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Framing violent conflicts on the official Amnesty International Facebook page

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Abstract

The article's main purpose is to show how the News Framing Theory operates within the news about violent conflicts presented by the journalists working for the Amnesty International organization. It tries to identify frames used by journalists by analyzing some posts that appeared on the official Facebook page of the organization. It attempts to show the function and significant role of frames used to present the news.

Key words

License

DOI

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Introduction

This study sets out to examine more closely in what ways contemporary media outlets try to draw receivers' attention to presented news items. It is assumed that the *way* news is presented influences people's attitudes towards the issue (Bednarek and Caple, 2012). Media professionals are likely to choose some images and rhetorical devices whose function is to make people focused on a specific aspect of the issue, and those choices are not random. In the field of Media Studies there are many theories concerning the ways in which news texts are shaped to achieve specific effects, including priming, agenda setting, cultivation, or framing (for a review see Potter, 2013). This article is based on the News Framing Theory, which assumes that the use of certain images and words by journalists influences the way the audience interprets presented issues or problems. News frames are used to suggest to the audiences how to understand and evaluate an issue or an event. Using frames to introduce an issue may also enable the audience to remember and assimilate certain aspects of the reality presented in the news better.

The main purpose of the article is an attempt to show how the News Framing Theory operates within the news about violent conflicts presented by the journalists working for the Amnesty International organization. The organization's aim is to protect human rights. The AI activists organize peaceful civic actions and campaigns whose purpose is to defend the people whose rights have been violated. The organization tries to draw the media attention to problems happening all over the world. The analytical part of this article is based on online materials posted between 1 December 2013 and 6 March 2014 on the official Facebook page of Amnesty International. The purpose of the article is to identify frames used by the journalists by examining the rhetoric of news' headlines and the features of images

corresponding to them. The news items that are subject to qualitative analysis concern selected conflicts with the use of force.

The article is to check in what way the journalists publishing on the Amnesty International Facebook page use framing to show the conflict-related news and to make people aware of problems which they present without risking desensitization. It includes the theoretical section which is devoted to a short overview of the News Framing Theory. This is followed by the section that presents the aims of Amnesty International, its activity as an organization, and also its activity on the Internet (mainly on Facebook). The next part contains the analysis of the materials which appeared on the Amnesty International page on Facebook in the chosen period of time. The results of the analysis are presented with exemplification and conclusion.

News Framing Theory

To stay informed about what is happening in the world, people watch news and listen to the radio, read newspapers, or check the Internet websites. We like to be kept up-to-date with the latest news, issues, and policies. De Vreese (2005, 51) points out: "the media is a cornerstone institution in our democracies." On the basis of what we see, read, or hear, we evaluate and interpret an issue, and form our opinion. "One influential way that the media may shape public opinions is by framing events and issues in a particular way" (de Vreese 2005, 51).

News Framing Theory suggests that the way something is presented influences our understanding of an issue; thus, our perception of the presented reality depends much on how the media and the journalists introduce it to us. Chong and Druckman (2007, 104) define framing as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (p. 104). The word "reorient" seems to be quite significant here. In their essay the authors point out that framing does not only have an influence on our forming of new opinions and attitudes, but it has even a bigger power: it may well change the attitude we already have, change our current way of thinking about an issue.

In order to explain the mechanism of framing, Scheufele and Tewskbury (2009, 17) use the comparison of journalists to artists who "take great care in how they present their work, choosing a frame that they hope will help audiences see the image in just the right way". Journalists, presenting an issue, are involved in the same process: "they choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies" (Scheufele and Tewskbury 2009, 17). De Vreese (2005, 53) explains the function of a frame: "by virtue of emphasizing some elements of a topic above others, a frame provides

a way to understand an event or an issue . . . In short, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic". Frames are used to portray issues in the news media, they "invite people to think about an issue in particular ways" (Scheufele and Tewskbury 2009, 19). In some sense, frames are rhetorical insomuch as they work to reorient the news recipients to align themselves with the mindsets of the journalists.

