Where is the Frame?

Victims and Intruders in the Belgian Press Coverage of the Asylum Issue

■ *Baldwin Van Gorp*

ABSTRACT

■ In this article an empirically oriented conceptualization of frames is developed, using the issue of asylum and illegal immigration in the Belgian press as a test case. The methodological focus of this study is on the question of how these frames can be detected in the coverage. How can they be defined independently of the researcher's perspective, knowing that the naming of frames in itself already involves a kind of framing? Two frames are reconstructed and deductively 'measured' by a content analysis: on the one hand, 'asylum-seekers are innocent victims' and, on the other hand, 'asylum-seekers are intruders'. In the second phase, this article examines to what extent eight Belgian newspapers used these two frames to cover the issue of asylum. A homogeneity analysis by means of HOMALS is introduced in the framing research. It turns out to be a fruitful way to establish the frames in the news more precisely. The construction of indices made it possible to explore the evolution of the use of frames over time. Surprisingly, the Christmas mood was a factor that caused a frame-shift and it even led to a media hype. ■

Key Words asylum, Belgian newspapers, content analysis, framing, immigration

Over the last decade, framing has taken a prominent place in the apparatus of enquiry into communication and the media. Numerous scholars have contributed to the theoretical development and empirical

Baldwin Van Gorp is associate professor in the Department of Communication Sciences, Radboud University, PO Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands. [email: b.vangorp@maw.ru.nl]

foundations of the paradigm. Routed in cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932) and anthropology (Bateson, 1972), the notion of frames was introduced in communication research by Tuchman (1978) and Gitlin (1980). Unlike well-known concepts such as agenda-setting, cultivation and the spiral of silence, there is neither a single name of a scholar nor a research tradition attached to framing. On the contrary, definitions of the term are diverse and multiple research trends are taking shape. Entman (1993: 51) urges us to 'identify our mission as bringing together insights and theories that would otherwise remain scattered', so a general framing paradigm can be developed, whereas d'Angelo (2002: 871) considers the diversity a trump card: 'Theoretical and paradigmatic diversity has led to a comprehensive view of the framing process.'

A typical characteristic of framing is the linkage between, on the one hand, the journalistic approach of shaping the news within a frame of reference and according to a latent structure of meaning and, on the other hand, the stimulation of the public to adopt these frames and to view reality from the same perspective as the journalists do (McQuail, 2000: 495). According to Carragee and Roefs (2004), the reduction of framing to a form of media effects is an indication of the neglect of this overarching quality. They argue in favour of analysing framing processes within a broader context of the political and social exercise of power.

With this article, I take one step backward in order to move more steps forward in the direction of a framing theory and a methodology that are tailored to the requirements of the concept. After all, the *conditio sine qua non* of framing research concerns the identification of the frames that are appropriate for the questions the researcher is willing to answer. The way a frame is conceived by a scholar affects the results, the scope and the comparability of the findings.

So far, most framing research is oriented towards general or generic news frames (de Vreese et al., 2001) such as the economic frame, the conflict frame, the powerlessness frame (Neuman et al., 1992) and the strategic news frame (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Other research is focused on issue frames, i.e. frames that are applied in relation to specific issues (Nelson and Oxley, 1999; Nelson and Willey, 2001), although some form of abstraction seems to be required to make a frame applicable to multiple issues. The exact articulation of these frames in news stories remains a subject of debate.

I start with clearing away some conceptual obstacles. First, there is the question of whether or not a frame is an objectively observable news characteristic used or created by journalists, or whether it is a heuristic tool constructed by the frame analyst who imposes it on the news story.

The next question concerns the origin of the frames in the news. Are frames pregiven in the events themselves, in such a way that the media adopt the frames that are embedded in reality? An issue related to a frame analysis of media content is: does a distinction have to be made between the frame that is reflected in the discourse of politicians and other social actors and the ways the media handle these built-in frames? Is framing a typical activity for the news media or is framing something that is connected to the construction of meaning in everyday reality and is partially picked up by the media, e.g. when they interview politicians?

This article argues that the main purpose of a frame analysis is to determine how framing devices co-occur in a news text and to form underlying patterns of meaning. I also suggest a frame analysis approach that, on the one hand, pays attention to the manifest and latent structure of a news story and, on the other hand, sufficiently guarantees the reliability and the validity of the findings.

In my test case, I conducted a frame analysis of the news coverage of asylum-seekers, refugees and illegal immigration in eight Belgian newspapers. I compared popular newspapers to elite or quality newspapers, and took their divergent ideological backgrounds into account. A major concern, however, was the clarification of the nature of the frames and the refinement of the approach to how they can be identified in the media.

A frame as a meta-communicative message

The conceptual vagueness of what is meant by framing and frames is partly due to the applicability of these notions to refer to the general idea of representation and the modelling of all kinds of issues in the media. In my opinion, it is better to avoid the use of the terminology when the connection to the main achievements in framing literature is virtually absent or when another clear-cut term, such as argument, topic or attitude, is available to convey the purpose of the research.

It seems to be more appropriate to start by representing a frame as a media package (see Gamson and Lash, 1983). Such a package consists of all indicators or framing devices by which the frame can be identified: metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, lexical choices, selection of sources, graphics, stereotypes, dramatic characters, etc. (Gamson and Lash, 1983; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Tankard, 2001). Beside these framing devices, there are reasoning devices that are connected to the four functions of framing: defining a problem, assigning responsibility, passing a moral judgement and reaching possible solutions (Entman,

1993). These devices can be manifest, but an important assumption of framing theory is that whenever a reasoning device is not explicitly stated in a news text, it will nevertheless be evoked by the frame message during the interpretation process of the reader. The frame itself is a specification of the idea that connects the different framing and reasoning devices in a news article. Within the scope of the news, this construct can be considered as a latent message from the journalist oriented towards the receiver, representing a suggestion or a stimulus to understand the news message in accordance with the idea expressed through the frame. As such, a frame is meta-communicative: it 'gives the receiver instructions or aids in his [or her] attempt to understand the message included within the frame' (Bateson, 1972: 188).

