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A frame analysis of opinion articles in online news

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Abstract. In this paper, I apply framing theory to the online newspaper opinion articles that were most shared and most liked in social media in 2014. The articles were published in two of Norway's largest and most influential online newspapers; Dagbladet.no and Aftenposten.no. Frame analysis makes visible how people define and construct a given issue, and as such can provide valuable input on how to write when you want a topic put on the political agenda. The findings show that the most popular opinion articles have one common theme: They are written in a personal tone, and aimed at our private sphere. The paper concludes by discussing what this means for agenda setting and for the public sphere.

Keywords: eParticipation, frame analysis, framing theory, social media, online newspapers, Norway

1 Introduction

Agenda setting is a very important element in the political decision making process, and some scholars argue that there is a direct link between agenda setting and new legislation [1]. Agenda setting can be defined as the ability to influence our perceptions of the importance of a topic [2], where the objective is to achieve consensus among the members of a public [3]. The news media is traditionally viewed as a very important actor in agenda setting [3], and issues that are high on the agenda of the news media are often prioritised by politicians [4]. Opinion articles, in the form of letters to the editor, are debate-focused genres in the newspaper, written by readers. These articles often address political issues, and can to some extent be seen as insight into the topics that are of interest to the general public, or at least to the more politically interested parts of the general public [5].

In recent years, social media, defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61) [6] has become increasingly important as a communications channel, also for political issues. The Internet and networks of engaged citizens have created a new space for engagement [7]. In a social context which fosters participation and action, the Internet and social media can attract more citizens to participate in political processes [8, 9].

A recent study [10] found social media to be increasingly important for agenda setting. And while Facebook is the most important social medium, the strength of social media is its diverse user base and the sum of many social media applications [10]. Perhaps even more important is the finding that social media and news media have a symbiotic relationship where stories from the news media are shared to, and discussed by, a larger audience in social media [10]. Drawing on the power of weak networks to form communities of individuals with similar interests can facilitate the formation of social movements, political campaigns and various protest groups [11, 12]. The objective of such groups will often be related to agenda-setting and to gaining the attention of the media [13].

According to framing theory, the way in which a story is framed is an important part of the agenda setting process [14], as the framing process is essential for 'level 2 agenda setting', the process where a set of attributes, or themes, are defined for the issues being discussed [15]. It is this very process of shaping the message which is known as framing: "Framing is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy" (p.567) [16].

This short introduction leads us to the objectives and research questions of this paper: To analyse the framing of content in successful online newspaper opinion articles, and to examine the potential implications this has for agenda setting and the public sphere. These objectives translate into the following research questions:

RQ1: How are the most liked and shared newspaper opinion articles framed?

RQ2: What are the implications of framing for agenda setting?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section two provides an overview of related research, specifically on the topics of framing theory and the role of the media in shaping public opinion. Section three presents the research approach of the study, and sections four and five present the findings and conclusions with some possible directions for future research.

2 Related research

2.1 Framing theory

Framing is concerned with how we construct the stories we tell about the world [17]. Framing theory has its roots in several disciplines, especially psychology and sociology [18]. One of the first to introduce the concept was sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1974 book "Frame analysis. An essay of the organization of experience" [19], where he used the concept of frames to show people organize their perceptions of society as a whole and of specific aspects of society. Framing relates to attitudes, and can be measured as the sum of positive and negative associations with a given issue [17]. These attitudes then influence how we choose to talk about the issue. For example, if a company wants to build office buildings in your city, which will generate jobs and income but have a negative effect on the local environment, your attitude towards the project can be determined by the value you put on the economy vs environmental and "green"

issues. These attitudes then frame how you talk about the issue. A newspaper reporter in favour of the environment will write more about the negative environmental impacts of the build, while another reporter focused on the economy will write about how the project is great for the local economy.

Several studies have examined the effects of framing on the public's perceptions of an issue. These studies show that framing has a clear impact on our perceptions, especially when we do not have a clear preference on the issue, or if the framing supports our own views. A survey asking people about their willingness to pay more for products in order to offset the products' carbon emissions, showed that especially republican voters were more likely to accept paying more only if asked about "carbon offset". When the extra amount of money was referred to as a "carbon tax", the number of republican voters willing to pay more dropped substantially [20]. Another survey asked about attitudes to free speech. When respondents were asked if they would support the right of a hate group to hold a rally, the survey questions tested framing by first asking "given the importance of free speech, would you support...", then "Given the risk of violence, would you support...". For the first question, 85 % of respondents were positive towards allowing the rally. For the second, only 45 % were positive [17]. In Norway, the protest group ATTAC was successful in gaining media attention and managed to become an important voice in the late 90's and early 2000's debate on globalisation. This success was due to the successful framing of their message, which were embedded in the popular discourses surrounding globalisation at the time, using the protests in Seattle and other cities as part of their framing process [21].