Because "news frames can exert a relatively substantial influence on citizens' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors" (Scheufele and Tewskbury 2009, 19), they are related to other processes in news understanding and processing. Therefore, research on framing theory (de Vreese, 2005; Modrzejewska, 2012; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele and Tewskbury, 2009) suggests a need of differentiation of framing from other concepts that are closely related. A special stress is put on distinguishing framing from agenda setting: "Agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues . . . and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences" (Scheufele and Tewskbury 2007, 11). It "deals with salience of issues" while "framing is concerned with the presentation of issues" (de Vreese 2005, 52). It means that they operate on different levels: agenda setting is based on "foregrounding" certain issues by journalists, devoting them more attention in the media, which results in understanding them as more important than others by the audience. In agenda setting journalists not only reflect reality but also shape it because these are they who decide which news deserves more attention. Framing is the process in which certain aspects *within* a given issue are presented as significant by means of using specific images or rhetorical devices.

De Vreese (2005, 51-2) differentiates three distinct stages in the process of framing, namely: frame-building, frame-setting, and the consequences framing has on the individual and the society. Frame building "refers to the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames" (de Vreese 2005, 52). Those factors can be divided into internal or external. Internal factors are the ones which determine "how journalists and news organizations frame issues." Scheufele (1999, 116) enumerates here such factors as ideology, attitudes, and professional norms. External sources of influence are "frames suggested by interests groups or political actors," which means that the journalist, before presenting the issue in a particular way, had been affected by someone or something. De Vreese (2005, 52) writes about the results of frame-building: "the outcomes of the frame-building process are the frames manifest in the text". The next stage – frame-setting – assumes the fact that the receiver has prior knowledge which interacts with media frames, so "frames in the news may affect learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events" (de Vreese 2005, 53). The last stage in the process of framing is the consequences.

Although this article does not deal with the effects the news framing has on the receivers, two levels of the consequences are worth mentioning. On the individual level, the exposure to certain frames may change a person's attitude towards an issue. The societal consequence may be "shaping social level processes such as political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions" (de Vreese 2005, 52). Framing is a complex and multilevel process that takes place on different planes of mediation.

Scheufele (1999, 107) distinguishes in his article two concepts of framing: media and individual frames. Media frames serve the audience: "the framing representation of events and news in the mass media can . . . systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand . . . events". Individual frames are the ones present in one's mind; we could understand them as sets of ideas which determine our perception of reality. In turn, Chong and Druckman (2007, 120) draw the readers' attention to a very interesting aspect of framing which are the terms in which we should evaluate it. They point out that framing can be viewed negatively, "as a strategy to manipulate and deceive individuals," or positively, since "it can refer more neutrally to a learning process in which people acquire common beliefs, as in the coordination of people around a social norm". As is the case with many other rhetorical categories, frames may be used to educate and explain reality or obscure it and impose a certain bias.

One more thing that is worth mentioning is the process of identifying the frames in the text. De Vreese (2005, 53), in his work, gives some advice on how to find frames in the news material. He distinguishes two approaches: inductive and deductive, which deal respectively with the assumption of the existence of frames in mind or the investigation to find them in the text. He suggests the necessity of profound analysis of the material in order to find frames. The method applied in this article is deductive. The analytical section of the article includes the data-driven analysis of the materials that appeared on the official Amnesty International Facebook page within a certain period of time.

