Crossing the Border: The Framing of Global Migration by National News Media

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Abstract

Migration is a human experience that brought civilization to every corner of the globe. However, its modern manifestation threatens stability, human rights, resources, and security. For those outside migration’s immediate reach, the news media is the source for public understanding of its flows and consequences. Through a cross-national comparison, this study investigated how different national news media frame migration to their audiences. Examining recent online news publications from the United States, Germany, and Spain, this study concluded that national news media construct multiple frames of migration, maintain a significantly international focus, and often emphasize their discontent with national governments’ handling of migration issues.

I. Introduction

Human migration is one of the greatest issues facing today’s society. Driven by violent conflict, social strife, poverty, and political turmoil, migration creates questions about the distribution of jobs, space, and resources, the cost of education and health care, and the security of national borders. It also challenges preconceived notions of nationality and belonging, as well as community traditions and culture. Migration, though, is only a symptom of many problems plaguing societies around the world, and because of its significant social impacts, it will continue to be a concern at the forefront of international discussion.

Today, not a single area of the world goes unaffected by human migration, nor has any nation gone untouched by flows of migration in the past. Once the hub of emigration, Europe is now facing one of the most dramatic episodes of immigration in modern history as millions of immigrants flee conflicts in the Middle East or search for economic opportunities outside of Africa. Across the Atlantic, the United States struggles with its own immigration issues, as it tries to secure its southern border against illegal migration from Latin America.

The migration crisis is a worldwide phenomenon and a megatrend of the 21st century, evidenced by the 244 million migrants who were accounted for in 2015 (United Nations, 2016). Unsurprisingly, global news media have focused heavily on the rapidly emerging flows of migration over the past decade, simultaneously chronicing global human migration and its wide-reaching consequences. The coverage of news media has driven migration to the forefront of regional, national, and international news on a daily basis.

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As a cornerstone to free and democratic societies around the world, journalism strives to educate citizens on current public affairs and issues in order to create informed participants and voters in public discussion (Aalberg, Aelst, & Curran, 2010). Journalism empowers communal dialogue by shaping out perception of events, as suggested by agenda setting and framing theories. The news media, and the journalists who construct it, are critical components to the public's understanding of the issues facing international leaders, policymakers, and their own communities. The global migration crisis has dominated headlines as more and more journalists bear witness to the experiences of millions of migrants and of the hundreds of communities they are arriving in. For those living outside of destination countries, the media's construction of immigration issues is crucial to the public's understanding of these topics because the public's lack of firsthand experience. This paper examined how national news media in the United States, Germany, and Spain framed these narratives for their audiences.

II. Literature Review

Research into the media is increasingly popular today, particularly cross-national comparisons of news media and news cultures, as technology has facilitated faster, wider reaching communication to broader publics. Advances in technology have also enabled the creation of new media formats and new avenues for citizens and non-journalists to communicate their opinions online. These novel territories in the field of communications have sparked plentiful research into the study of journalism ethics in light of new channels for reaching publics, into studies of comparing the validity of online and print journalism, and into cross-national comparisons of competing models of journalism.

A recurring theme throughout this field of research is framing theory, which suggests that how journalists frame an issue, event, topic influences the choices that people make about how to process that information (Davie, 2014). Framing theory examines how journalists and the media focus attention on certain events and then place them within a field of meaning. Although closely tied to agenda-setting theory, which describes the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media, framing theory goes beyond it by claiming that the way in which news is presented creates a "frame" for perceiving that information (Davie, 2014). Journalists and broadcasters place "frames" on the information they convey to the public, not only telling their audiences what to think about (agenda setting), but also how to think about it (framing) (Davie, 2014).

Framing theory is crucial to the study of communications, especially in a cross-national setting, because the frames which journalists create reflect what they believe is most valuable to their audience and what narrative their audience is most likely to identify with and internalize. According to Goffman (1986), frames are abstractions that people use to organize and structure message meaning in their everyday lives, and the frames that they internalize greatly influence how data is interpreted, processed, and communicated (Davie, 2014). With an issue like human migration, which affects the lives of billions of people, the frames that the media presents to the public have the potential to influence how citizens vote on immigration policy, how citizens welcome and treat immigrants, and how citizens understand the problems that migrant trends stem from.