Studies of framing effects are useful in showing that framing works. Other scholars have studied how and why framing works. One study found two factors that helped explain how framing affects us. The first factor was that framing changes the weight assigned to our beliefs. Read about global warming long enough, and we start being concerned about it. The second factor was the introduction of new ideas and new information, showing us content we had no previous awareness of, i.e. reading about global warming for the first time [22]. A literature review found that successful framing had effects related to the dissemination of information, persuasion of readers and for agenda-setting [18].

2.2 Conducting frame analysis

Analysing the framing process can be done using a number of different approaches. This section provides an overview of the most common approaches to frame analysis. Table 1 summarises the different approaches identified in literature.

Reese points out that empirical analysis of frames can be both quantitative/positivist and qualitative/interpretive [23]. Bishop [24] applied frame analysis to media coverage of play. He collected texts from US newspapers and transcripts from national TV news and performed a qualitative content analysis because "a quantitative content analysis would not have enabled the author to unpack the layers of meaning found in the texts"

(p. 513). His unit of analysis was the entire article, and he coded the articles looking for keywords, stock phrases, stereotypes and judgments connected with the themes he identified. This allowed him to create labels for the frames he found in the texts. This approach allowed him to identify eight distinct frames for talking about children's play, ranging from play as a form of learning to the need for physical exercise.

Kang [25], in his study of autism, follows a similar approach of identifying themes and following a coding scheme for the identification of frames, but applies quantitative content analysis and statistical methods to identify frames and to examine how these frames have changed over time. Liu and Pennington-Gray [26] also argues for quantitative content analysis in their study of the media's coverage of bed bugs. Again, the unit of analysis is the news article. They develop a coding scheme and perform various statistical analyses. These two studies both had a somewhat different objective in that they were interested in following the news framing over time.

Silberberg [27] argues for a mixed-methods approach, where the research methods applied varies according to the research question being asked. Her study on newspaper framing of the US Food and Drug administration (FDA) applies quantitative methods to examine the number of positive, negative and neutral articles from three selected newspapers about the FDA, as well as identifying bias and any ideological differences in the newspapers. He applies qualitative analysis for identifying specific framing techniques, general discussion of results, textual patterns in the reporting, and to present example content from the different frames. Yarnell [28] similarly argues for a mixed-method approach, pointing out that a pure quantitative framing analysis lacks context and depth, while qualitative framing analysis can lose out on important statistical facts.

Approach	Purpose	Insights gained
Qualitative content analysis Coding of qualitative data: Keywords, key phrases, judgment statements	Identify themes and topics Interpret meanings of texts to identify frames for the different themes and topics	Rich description of the frames used to talk about a specific issue.
Quantitative content analysis Follows pre-defined coding scheme based on hypotheses	Using frames to examine issues of statistical significance. Impact over time.	Time series data, tendencies/consequences of frames
Mixed methods Approach varies according to research question	In-depth analysis and identification of frames, and of the impact of frames.	Impacts and tendencies mixed with a deep understanding of context and the individual frames

Table 1: Summary of research methods, frame analysis

2.3 Online newspapers' role in shaping public opinion

The news media is traditionally viewed as a very important actor in agenda setting [3], and issues that are high on the agenda of the news media are often prioritised by politicians [4], as successful framing of newspaper stories have proven successful in persuading the public about the merits (or negative sides of) an issue [18]. For example, a study of news coverage of the funding of children's programs showed significant changes in the city budget before and after an editorial campaign calling for increased spending on children's related policies [4].

In Norway, both the Internet and newspapers have a strong position. According to the Bureau of Statistics¹, 75 % of Norwegians read a printed newspaper at least once a week, and 85 % use the Internet every day. 61 % of Internet users visit at least one online newspaper. While print readerships have dropped significantly in recent years, online readerships and subscriptions are on the rise, and newspapers remain one of the most important sources of information for Norwegians. However, social media is on the rise, and according to the TNS media survey², 56 % of Norwegians use social media to meet their needs for information, and 71 % respond that the newspaper (on- or of-line) meets their needs for information. As there is some overlap between the media channels, these numbers support the findings of Grzywinska & Borden, which claims that social media and traditional media are in a symbiotic relationship where traditional media extends its user base through sharing in social media [10].