Amnesty International's online media activity

Amnesty International is a non-profit and non-governmental organization which was founded in 1961. As it is stressed on the official website of the organization, available at www.amnesty.org, "we [Amnesty International] are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion." The aim of Amnesty International is to protect human rights described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the vision of the organization is "for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

and other international human rights standards." Its aim is to counteract the abuse of people's rights and to help to change human lives. It campaigns, among other things, for the abolition of the death penalty, the defense of the rights of women, refugees, prisoners and minorities, and for ending torture. As members of the organization declare, it does not only aim at revealing a gross violation of human rights; the organization also prompts hope for a world that will be better when we involve ourselves in public actions and when we show our international solidarity. By organizing many actions and campaigns, it seeks justice for the ones whose rights are being violated. On its website, AI encourages people to become its members or supporters, "come with us to our journey . . . and then help us make a real difference to people's lives" (note the use of the journey metaphor). As it is stated on the website, "until every person can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed" (note the ethos and emphasis in expression).

Amnesty International's activity on the Internet is significant: by posting "regular blogs, articles, stories and personal accounts to explain what is happening, and why it is important to those on the human rights front line," journalists try to reach a wide range of people and influence the life of the abused and change it for better. Also AI has its official page on Facebook. On 12th November 2013, the organization celebrated the success of having 250,000 followers of the page, on which the following post expressing thanks to them appeared: "We just reached a quarter of a million followers! On behalf of Amnesty International we want to thank you so much for all your likes, comments, questions, shares and recommendations on the Facebook page over the past few years! We look forward to many more joining the fight for universal human rights." About five months later, on 9th April 2014, the number of people who had liked the page was 341,359. Every day, or actually every minute, the number increases since there are more and more people following the page. The majority of followers are from Great Britain; the age of people with whom the Facebook page is the most popular is 25-34 years. On the page, people may share their opinions and points of view on issues by commenting on posts. Besides the official Facebook page, there are also pages concerning the activity of Amnesty International in particular countries that are published in the languages spoken in those countries, which enables a follower to read articles in their native language and to be up-to-date with the situation of the abused in their country.

Amnesty International is also present on other social networks and websites, like Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and Pinterest where different articles, photos, etc. are posted. It is also possible to subscribe to e-newsletters in order to be "up-to--date with the latest campaign news, urgent appeals and special events."The organization's activity on the Internet is substantial.

Framing in Amnesty International's news on violent conflicts

This part of the article is based on online materials posted between 1 December 2013 and 6 March 2014 on the official Facebook page of the Amnesty International organization. There were 48 posts published on a variety of issues, including refugees, asylum seekers, prisoners, human rights violations. For the sake of the article, out of the 48 posts that appeared on the page within those days, 11 posts were separated, as they concerned all kinds of military conflicts, wars, brutal attacks, violent actions, etc.. Although all the issues presented by Amnesty International are very important and they all publicize human tragedy and defend fundamental human rights, in this study we examine only the frames concerning violent conflicts.

In the subsequent part of the article, the rhetorical and visual elements of six selected posts are analyzed in order to find frames and to see to how journalists try to "reorient" receivers' attention. This section is to raise awareness, with a detailed analysis of framing, of the aspects within presented issues concerning military actions and conflicts with the use of violence that AI activists aim to highlight.

One of the posts (16 Jan 2014) concerns the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The headline is "Syria peace conference must end starvation for besieged civilians." A reader sees the word *must* which suggests a necessity of quick reaction and finding solution to the problem. The journalist who prepared the news item did not choose another word, as for example *aims* at which would seem less powerful. *Must* implies that there is not any other option and it is necessary for the Syria peace conference to bring an end to starvation. The choice of the word phrase *besieged civilians* is also significant here. According to the definition in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009), the word civilian means "anyone who is not the member of the military forces or the police." This choice stresses the fact that the people who are starving are not involved in the conflict directly, as one of the sides of it, but the situation has a negative impact on them and their life. It brings to the mind of a reader the picture of innocent people who are simply falling prey to the conflict, not being guilty of the situation, being defenseless victims of military operations. They are *besieged*, which evokes the image that they are in a trap and the only chance for them to escape it, and starvation, is the peace conference. The definition of *besiege* in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009) is "to surround a city or building with soldiers in order to stop the people inside from getting out or from receiving supplies." The people have no possibility to flee from the place where they are; thus, without receiving help, it is possible they will starve to death.