Recent research into cross-national studies of communication has revolved around the comparison of content between the United States and the nations of Europe, as both are similar in terms of development, economics, and politics. Deuze (2002) stressed the importance of choosing "more or less similar countries" when conducting a cross-national comparison of journalists because if not, "the societal and corresponding media cultural influences" would better explain differences of journalists than journalists themselves do (p. 135). The research comparing and contrasting the two regions has tended to focus on a particular topic, such as political elections or the commercialization of online media. The cross-national comparisons of individual news media in different countries will help people understand how each country's media covered immigration differently because domestic media share "enduring, deeply embedded practices and beliefs established at the formation of [each nation's] journalistic field," (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, and Zambrano, 2012, p. 23).

Benson et al. (2012) also explained "medium theory" within communications, which describes how each medium will tend to encourage or "afford" particular types of "meaning making" and will discourage others. Medium theory reflects cross-national comparisons of media systems because it can be used to
hypothesize why there are competing tendencies toward an emphasis on commercialization and information in the news, or a greater emphasis on opinion and deliberation in the news. For example, in a recent study coding the front pages of both print and online versions of general interest national newspapers, they concluded that the prevalence of news decreased when moving from print to online both in the United States and France, alluding to the trend of journalism becoming more entertainment-based online.

Other scholars also investigated the role of media systems in cross-national comparison as they relate to levels of democracies, (Esser, 2008; Hanitzsch, 2007; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006).

The discussion of media coverage on human migration has yielded little published research so far, particularly in regard to recent migration in Europe, despite the significance it holds for the global community. Thus, this paper tried to compare national framing of human migration in some countries. For this study, the author raised two research questions.

RQ1: How do national news media frame migration or immigration within their borders?
RQ2: How do national news media frame migration internationally?

III. Methods

The author conducted a qualitative content analysis to identify and examine the coverage frames that news media employed to inform readers of news about migration, primarily on issues in their own nations, but also in the global community. This study relied on framing analysis, which, as described by Robert Entman, is a method:

To select 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, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993)

He also described framing as “essentially involving selection and salience,” meaning journalists select the information they believe to be most salient for their audiences, and thus, the selection pattern of content delivered to the public reflects journalists’ judgment within a media organization. Entman further states:

Frames . . . define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (Entman, 1993)

Through a qualitative approach using framing analysis, this paper sought to discover what information journalists choose to share with the public about migration trends and how journalists make sense of these trends. Although this approach cannot explain why journalists create these frames, it can reveal insight into the “what” is covered and the “how” it is covered.

Sample

The countries selected for this study include the United States, Germany, and Spain, based on their recent and past experiences with influxes of immigrants, many of whom through unregulated immigration measures. Within these nations immigration still exists as a key policy concern, and its leaders actively seek solutions to the conflicts that immigration trends create. The United States and Spain have dealt with steady waves of immigration over the past decade. Germany has a history of absorbing Turkish immigrants, but more recently is dealing with the strains of a rapid and widespread wave of immigration, which originated as a symptom of conflict in the Middle East.

To determine how countries receiving great waves of immigration craft narratives of this phenomenon, the author examined three national news outlets from each of the three nations: CNN, The New York Times, and Voice of America for the United States; Deutsche Welle, Die Zeit, and Spiegel Online in Germany, ABE, El Mundo, and El País in Spain. These publications were selected based on their national popularity and
prominence, as well as on their reputations as credible sources. For convenience, online articles published on these organizations’ websites were used. The author selected articles by reading their headlines and assessing their relation to immigration or migration. All these articles were published from between May 1, 2016, and October 31, 2016.

This study collected 87 articles, with 22 from Germany, 33 from the United States, and 32 from Spain, in order to obtain enough material to garner legitimate findings and answers to the research questions outlined.

**Procedure**

Each article was coded based on a) the overall sentiment of the article and topic, b) the theme or narrative, c) the credibility and richness of the article, d) the scope, perspective or focus of the article, and e) the language used to describe migration or immigrants.

