

## **Syrian War and Media Politics: Priming, Framing and Agenda-Setting**

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### **Abstract**

*The Syrian war is about to enter its seventh year. Apart from being a theatre for great power political and military showdown, the war has been an object of international media competition. Meltwater, a United States-based media intelligence group published a report in late 2015 on digital and social media coverage of Syrian war, called Representation of Syria in International Media. The report covers micro and macro picture, comparing Syrian war with its contemporary, Ukrainian war, and then evaluates different aspects of the Syrian war's coverage in top international media outlets during the period from 10 March to 10 September, 2015. Among many of its findings the report concludes that terrorism category holds the major share of media coverage – 30 percent – in the given time period against rest of categories, such as women, peace, children, refugees, politics and conflict in general.*

*This paper, by relying on the report's findings, explores the underlying political role of international media, assuming that media throughout the war acted as a tool for contending powers to advance their objectives, rather than as an independent agent; thus highlighting the media control mechanisms, as has been studied in the past. The theoretical tools -- framing, priming and agenda-setting – enable us to examine the elite control of media and media's control of messages. By contextualizing the highest proportion of media coverage for 'terrorism category', the paper evaluates the underlying assumption that media collaborate with contending political rivals, while do not lose their reputation of being biased.*

*Keywords: War, Syria, Communication, Media*

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### Introduction

In late 2015, Meltwater, a United States-based media intelligence group published a report, *Representation of Syria in International Media*, which examines the digital and social media coverage of Syrian war. The report covers both micro and macro picture, comparing Syrian war with its contemporary, Ukrainian war and then evaluates different aspects of the Syrian war's coverage in top international media outlets during the period from 10 March to 10 September, 2015. (Meltwater, 2015) Among many of its findings the report concludes that terrorism category holds the major share of media coverage – 30 percent – in the given time period against rest of the categories, which include women, peace, children, refugees, politics and conflict in general. The Syrian war is about to enter its seventh year. Apart from being a theatre for great power political and military showdown, the war has been an object of international media competition – both social and digital media. However this paper only focuses on the report's finding on digital media coverage.

Following are the report's important findings:

1. Terrorism had the biggest share of the media coverage getting 4176 hits during the period of analysis, 30% of the total coverage on Syria. Terrorism and conflict categories comprised 46% of all coverage.
2. Biggest spikes came from terrorism actions made by ISIS or military actions made by the Syrian Regime army.
3. Among the least covered topics were women (1% of total), humanitarian aid (2%) and peace (3%).
4. Articles were often short and covered only one aspect of the ongoing situation lacking deeper presentation of events.
5. Media was in many cases reporting according to its home country's geopolitical position and policy on Syria.

The findings of the report show consistency with the existing mass media propaganda theory (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), agenda-setting and cognitive and sociological theories of priming and framing. The paper analyzes the findings of the report through the application of these theories for macro level analysis for micro level. (Iyengar & Simon, 1993) (Macrae &

Bodenhausen, 2001) Defining Theories Large research has been conducted that provides evidence of media priming, framing and agenda-setting effects the judgment of people with regard to the issue. While making judgments, citizens largely rely on the media information. Experimental studies on the agenda-setting effects of news found that people with lower levels of political knowledge were less able to argue against the information in the news. As a consequence, it turned out that political novices, as opposed to those with higher levels of political knowledge, were more open to media influence. (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, P. 7; Scheufele, 1999, P. 104-107).

Agenda-setting assumes 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. Media emphasis takes place through relative placement or amount of coverage to a particular issue. Priming phenomena occurs when people changes standards to make political evaluations. Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use

specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of contenders. Priming and agenda setting assume that people's attitudes about their decisions are based on the considerations that are most salient or most accessible. Judgments formation is related to how easily mind can recall instances. By this way mass media plays an important role by emphasizing certain aspects of an event in relation to other aspects to shape people's judgments.

“By making some issues more salient in people's mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political or issues (priming). The priming hypothesis presumes that, as a result of cognitive limitations, people use only a limited subset of the information stored in their memory. They are most likely to retrieve information from recently.” (Brug, Semetko & Valkenburg, 2007, P. 116-118) (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, P. 11)

Framing regulates audience's perception and acceptance of a particular meaning. The way an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences. Goffman states that individuals cannot understand the world fully and apply interpretive schemas or “primary frameworks” to classify information and interpret it meaningfully. Frames are tools for presenting relatively complex issues efficiently and in a

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way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas. As a micro construct, framing describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions. (Goffman, 1974, P. 27) (Allen, O'Loughlin, Jaspersen & Sullivan, 1994, P. 266) (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, P. 7) (Hanna, 2011, P. 520)

### **Syrian War and the Theories**

The paper develops the assumption that media and contending partners' and rivals interests in Syrian war are closely related. Terrorism category received highest media coverage because the different contenders in the Syrian war consider terrorism as neutral category as there is no political stake involved while targeting this category. Considering the report's finding: "Media was in

many cases reporting according to its home country's geopolitical position and policy on Syria." The report mostly focused on the media outlets from the countries which are also the contenders in Syrian war: the USA, Britain, France, Turkey, Gulf countries, Russia, China, Iran and Lebanon. All these countries have strategic interests in the war and media from these countries find highest exposure of Syria-related news articles.