This frame is rhetorically underpinned by a contrast. For one, our world is said to be a "global village", as people from different cities, countries, or even

continents can contact one another without any problems; for another, the world's transportation is very well-developed, getting from one place to another does not cause as much trouble as it used to cause in the past. By contrast, for the people that are besieged in Syrian towns, no contact with the external world is possible. They are isolated and alienated. The word *besieged* also brings to one's mind a historical image of a medieval fortress surrounded by the enemy's army. As we know, human life did not count at all at that time, it was the last thing to care about; the most important task was to force the besieged to surrender by not letting anybody get out, to make people who were inside give up or die. The same concerns the Syrian people who are projected as left without any help, any supplies, any food, because they are 'cut off' from the outside world by enemy's troops. They can actually only wait for death, if no rescue comes.

picture 1

When a receiver looks at the photo that corresponds to the news, the frame becomes even more visible and easy to be noticed and interpreted. The photo shows

a small girl, about 4 or 5 years old, who is sitting on a piece of wood. Her head is lying on another piece of wood; she is holding a small piece of bread in her hand. She is wearing a red sweatshirt which is actually the only colourful object in the photo. The girl is alone; she is the sole person in the picture, placed in the middle of it. She is surrounded by empty buckets and containers, and some rubbish. She seems to be looking at the person viewing the picture. Her face is sad; the girl appears to be tired and unhappy. The thing that may draw the audience's attention is that the girl is alone. In the photo there are neither any other children, nor any other adults. The choice of the photo may suggest that other civilians, which may also include the parents of the girl, have already starved to death; that is why she is alone there.

What is also striking is the choice of the individual to embody the Syrian crisis: a minor and a girl. The thought of children and childhood brings to our mind rather positive and happy connotations. According to the Western frame of childhood (cf. Jenks, 1996), children are considered to be innocent, honest, carefree, and childhood is considered to be a happy time of playing games with friends and being free from worries, problems and stresses. Had she been born in another place, she would have probably had a chance to enjoy her childhood. A reader may conclude that the conflict deprived the girl of having a safe and happy childhood. Another thought-provoking thing is also that the picture shows a girl, not a boy. Media tend to make us see a war as a male-dominated issue. Most of the people who participate in and fall victims in military operations are men. Women are not directly involved in military conflicts; however, they also suffer. The photo makes the audience feel sorry for the girl and find the crisis in Syria destructive and having a negative influence on people who are not responsible for it, especially on children who are obviously associated with innocence and pureness. Unlike it is the case with news agency materials, AI coverage makes us aware that Syrian military conflict has brought unnecessary suffering to women and children. The AI journalist establishes a consistent frame that foregrounds the fact that the war in Syria, except for bringing death to combating soldiers, affects mostly innocent people, including children, who are not fighting in it, but are its victims.

Another four posts (20, 21 Jan 2014; 12, 20 Feb 2014) concern the situation of Muslim people who are denied rights and citizenship in the Central African Republic. The frames presenting those news items show the oppressive kind of relationship between the religious minority (Muslims) and their persecutors (natives who do not accept ethnically different people in their country). One of the headlines (21 Jan 2014) is "Hunted down: Muslims forcibly displaced in the Central African Republic." The phrase *hunted down* has special significance in the context of the presented humanitarian problem. Following its definition of it in *Longman*

Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009), *hunt down* means "to search for a person or animal until you catch them, especially in order to punish or kill them." The first association that comes to one's mind when they hear the word *to hunt* is probably connected with killing animals. The journalist wants to make receivers aware of the fact that Muslims in the African country are treated as animals – they are being persecuted, chased in order to be killed. This magnifies the impression of intolerance and brutality of native inhabitants of the country. Another headline ("Interim president must rein in "out of control militias" as Muslims forced to flee," 20 Jan 2014) says that Muslims are "forced to flee" the country. As we can read in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009), *forced* means "done suddenly and quickly because the situation makes it necessary, not because it was planned or wanted." The word *flee* suggests more than only leaving a place. The AI journalist chose it to carry a more significant meaning, *flee* is "to leave somewhere very quickly, in order to escape danger" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2009). Muslims have to escape the place; it is not their choice; it is necessary for them if they want to survive. Native inhabitants of the country are cruel and act as oppressors; they violently make Muslims leave their homes. Muslims are not able to prepare themselves for leaving the Central African Republic; they have no time to do it; willing to escape their oppressors, they have to act in a hurry. It may bring to a receiver's mind the connotation of some animals – when frightened, they disperse in different random directions. The framing demonstrates that the situation of Muslims is analogous; they are forced to leave the place having no idea of where to go: they are treated like animals.

picture 2

Amnesty International ha compartido un enlace.
20 de enero

"People from Muslim communities feel totally unprotected from anti-balaka attacks and terrified about what might happen to them if they stay in the country," said Joanne Mariner Senior Crisis Adviser at Amnesty International, who is currently in the Central African Republic.

CAR: Interim president must rein in "out of control" militias as Muslims forced to flee |...
www.amnesty.org

The new interim President of the Central African Republic must urgently rein in the anti-balaka militias forcing scores Muslims to leave the country in a bid to escape abuse.

picture 3

One of the photos that are linked to the headlines shows a group of Muslims, most of them are children. Again, we can observe the frame of using an image of children. It is to draw our attention to the fact that children suffer the most in the situation. They are the ones who should feel safe and protected, but instead they feel threatened and afraid. The living conditions of the children presented in the photo (21 Jan 2014) (*picture 2*) are very difficult; they do not have houses; they have to stay outside, in provisional camps, where many people occupy a really small space. Another photo (20 Jan 2014) (*picture 3*) shows anxious mothers who are carrying their children in their arms, because this, apparently, is the only safe place for them. The frames chosen to illustrate those news items are used to draw one's attention to the fact that the world's action is necessary because people who are treated like animals are, in fact, not guilty of anything but just practise a religion that is not tolerated. It is shown as unacceptable that in the times where the freedom of religion is one of the basic human rights: some people suffer because of their beliefs.

Amnesty International ha compartido un enlace.
12 de febrero

"Anti-balaka militias are carrying out violent attacks in an effort to ethnically cleanse Muslims in the Central African Republic. The result is a Muslim exodus of historic proportions," said Joanne Mariner, senior crisis response adviser at Amnesty International

Central African Republic: Ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings | Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org

International peacekeepers have failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslim civilians in the western part of the Central African Republic, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

picture 4

On the other hand, we have the photos presenting the other side of the conflict – the persecutors. (*picture 4 & 5*) These are not any members of military forces; these are simply native people of the Central African Republic. In one of the pictures (12 Feb 2014) (*picture 4*) there is a black man who is placed in the centre of the photo. Holding an object (probably a kind of weapon) in his hand, he seems to take aim at the person who is looking at the photo. This imagery is compatible with the verbal frame of hunting. Consequently, some receivers may have a feeling of being his target: they may feel anxious looking at the photo. The man's face is angry and terrifying. A viewer can conclude: if I myself feel insecure and vulnerable looking at the man in the picture, then his victims must face a real threat. Thanks to the frame a receiver realizes how Muslims facing the situation may feel. The background of the picture is also horrific. Looking at it, the big scale of the tragedy becomes apparent to a receiver. It shows an abandoned, destroyed car whose windscreen is broken. On the left, there is a burning building; we can see the fire and flames. For the receiver, the destructive character of the conflict is visible at first glance, thanks to the chosen photo.

