

THE USE OF STRATEGIC FRAMING IN LOCAL CRISIS REPORTING BY NATIONAL FREQUENCY TELEVISION IN SERBIA

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Abstract: This paper analyses the use of a strategic framework by national frequency televisions in crisis reporting. They aim is to determine the presence of strategic frames in media content, language forms and methods used to construct strategic frames by media, and who the subjects and sources of crisis reporting are. During a crisis, the public relies on the media as a source of information, and political entities exert high pressure on journalists. Due to the connection between the media and politics, media reporting is becoming more biased. The focus is on the political subjects as dominant sources of information and representatives of the crisis. The analyses tries to indicate the role of pluralism of ideas in the Serbian political process and to examine wheather the ideas articulated in the public space reflect the true spectrum of social aspirations. This research was based on a case study of media coverage of the domestic crisis in Belgrade, Serbia. The results show a high degree of singular presentation of reality and routinization of local media practice. Also, symbolical politics is reflected through strategic frames, and the public is getting an image of a polarised world from the dominant political players' perspective. By giving practical examples and insights into various aspects of media content, we can increase awareness of the level of strategic framing used and encourage media outlets to return to the research process.

Keywords: Media, Strategic Framework, Crisis Situations, Television, Framing

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Establishing a boundary between the media and political spheres appears to be difficult because the media represents the activities of political actors and the representation of reality from their perspective. As constructors of reality, the media are external generators of semantic manipulation based on the choice of sources and information (Baudrillard, 1991). Consequently, journalists can construct an image of an event by highlighting some aspects of reality over others (Entman, 2007). This media technique is called framing and, by using it, published content promotes a specific theme, moral assessment, or recommendation (Gamson, 1992). Journalists create frameworks that define problems and causes, predict consequences, and propose solutions (Entman, 1993). When these frames inform and direct the audience towards certain aspects of the content and further lead to persuasion and a specific interpretation of social reality, they are categorized as strategic (Hallahan, 2008). The goal is for the interpretations to be taken over, adopted, disseminated, and used to classify and evaluate public events. By focusing on specific segments, the audience is under pressure to think about the topic in desirable ways and use selective knowledge related to it. Strategically framed news emphasises affectivity, underrepresents political discourse, and highlights the role of institutions in audiences (Rhee, 1997). When patterns of strategic framing appear in different messages, it means that the media systematically helps entities such as political parties and contributes to the distribution of power. Journalists use strategic frames daily, and they can serve as valuable methods for presenting extraordinary situations such as crises because the media image defines the crisis (Milivojević & Matić, 1993).

In a crisis, journalists are less focused on norms and more on individual stories, which is why state intervention in the media sphere is higher. The political subjects' goal is to preserve control in symbolic practice and disallow the definition of the events contrary to the official definitions (Milivojević, 2015). This situation opens up a public debate and affects the development of descriptive journalism that helps portray political actors as credible crisis managers rather than tactical politicians (Olsson & Nordb, 2014). Political subjects will use aesthetic-symbolic resources and create symbolic surrogates of political activities to legitimise and consolidate themselves. In this way, the research of the symbolic presentation of politics is related to the research of the media space in which competitive interpretations of social reality are produced and spread while symbolic politics is realized through strategic frames (Pocelúev, 1999). This paper aims to show the extent to which media contents are strategically framed, determine the elements and techniques by which journalists strategically frame the content, and present the sources of

