

Empathy Legality Politics and Protection: Framing Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the frames used in UK tabloid and quality newspaper coverage of refugees and asylum seekers [RAS] from August 2015 to February 2016. Specific and general framing devices were identified, and these were found to co-occur in coverage. A number of unexpected similarities were found, indicating a possible divergence from immigration related reporting patterns in the past. Moreover, the distinction between the presses with regards RAS coverage is becoming increasingly difficult to discern, likely driven by commercialisation of the market.

Keywords

Framing, tabloidisation, refugees, asylum seekers

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, over one million refugees crossed the Mediterranean in search of safety in the European continent. UK media coverage of the ongoing 'crisis' as it is now referred, has been heavily criticised for being the most polarised and aggressive within the European continent (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2015). With media playing a key role in "re/constructing and re/creating attitudes" of the public (Khosravini, 2010, p. 3), these messages could contribute to polarisation in society.

With their high circulation figures, tabloid newspapers are expected to appeal to the masses more so than elite or quality newspapers - which are viewed as covering issues primarily of interest to social elites (Allern, 2002). Tabloids adopt a more sensationalist approach towards coverage, putting greater focus on celebrity gossip, lifestyle and entertainment stories, whereas quality newspapers focus on the 'hard news' topics (Allern, 2002). However, recent scholarship suggests a trend whereby the distinction between the tabloid and quality press is narrowing in terms of both journalistic practice and indeed standards (e.g. Welbers et al., 2015) - a process referred to as tabloidisation.

Akkerman (2011) argues that the difference between formats lies not within content, but rather within *style*. With regards to immigration scholarship, studies on differences in content have traditionally focussed on the use of the five specific-immigration frames: threat-security, economic, legal, multi-cultural and humanitarian. This study goes further however, by considering the use of these in conjunction with broader framing practices - an area where stylistic difference may emerge.

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The first of these broader frames, collectivisation-othering, views RAS in generalised terms, constructing them as group devoid of individual qualities and consequently as an out-group to the social norm. On the other hand, individualisation-humanisation framing recognises diversity amongst RAS, their backgrounds and stories, consequently aiding in facilitating empathetic emotional responses from the audience. As a recent topic, and subsequently an area thus far unexplored, this research investigated the similarities and differences in the framing employed by the tabloid and quality newspapers of the United Kingdom in their coverage of the current refugee crisis.

FRAMING IMMIGRATION

The frames identified in earlier scholarship can be clustered under several main themes; the threat-security, economic, legal, humanitarian and multi-cultural frames. Previous literature (e.g. Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008) suggests that discussions pertaining to a suggested threat posed by RAS - either to national security, culture or through criminality - will be found to feature more prominently in the tabloid than quality newspapers (H1). Economic frames relate to either an economic threat or burden posed by RAS (Caviedes, 2015), or alternatively, discuss possible prosperity due to immigration (e.g. Helbling, 2013). Scholarship is divided in terms of whether one format draws on such techniques more frequently than the other, thus RQ1 asked to what extent economic frames were employed by each regarding the present situation. Quality newspapers have been found to feature positive economic frames more frequently than tabloid newspapers (Blinder & Allen, 2015), thus it was assumed that the tabloids make greater use of *negative* economic frames to discuss RAS (H2). The legality frame encompasses discussions which relate to the legal status of RAS and their means of entry to the UK (Blinder & Allen, 2015), and also law, policy, and the ability of authority actors to manage these aspects of immigration (Matthews & Brown, 2012). As earlier scholarship found the frame to occur in both tabloid and quality newspaper coverage (Blinder & Allen, 2015), RQ2 asked to what extent UK tabloid and quality newspapers draw on legal framing, and in which manner it is used.

The final two immigration-specific frames - the multi-cultural and humanitarian frames - have been identified in earlier scholarship as inherently positive. Multi-cultural frames are those which discuss diversity within a given community, often highlighting the contribution to, and participation of immigrants within that community (Haynes, Deveroux & Breen, 2006). However in the present context, as many RAS entering Europe are from predominantly Muslim nations, literature does suggest that such discussions of cultural diversity may not always be

positive (e.g. Bleich et al., 2015). Thus, RQ3 asked: to what extent is multi-cultural framing used by tabloid and quality newspapers, and what is the sentiment of such framing in relation to the current refugee crisis? Humanitarian framing however, focusses on the circumstances surrounding their situation and is employed to elicit “charitable and emotional responses” (Maier, 2015, p. 705). Current research provides few clues however as to which format will draw on this most frequently, thus RQ4 asked to what extent do tabloid and quality newspapers draw on humanitarian framing in their coverage of the current refugee crisis?