The importance of this symbiotic relationship becomes even more visible when we take into account the notion of the network society. Western society is increasingly organized through networks, and networks influence culture, business and politics alike [29]. A network consists of nodes (the individual parts of the network) and the connections between these nodes. Nodes can be individuals, organizations, societal institutions, business and government [30]. Studies in marketing have shown powerful network effects from the sharing of content, especially when the one sharing is seen as an influencer in the network [31]. This combination of the media's agenda setting power and the network effects that brings content to an even larger audience is part of what makes understanding framing so important. An increased awareness of the fact that content is framed can aid us in being more critical citizens, as being part of a social network where you are exposed to alternative arguments and different sources of information leads to a more informed public, which is less likely to be persuaded by how others frame an issue:

"Deliberation, discussion, and exposure to information and alternative arguments can raise the quality of public opinion by reducing ambivalence and uncertainty. People who are better informed about the issues are more likely to have established a frame of reference for their opinions and are less likely to be swayed by how other people frame the issues for them" (p. 121) [17].

¹ <http://www.ssb.no/medie>

² <http://www.tns-gallup.no/medier/avis>

3 Research approach

The objectives of this paper is to analyse the framing of content in successful online newspaper opinion articles, and to examine the potential implications this has for the public sphere. In order to address these objectives, I chose to follow a qualitative research approach with an interpretivist epistemology. This approach is appropriate because framing concerns the creation of meanings, and meanings are in their very nature interpretive [23]. The empirical basis for the paper is the lists of the most shared and most liked opinion articles from two of Norway's leading online newspapers. This provided me with 40 articles for analysis, covering different topics and published throughout 2014. The data was imported to the Nvivo software package for qualitative research, and analysed using a frame analysis approach, as outlined by Reese [23] and Bishop [24]. Because the number of articles is limited and the selection is so heterogeneous in terms of the topics addressed, I have chosen to identify frames from a macro-perspective. For example, the frame "deliberation" could easily be broken down into smaller frames based on the actual argument. Given the limited number of articles within the frame, this would however not allow me to identify patterns of interest in the data.

Reese [23] points out that the frame analyses should always start with answering a set of questions: Where does the frame reside? In text, culture or in the mind of the receiver? How do we know that a frame actually exists, or is it simply a construction by the researcher or the reader? What is the unit of analysis? What is the relationship between frames and agenda setting, and how do we separate topics and themes from the frames used to present them? For this paper, the answers are as follows: The frame resides in text, in the arguments structuring the opinion article. Being an interpretive study, the frame exists as a construction based on the researcher's interpretations of text. We can code the story about the drunk driving of famous cross-country skier in several ways, such as justice, celebrity blunders or drunk driving. I have attempted to code using relatively broad categories, so in this case I would code the article as "justice". The unit of analysis is the individual article. Topics and themes are separated from frames through the coding process, as these are the first items to be identified for each article. As for the relationship between frames and agenda setting, the literature section addresses this issue. The actual coding process is influenced by Bishop [24]: The individual article is coded by first identifying the theme of the article, then searching for key words and phrases, as well as judgment claims.

The coding process followed a grounded, iterative approach. Specific sections of the texts were coded as different themes and frames, in order to create a coding scheme. In the second round of coding, the texts were coded with the identified themes and frames. I performed the first two rounds of coding, and verified my findings through having a colleague examine and comment on the data set and findings.

In addition to the frame analysis, I performed a set of descriptive statistical analyses. Word-frequency analysis, and cross coding of nodes to identify issues such as how many women and men used specific frames for their articles, and how many of these were unknown writers (people who are not hired as comment writers, run a popular

blog or are frequent writers in the letters to the editor section). This allows for a more mixed-method approach, as argued for by [28].

4 Findings

The two newspapers selected for analysis are two of the largest online newspapers in Norway, based on number of readers. Dagbladet.no had 1.906.000 readers in 2014, and Aftenposten.no had 1.162.000. Looking at the list of most visited web sites in Norway, published by the Norwegian Media Businesses' Association³ (NMBA), we find newspapers at five of the top ten most read web sites. The other sites are weather forecasting service yr.no, classifieds site finn.no and the national broadcaster NRK, as well as “other services”, where we find social media and other web sites. Both Dagbladet.no and aftenposten.no ranks in the top ten most read web sites in Norway. This is a clear indicator of the importance of newspapers in Norway. Table 2 shows a summary of statistics for the two newspapers, including their Facebook and Twitter readership (both newspapers have “share on Facebook/Twitter buttons attached to each story). On Facebook, both newspapers have a separate page for opinions and letters to the editor. This page is also included.