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information during crisis reporting. This raises the question of the role of pluralism of ideas in the political process in Serbia, i.e. how much the ideas articulated in the public space reflect the actual spectrum of social aspirations (Bubanja, 2021).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To research the use of strategic framing in media coverage, the author has used a case study method connected to a local crisis. Also, a quantitative-qualitative analysis of the content has been applied as a standard method of research media reporting. The strategic frames have served as the basic unit of analysis because they influence how the audience understands reality. The author has relied on an inductive approach to media frame analysis, which entails that frames have been inducted during material analysis (van Gorp, 2007). The case study refers to the media reporting during the local crisis caused by the illegal demolition of buildings in the city district of Savamala in Hercegovačka Street in Belgrade after the election night in 2016. The author has researched the content broadcasted from April 4, 2016, to May 31, 2016, in news broadcasts on television with national frequency (RTS1, Pink, Prva, and B92). Television is still the most important means of information in Serbia, and for that reason, it has been analysed (Matić, 2014; Atlagić & Surčulija Milojević, 2018). The choice of content has been impacted by the difficult availability of the material and preservation issues. That is why the interpretation of the data has been made from a general point of view and not at the level of the individual television sets. This crisis has been selected as a case study due to its specificities: a) there is no single record of the crisis event itself, so all knowledge stems from an interpretation of the media content before and after the crisis peak; b) after the crisis, media coverage initially proves to be non-existent, and questions about the crisis are asked by journalists from the commercial local media while covering other events. The crisis in question occurred during a transitional phase when the former government had dissolved, and the new government had yet to be established. As a result, the discussions were based on the positions of the participants and the creators of the strategic frames after the formation of the government in August 2016. As such, the emphasis was on power dynamics and roles rather than individual identities (Bubanja, 2022).

3. RESULTS

The results will be presented and explained according to the categories determined during the research process.

a) Presentation of the context in which the crisis occurs

The crisis happened during a time of political instability, which coincided with extraordinary elections and unfulfilled political promises (Stojiljković, 2014). The media was facing a tough time due to the poor economic situation, incomplete privatisation, and co-financing of media content from the state budget. Despite a large number of media outlets, ensuring the pluralism of information in the public sphere was difficult. On the night between April 24 and 25, 2016, the day after the parliamentary elections, people with balaclavas on their faces demolished some private buildings in the Savamala district in Hercegovačka Street in Belgrade. The events, which had the elements of criminal offences, were reported to the relevant authorities, but none of the police officers or media representatives appeared on the scene, nor did they inform the public about what was happening in the centre of Belgrade at the time (BCHR, 2016). After a few days, representatives of the city administration turned to the public and promised to investigate the incident (Prva, 2016). An inquiry was initiated by the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade following the demolition. The district police's decision to remove debris jeopardised the preservation of evidence during the process. The City of Belgrade allowed this to make way for the Belgrade Waterfront project's parking lot construction. The lack of transparency in public information prompted an investigation by the Ombudsman and intervention by the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection. According to their reports, the Police Department of the City of Belgrade did not act efficiently, resulting in public protests. This marked the first instance of civil criticism of the government, with no political party publicly supporting the protest, making it unique. The responsibility of the perpetrators is still being debated publicly each year.

b) Strategic framework and their characteristics

The media content was carefully selected based on crucial keywords such as "Savamala", "demolition", "protest", "police", "ombudsman", "wiretapping", "responsibility", and "Herzegovina". Out of the total number of posts analysed (142), 115 strategically framed articles (81%) were selected for further analysis. The chosen articles were mainly in the form of thematic articles (55.6%) and news (27.8%) (Bubanja, 2022). Thematic articles are suitable for strategic framing as they are created gradually, and

the journalist has time to censor segments or contact appropriate sources. None of the articles had author reports or polls as standalone features. Active voice recordings were included in 52.2% of the content, as the protagonists' statements were the central segments (Ibid). Archive material was present in 15.6% of the articles, and in those contents, the crisis was compared to similar events in the past. The authors of the articles were not highlighted (63.6%), indicating that the respective journalists only reproduced the statements and were not held responsible for the published content. The articles were directed towards the current ruling coalition and had a positive character (Ibid).