Amnesty International
20 de febrero · Editado

Anti-balaka militias are carrying out vicious attacks in an effort to ethnically cleanse Muslims in the Central African Republic. Demand the African Union act IMMEDIATELY to bring an end to this before its too late! http://bit.ly/1bMMpj9

STOP ETHNIC CLEANSING IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

picture 5

The last news item to be scrutinised in this article concerns violent protests that took place in Ukraine in February 2014. The headline introducing the article is "'It felt like real war' – An eyewitness account of the EuroMaydan clashes" (21 Feb 2014). The headline includes the words of a person who was present in the place where the clashes occurred, so the person is called "an eyewitness." The definitions of the words *a witness* and *an eyewitness* in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009) are roughly the same, but the word chosen in the headline helps the audience to conclude immediately that this person was in the centre of the conflict and saw everything that was happening. We have two words used to describe the same event: *a war* – the word used in the cited sentence, and *clashes* – the word used by the journalist. *A clash* is "a short fight between two armies or groups" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* 2009). Following the definition, *clashes* do not seem to be very serious; however, for the person who was an eyewitness of the EuroMaydan clashes, it seemed like a war. The rhetorical analogy between a protest and a war is routinely exploited in news media as an amplifying frame. However, AI coverage shows that what may not seem very dangerous or serious to onlookers poses a serious threat to people who witness it.

picture 6

The photo (21 Feb 2014) (*picture 6*) corresponding to the headline presents a group of people (men) who are running in order to escape danger. One of the men has his mouth open, as he is probably shouting. He and another three men are carrying a stretcher with a wounded person. Some of them have got crash helmets and masks. In the background we can see either smoke from some burning buildings or a cloud of tear gas. Looking at the photo, a receiver does not even need to read the article to know that the situation in Ukraine at that time was really dangerous and horrific. Protesters were being wounded, had to flee and wear special devices so as not to be hurt. Again what is visible in those frames is a human who is a victim of a conflict and who suffers from it. A striking thing about the photo is that it presents only one side of the conflict – its victims, because, according to the framing by AI, a receiver should pay attention to the difficult conditions of individual citizens. What is also visible, thanks to the frames, is human solidarity when facing a problem. Nobody is left without help; one who suffers may count on help of others who are in the same difficult situation. This frame may encourage the viewer to act out in solidarity and support AI activities.

Conclusion

For the activists working on the publicity for Amnesty International, using frames serves to show the human dimension of war and military conflicts. What matters most for the journalists here is to foreground individual victims and the way they suffer and struggle in a presented situation of the violent conflict. Every

conflict that involves the use of force is a tragedy for people. And that is what the organization is trying to make the audience aware of. Frames used by Amnesty International journalists that present news items concerning conflicts with the use of force help the audience to realize clearly that every war, clash, or violent attack brings suffering. This human aspect is often left out in news agency materials in mainstream media. Those who suffer are often people neither responsible for nor guilty of anything, and the organization wants to stop, or mitigate, the violation of their rights.

What all the items analysed in this article have in common is that they present a destructive character of conflicts. Amnesty International journalists' task is to acquaint the audience with the fact that every conflict produces victims, and to encourage the audience to take action. They use frames to show that what is the most important in a given problem is a human who should be respected and treated fairly, and instead of that sometimes is treated rather as an animal, chased, perse-cuted, wounded, or even killed. The frames analysed in this article present always one side of a conflict – victims of violent actions and their difficult situation, but sometimes, for a stronger effect, also include the other side – cruel people who are responsible for it.

Frames help receivers to understand a problem more clearly and to evaluate it more precisely. They are to draw our attention to the most important aspects within a given issue, as presented by the framers. They "pave the way" for reali-zing important aspects of a presented problem; they guide the audience's interpre-tation in a certain direction of understanding an issue. It is worth remembering that frames are rhetorical in the sense of persuading the receiver to adopt the framer's point of view, attitude, and evaluation. As is the case with any rhetorical device, frames need to be analyzed critically and reflectively, which this article hopes to have achieved as well.

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