Title	Web	Twitter	Tw., opinion	Facebook	FB, opinion
Aftenposten	1.162.000	65600	13200	194248	21680
Dagbladet	1.906.000	5677	4035	95010	64781

Table 2: Statistics for the two newspapers in the study.

Facebook is by far the most popular channel for sharing. 42.000 people on Facebook, and only 452 times on Twitter shared the article that was on top of the most shared list. We see this trend across all the examined articles, where 100+ people share in Twitter, while Facebook sharing is in the tens of thousands. The articles were published throughout the year, at different times of day.

4.1 General findings – closeness, personal issues and new voices

The word frequency shows that the issues close to home get more attention. Norway/Norwegian is mentioned 136 times, while Europe/European is only mentioned 15 times, and only in four of the 40 articles. Frequently used nouns give us a hint of the themes that are important. These include “children”, “school”, “work”, and “women”, reflecting the most common themes found in the articles. Unknown writers (writers who are not regular columnists, well-known bloggers or frequent contributors to the opinion section of newspapers) write more than half of the articles, and around half of the writers are women. Only six writers have an academic background. This indicates that social media sharing does help new to include new voices in the public sphere.

³ <http://www.mediebedriftene.no/Tall--Fakta1/Lesertall/lesertall-avis-host-2014/>

Personal issues are the most popular themes: Health, gender/body, parenting and education make up 75 % of the articles. This supports Graham's [34] view that the personal sphere has become an important part of public debate.

4.2 Frames

Six frames were identified. The first frame, *metaphor*, was found in one article that used a fairy tale figure to discuss current social issues. "Askeladden" is a stereotype of the idealized Norwegian, the underdog who succeeds by being creative and thinking outside the box, and who thinks more about others than about himself. The article uses the metaphor to show everything that is wrong with Norwegian society today:

"Askeladden helped those in need. When others needed him, he forgot about his own issues and needs. Personal kindness translated to politics is solidarity... However, now the welfare state is threatened. Social inequality is on the rise. The number of poor children increases. The wealthy do not have to pay taxes"

The second frame is *satire/irony*. Three articles use this to frame their message. They do this to ridicule the position they are arguing against, in order to convince the reader that there is only one way of interpreting said issue. A columnist comments on the teacher's strike in the autumn of 2014, ridiculing the arguments made by those who oppose the strike:

"After all, the strike affects an innocent third party. I am not thinking about the students. No one cares about students. I am of course thinking about myself. And people like myself."

Another article discusses gender stereotypes used in advertising, and uses male stereotypes to argue against this form of advertising:

"How many of us see these images and think 'yes, we can relate to this. Party and drinking trips to European brothels, where we party all night with heavy-chested women who has no personality?'"

The third frame identified is *Justice*. The frame uses arguments related to justice, fairness and equal treatment to frame the message. Two articles use this frame, one discussing terrorism and the treatment of Anders Behring Breivik, the other discussing the drunk driving of a famous cross-country skier:

"You can't call yourself a victim of the media in this case. No one in VG [Norwegian newspaper] gave you a bottle of vodka and Audi the last time I checked. You are a huge role model for young kids, who now might think that drinking and driving is ok. Therefore we should all be happy that this episode is so massively criticized in the media."

Another frame, used in four articles, is *pressure*. This frame focus on the psychological pressure that faces us in modern society, and argues that we need to find ways of lessening pressure. Peer pressure, parenting and the pressure to be the best at everything are topics within this frame, which has a clear "them and us" perspective. A liberal

Muslim woman is tired of the peer pressure she claims comes from conservative Muslims in her surroundings:

«I am sick and tired of Muslims who think they are better than the rest of us. Why do they insist on being so different? Do they believe God loves them more than us? The Niqab does not just represent oppression, but also arrogance.»

Pressure related to parenting and testing in schools are other issues. The following quote is an example from an article incorporating both of these topics:

“At supper, 6.30 PM a Tuesday in May, we receive a call from a concerned teacher. Our six year old boy is having trouble separating the letters ‘b’ and ‘d’...and there is a test tomorrow...It is thought provoking that a teacher has to call parents late at night about this. Who is it really that is being tested tomorrow? The pupil or the teacher?”