The next important conceptual assumption is that a frame is never pregiven or included in the occurrence that is turned into a news event by the journalist. In their reports, the news media unavoidably structure the chaotic and confusing world, and how this is done is not incorporated in the occurrences themselves (Hackett, 1984). Consequently, four locations in the communication process remain open for discussion: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture (Entman, 1993).

To put it briefly, we situate frames as part of a culture and, consequently, localize them quite independently of individuals. In this way, we follow Goffman (1981: 63): 'Frames are a central part of a culture and are institutionalized in various ways.' This implies that cognitive structures of the mind are not labelled as frames. There is no such thing as an 'individual frame' (see Scheufele, 1999: 107); to avoid confusion of concepts it seems better to call those organized patterns of thought schemata (Graber, 1988; Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Frames also do not represent something that is present in a news text, independently of readers of the texts. Framing, in the end, requires the intervention of an individual to connect the framing and reasoning devices in a text with a frame as a cultural phenomenon, notwithstanding that journalists can construct a news report *deliberately* starting from a certain frame, but not incorporating the frame *itself* in the text. As such, journalists are applying the frames that are part of the *repertoire* of frames that we dispose of in our culture to represent reality. Frames are not mere heuristic tools. They make themselves manifest within a text by means of framing and reasoning devices. The connection of these selected elements with the frame itself as a cultural motive (e.g. myth, value, stereotype, shared belief) forms a crucial step, although it cannot be observed directly during a frame analysis. It is made by the reader in interaction with his or her perception of the news text.

The purpose of a frame analysis is to search the structural dimensions of a news text (see Pan and Kosicki, 1993) in order to reveal devices that ideally coincide with the latent meaning of the news story. According to Entman (1993), framing implies 'selection' and 'salience'. The selection is carried out by the news media, as is the decision to emphasize certain elements. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to grasp the frames that result from media practices and the historical, political and social context in which they occur. Even scholars will probably not notice them, because these frames are deeply anchored in the spirit of the age and because they resonate naturally with cultural motives (Entman, 1991; Gamson, 1995). Furthermore, the sources used by journalists are not averse to frames. These sources contribute greatly to the (political) work that creates and defines the public's beliefs about the causes of social issues, and they thereby justify the action of certain actors (Edelman, 1993). Therefore, doing a frame analysis starting solely from media messages can be difficult.

Validity and reliability in framing research

Conceiving a frame as a latent meta-communicative structure did not simplify the purpose of this research, namely the reliable exploration of these frames. However, by embracing the heuristic principle that sequences of manifest variables can represent a latent construct (see Neuendorf, 2002), it was possible to circumvent this obstacle, since my inventory of manifest framing devices refers to preconceived frames. Another obstacle to overcome was the reasoning devices. They can be composed of manifest or latent textual propositions, and they made a comparative assessment necessary in order to decide to what extent, for example, the definition of the reported situation or the assignment of responsibility that was *indirectly* formulated in the news needed to be taken into account during the coding procedure.

The aim to reliably explore frames, i.e. in such a way that other researchers come up with the same frames, is an argument to restrict a frame analysis to easily measurable framing devices, e.g. counting catchwords. Although this approach generates results, it does not guarantee valid data. The data do not necessarily represent the frame. Indeed, reliability often stands in the way of validity (Krippendorff, 1982: 130). Paradoxically, if frame analysts concentrate on reliability checks too much, they run the risk of recording all kinds of media content and missing the frame. I limited the coding scheme as much as possible to the presence of manifest framing and reasoning devices. Yet,

it was also necessary to formulate some coding instructions that allowed the coders to interpret the implicit meaning of the news texts. Consequently, we had to accept that the intercoder reliability could never reach the level that is usually expected in case of a content analysis that is focused on, for example, counting frequencies of words (see later).

The news coverage of asylum as a test case

The victim-frame and the intruder-frame

Although a diversity of frames may be important in the context of the asylum issue,[1] I limited this deductive research to just two frames that are both related to the representation of asylum-seekers. On the one hand, asylum-seekers can be depicted by a frame that refers to the archetypical role of the innocent victim, while, on the other hand, they can be represented by a frame that refers to the stereotype 'all strangers are intruders'. Victimizing people is a dramaturgic technique that the media can also use to portray, for example, the poor, the elderly and children as people being in a situation that is due to a force that lies beyond their own actions and responsibility. The idea of the unknown and seeing the 'other' as a threat to one's own cultural and economic achievements are also cultural motives that manifest themselves in the media.

If one considers an asylum-seeker as a vulnerable victim 'who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence because of a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion', the issue is resolved by the awareness that these people are in need of help, and that the United Nations Geneva Convention (1951) should be applied flexibly. Conversely, under current asylum policy (in Belgium, and indeed in most other European countries), asylum-seekers are viewed as suspects or even as the associates of human traffickers, and, by the opponents of asylum, as criminals (Van Gorp, 2002). The policy option connected to this frame is to try to discourage people from seeking asylum in Belgium and, if they do come to this country, to send them back to their homeland. When it comes to global politics, these frames are respectively related to the discourse concerning the humanitarian aspect of the asylum issue and the discourse that formulates it in terms of national security (e.g. Harrell-Bond, 1999; Zetter, 1999). On the level of European politics, asylum and illegal immigration is strongly related to issues of protecting national identity and the level of prosperity from external threats (see, for example, Huysmans, 2000). As such, the external

borders of the European Union function mainly as a defence against 'unwanted intruders' (Anderson, 1997: 129).