Frames' authors were representatives of the government in 41.8% (in 22.5%, the Prime Minister). The media workers were also the authors of the frames (34%), who kept relying on previously established public image and interpretation of the crisis (Ibid). The character of the frame quality was diagnostic (67%) and, to a lesser extent, diagnostic-prognostic (8%) or diagnostic-motivational (9%). As usual, frames were created by selection and fragmentation techniques. In the selection method, aspects of the event are singled out and presented to the audience individually. After this, fragmentation is performed as the particular transmission of statements and control over the facts (Slavujević, 2009). In almost half of the articles, the technique of spreading the theme was used, as well as the transformation method. The transformation method shifts the audience's attention from a known event to a new one, which means that a new, insufficiently known event is taken as a reference (Benford & Snow, 2000). The imposition of authority as a technique was reserved for government representatives, which emphasised their position, and the articles tended towards personalization. The study identified some for and against strategic frames, which are listed below, along with the number of repeating frames (Bubanja, 2022):

- For-strategic frameworks:

- 1) The state is not responsible for the demolition in Hercegovačka Street and it will find the responsible culprit. However, they should have been demolished legally during the day because they were illegal, unlawful, ugly. (52)

- 2) Those who demolished the government with balaclavas in the 90s are responsible for the demolition in the Savamala district. This is evident from the opposition's reaction, falsely linking the death of the Savamala watchman to the demolition of the buildings, along with the Ombudsman's false statements that someone was bugging him. (12)

- 3) The state solved the case of the demolition in Savamala, revealing that the people who had demolished public and private property that night were members of the ruling party. What is more, they were also members of the previous government, which shows that people who have been stealing from the state for years cannot change. (3)

- Against-strategic framework:

- 1) The state is guilty and responsible for the organised and illegal demolition of private buildings in the Savamala neighbourhood. This is because the city services and the police did not react in time and should bear responsibility in the form of resignations of the city's officials. (30)

- 2) The government organised the demolition in Savamala for the needs of the "Belgrade Waterfront" project. Hence, people should revolt against those who threaten their rights and freedoms. (12)

- 3) The representatives of the ruling coalition who manipulated the election results are manipulating the media's reporting of the demolition in Savamala. (3)

Three strategic frames could not be categorised.

The majority (58%) of the sample used for-strategic frames to present the crisis from the government's perspective. For-strategic frames personalised politics that highlighted the personal qualities of those in power. Conflicts were presented more attractively with a for-strategic frame, dividing the audience into "for" and "against" the government. Both for-strategic and against-strategic frames used techniques such as victimization or emotional language. Of the total number of for-strategy frameworks, 85% focused on the ruling coalition, its previous work, and the transfer of responsibility, while the remaining 15% were divided between the media, NGOs, the civil sector, the opposition, and foreign institutions (Ibid). Against-strategic frames were focused on the government as well, yet they portrayed it negatively. In the analysed sample, the articles' strategic framing was indicated by the representation of the language of sport, game, competition, and war. The media used the same terms to describe different situations, which was obvious from the repetition of the terms and concepts. The most common strategic terminology used was the language of war and strategic metaphors, and Table 1 can be referred to for details regarding the purpose of this terminology.

Table 1. Linguistic indicators of strategic framing in the total sample in percentage

Linguistic indicators	%	The purpose
Metaphors	35, 6	Emphasized the circumstances of the crisis and blamed those responsible
The language of sports	10, 5	Created the assumption that victory is the only motivation of political subjects
The language of competition	10, 5	Indicated innocence, enabled the transfer of responsibility, created dichotomies between political representatives
The language of the game	13, 4	Showed self-initiative of the political process and players
The language of war	37, 4	Widened the gap between the parties and contributed to a more extreme display of the conflict
Statistics	34, 7	Raised visibility and served as a tool for portraiture

Resource: (Bubanja, 2022)

Apart from the aspects mentioned in Table 1, game frames activated political cynicism as they focused on the political game rather than the facts. This created a distinction and highlighted the lack of trust in state institutions by those whose views ran counter to those of the ruling coalition. The media's lack of neutrality was pointed out through the creation of binary divisions by emphasising individual elements and using such language.

