Contents

Book review

Nicoleta CORBU*
Raluca BUTUROIU**
Flavia DURACH***

Framing the Refugee Crisis in Online Media:
A Romanian Perspective

Abstract

The European Union (EU) is under severe pressure, due to the multiple crises it has to manage. Among them, the refugee crisis is remarkable, since it is shaking both the individual member states and the EU as a whole. The media coverage of the refugee crisis is important because the media still are the main source of information concerning distant issues (the refugee crisis included), and as such it facilitates people's access to social reality. Using the perspective of agenda-setting and the conceptual background of framing theory, we aim to (1) identify the most prominent frames online media employ with reference to the refugee crisis, and (2) reveal the tone of voice online media use when portraying issues related to this crisis. To achieve these two goals, we content analyzed 1493 online news articles, published between April 15, 2015 and February 29, 2016.

Main findings show that online media outlets mainly refer to the refugee crisis in terms of responsibility and conflict, in this order of prominence. At the same time, online media portals prefer using a reasonably balanced viewpoint when portraying the refugees, and a slightly negative one in terms of attitudes towards the European Union.

Keywords: online media coverage, generic frames, tone of voice, EU refugee crisis

Introduction

Issues related to refugees and the refugee crisis have been highly debated in many European Union countries over recent years (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). One explanation refers to the implications of the increasing waves of refugees who found shelter in the EU, leading to the refugee crisis, often portrayed as the second most important crisis at the EU level, after the financial crisis from 2008. The most severe implications include the continuous degradation of positive public attitudes towards refugees (i.e., the positive attitudes of compassion, solidarity, and empathy have quickly turned into aversion, disruption, and apathy); the widespread feelings of insecurity associat-

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, nicoleta.corbu@comunicare.ro.

** National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, raluca.buturoiu@comunicare.ro.

*** National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, flavia.durach@comunicare.ro.

ed with the refugee crisis; and, as a consequence, the rise of populist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties across the EU. The media have an important role to play in this dynamic.

Previous research studies show that the media are people's main means of information, especially with reference to topics to which people do not have direct access (Strömbäck et al., 2011). The media function as a "window" to the world, in the sense that they offer the order of priority of real-life events, the objects, the associated attributes, and their interpretation as well. Therefore, by offering people the most important topics of discussion and the main frames of interpreting those topics, the media also function as a "guide". First, they attract people's attention, second, they provide a certain direction towards that topic, and, then, they cultivate people's opinions and attitudes about that specific topic. It is against the background of these well documented roles of the media that our research unfolds.

The aim of the present article is twofold: (1) to explore the online media framing, and (2) to determine the tone of voice used with reference to the European refugee crisis. We start from the existing literature which shows that the media coverage of EU-related topics, and the tone of voice used by the media to cover issues referring to the EU largely influence public perceptions and attitudes towards the refugees and the refugee crisis. We calibrated this study on the basis of the third-level agenda-setting theory and framing theory. Its focus is to reveal the way online media frame the refugee crisis (i.e., which are the main attributes online media associate to the crisis), and the way online media cover the crisis in terms of attitudes towards the refugees and attitudes towards the EU. This theoretical setting allowed us to identify some important characteristics of the online media coverage of the refugee crisis which could further explain changes in people's attitudes towards the crisis.

1. Media coverage of the European refugee crisis

Both theoretical and empirical studies so far suggest that the media play an important role in modern and complex societies, mainly due to the fact that the citizens are dependent on the information provided by the media (Machill, Beiler, & Fischer, 2006, p. 173). The media can either "lead or follow public opinion" (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017, p. 968), meaning that there is a permanent renegotiation of roles among the entities (i.e., the media, the policymakers, and the public) involved in the process of public opinion formation. However, the role of the media not only as a source of information, but also as a source of interpretation of events cannot be neglected (also see Milioni, Spyridou, & Vadratsikas, 2015).

The media coverage of EU-related topics has been recurrently studied from various points of view, such as the visibility of EU-related news stories (de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), or the type of news coverage (de Vreese, 2007; Norris, 2000; Schuck & de Vreese, 2012). Such studies suggest two relevant connections: (i) the greater the visibility of EU-related topics in the media, the higher people's knowledge about the EU; (ii) the more negative the tone of the news about the EU, the more negative the public evaluations of the EU (see also Menéndez Alarcón, 2010).