Table 1 presents a matrix of these two frames, according to the most representative framing and reasoning devices that we came across during our preliminary investigation. They were elaborated on the basis of all kinds of texts in which the authors definitely used certain frames for rhetorical reasons, e.g. propaganda material from the Flemish populist extreme right-wing party Vlaams Blok (from November 2004, Vlaams Belang) and source material from non-governmental organizations working for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Finally, these devices were converted into about 100 categorical variables and into a coding scheme.[2]

Research questions

The conceptual and theoretical aim of this study was to answer the question to what extent the victim-frame and intruder-frame are used to cover the issue of asylum and illegal immigration. We also wanted to make a comparison between quality papers and tabloid-type papers and their ideological background (e.g. conservative vs progressive). We formulated the hypothesis that in the qualitative or broadsheet press the victim-frame is dominant and that the intruder-frame thrives in the popular press. Within this distinction we expected to find the most tolerant reporting, i.e. references to the victim-frame, in the progressive, left-leaning press. A third comparison was made between the two main parts of the country: the Flemish and the French part. Belgium is a federal state and is divided into three Communities based on language. The Flemish and French Communities are the majorities and the German Community (0.7 percent) is the minority. Although the asylum legislation is a federal issue, we wondered if the use of frames differed in accordance to the language of the public.

The next topic we wanted to examine was the evolution in the use of the two frames. Gitlin (1980: 7) stated that frames are part of the routine organization of the news production process and that they are resistant to change. Although we also confirm that the frame itself as a message that is linked to cultural elements is persistent, we perceive the framing process as very dynamic. Frames are activated, reveal themselves in public discourse, are adopted by other actors (the media, politics, etc.), dominate the media coverage and public opinion, disappear, and finally,

Table 1 Frame matrix for the asylum issue with their representative reasoning and framing devices

	Type of asylum-seeker	Role of asylum-seeker	Problem definition	Problem source	Responsibility	Policy solution	Moral and emotional basis	Metaphor/ stereotype	Lexical choices	Visuals
Victim-frame	Refugees according to a broad interpretation of the definition of the UNHCR (1)	Passive / people in need of help (2) and people who frequently fall into the hands of human traffickers (3)	How to receive refugees who are victims of persecution and other kinds of harm (4) and who are forced to leave their country? (1)	Violence, persecution, poverty (5) and the gap between rich and poor countries (6)	Borne by democratic countries (on the basis of e.g. the Geneva Convention) (6)	A humane (7) and a flexibly, cautiously and effectively applied (8) asylum policy	The moral duty to help people in affliction (9). Emotion: compassion (10)	Metaphors: shelter (11), hunting (12), fortress Europe (13), gate (14). Stereotype: helpless and anxious victim (15)	'The enemy is waiting in the homeland'; 'returning home = death' (16). Terminology: refugee (17), documenta-tion (18)	Families with children (15); pictures that represent distress, fear and misery (10)
Intruder-frame	The would-be asylum-seeker who abuses the right to seek asylum (A)	Active / adventurer or criminal who resorts to illicit practices (B) and makes a deal with human smugglers (C)	How to stop people who form a threat to 'our' culture, achievements and social services (D)?	A lax asylum and deportation policy (E)	Borne by policy-makers; and the asylum-seekers themselves (F)	Deportation of asylum-seekers and a discourse oriented towards discourage-ment (G)	Protect the interests of the native people (H). Emotion: xenophobia; aversion to (I) and distrust of (J) strangers	Metaphors: flood (K), garbage (L). Stereotype: the dangerous stranger (M)	'The degeneration of the neighbour-hood' (N); 'Belgium can't be the world's Public Centre for Social Welfare' (O). Terminology: [would-be] asylum-seeker (P)	A batch of asylum-seekers (K), especially single men

are applied again. During this process, the frame remains the same, yet the degree of perceptibility and, consequently, its effects can vary.

Method

We selected eight newspapers that represent the diversity in the Belgian media landscape and covered the entire territory in the best possible way. *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* may be regarded as the two best-known quality or elite newspapers in Flanders. *La Libre Belgique* is their French-language counterpart.[3] These newspapers have a limited circulation: *De Standaard* sold approx. 78,000 copies a day in the two periods concerned, *De Morgen* and *La Libre Belgique* each sold approx. 50,000 a day. From a historical point of view, *De Standaard* is pro-Flemish Catholic, *De Morgen* is leftist or, more recently, progressive, while *La Libre Belgique* is Catholic and conservative (De Bens, 2001). *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Gazet van Antwerpen* are the popular, Flemish-language titles in the sample. As both newspapers have an elaborate regional section, we selected the edition for the Antwerp region. *Het Laatste Nieuws* is the best-selling newspaper in Flanders. This newspaper is rooted in the Flemish humanistic and liberal tradition and sells approx. 288,000 copies a day. During the period of the research, *Gazet van Antwerpen* sold approx. 118,000 copies on a daily basis. The political roots of this newspaper are right-wing, rather conservative and Catholic. The three remaining outlets are *La Dernière Heure-Les Sports*, *La Nouvelle Gazette/La Province* and *Vers l'Avenir*. They are all popular, tabloid-style newspapers. While the first two have a liberal background, the last is Catholic. The average circulation for these newspapers was respectively 80,773, 129,073 and 97,527.

We assembled the articles on asylum-seekers, refugees and undocumented immigrants that appeared in the eight newspapers over the course of two time periods. We used the original newspapers as much as possible, but in 40 percent of the units the articles were gathered by use of electronic press archives, particularly in the second period.

