribution. Based on the latter assumption the online news content in Lithuania and the United Kingdom was investigated in terms of attribution of responsibility to citizens, authorities and industry/corporations. The findings showed that the use of the same frames varies by country and political preferences of media. However, the findings were not explicit enough to prove the one directional relationship between media content and individual level behavior, where media is perceived as having power upon individuals. Contrary, the results showed that social problems guide thematic choices of editorials and therefore individuals have impact on media. As a result, findings raised concerns that the notion of framing as an interactive process would more relevant than the assumption of framing as linear process.

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Introduction

Today climate change is on political, media and individual agendas all across Europe. Political and legislative efforts prove that climate change mitigation is a priority for the European Union. Furthermore, citizens are expected to take responsibility and actions to limit the threat as well. Supranational survey Eurobarometer shows, 63 percent of Europeans say they have taken personal actions to combat climate change (European Commission, 2009). However, the EU as a body of 27 Member States is more diverse than one seeing aggregate level figures could think. For instance, while only 36 percent of citizens in Lithuania take personal action, 75 percent of British do (European Commission, 2009).

The topic of climate change not only has its thematic relevance, but as well scientific. In light of framing theory media coverage can be considered as an explanation for different levels of personal contribution to climate change mitigation among Lithuanians and British. To assess the influence of media portrayals of climate change on individuals, two research questions are developed:

RQ1. To what extent do media frame climate change in terms of attribution of responsibility to industry and corporations, international and national authorities, and citizens themselves?

RQ2. Does the attribution of responsibility to particular actor vary by country: the United Kingdom and Lithuania?

To be more specific, I expect to find that Lithuanian media attribute responsibility to citizens more seldom compare to British media. Moreover, in media coverage in Lithuania attribution of responsibility to citizens should be less visible than attribution of responsibility to authorities or industry. Contrary, in British media attribution of responsibility to citizens should more or equally visible compare to authorities and industry.

The next chapter will provide theoretical framework on which the paper rests. It will be followed by the sections of method, results and discussion.

Literature review

Within the realm of social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, political science and political communication, studies of framing are common. In a way it explains why framing as a concept is rather "scattered", as Entman once referred to it (Entman, 1993, p. 51). However, scientists of different disciplines share the perception that "the function of a frame is to help people organise the complexity of the world into meaningful categories" (Nickels, 2005, p. 21).

Framing as theory can be conceptualized in terms of media effects (e.g. Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele, 2000). Generally, media effects are classified into cognitive, affective and behavioural. Cognitive effects refer to the assumption that how news is presented has influence on what people know or "think about issues, people, and event" (Glynn & Jeong, 2003, p. 634). Affective effects refer to emotional reactions to media coverage. Behavioral effects can be understood as "observable actions that are linked to media exposure" (Perse, 2001, p. 3). What concerns the latter, a widely cited study of Kahneman and Tversky (1984) showed that how a particular issue is framed determines perceptions of problems and subsequent actions upon them (Vliegenthart et al., 2008, p. 419). In view of these considerations, the prominence of framing theory and framing effects studies in the field of communication flows naturally.

In the field of political communication framing effects studies often focus on investigating the relationship between news content and individual perceptions (e.g. de Vreese, 2002). Nickels (2005) argues that partially this is determined by the assumption that "the news is the principal means by which they [i.e., people] experience and learn" (p. 22) about certain issues. A frame in media is "an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic" (De Vreese, 2002, p. 27). The frame works by omitting some aspects and attaching more salience and meaning to others (Entman, 1993, p. 53). The reasoning of selecting of these aspects can be determined by political, media and social context (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004, p. 93). Therefore, media

frames can be defined as “social and cultural indicators” of the particular time (Nickels, 2005, p. 26).

Frames in media can be investigated by “the presence or absence of certain key-words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In general, two main ways to analyze frames can be identified – issue-specific and generic. The former is considered to be a better approach to detect newly emerging frames while the latter is based on the investigation of predefined frames in the text (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Majority of the studies of generic frames focus on the prevalence of one or several frames in media. Attribution of responsibility (e.g. Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999) fall Frames in media can be investigated by “the presence or absence of certain key-words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In general, two main ways to analyze frames can be identified – issue-specific and generic. The former is considered to be a better approach to detect newly emerging frames while the latter is based on the investigation of predefined frames in the text (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Majority of the studies of generic frames focus on the prevalence of one or several frames in media. Attribution of responsibility (e.g. Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999) fall within most commonly investigated generic frames. Valkenburg et al. (1999) defines the attribution of responsibility frame as representing “an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving a problem to the government or to an individual or to a group” (p. 552). The biggest advantage of generic approach enables to detect differences or similarities between certain media (or within it), cross-nationally and over time (Nickels, 2005, p.24). However, generic frames are not suitable to explore the new issues as they are derived from theory