Studies on European migration topics emphasize the fact that the media coverage (i.e., media framing and media's tone of voice) "can influence public opinion, promote various interpretations of the immigration system […], or cue specific considerations, including legitimacy, 'need', and security" (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017, p. 968). In other words, the way in which migrants and refugees issues are described, categorized and represented has a great importance,

especially when it is done by news media "whose 'cultural authority' is premised upon speaking truth to power and representing the world of events to us" (Berry et al., 2016, p. 13). The media coverage and interpretation of topics related to refugees actively contribute to people's understanding of events – what the events are about, and how people should further relate to them (for an overview of social representations of refugees and the refugee crisis in the media, see Bleich, Bloemraad, & de Graauw, 2015; Horsti, 2008; Licata & Klein, 2002; Mengistu & Avraham, 2015). As Strömbäck et al. (2011, p. 161) show, "what the media cover and how they cover it thus become highly important". According to results from studies on agenda-setting, framing and priming, the media can have a strong influence over what topics people consider important (i.e., the first-level agenda-setting or the order of priorities of events), and how people evaluate and perceive issues, actors and events (i.e., the second and third-level agenda-setting) (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). Indeed, the media provide the information which citizens use to understand the world and find their place within it (Berry et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that not only the presence and visibility of the topic make a difference, but also the tone of news coverage: "evaluative media content is an important parameter for assessing the nature of public debates, because evaluative media content provides important cues for citizens' perception of the EU" (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006, p. 483). According to Berry et al. (2016), research developed in many EU countries confirms that refugees are more likely to be referred to in a negative manner, as a problem, rather than as a benefit to host countries. The negative evaluations of the refugees in the media often lead to negative evaluations from the public (Menéndez Alarcón, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are occasions when the media can have a positive impact on public attitudes and policy. Positive references to refugees in the media are often associated with less concern about immigration among people (Berry et al., 2016; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). In other words, the media coverage of sensitive topics (such as the refugee crisis) might explain the shifts in public opinions and attitudes, and might give some clues about the emergence and development of decisions and behaviors at a societal level (e.g., "unexpected" voting results or the rise of populist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties).

2. Third-level agenda-setting and framing

Some of the most recent studies referring to media and communication effects identify a new theoretical approach, namely the third-level agenda-setting or the network agenda model (Guo, 2012; Guo & McCombs, 2016). According to this rather new model of influence, the media are responsible for offering people the topics of discussion (i.e., the objects), their attributes and their interpretation, as well as the way topics are associated with each other: "the news not only tells us what to think and how to think, but also determines how we associate different messages to conceptualize social reality" (Guo, 2016, p. 3). The hypothesis behind this new model of influence is that "the salience of media networks of objects and attributes influences the salience of the networks of these elements among the public" (Guo, 2016, p. 5). In other words, the third-level agenda-setting model suggests that media's influence might not be limited only to offering people topics of discussion, the order of priorities (first-level agenda-setting), and a direction of interpreting events (second-level agenda-setting). This new model suggests that media's influence goes further, shaping or reshaping people's cognitive network.

The main aspect that characterizes the third-level agenda model is that the representations in "people's heads" are based on images following a network-like structure; unlike the other two ramifications of the agenda-setting theory, the network agenda model states that the media influence not only the objects and their associated attributes, but also the relationship between the objects themselves. In other words, the network agenda model has deep implications, suggesting that the media play an important role in configuring the way people think and how they think about certain events (Guo, 2014). The implications of the theory have been empirically tested and there is sufficient ground to argue in favor of a third-level of agenda-setting effects. Studies emphasize the idea that the more prominent the simultaneous association between certain objects and attributes in the media, the more likely the public perceive them as strongly linked together (Meraz, 2016; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014).

In what regards the framing theory, researchers tend to agree with each other that the media offer, through framing an event or an issue, a certain direction of understanding , in the sense that they might change the way people might understand that specific event or issue (de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2011; Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008; Matthes, 2008). Starting from the classic definition of frames and framing proposed by Entman (1993), the media have the ability to select some aspects from the reality and make them salient in a communication context. Therefore, by emphasizing some aspects and ignoring others, the media guide people's perceptions on a specific topic. Following the same line, other classic views suggest that media frames are "a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3).