The first period, of six months, ran from 23 October 2000 to 29 April 2001 and deals with the follow-up of the decision by the Belgian government to abolish all financial assistance to asylum-seekers and to replace it with free provisions, such as accommodation, food, education and medical care. This law came into force on 1 January 2001. Consequently, the Belgian government was able to create open asylum centres with a capacity for 10,000 asylum-seekers in the short-term. The new policy measure set off a chain of newsworthy events: asylum-seekers who were accommodated in hotels because the existing facilities could

not cope; hastily vacated army barracks, disused buildings and even holiday parks that were transformed into refugee centres; and protest marches organized by Vlaams Blok in communities where new refugee centres were being established. During this period, some 1004 news items on the asylum and refugee issue were published. The second period ran from 1 September 2002 until 31 August 2003 and was selected as a period of routine coverage without any significant events that caused a media hype. During this one-year period, 485 items were collected and analysed.

Twelve individuals coded the selected items. The matrix in Table 1 presents an overview of the main framing and reasoning devices that were identified as indicators for the two frames.[4] The coders had to indicate whether or not these indicators appeared in the news items.

During the coding procedure, much attention was paid to reliability checks. The coders' instructions were very strictly formulated in order to confine the coding to the manifest content as much as possible, with a limited space for free interpretation. If, for example, an article reported on traffic jams caused by police inspecting trucks for the presence of undocumented immigrants, the item 'asylum-seekers cause trouble and inconvenience' was coded as a 'no', unless the journalist or the interviewee stated so *explicitly*. This methodological consideration seemed to be the condition for obtaining satisfactory reliability coefficients. After teams of two and three coders had independently coded a subsample of 363 items (24 percent), Cohen's kappa was computed. All variables with a value less than .60 were removed from the data (see Krippendorff, 1982). The other variables had an intercoder reliability that ranged between .60 and .99 percent with an average of .77, taking into account that the variables with the lowest reliability coefficient were treated more cautiously.

During the preparation of the coding scheme, the question occurred whether or not it was necessary to insert an additional code to indicate that, for example, the statement 'asylum-seekers are poor' was written down by the journalist or that it was pronounced by an interviewee. Suppose the media were reporting a party convention of the extremist party Vlaams Blok and they quoted some of the more remarkable statements about asylum-seekers and refugees? Keeping these circum-stances in mind, is it fair to conclude that the media are using the intruder-frame? The first possible answer is 'no'. In order to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the circumstances of the news event and the (policy) statements made by, for example, interviewees, and, on the other hand, the journalistic handling, the coders needed to answer some additional questions. The journalist can either agree with

the point of view expressed by the interviewee or disagree with it. Nevertheless, the second possible answer to the question is 'yes'. Reproducing a statement, regardless of who said it, is the result of a choice made by the respective journalist. In an interview, journalists decide which (leading) questions will be asked and which part of the interview is reproduced in the final article. Frequently, questions, wording and sentences are reformulated to deliver a readable story. As such, the position of our example-statement in the story and its exact formulation are much more the result of journalistic practices than the impression the quotation marks are trying to give.

In order to better define the frames, the researchers relied on homogeneity analysis by means of alternating least squares (HOMALS), an implementation of multiple correspondence analysis that is suitable for visualizing a multivariate data structure that is made up of categorical variables (van de Geer, 1988).[5] The algorithm of the HOMALS program calculates for each object (framing or reasoning device) proximity coefficients starting from the 1489 coded newspaper articles. The distance between the particular devices in the plot is an indication of the similarity between the articles that contain these devices. Devices that occurred together in the same news articles were plotted in the two-dimensional space close to each other, whereas devices that did not appear simultaneously in any of the articles were plotted far apart.[6] This method of multiple correspondence analysis enabled us to ascertain which devices appeared in the same news articles. Subsequently, we could interpret the dimensions in the plot and compare the cluster(s) of devices to the initially defined frame matrix.

Results

Two clusters of framing devices

We started our exploration with the interpretation of the HOMALS graph, i.e. naming the dimensions and identifying the clusters, as displayed in Figure 1. The categories, which were simultaneously ticked by the coders for every single newspaper article, are presented graphically in clusters. Categories of variables that did *not* appear in two or more articles *at the same time* are plotted *far apart*. For example, the use of a news format that represented the asylum-seeker in an episodic 'frame' (see Iyengar, 1991), positioned in the top right corner, was rarely used by a
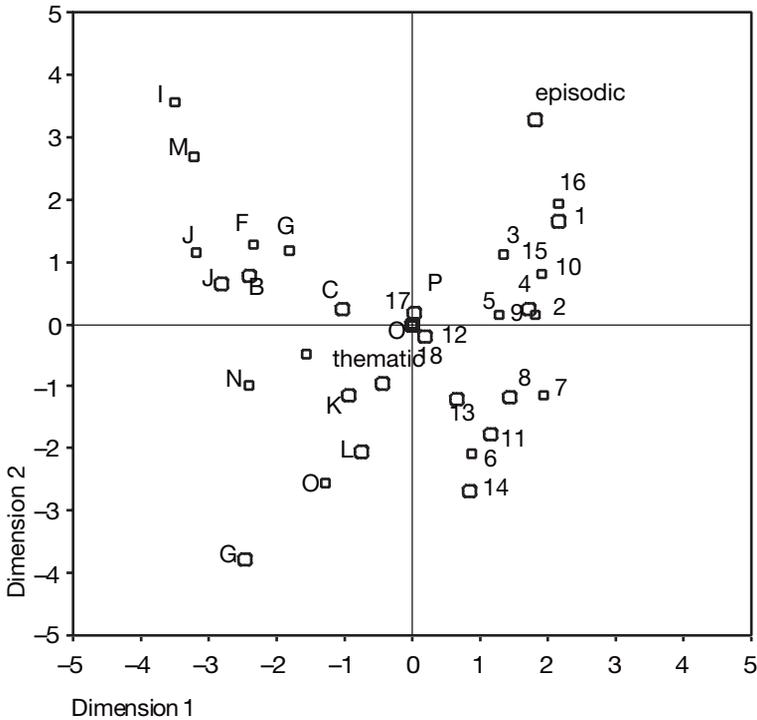
Figure 1 Homogeneity analysis of framing and reasoning devises (see Table 1), generated by HOMALS (N = 1489) with the first dimension (goodness-of-fit = .497) that splits them up into clusters related to the intruder-frame (L) and the victim-frame (R)

journalist in combination with the idea that asylum-seekers must be deported to their home countries (device G, see Table 1).