Iyengar (1991) measured how individuals attribute responsibility for social problems after exposure to different content. The research proved that, when television news present issues in terms of individual, people tend to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than government. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) investigated the presence of 5 news frames theoretically derived from prior framing studies: attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality. Media content was analyzed “in the period surrounding the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997” (p. 93). The study unveiled that the attribution of responsibility frame was used the most in news. Moreover it showed that attribution of responsibility was more used in “serious” media both press and television.

Bennet and Iyengar (2008) argues that today with growing opportunities to personalize media content the way people learn about and experience the social world has changed. Therefore, media effects theories have to be reconsidered to go in line with changing social environment. Opponents claim (e.g. Holbert, Garrett & Gleason, 2010), to announce a new era of minimal media effects is too early. Another criticism addressed to framing-effect studies is the commonly used experimental design, which neglects natural environment people live in and questions generalizability of the findings (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 102). Those trying to overcome methodological drawback by comparing media content with survey results agree that “it is difficult to separate out the effects of the media from

other environmental or social influences” (Glynn & Jeong, 2003, p. 633). On the other hand, if effects are proved to be present on individual level under experimental conditions, it is logical to expect them to be present in society at large. To put it in Vliegenthart et al. (2008) words, “this does not imply that all citizens are exposed to (...) news, but that on the aggregate level news coverage has the potential to drive the attitudes of a substantial share of the population” (p. 418). To sum up, despite changing media environment and individual habits towards media use, media still often is a primary “framer” and therefore has the power to set the tone and scope of the discussion about particular issue.

In view of the considerations discussed in this chapter, the present empirical research was based on the assumption that frames in media influence how people think about certain problems and act upon them. To be more specific, that how media frames climate change issue in terms of frame of attribution of responsibility affects individual behavior. As in this study aggregate level public opinion survey’s results will be compared with media content, I am aware that social or other influences will not be encountered.

Method

The main interest of the current study is to find out if media content are capable of explaining, why people in some countries are more likely to take personal actions to fight climate change than others. Therefore, two cases representing significant contrasts in citizens’ behavior were needed – The United Kingdom and Lithuania appeared to comply with the condition (Eurobarometer, 2009). Consequently, the comparative design was chosen as it served the aim of the study best. As Hantrais (1996) defined, the aim of comparative cross-national research is “to seek explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts” (Bryman, 2004, p.53). The design was realized in the form of quantitative content analysis of news websites’ articles in two countries.

The content of news was analyzed in terms of the presence of attribution of responsibility frame. The operationalization of this generic frame was mainly based on measures developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). However, as I was interested, to what extent responsibility is attributed to a particular actor, the frame was divided into three new frames. These are: Attribution of responsibility to international and national authorities, attribution of responsibility to industry and corporations, and attribution of responsibility to citizens themselves. Clusters of four “yes-no” framing questions were used to identify if generic frames are present in analyzed news articles (see Appendix 1).

For framing analysis four news websites were chosen – Guardian.co.uk and Thetimes.co.uk in the United Kingdom, and Lrytas.lt and Respublika.lt in Lithuania. All of them are websites of popular national newspapers: The Guardian and The Times, and Lietuvos rytas and Respublika, respectively. As the online and traditional versions of newspapers share the content, it can be estimated that information reaches young and older, online and traditional newspaper readers at national level in both countries. Furthermore, it was estimated that political leaning of newspapers can influence the findings. According to traditional division of newspapers by political affiliation, Guardian.co.uk and Respublika.lt was chosen as leaning to left, and Thetimes.co.uk and Lrytas.lt – as leaning to right. The period of investigation is from 2009 July 1 till 2009 August 1. The choice of the period was determined by the fact that the survey on European’s attitudes towards climate change (Eurobarometer,

2009) was conducted in 2009 August-September. Therefore, the period had to be prior to survey fieldwork. Only articles with the main topic of climate change/climate change mitigation were selected for framing analysis. In total media sample consisted of 135 articles. However, media coverage varied by country meaningfully: N=26 in Lithuania and N=109 in the United Kingdom.

Although chosen research design is consistent with the aim of the study, it also has several drawbacks that must be considered. Firstly, small media sample may lead to biased results as media coverage was restricted to two news websites in each country. Secondly, the study period of month does not allow measuring the presence of frames in changing political and social environment throughout longer period of time. To put it in other words, the findings show one-time situation. As a result, I am aware that generalization of research outcomes is limited.