c) The presentation of subjects and actors

Dominant subjects and actors (marked with S and A in parentheses) were the media (S-60, A-35) and representatives of the republic's state institutions (S-51, A-174). The Prime Minister was the dominant crisis manager, with a large number of appearances in both positions (S-24 and A-45) and the highest public exposure during the crisis (8038s), which was 20 times longer than the next-ranked subject (Ibid). Other sources of information also included the relevant ministers, who shifted responsibility away from the head of the government while denying the crisis. Members of the opposition received less coverage and had a three times shorter presentation period compared to representatives of the ruling coalition. Representatives of the NGO sector were mentioned only when necessary and were not interpreted by the journalists. (Bubanja, 2022). There was uniformity in the number of subjects - government representatives (the dominant sources as well as actors), who were crisis managers, although none of them were experts in dealing with the subject of crisis. Almost half of the identified individuals in the sample were exclusively in actor positions. The context value of the actors was intoned both positively and negatively at the same time (66%) because there was a constant distinction between the ruling coalition and the "others" (the opposition, NGOs), and the tone of the subjects' addresses was moralising. Based on the already existing categorisations (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Petrogiannis & Freidenvall, 2022; Papakyriakopoulos & Zuckerman, 2021; Langhamer, 2018; Anker, 2005), subjects and actors were assigned roles that show the strategic framing of contributions. The first categorisation deals with the character of the personality (good people and negatives; villains and victims), and the second focuses more on the roles of the subjects and actors themselves (leaders, ordinary people, heroes, and fathers of the nation). Table 2 reflects the attribution of the roles and characteristics to subjects or actors (how many times).

Table 2. Portrayal of subjects and actors (number of assigned roles and their players)

Role	Subject	Actor	Players
Good people	58	66	Ruling coalition
Victims	34	66	Ruling coalition
Negatives	12	98	Those behind the crime
Villains	5	18	Perpetrators of crimes
Leader	47	275	Ruling coalition
Heroes	6	4	Only the prime minister
Father of the nation	20	6	Only the prime minister
Ordinary people	11	4	Invisible

Resource: (Bubanja, 2022)

Table 2 reveals that subjects and actors were usually portrayed as good people or leaders, as indicated by the presenter's retelling of statements. Moreover, actors repeated themselves and changed their positions, which means that in the same article, one person is the subject with one role and the actor with another (B92, 2016). The Prime Minister is the only one who appeared as a hero and father of the nation, which speaks of his role as a dominant creator of strategic frameworks and presenter of the

crisis. Table 2 additionally shows that no ordinary citizens appeared in the media content with whom the audience members would connect and identify, nor was there any insight into citizens' attitudes or fears regarding the event itself.

d) Crisis strategic framing

The analysed articles presented the crisis in a broad context (67%), while 86% described it as a crisis of loss. The desire to maintain the current state of society was stated in 89% of the content. Only 33% of the articles described the current situation, and all referred to the time after the crisis. The causes of the crisis were discussed in 78.2% of the articles, while 74.8% mentioned its consequences (Ibid). Only a few posts (18.2%) provided proposals for solutions, which included calls for city leaders to resign due to failing to respond to the crisis. In 14.7% of the articles, the situation was assessed, while in 47.8%, the picture of the crisis was simplified because the highest political officials justified and downplayed the violence. Responsibility was stated in 50% of the sample, but it was shifted to "others", focusing on the consequences of the crisis. The differentiation between the government and the opposition (74.8%) was based on the responsibility factor, which confirms the previous statement (Ibid). Due to human error, the officials had a high level of responsibility (96.5%). Government representatives urged people to be patient and tolerant (91.4%) in resolving the crisis. Despite bringing uncertainty, the crisis was presented in a way that suggested it could be beneficial for the country as a whole. By portraying the crisis managers as heroes and saviours, the severity of the crisis and the responsibility of the political actors were downplayed.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis indicates that the media coverage of the crisis in Serbia is often influenced by political factors, which implies that biased media content can be produced. While the media does cover domestic politics, they also focus on non-political topics, which allows politics to permeate all areas of society and gives political figures a platform to comment on various events (Bubanja, 2021). This can result in uniformity in reporting, where the same individuals hold both the position of the subject and the actor, and the focus lies on reinforcing existing attitudes rather than presenting a critical view. Journalistic practice also appears to be routine, with the use of repetitive language and dramatic coverage. The use of strategic frameworks contributes to an image of the crisis that aligns with the ideology and outlook of those in power (Ibid). The manner in which the media formulated their contents indicated that the use of strategic frames contributes to the presentation of symbolic politics in Serbia and that it has several characteristics (Bubanja, 2022):