Two broader overarching, general frames which have been the subject of numerous studies on immigration in the past were also included. These two frames are what this research has termed individualisation-humanisation and collectivisation-othering framing. Essentially, the individualisation-humanisation frame relates to the notion that RAS are diverse individuals, with differentiating qualities, and their voices should be present in coverage which concerns them. By personalising coverage it becomes more digestible and relatable for audiences, and in relation to immigration has been found to be used by both tabloid and quality newspapers alike (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). This is in stark contrast to the collectivisation-othering frame which presents RAS as a homogeneous group, or “an amorphous mass” and often (re)presents the group as problematic (Haynes, Deveroux & Breen, 2006, p. 15). Such framing marks distance between an in-group and out-group, seeking to “anonymise and dehumanise” the other (Haynes, Deveroux & Breen, 2006, p. 15), and has been found to feature more often in tabloids (Khosravini, 2010). However, as these have been observed in each format, RQ5 asked whether there is a difference in the extent of use of the general frames between formats, with regards to the current context.

Although these two general, overarching frames are often employed by media in immigration coverage, previous research suggests that they are used in combination with one or more of the aforementioned specific framing devices. Although relatively unexplored, Haynes, Deveroux and Breen (2006) did consider this, concluding that framing techniques similar to individualisation-humanisation framing occurred in coverage which was sympathetic to the concerns of immigrants and their integration. This would indicate its likelihood to appear alongside the aforementioned multi-cultural and humanitarian frames. Similarly, collectivisation-othering framing was found to occur in conjunction with those which referenced national identity, economic concerns, the legal protection of citizenship and the broader threat frame. These too are in line with the threat-security, (negative) economic and legal frames of this paper. For these reasons, it was assumed that the individualisation-humanisation frame would occur in combination with the multi-cultural and humanitarian frames, whereas the collectivisation-othering frame was expected to occur in combination with threat-security, (negative) economic and legal framing techniques. However, as literature on this topic is very limited, RQ6 asked how tabloid and quality newspapers combine the general and specific framing devices in the present context.

DATA SELECTION, COLLECTION AND METHOD

Two tabloids (*The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*) and two quality newspapers (*The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*) were selected for analysis. These titles have the largest circulation thus are representative of their formats. Earlier scholarship has identified particular events which increase the likelihood of specific coverage patterns emerging (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008). Due to this, a 7 month window was identified (August 2015 – February 2016) to reduce the chance of bias caused by the occurrence of such events. A complex search string using RAS related synonyms and excluding internal EU migration synonyms was used to source a total dataset of 6,791 articles. The dataset was then stratified, with each stratum containing the articles of one newspaper for one month, and from each of these a random sample of 20 was drawn. The eventuating sample of 560 contained 424 valid articles which were analysed - 217 from tabloid newspapers and 207 from quality newspapers.

Manual quantitative content analysis was conducted to ascertain the extent of use of the pre-determined framing devices. Based on the methodology of previous literature (e.g. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), each frame was operationalised into three or, for the more complicated frames, four questions. Guided by the codebook, these were scored either as YES = 1 and NO = 0, or where appropriate a scale of -1, 0 and 1 was used to test the sentiment expressed in relation to a given variable’s attribute. An inter-coder reliability test found these measures reliable, with a mean Cohen’s Kappa of .68 per frame.