When the clusters of devices are compared to the initially defined frames in the matrix it is remarkable that all the variables belonging to the intruder-frame are in the cluster on the left-hand side of the figure and that all the variables connected to the victim-frame are plotted on the right-hand side, without exception. In other words, this fixed division confirmed the conceptual assumption that news reports contain defined, univocal clusters of framing devices. In this respect, the position of the variables on the first dimension indicates to what extent the framing devices are indicators for either the victim-frame or the intruder-frame. The second dimension makes a distinction on the basis of the journalists' perspective. It serves to split up the variables *within* the two clusters. By using the framing devices represented in the

bottom half, the journalist takes the stand of the in-group, i.e. the view of the local population and natives of the country who are confronted with asylum-seekers: '*our* duty is to help the refugees' and '*we* fear the degradation of *our* neighbourhood'. By using the categories at the top, he or she takes the stand of the out-group: '*they* are handled as merchandise' and '*they* use dark practices'.

For every dimension, HOMALS carried out a variance analysis for the coordinates on the two dimensions. As such, it was possible to work out how well the dimensions describe the data. The goodness-of-fit of the first dimension was .497. Since the maximum fit of a solution in the dimensions amounts to 2, this 'framing dimension' explains 25 percent of the variance in the codes. The second dimension added another 14 percent.

A number of variables are located in the centre of the figure, where the two clusters are connected. Consequently, these framing devices are a part of both frame clusters and as such they are not good indicators for measuring to what extent the frames are present in the newspaper articles. This concerns the use of terms and metaphors such as 'asylum-seekers as garbage' (e.g. 'A container of human waste is removed') or 'asylum-seekers as the target of a hunt' (e.g. 'It seems he [the border guard] goes hunting. His target: refugees'). We thought the media would use the term 'asylum-seeker' in the context of abuse, because many asylum-seekers are perceived to be asking for something they are not entitled to, in contrast with the term 'refugee', which has a more positive connotation and an undertone of legitimacy (Kaye, 2001: 68). In the news stories we analysed, however, the terms 'asylum-seeker', 'refugee' and 'illegal immigrant' were used synonymously. Linguistically oriented framing devices did not seem to be the most powerful indicators to determine to what extent the eight newspapers used the two frames as described in Table 1. In sum, journalists are authors concerned with writing a fluent text. The use of synonyms and metaphors follows on naturally from this line of argument.

Consequently, the relative position on the first dimension is an indication of the contribution of each framing device to the presence of either the victim-frame or the intruder-frame. We constructed two frame indices for a practical comparison of the newspapers, taking into account the position of the framing devices on the frame dimension as assessment coefficients. This means that each newspaper article got two index numbers that varied from 0 (none of the framing devices are present) to 100 (all framing devices are present). According to the coordinates on the

first dimension, the framing device that the asylum-seeker was forced to leave his or her country (device 1) and that returning home was equal to the death of the asylum-seeker (device 16) carried the largest weight within the victim-frame. The idea that asylum-seekers are dangerous (M) and the expression of feelings of aversion and xenophobia (I) were the framing devices with the largest weight within the intruder-frame.

An additional methodological question was whether it was necessary to attach an added assessment coefficient on the basis of a device originating from a large or a small newspaper article. A plausible argument is that the chance of finding a *framing device* in a lengthy news story is bigger than the chance of coming across one in a very small story. As already mentioned, we consider a frame as a qualitative aspect of news, and therefore we did not concentrate our research on lengths and frequencies. After all, journalists do not need much space to launch a frame in their stories. For example, a picture in *De Morgen* taken on a Spanish beach and depicting the dead body of a young African girl who had tried to cross the Straits of Gibraltar resulted in numerous letters to the editor. The picture was reproduced with just the brief caption: 'Stranded'. In quantitative terms, the length of the story was negligible, but in terms of framing, the picture was very powerful. This methodological statement can also be supported by our data. Pearson's correlation coefficient between the size of the news articles and the index for the victim-frame was only .16 ($p \leq$ .01) and what's more, no correlation was found between the size of the story and the presence of the intruder-frame.