In real-life media contexts, there is a high probability that media frames differ in terms of typology. Therefore, the exposure to different media frames could cause different effects. Theoretical studies show a rather clear distinction between generic and issue-specific news frames and their effects on audiences (Carter, 2013; de Vreese, 2005, 2012; de Vreese et al., 2011; Iyengar, 1990). On the one hand, the generic news frames might go beyond thematic constraints, being used for an entire set of topics. On the other hand, the issue-specific news frames are suited for individual or particular situations and events (de Vreese, 2005).

The generic approach to media frames enables generalizations and conclusions that "transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural contexts" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). Specifically, generic news frames facilitate the comparisons among similar topics and, thus, contribute to the creation of associative networks among connected theories. In this context, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five types of generic news frames: (1) responsibility frame; (2) conflict frame; (3) morality frame; (4) economic consequences frame; (5) human interest frame (for details regarding the types of questions used in order to identify each of these frames, see the Appendix).

Theoretical studies prove the existence of two main ways of identifying news frames, irrespective of their typology. The deductive approach refers to "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, by using such an approach, researchers try to find out if certain pre-defined ideas are recognizable in a news story. This type of news frame identification is considerably safer than the inductive one. The latter "refrains from analyzing news stories with a priori defined news frames in mind" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53).

Empirical studies so far underline the idea that these five generic frames are widely used by the media with reference to a wide variety of topics (Asker Guenduez, Schedler, & Ciocan,

2016; de Vreese et al., 2006; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, due to the rather few studies on the media coverage of European migration and because of the novelty of the issue, both the way media frame the refugee crisis, and the tone of voice used in portraying the refugees and the EU are still subject to examination. Therefore, this research paper aims to investigate the online media coverage of the refugee crisis (i.e., the most prominent frames used by the media and the tone of voice used for covering issues related to the crisis), in an attempt to understand the emergence and development of public attitudes towards the refugee crisis.

Specifically, this research paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How was the refugee crisis framed in Romanian online media?

RQ2. Were the most prominent topics about the refugee crisis framed similarly or differently in the Romanian online news?

RQ3. What was the tone of voice used in Romanian online news regarding the European refugee crisis?

RQ4. Was the tone of voice of the most prominent topics about the refugee crisis similar or different from the rest of the news, in terms of attitudes towards the refugees and attitudes towards the EU?

3. Methodology

Method

This study proceeded from a content analysis of the online news concerning the refugee crisis in the period April 15, 2015 – February, 29, 2016. The online media outlets were chosen based on the number of unique visitors during this time period (reported by SATI, the Romanian media audience measurement agency): two news portals, hotnews.ro and ziare.com, and two online newspapers, adevarul.ro and gandul.info. TV news sites were not considered for this study. Only news concerning the refugee crisis were content analyzed. Archives of the news outlets and 21 keywords covering the semantic field of the refugee crisis (such as refugee, migrant, quotas, asylum, etc.) were used to identify all relevant pieces of news for the topic. A total number of 1493 news stories were coded: hotnews.ro (n=376), ziare.com (n=367), adevarul.ro (n=436), and gandul.info (n=314). Coding was performed manually by four native speakers, graduates of a College of Social Studies in Romania. The intercoder reliability tested on a subsample of 30 articles yielded satisfactory results for both frames (.76) and tone of voice (.88).

Framing measures

To assess the extent to which a frame appeared in a news story we used an adapted scale from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Thus, five generic frames were measured, using 18 questions to which the coder had to answer with "yes" (1) or "no" (0). The answers were afterwards grouped into scales for the five generic frames typically used in news analysis: responsibility, conflict, morality, economic consequences, human interest (for full scales, see Appendix). We used Cronbach's alphas (according to Kuder-Richardson 20 method for dichotomous data) to measure the internal consistency of the five scales. Thus, alpha values were: responsibility .822 (5 items), conflict .753 (4 items), morality .811 (3 items), economic con-