RESULTS

The legal, multi-cultural and humanitarian frames were the only frames found to be used to a significantly different extent between newspaper groups (see Table 1). Contrary to previous literature, tabloids did not draw on the threat-security frame to a greater extent than quality newspapers. Interestingly, the cultural threat indicator measured showed quality newspapers in the sample employed this more frequently than tabloids (17.9% and 12% respectively), and a trend towards significance was observed ($\chi^2(1) = 2.91, p = .088$). Similarly, no significant differences were found regarding use of the economic frame. However, when considering the sentiment attached to the economic frame, both tabloids ($M = -0.82, SD = 1.31$) and quality newspapers ($M = -0.58, SD = 0.98$) drew on this in a predominantly negative fashion, although no significant difference between the formats was observed ($t(129) = 1.19, p = .235$). This highlights the tendency of the UK press in *general* to emphasise negative economic impacts of the current situation, and for this reason it has been included with the negative framing devices. Quality newspapers used the legal frame to a significantly greater extent than their tabloid peers, a result in line with the notion that quality newspapers address ‘serious’ or ‘hard’ news topics (Welbers et al., 2015). The multi-cultural frame was also used to a significantly greater extent by quality newspapers, indicating these journalists appear to promote the “peaceful coexistence of various cultural and religious groups within a society” (Helbling, 2013, p. 24) to a greater degree than tabloid journalists. Similarly, quality newspapers also featured the humanitarian frame significantly more than tabloids, suggesting that they discuss the circumstances of RAS in greater detail.

With respect to the general frames, no significant differences were observed between formats in the extent

to which they were employed. A trend towards significance was however observed with regard to the individualisation-humanisation frame ($p = .073$). Although no significant difference was found between either newspaper groups' use of these frames, it is worth noting that they each appear in a similar proportion of RAS related coverage. This suggests that although the UK press view and frame RAS on the one hand as a problematic 'other', they also seem to sympathise with their current circumstances.

Table 1. Extent of frame use

	<u>Quality</u>		<u>Tabloid</u>		<i>t</i>
	% in	<i>M</i>	% in	<i>M</i>	
Threat-security	49.3	0.77	47.5	0.71	0.67
Economic	34.3	0.51	27.6	0.47	0.49
Legal	84.5	1.57**	80.2	1.24**	3.64
Multi-cultural	48.8	0.92**	40.1	0.67**	2.49
Humanitarian	75.8	1.47*	60.4	1.01*	4.11
Collectivisation-Othering	40.6	0.44	47.3	0.52	1.41
Individualisation-Humanisation	37.8	0.68	43.5	0.86	1.80

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

General-specific frame combinations

The newspaper groups shared commonalities in terms of the correlations observed between the threat-security and collectivisation-othering frame, and the humanitarian and individualisation-humanisation frames (Figure 1). These results highlight the tendency of UK newspapers to present RAS as a homogeneous group in discussions which feature protectionist discourses and concern national security. On the other hand, discussions which highlight the causes of RAS current circumstances and detail difficulties they have experienced are approached by the UK press from an individualised level – i.e. they are likely to include personal narratives and individuals' voices in an effort to elicit a compassionate response

from the audience. The lack of correlation between the economic frame and either of the broader frames was also common to both, possibly indicating the presence of an additional broader frame being used.

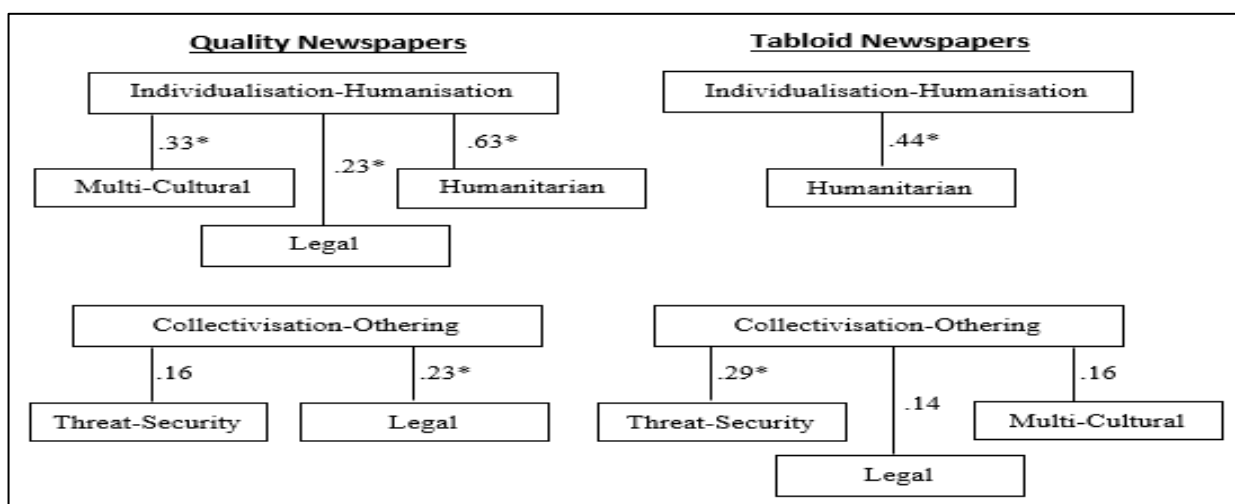
Both formats used the legal frame in combination with collectivisation-othering framing as expected, however near identical relationships between the legal frame and the two broader frames were identified in quality coverage. Journalists of each have a tendency to discuss political and legal aspects of the current situation from a generalised point of view, where RAS become a group whose actions need be controlled through political and legal means. However, in the case of quality newspapers, journalists use personalised accounts and experiences to highlight legal and political aspects of the current situation. Since use of the individualisation-humanisation frame tends to indicate a sympathetic stance (Haynes, Deveroux & Breen, 2006), this suggests quality coverage is more sympathetic towards the political and legal aspects of RAS's circumstances in the current context.