To determine overall sentiment, each article was coded for having a narrative with positive, negative, or neutral sentiments toward migration and its related topics. To determine the article’s theme and narrative, the author wrote a short summary of each article, its purpose, and its position on immigration/migration, refugees/asylum, aid to migrants, and human rights. To bring additional insight into the analysis of the theme or narrative, the author checked if the article includes a call to action for the audience or for other interest groups. The credibility was based on the degree of verification of its arguments by citing additional sources—whether the article considerd the perspectives of exterior sources, such as those of immigrants, citizens, government officials, or other authorities on the topic and included their views. To determine richness of each article, the study counted additional elements to the text, such as statistics, quotations, multimedia images, or videos. To determine the scope or perspective of each article, the study examined the inclusion or mention of national and international interests and mention of the perspectives from any government concerned.

Finally, the articles were coded for specific language included throughout and how often those specific words were used in the text, excluding image captions and advertisements. The analysis of language is important since biased language could influence the audience’s perception of the article’s narrative. The results of this coding are written on a coding sheet in Appendix A.

**IV. Findings & Analysis**

This section describes the four frames found through this study and the analysis of these frames.

**Frame 1: General discontent with current handling of international migration by national governments**

A dominating theme throughout the articles collected was dissatisfaction with the current state and handling of international migration and its many consequences—such as high death tolls, smuggling and exploitation, national insecurity, overcrowding, and violations to international human rights. News media in all three countries framed this dissatisfaction by pointing out the absence of strong and collaborative policies that were put forth by national governments and international organizations to address these concerns. Headlines, including “A mounting challenge for solving the current asylum crisis” (Gagnon, 2016) and “Disaster in the Making: The Many Failures of the EU-Turkey Deal” (Spiegel Online, 2016a), highlighted the overall disappointment expressed toward leaders and policy makers. A strong majority of the articles included a call to action on behalf of those administrators to bring viable solutions to this crisis. One such example was written by *El País*:

> The international community must create a system to regulate large human displacement, to consider geopolitical circumstances, and to cover migration efforts from search and rescue to local integration . . . . It is essential that governments understand that the incentive structure should lead to effective shared responsibility, transforming migration into an opportunity for investment and growth. (Martelli & Zárate, 2016)

Other articles included calls to action to commit more efforts to put national interests first in terms
of accepting migrations, to increase investment in migration-departure communities in Africa, to provide
greater aid to refugees within Europe’s borders, and to propose better-informed policies to handle the flows
of migration in the future. The inclusion of a call to action in the news media, at the journalist’s discretion,
illustrates that national news cultures view their role as critics of society and of government, and as informants
to publics who have a responsibility to influence in how those societies and governments are run.

This framing by the news media is likely a reaction to the global events and initiatives that occurred
during the sample time period (May-October 2016). The EU-Turkey deal and the rising death tolls of migrants
in the Mediterranean heavily shaped public discussion of migration and both topics were viewed repeatedly
in the examined articles as failures on the part of government leaders and policy makers to address these
problems decisively. Much criticism, from both Germany and the other nations, fell upon Angela Merkel and
her advocacy for the EU-Turkey deal; one article, “Merkel’s refugee party: When values and interests collide,”
condemned Merkel for not putting Germany’s interests first and for presenting Germany as unpredictable
when handling world affairs, with the author stating that “the admission of unlimited numbers of people from
different cultures, many of whom are poorly educated, cannot be in the best interest of a highly developed
state” (Hasselbach, 2016).

The European Union experienced similar backlash from all sources in respect to its failed attempts
to collaborate on issues like saving lives along migration routes and addressing the causes of migration
in surrounding regions. One article titled “Boat carrying hundreds of migrants capsizes off Egyptian coast”
blames the European Union for tragedies during the migration crisis as the “closure of the Balkan route
and a migrant deal with Turkey” has pushed “asylum seekers trying to reach Europe to look to other paths”
through illegal migration and the smuggling trade (Deutsche Welle, 2016). Few articles were congratulatory
toward any national government in the handling of current migration issues, and many articles included
dissenting opinions from not only citizens, but also from refugees or migrants who expressed disappointment
in bureaucratic systems and national governments.

**Frame 2: United States critical of the state of international migration, yet reflects very
little on migration issues internally**

The publications from the United States maintained a heavy focus on the international sphere,
presenting stories on external migration issues more often than not. Of the few articles that did discuss
the American relationship with migration and immigration issues, the majority were published by CNN and
discussed trends of immigration from Latin America into the United States, with an emphasis on illegal or
irregular migration. These frames cast the United States in a particularly negative light and often narrated the
illegal immigrant experience in the country, such as one article covering a valedictorian’s speech that revealed
her status as an undocumented immigrant at her graduation (Richmond, 2016).