Results

The results of content analysis showed that the frame of attribution of responsibility to citizens in Lithuanian media is more present than in British media (see Table 1), contrary to initial expectations. The most present frame in both countries appeared to be attribution of responsibility to international or national authorities. The Lithuanian media was more likely to use this frame and exclusively attributed responsibility to international authorities. The British media paid more attention to attribution of responsibility to industry and corporations than Lithuanian.

The findings confirmed that political affiliation plays an important role in presenting climate change issue. Left leaning websites (Respublika.lt and Guardian.co.uk) appeared to be more likely to attribute responsibility to citizens than left leaning (Lrytas.lt and Thetimes.co.uk). In Respublika.lt 63 percent and in Guardian.co.uk 28 percent of articles contained the latter frame, while only 17 percent in Thetimes.co.uk and none in Lrytas.lt did. Right leaning news sites considerably more discussed climate change issue in terms of attribution of responsibility to international and national authorities than left leaning.

To sum up, the media coverage does not seem to be directly related to behaviour: In Lithuania, where citizens are less likely to combat climate change personally, the frame of attribution of responsibility was more present than in British media. In this case, the personal behaviour in relation to climate change mitigation seems to be a reason for a bigger or smaller media attention rather than a cause of citizen's behaviour.

Discussion

As is evident from the last chapter, the use of frames of attribution of responsibility in news sites varied by country. However, the variation was not consistent with initial expectations. In terms of presence of attribution of responsibility frame results were opposite than expected: In Lithuania the media attributed responsibility to citizens more than media in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the media cannot be considered as a main factor determining low citizens' involvement in climate change mitigation in Lithuania and high involvement of people in the United Kingdom. In this case the direction of influence is likely to be from individuals to media. Low awareness of climate change mitigation at individual level in Lithuania encourages media editorials to address the problem. As the latter problem is not present in the United Kingdom, the frame of attribution of responsibility to individuals is less present in media. Furthermore, the results go in line with criticism of framing as a one way-communication model. As

Nickels (2005) noted, "the framing process (...) is more likely to be an interactive process of negotiation where political, media and public actors have different measures of framing power"(p. 32). From this point of view, a relationship between media and individuals should be investigated as an interactive process of negotiation about climate change. In light of such an approach the power of framing of different actors could be assessed more accurately.

Both Lithuanian and British media mainly discussed how climate change is tackled at political level while the role of citizens and industry and corporations received considerably less attention. The prominence of attribution of responsibility to authorities frame should not be surprising considering policy priorities of the EU. Firstly, the European Union is said to play an important role as "the international agenda setter in relationship to climate change mitigation" (Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007, p. 19). Secondly, during the last twenty years the EU managed to turn the encouragement to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions into legislation. Furthermore, the comparison by political preferences of news websites shows that political affiliation strongly influences the content. Climate change mitigation in terms of citizens' behavior in left leaning websites was presented more often than in right leaning. The latter news sites concentrated more on attribution of responsibility to authorities. In total, right leaning news are more balanced according to the frequency of the whole three frames use. Therefore, findings prove a tight relationship between politics and media.

The main limits of the study appeared to be related to methodological concerns. A short period of investigation at one particular time does not let to assess if findings can be generalized or they represent only a particular case. Another drawback is that aggregate level data on citizens' behavior in relation to climate change mitigation was compared to media content of small sample. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the aim of the study to increase media sample and investigate how changes in media correspond with changes in public opinion/behavior over time. This could be considered as a future research direction in terms of methodological improvements.

Besides the information related to the aim of the study, the investigation showed that Lithuanian media uses the frame of attribution of responsibility in context of international affairs: The role of national or local authorities was not mentioned in media once. Contrary, British media paid more attention to national government's policies related to climate change. As the EU is instrumental in climate change mitigation, it would be intriguing to explore how successful is the EU in setting climate change issue on political agendas of new Member States, i.e. what role governments play in climate change mitigation. Furthermore, media sample of climate change related articles in the United Kingdom appeared to be five time bigger than in Lithuania. Consequently, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent the climate change issue is present compare to the total content media in different countries.

In light of media frames the study to show that the use of the same frames varies by country and political preferences of media. However, in light of framing effects the empirically collected data was not explicit enough to shed light on connection of citizens' attitudes and subsequent actions and media content. The study unfolds the need encounter cultural, economic and political differences, as well as the interactive notion of framing process participants.

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