An unexpected correlation was found in tabloid coverage between collectivisation-othering and multi-cultural framing, whereas quality newspapers used multi-cultural framing with the (expected) individualisation-humanisation frame. This suggests that tabloids, rather than drawing on the multi-cultural frame to celebrate diversity within the community as previous scholarship suggested (e.g. Helbling, 2013), use it to undermine that very celebration. In other words, tabloids use of these frames presents multi-culturalism as upsetting the status-quo of the community concerned – a cultural threat.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The use of collectivising versus individualising frames in conjunction with more specific immigration related framing proved particularly interesting in the current context. The UK press drew on individual stories and used the voices of those affected in combination with humanitarian themed stories - in an attempt to evoke an understanding sympathetic towards their situation from the readership. In the opposite vein, journalists discussed RAS as a collective, homogeneous group when constructing them as a threat, suggesting that as the homogenised 'other', RAS ought to be feared. A major difference between the two news formats however, involved the tabloids use of collectivised discussions of

Figure 1. Significant correlations between general and specific frames



* $p < .001$.

RAS in combination with social diversity, highlighting the tendency of tabloids to undermine the supposedly positive sentiment, and instead portray diversified cultures within a community as an inherently negative attribute. This is a particularly interesting finding as it was in fact quality newspapers which appeared to present RAS specifically as a cultural threat more often than tabloids. This indicates that celebrations of cultural diversity and concerns related to a perceived threat to cultural and/or social norms are in fact, not simply opposing factors in immigration coverage, but rather their relationship is more complicated. As such, this area remains a worthwhile avenue for future research to determine whether these divergences are confined to the present scenario, or indeed whether they reflect a broader shift in immigration related discourse.

The similarities in coverage identified in this study suggest that tabloidisation may be occurring to some extent, particularly as quality newspaper coverage features a large amount of individual-focused content. However, quality newspaper coverage remains dominated by discussions centred on the 'hard news' aspects, - namely political and legal discourses. Interestingly however, these topics were also the lenses most frequently adopted by tabloid journalists in their discussions of RAS. Indeed such similarities in coverage patterns suggest a race between outlets to attract and retain audience numbers, indicative of a media landscape driven by commercial forces. These observations suggest that the once clear-cut divisions between media groups are diminishing - particularly in relation to RAS coverage - yet it remains to be seen if this is due to the tabloidisation of the quality press, or perhaps the *qualitisation* of the tabloid press.

The stories of RAS offer regular ongoing content for time-poor journalists and their publications operating in a commercialised market, and consequently, stories which would encourage empathy are being (re)presented and adapted into legal and political issues. By drawing on (il)legality frames, RAS become associated with criminality, and as such, can be seen to pose a threat to the society. RAS become a group to be feared, which both encourages and justifies the presence of anti-immigration and protectionist discourses to proliferate within the public sphere, potentially leading to greater polarisation within the society.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

This research project was completed by Haylee Kelsall, an undergraduate student working under the supervision of Dr. Nel Ruigrok. The student proposed the topic, designed the codebook, analysed the data and drew the conclusions presented. The writing was completed by the student, with the supervisor providing advice, support and feedback during the process.

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