The two indices were compared in 1489 newspaper articles. The comparison demonstrated that in only 3 percent of the articles did the indices number zero. The victim-frame was present in its 'pure' form in 21 percent of the cases, i.e. in combination with an index for the intruder-frame of zero. The opposite situation, the intruder-frame in combination with an index for the victim-frame of zero, was shown in 26 percent of the newspaper articles that were analysed. Put differently, one out of five newspaper articles referred 'purely' to the meta-communicative message that asylum-seekers are innocent victims and one out of four articles referred to the message that they are intruders. In this respect, the intruder-frame was more dominant than the victim-frame. Fifty percent of the articles contained devices from both frames. Pearson's correlation coefficient between the two indices was −.49 ($p \leq$ .001), a strongly negative correlation, which indicates that the presence of the intruder-frame goes together with a low presence of the victim-frame, and vice versa.
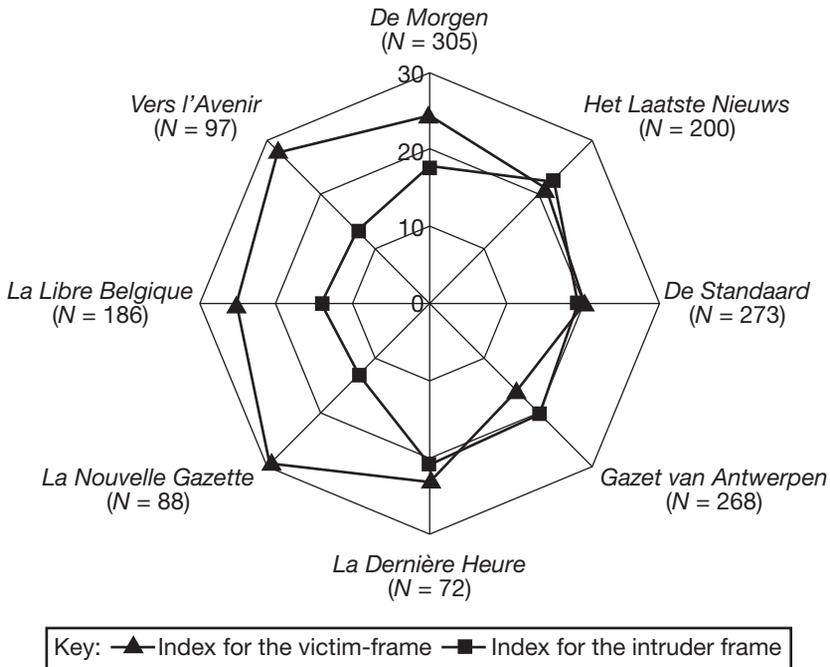
Figure 2 Average index scores for the victim-frame and the intruder-frame as applied in four French-language (left-hand side) and four Flemish-language (right-hand side) dailies in Belgium (*n* = 1489)

Comparison of the newspapers

Figure 2 presents an overview of the averages of the two indices for the eight dailies that were analysed. This graph demonstrates that the former conclusion saying that the intruder-frame is displayed in more articles needs refinement. If the victim-frame was present in the press reports this happened more pronouncedly. Several framing devices revealed this. The intruder-frame was expressed in a more subtle way.

The disparity in the use of frames in the Flemish press in comparison with the French-language newspapers is remarkable. The intruder-frame was used significantly more by the Flemish newspapers (*M* = 20.0, SD = 17.7) than by the second group (*M* = 15.9, SD = 16.1), *t*(909) = 4.4, *p* ≤ .001, two-tailed. The French-language dailies, for their part, show a marked use of the victim-frame (*M* = 26.1, SD = 17.3) compared with the Flemish press (*M* = 21.0, SD = 18.5), *t*(884) = 5.2, *p* ≤ .001, two-tailed. This confirms the hypothesis that the use of frames in both parts of the country was quite different. The homogeneous

pattern within both parts of the country is also an indication of the 'cross-fertilization' of the newspapers: both qualitative and popular outlets are operating in the same marketplace and use each other as a source. As such, the newspapers look alike and, to a certain extent, pick up the same frames. Nevertheless, a short comment on this finding is necessary. The number of news articles that were found in the French-language newspapers was much smaller than those in the Flemish papers. This means that the French part of the country paid less attention to the asylum issue in comparison with their Flemish neighbours. Yet, when the French-language newspapers reported on the issue, the victim-frame was used abundantly.

De Morgen is the exception on the Flemish side. The victim-frame was expressed significantly more often in this newspaper than in the three other titles in the sample. In *De Standaard*, the index measuring the victim-frame and that measuring the intruder-frame balance one another out. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Gazet van Antwerpen* are the only newspapers in our sample for which the intruder-index slightly exceeded the victim-index. *Gazet van Antwerpen* registered the lowest victim-frame index: 17.3 (SD = 17.8), while *Het Laatste Nieuws* reached the highest index for the intruder-frame, that is 23.1 (SD = 18.7).

When comparing the popular newspapers with the three quality papers, i.e. *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *La Libre Belgique*, it becomes clear that the intruder-frame was more pronounced in the popular papers: the average of the index developed for the intruder-frame was 20.0 (SD = 18.3) in the popular newspapers, compared with 17.7 (SD = 16.2) in the quality press, $t(1444)$ = 2.5, $p \leq .05$, two-tailed. This confirms our hypothesis that the intruder-frame is used more frequently in the popular newspapers than in the quality papers. The hypothesis that the group of quality dailies uses the victim-frame more frequently in comparison with the popular press was also confirmed, but the difference was not significant. This implies also that the use of the two frames is about equal in the popular tabloids and the broadsheet press.

We conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the political and ideological background of the newspapers with the indices for the victim-frame and the intruder-frame. The analysis shows that only the use of the victim-frame was significantly different, $F(2, 1486)$ = 6.3, $\leq .01$. In comparison with the conservative and liberal papers, *De Morgen*, i.e. the only paper in the sample typified as progressive, had the highest average for the index measuring the presence of the victim-frame (M = 24.8, SD = 18.6). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *La Dernière Heure-Les Sports* and *La Nouvelle Gazette/La Province*, the three

papers with a liberal stance, had an average value of 23.9 (SD = 18.5) for the victim-frame. When measuring this index in the Catholic-oriented newspapers, *Vers l'Avenir*, *Gazet van Antwerpen* and *La Libre Belgique*, we found an average of 21.0 (SD = 17.9). However, it was clear that these differences were thwarted by the differences in the use of language and by the contrast between the popular press and the broadsheets.