*The New York Times* and *Voice of America* demonstrated a more global perspective in the framing
of their stories, with reports frequently covering the refugee crisis in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.
Journalists painted a negative frame of these events and the principles involved in them, frequently posing
questions of how Europe would manage and accommodate the mass of migrants entering the region
legally and illegally. An article by *Voice of America* denounced the conditions of the Calais migrant camp
and France’s inaction to improve its quality stating, “The Jungle is not fit for humans, its for animals . . .
the filthy ramshackle camp has become a searing symbol of Europe’s struggle to respond to an influx of
migrants fleeing war and poverty” (Reuters, 2016). In another *Voice of America* article on rising xenophobia in
European Union the author wrote:

The arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants has created panic and political
instability in the global north fueled by irresponsible politicians . . . . The right to asylum
is being undermined by xenophobia as well as nationalistic and political rhetoric intent
on linking refugees with security concerns and terrorism. (Schlein, 2016)

The framing of American journalism as internationally focused is further supported by the presence
of international interests and the mention of other countries in almost all of the articles published by *The New York Times* and *Voice of America*, while there was no mention of national U.S. interests in over 90% of
the articles posted by those publications. These publications rarely have articles covering migration-related
interests in the U.S., with the exception of one article in *The New York Times* titled “Neighbors Question Cuba
Migration Policy.” This piece reported on a collective statement from nine Latin American countries that “called on the United States to end its preferential immigration policy for Cubans, calling it ‘discriminatory’ and a boon to human smuggling networks . . . creating trafficking, sexual exploitation, and violence” (The Editorial Board, 2016). While internationally focused, this frame negatively positioned the United States government as creating preferential treatment for some in migration process and included a call to action for the United States to treat all potential immigrants as equal.

Frame 3: Germany offers self-reflective media frame of migration, often illustrating mixed opinions on the subject

At the center of the refugee crisis in Europe, Germany publications offered a wealth of articles discussing migration and the German response to this phenomenon. German frames were particularly self-reflective, presenting both criticism of the national government and praise for its contributions to the refugee crisis affecting the region. Neither negative nor positive frames were dominant in German national media, but rather journalists presented a holistic view of the migration crisis, delivering arguments and narratives to support both sides. Almost all frames, however, presented German interests to the public.

In the past two years Germany has accepted more than a million migrants into its borders, yet German journalists do not seem to agree on whether to embrace these new additions or not. More recent frames highlighted Germany’s efforts to accommodate and aid migrant populations, such as one title proclaims, “German Catholic Church raises 80 million euros in migrant aid in the first half of 2016” (Deutsche Welle, 2016.) The publication of a complimentary piece like this one illustrates a frame of pride in the national news culture. This frame was supported by other articles like “Did We Do It? Taking Stock One Year After Refugees’ Arrival” (Wittrock, 2016) in which refugees thanked Chancellor Angela Merkel for her open-door policy implemented a year earlier. This frame is reinforced by rhetoric that positions Germany as a proponent for immigration and asylum—“Germany is a country of immigration, even if some people refuse to believe it. Some rhetoric on migrants has become ‘alarmingly radicalized’ and we call on society and political circles to rediscover a more rational discourse” (Deutsche Welle, 2016). Another article praised the inclusion of immigrants in German society saying, “The migration of skilled foreigners . . . would help stabilize the decline in the number of people and offset the effect of an increasingly ageing population” (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

Conversely, many articles in Deutsche Welle, Spiegel Online, and Zeit Online also fostered a negative frame of migration and its potential detriment to European society. German journalists were not hesitant to criticize Chancellor Angela Merkel for her open-door policy and her support of the EU-Turkey deal; her leadership in these two policies, they state, neglected to consider German interests or resources, and weakened Germany on the international playing field (Hasselbach, 2016). A separate article reported on the German exterior minister’s retraction on the number of refugees admitted into Germany during 2015, contributing to the frame of confusion and uncertainty about how to address the migrant crisis in the national media (Brady, 2016). Additionally, German articles also included criticism from the perspectives of migrants trying to enter Europe, as one migrant commented to Spiegel Online, “The Germans have done nothing. They don’t seem particularly interested either . . . Are the Germans arrogant or naïve?” (Bühler, Koebel, Mattioli, & Mayr, 2016). The inclusion of outsider views of Germany’s efforts to aid the migration crisis illustrates how journalists in Germany are trying to create a holistic and unbiased narrative for their audiences.