Deliberation is the frame of the classical debate article. This frame presents arguments backed up by reasoning and references to literature. The objective is to convince the reader through presenting facts and rational arguments. It is not surprising that the six academic authors and the established commentators are the most frequent users of this frame. The topics found in this frame relates to politics and society, discussing the dangers of drugs, financial policies, international politics and women’s rights. Ten of the examined articles falls within this frame. While the topics vary, their content is such that they are relevant to large numbers of people. For example, the article discussing NATO does so in a context of Russian expansion in the Ukraine, and the dangers a strong Russia poses for Norway:

“The Russian insurances comes after Russia several times the past few months have entered Swedish airspace with their fighters, and after several military provocations of all their European neighbours, including Norway”

The last frame is perhaps the most interesting one. More than half of the articles are framed as a *personal account* of events, where the author describes his or her experiences in relation to a theme, and discusses the theme based on these experiences. The articles framed as personal accounts are the most shared articles by far, showing that content we as readers can relate directly to, which addresses issues we are concerned with, is perhaps the best way of gaining attention and reaching a broad audience. The topics in this category varies greatly, ranging from terrorism to education and parenting. What the articles do have in common is how they address something they perceive as a societal issue through personal experience, and how they relate these personal experiences to a broader context. An anonymous mother discusses the failure of kindergartens to avoid bullying through an account of her three-year-old daughter’s daily life:

“Now I suddenly understand the more than 50 necklaces she has brought home from kindergarten the past few months. Each piece is made out of loneliness, exclusion and small children’s hands, alone at a table”

In another example, a woman discusses the pressures of modern work life through the story of her own illness:

“I’m burnt out. Exhausted and depressed. On sick leave because I could not handle it all anymore. They call it hitting the wall. I would rather compare it to walking off a cliff. I did not see a wall, I did not feel a crash, and it never stopped. Suddenly I just lost my footing and fell.

This frame most clearly reflects the general findings in section 4.1. The issues that seem closest are the most engaging ones. The writers are new voices in the public sphere, and while their message is personal, the readers seem to find something universal in the stories they read.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined popular opinion articles from two online newspapers, using frame analysis to identify how writers frame a popular article. The analysis revealed six frames. One of these, the *personal account*, accounts for more than half of the examined articles. Except for an article by Steven Hawking the articles using this frame are at the very top of the list of shared content.

We can interpret the meaning of this for the wider public sphere and for agenda setting in politics in several ways. A sceptic would perhaps say that this fascination for the private and personal is a sign that we should stop worrying about including citizens in the public debate. Aftenposten commentator Thorgeir Kolshus points us in another direction, claiming that the “idea of our private stories having public value is an expression of societal trust. My issues are relevant for others, and other people’s issues are relevant to me. This helps build community”⁴. Kolshus’ interpretation is also found in research claiming that the private realm is becoming more and more relevant for the public sphere [32]. While the stories are private, they contain arguments related to important societal issues. This framing brings new issues to the attention of thousands of new people through sharing in social media. If we assume that every user sharing an article has 100 unique friends, an article that is shared 42.000 times potentially reaches out to 4 200 000 people. That is 85 % of the Norwegian population. The sum of this sharing certainly has implications for agenda setting both in the media and in parliament. Political parties spend many resources following the stories that trend in the media, looking for issues to comment on. Thus, it is likely that over time, the personal framing of opinions will have implications for which cases are put on the agenda of political parties.

This paper has a few limitations that are worth noticing. First of all, existing studies of framing (see for example [22, 25, 26]) tend to focus on one topic or issue, and examine the framing surrounding this issue. As my approach was to examine what makes us share content, the analysis process was slightly different in that I had several topics and a limited number of articles to analyse. Thus, the frames “deliberation” and “personal account” should be seen as meta-frames, overarching frames that contain more specific framing about the topic. The data set is somewhat limited, covering only 40

⁴ <http://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikker/Var-private-offentlighet-7833509.html> Quote is translated from Norwegian.

articles. I did attempt contacting the other leading newspapers in order to have a larger data set to work with, but I was not successful in getting answers from them. Even so, the findings in this paper shows some interesting trends that are worth reporting. In addition, the paper identifies several possibilities for future research:

The framing analysis includes only a small subsection of opinion articles, and it would be useful to examine a larger sample, which also included an examination of the comment fields in newspapers, as well as comments on Facebook and Twitter conversations. The role of technology in this process also needs a more thorough investigation, and a study of the affordances of social media in relation to agenda setting and framing could be an interesting approach for this purpose. Another interesting approach would be a Social network analysis examining the sharing of content, as well as examining the discussion that follows a shared article in social media.

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