The use of frames over a period of time

The news items were analysed over two separate periods of time. In the first period of our research, remarkably more articles were published. We compared the monthly number of articles on the asylum issue and related topics, as well as the number of asylum applications in that period of time. Pearson's correlation coefficient between the number of articles and the number of applications was .42, but was not significant. The peak in the coverage at the beginning of the period coincides with a peak in the number of applications. However, the application trend was already descending when the amount of coverage had not yet come to a head. It is remarkable that the rise in the number of asylum applications in the second period of time was not followed by an increase in the news coverage. As a consequence, it can be stated that the number of asylum applications goes hand in hand with more coverage only if an increase is *framed* as an increase.

When the two indices related to the two periods of time are compared, we can draw a number of conclusions. A first important issue is that the use of frames was not more explicit in the first period, although the coverage in the first period of six months was more than double the number of articles published in the second, more routinely covered period of one year. It was, in fact, quite the reverse: the index measuring the presence of devices related to the victim-frame averaged 28.9 (SD = 18.7) in the second period compared with 19.4 (SD = 17.2) in the first period, $t(893)$ = 5.5, $p \leq .001$, two-tailed. This result contradicts the idea that the use of frames is more marked in a period of increased coverage or that it goes together with the salience of an issue, in such a way that the journalists are easily inclined to use frames more frequently and on a routine basis.

Nevertheless, further analyses found that the number of articles in which only framing devices connected to the intruder-frame were found was higher in the first period (16.6 percent) than in the period of routine coverage (5.8 percent). In 49.2 percent of the articles of the first period, the intruder-frame was more dominant than the victim-frame. In the
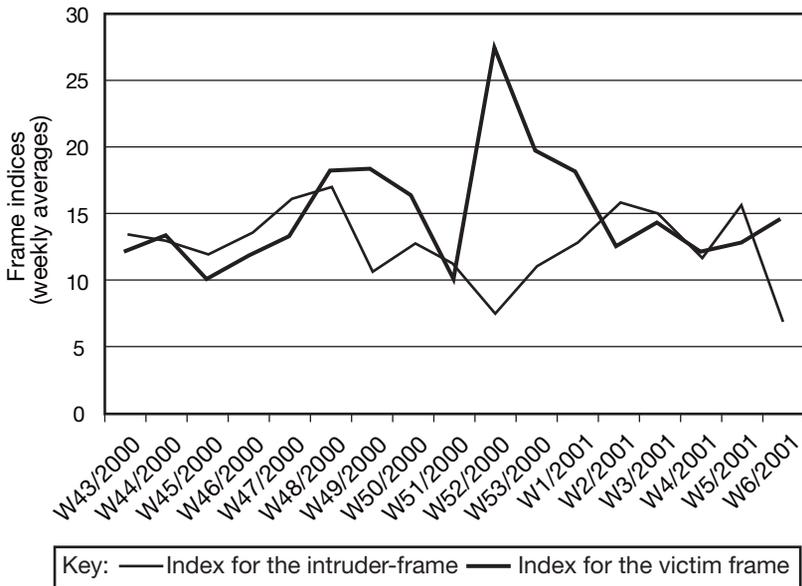
Figure 3 Weekly analysis of the index scores for the victim-frame and the intruder-frame between week 43, 2000 and week 6, 2001 in eight Belgian newspapers (*n* = 1004)

second period this was the case in only 33.1 percent of the news reports. As such, the presence of the intruder-frame prevented the use of the opposite victim-frame. This can also explain why the victim-frame was more pronounced in the second period.

A frame-driven media hype

There are enough articles from the first period to enable us to split that period up into weeks. This enables us to compare the use of frames over time and in more detail. Figure 3 displays the pattern of the weekly averages of the victim-frame and the intruder-frame, accumulated for all eight newspapers in the sample. At first, both frame lines run parallel with one another, then the use of the frames drops. The peak of the victim-index and the simultaneous slight decrease of the intruder-index is the most remarkable element in the graph. Finally, the peak fades away and the initial pattern is re-established.

We sought a possible explanation for this striking pattern. After all, during the two-week peak there were no special events that could have forced the media to use the victim-frame. The peak in the line that

represents the use of the victim-frame occurred in the last week of the millennium, between 25 December 2000 and 1 January 2001. According to our assessment the peak is due to the fact that this was Christmas week: the Christmas mood encouraged the newspapers to set the intruder-frame aside and to apply the victim-frame abundantly.

During the last month of 2000 and the first month of 2001, a media hype was visible in the Belgian press. The literature indicates that specific key events are responsible for such media hype, e.g. the arrest of child-murderer Marc Dutroux in Belgium in the summer of 1996 (Vasterman, 2004). These key events can lower the threshold for news selection in such a way that occurrences that resemble the key event are covered more abundantly (Brosius and Eps, 1995).

In our case study the situation was quite different and more complicated. During the first weeks (week 43 until week 50) the news was dominated by the commotion around the establishment of new refugee centres by the government. As described in the preceding sections, the use of frames was diverse, and as shown in Figure 3, none of the frames really dominated. It was only during the Christmas week that the coverage is marked by use of the victim-frame and that the number of articles reached a peak. Yet, this media hype was not driven by any key event, since by that time the commotion about the establishment of asylum centres had died down. According to our analysis this media hype was *frame driven*. The Christmas mood made it acceptable to use the victim-frame when covering the asylum issue. Journalists used this frame as a starting point and actively sought stories to fit the victim-frame. The number of reports with an episodic 'frame' (see Iyengar, 1991) and covering the asylum issue from a particular asylum-seeker perspective also increased: from four in October and seven in November, to 32 in December 2000 and 36 in January 2001.