Frame 4: Spain’s national media leans toward more positive accounts of migration—speaks of investment, integration, and success

Unlike the other two countries’ media, Spanish frames were skewed toward more positive accounts and perspectives of migration, in respect to its experience with immediate migration from Africa and its shared experience with the rest of Europe in the refugee crisis. Spain maintained these positive sentiments through the coverage of European investment in African communities as a method to abate motivations for migration north. Articles like “Niger: The New European Frontier” (Puig, 2016) and “Onions Against Irregular Emigration” (Lucas, 2016) both shared Spain’s value in investing in the departure communities of sub-Saharan Africa as a means for undermining economic motivations for migration. In “Onions Against Irregular Emigration,” the journalist applauds Spanish investment in Africa, describing that the program maintains the “aim of addressing irregular migration in Africa and the phenomenon of displaced persons” so that “immigration is by choice of aspiration, not by compulsion or despair” (Lucas, 2016). As a nation that attracts a strong majority of African
immigrants, Spanish journalists framed these accounts in a positive light, as the Spanish national interest is the deterrence of additional economic migration from Africa.

Taking on a more European focus, Spanish frames paid much attention to the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and on Europe’s eastern borders, where coincidently negativity and pessimism became more prominent sentiments within the articles. Similarly to the U.S. and Germany, Spanish national news media highlighted European problems with the high death tolls of migrants and the lack of effective collaboration by national governments, and a majority of the articles called for solutions to these problems. However, Spanish journalists were still enthusiastic toward immigration, stating, “Immigration is positive in the medium and long term for public finances, economic growth, and the labor market” (Valderrama, 2016).

The framing of this crisis in Spain also focused frequently on Germany, which is likely due to Germany’s active role in accepting refugees and in proposing initiative to stop the mass influx of migrants. Just as Germany offered conflicting frames about its involvement in the crisis, Spanish journalists framed Germany’s involvement as positive in some cases and negative in others. In one instance a Spanish journalist framed Chancellor Merkel’s leadership in the crisis as successful, covering Merkel’s fulfilled promise to reduce refugee flow (Valero, 2016b). In another, journalists reported Merkel’s statement on her belief that the success of the EU-Turkey deal could be replicated with other nations along the southern border of the Mediterranean (Doncel & Abellán, 2016). However, journalists also framed the German relationship with migration as resulting in more challenges than solutions—such as one article’s report that Germany blamed refugee populations for the first rise in unemployment since 2013 (Valero, 2016b), while another shared a German poem that stated “Islam is not a part of Germany” (Valero, 2016a).

V. Conclusion

This research asked how selected news media construct narratives of migration domestically and internationally. The human experiences of migration is a salient issue that will not fade, but will likely grow in magnitude as the world continues to become more populous and interconnected. The movement of people, along with the transformations of communities that led to the migrations, has profound effects that journalists seek to explain in their daily reporting along with the sentiments and divisions of opinion on migration.

The findings of this research illustrates that the selected examples of national news coverage do not frame migration in one dominant manner, but rather depict migration in accordance with its current state within a local, regional, or international context. Journalists often offered multiple narratives within individual articles as they recognized the complexity of the migrant or refugee experience. One recurring theme throughout all the sampled articles was the involvement of national governments or international organizations in the migration process, both in positive and negative lights. As modern migration aligns with human rights to freedom of movement, but with the complications of security and nationality, governing bodies have taken on the responsibility for regulating and administering migration within the global community. Many journalists framed governing bodies as failing to meet this responsibility and repeatedly included demands to take larger steps to deter the need for mass migration by migrants and asylum-seekers, to more adequately accommodate migrants when they do arrive, and to introduce more informed, effective policy for handling migration in the future.

It is also worth noting how journalists did not frame their stories. They rarely built their stories around angles that tested whether authorities should have been restricting migrations or doing less for migrants and asylum-seekers. Overall, while the media reports were impatient with the works of governments and leaders in coping with immediate issues, the stories primarily adopted frames that echoed the concerns of international organizations and often looked upon the migration crisis with a mixture of national interests and humanitarian concerns.
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