If media priming of the terrorism category came at the cost of other important categories which almost remained shadowed, framing of messages as a phenomenon, inundated the Syrian war with other contemporary wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan, whose conflict is assumed to be between state and non-state actors. The method dispossesses the Syrian war its exclusive character: the Syrian war although began as a mass uprising against the dictator soon turned into a theater for rivals like Americans and its allies on one side; Russia and allies on the other. Consider other two finding of the report: "one, among the least covered topics were women (1% of total), humanitarian aid (2%) and peace (3%). Second, articles were often short and covered only one aspect of the ongoing situation lacking deeper presentation of events." Women's condition, humanitarian aid and peace are the other equally urgent categories that require deeper and more analytical reportage. The unprecedented magnitude of the crises caused by the Syrian war is paralleled compared to its other contemporaries. (BBC, 2016) (Connor, 2016) (Ward, 2015) (al-Hawat, 2016)

As the report itself states articles were short and lacking deeper presentation of the situation, small proportion of coverage of these issues explains this. The third party, ISIS, Al-Qaida and uncontrolled groups, though relatively insignificant, began to emerge as major objects of media symbolism. While the Syrian war prolonged because of the conflicting interests of different rivaling states, whose attitude was uncompromising, media's framing of the war as rivalry between states and terrorism changed the whole complex of public perception of the war. (Gikaru, 1994, P. 31)

These findings explain two things: one, media assumes audience as "Cognitive misers"; second, categorical knowledge structure is simpler for audience to comprehend. This characterization assumes that human minds are rarely motivated to engage in the mental activity necessary to optimize their evaluations of others. Rather, they do just enough mental work to get by, mental work that is simplified through the activation of category-based knowledge structures. Fundamental to this account of social-cognitive functioning is the assumption that reliance on categorical knowledge structures is mentally easier than the alternative of forming data-based, individuated impressions of others. Simply stated, categorical thinking is preferred because it is cognitively economical. (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2001, P. 241-245)

In Syrian war media limited its function to serve the interests of contending powers by selectively emphasizing on a particular category and framing it in a particular way: one side accusing the other for "supporting terrorists" raises the frequency of 'terrorism' in media. It thus offers a shield behind which the contending powers hide their strategic interest by glossing their intervention in the Syrian war as humanitarian. (Nelson, Oxley & Clawson, 1997, P. 223-225)

Here the question is not, as previously researched (Biernatzki, 2002, P. 5), whether media's coverage distorted the definition of terrorism or terrorists. (Arceneaux, Johnson & Murphy, 2012, P. 176) While the terrorism did exist in substance, the paper addresses different aspect of the media coverage: why among many categories such as Terrorism, Conflict Regime, Opposition, Politics, Refugees, Kurds, Children, Peace, Humanitarian aid and Women that the report studied terrorism received highest coverage in the word's high coverage media. This argument opens up a window to the discourse of media political role, its role in foreign policy and its ownership.

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Herman and Chomsky state:

“The elite domination of the media and the marginalization of dissidents that results from operation of these filters -- media ownership, advertising, sources of information, and flak -- occurs so naturally that media news people frequently operating with complete goodwill and integrity are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values. Within the limits of filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful and are built into the system in such fundamental way that alternative basis of news choices are hardly unimaginable.” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, P. 2)

### Conclusion

Agenda-setting, priming and framing serve as bridges between elite discourse about a problem or issue and popular comprehension of that issue. From the spin-doctoring that follows every televised debate to the timing and stage-crafting of press conferences, political elites devote considerable effort toward influencing not only what information gets on the air but how it is presented. Syrian war is one laboratory subject for media where “media decides not only what they think about Syrian war but also how they think about it.” Media acts in compliance with state actors to concentrate popular thinking on one particular aspect of the war while as defocussing other aspects; thereby absolving contending states of their responsibility while at the same time media doesn't lose their own integrity.

The symbolic and rhetorical devices deployed by political elites help the media frame their stories. Such efforts are encouraged in no small part by the symbiotic relationship between news organizations and media relations specialists representing government, business, labor, and other organized interests. Representatives of organized interests supply such framing devices as sound bites, slogans, analogies, and imagery to succinctly and effectively convey a specific construction of an issue-one that naturally benefits the organization's own interests. These rhetorical elements may eventually end up, in whole or in part, in news stories about the issue.

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