The media acted compulsively: events with a low intrinsic news value became the news of the day. Inhabitants of a small village gathering around a Christmas crib, singing carols and expressing their sympathy for the asylum-seekers and the 'kidnapping' of the baby Jesus from the crib by an action group founded by Walloon citizens were two such 'pseudo-events' that hit the headlines.

The best example was a sequence of news reports on prospective refugees who were queuing up in the cold weather to fill out their application forms just before the new policy measure came into force. This event was published on the front page of all the newspapers in the sample. Although standing in line when it is cold is uncomfortable and not unusual, it is not, by definition, news. The media defined the

situation as 'humanly disgraceful' and no one could change that perception, whatever they tried to do, e.g. pitch tents and distribute blankets and pea soup. On 4 January 2001, *Het Laatste Nieuws* published two pictures where the caption played the key role in audience interpretation. One of the pictures depicted two people resting. Nothing else. The evocative caption read: '*harrowing situations* in one of the six tents: a child and its mother turn to each other for comfort, waiting for what will happen' (emphasis added). The adjoining picture shows a girl with the caption: 'this girl from Bosnia cries bitterly', whereas the picture did not actually show any tears. The victim-frame dominated the news and was compatible with the Christmas mood. As such, it was impossible to deviate.

Conclusion

In this research, we defined a frame as a persistent meta-communicative message that specifies the relationship between elements connected in a particular news story and thereby gives the news coherence and meaning. The frame was localized quite independently of the person and linked to cultural motives. In our case study, we identified the archetypal role of the innocent victim and the stereotype 'all strangers are intruders'. An analysis of the press coverage of the asylum issue shows that in the main Belgian newspapers, one out of five newspaper articles referred 'purely' to the meta-communicative message that asylum-seekers are innocent victims and one out of four articles referred to the message that they are intruders. The main dividing line was drawn between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Probably, the strength of the right-wing populist party Vlaams Blok (subsequently, Vlaams Belang) has repercussions on the application of frames in the Flemish press. Asylum, and especially illegal immigration, are dominant themes in the discourse and campaigns of the party. Nevertheless, we concluded that the victim-frame, with its emphasis on a humanitarian policy towards asylum-seekers, still has a more dominant position in the Belgian press coverage, especially in the French-speaking part of the country. As such, it is possibly the aversion towards Vlaams Belang in this region that can partially explain why the tenor of the arguments in the French-speaking dailies was so pronouncedly pro-asylum.

Despite all our efforts, we could not help but feel that it is extremely difficult to neutralize the impact of the researcher in framing research. Therefore, we introduced homogeneity analysis by means of HOMALS, an MDS technique that seems to be a fruitful way of

establishing the borders of the frames in the asylum and immigration issue. Since journalists are also authors and are concerned with the construction of a fluent story, linguistically related framing devices such as metaphors and lexical choices are not the best indicators to make a clear distinction between the two reconstructed frames.

When comparing the use of both frames over time, we noticed a frame-shift during the Christmas week; the presence of the victim-frame prevented the use of its opposite, the intruder-frame. The victim-frame became suitable to cover the asylum issue. Journalists used the victim-frame as a starting point and actively sought pseudo-events, for example, that fit the frame.

Asylum and illegal immigration constitute one of the main challenges for the governments of the EU member states. The borders are far from being open: some have become harder than ever to cross. The media play an important role in generating public support for or condemnation of the immigration and asylum policy. If some people are still not convinced that frames are really forming part of our culture, framing is at least a heuristic tool and a fruitful way to gain an insight into these kinds of crucial social and political processes. The enthusiasm with which so many scholars have approached the elaboration of the framing concept will, I suspect, lead us to the very heart of mass communication theory.

Notes

1. In a previous study, in which the debate regarding the establishment of a reception centre for asylum seekers in Belgium was analysed, a set of six frames was inductively reconstructed, so that the establishment could be framed in at least six different ways: as (1) a proof of misgovernment (frame: 'authorities are to be distrusted'); (2) an aggregate of suspicious and criminal strangers (frame: 'strangers are intruders'); (3) a sign of our hospitality (frame: 'everything in the garden is lovely'); (4) it offers opportunities for the neighbourhood (frame: donor); (5) a shelter for refugees (frame: innocent victim); (6) will cause inconveniences because the location is mistakenly chosen (frame: 'not in my back yard') (see Van Gorp, 2002).
2. The detailed codebook can be obtained upon request from the author.
3. *De Tijd* and *L'Écho* were not included in the sample of quality papers because their main focus is on economic news. Also, *Le Soir* was excluded because it is, just like *La Libre Belgique,* a daily that is specifically dominant in the region of Brussels, while we preferred to include more comprehensive coverage of Walloon.

4. The original matrix was much more complex. For reasons of clarity we reduced it for this publication and made connections with the plot (Figure 1). See van Gorp (2005) for a descriptive overview and a more in-depth analysis of the separate framing and reasoning devices.

5. The main strength of HOMALS (and MDS techniques in general) is that it provides the researcher with one graphic image that represents immense quantities of relationships between, in our case, circa 30 devices within 1500 newspaper articles. According to the SPSS manual, the interpretation of the graphs should be more straightforward than in other categorical techniques, such as cross-tabs and log linear modelling. Although the HOMALS output provides us also with extra quantifications and statistics, there are some weaknesses: the absence of numbers in the plot; the distorting effect of extreme categories; and the frequently occurring horseshoe effect mean that the (re)interpretation of the plot by outsiders is not always consistent (see also, for example, van der Kloot, 1997; Cox and Cox, 2001).

6. It is important to note that all 'no' answers in the data matrix have to be treated as missing values (van de Geer, 1988: 131). For example, when two separate articles do not mention that asylum-seekers are poor there is no reason to state that they bear a significant resemblance.

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