a) It stresses the conflict between the government and the opposition, i.e. those in favour of preserving the status quo and those in favour of a change. Public debate presentations were held between the Prime Minister and "others", while ministers had the role of taking responsibility from the government representatives. The term "public debate presentation" is used because there was no actual debate, and political communication is personalised and based on the Prime Minister as the dominant crisis manager. The symbolic presentation of politics limited the presence and arguments of the actors but included self-support for the position of the dominant political subjects. This is in line with Srcinellys' (1987) research because other actors were provided with arguments when they appeared in public.

b) It focuses on the EU accession process and under the auspices of progress, Serbia is undergoing a series of reforms that include legal and procedural changes as well as the creation of an image of Belgrade as a modern city that is becoming more attractive due to constant innovations (RTS1, 2016).

c) It ensures the transformation of collective identity and mobilisation, new public programmes, and changes in public policies. The new political majority emerged through the reaffirmation of national pride, overcoming the image of Serbia as an aggressor and culprit for events from the past, and building Serbia as a respected and valued political community with a committed and engaged leadership (Milivojević & Matic, 2021). Symbolic politics emerges as a search for identity through which the audience learns new roles and values. This further entails that the roles and values that existed in the past were replaced by identification with the "main hero" – the dominant political subject and crisis manager. Life stories were used to create a more intimate relationship with the audience or to emphasise elements of the existing identity that need to be replaced (Ibid). Symbolic processing rationalises a particular relationship in terms of the interests of the dominant political actors in power, trying to legitimise and strengthen those interests and define the field of collective action. Therefore, all activities are connected with the political and ideological actors' points of view (Malinova, 2013).

d) It also represents other policies, and "the 1 out of 5 million" protests were the first outpouring of civil discontent after 2000. Their initial strength rested on civil discontent, different from the one that happened before the October 5th changes. This is the reason why most of the TV stations included in the analysis

did not broadcast the protests publicly from the beginning, which indicates the fact that the government does not have the same level of public approval as the one it publicly portrays. This inconsistency was a unique problem for a party that identifies as national and rests on the will of the people (Milivojević & Matić, 2021). The scale of the protests increased with the demolition in Hercegovačka Street. The media could no longer keep quiet about them, so they broadcasted them. The manifestation of the human body on the street stands for a political potential and demand for change, with the possibility of exerting political influence and conveying a message. Unfortunately, in this case, the media did not present that message to the audience due to bias, especially of the Public Service and other commercial televisions as well. In this study, subjects gave the most significant interviews to commercial televisions, indicating the beginning of the regime media creation, which ceased to be independent information transmitters but rather the newspapers of subjects in power who used them to present their version of events. The government's symbolic policy was implemented through strategic framing, and they manipulated the media content to promote their agenda. Owing to incomplete or biased knowledge of the events in Savamala, the public was susceptible to the government's ideology.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research carried out in this paper tries to determine the beginning of the significant deterioration of the media state in Serbia. The analysis has shown that the political pressures on the media could be detected as early as 2016, and reactions from the professionals and journalists were lacking. Televisions took a step towards bias and even then became the propaganda backbone of the regime, which left no room for alternative views. These actions of the media demonstrate their power when creating a new reality, the possibility to build one version of events, and form an image in the minds of the audience that is following the goals of the dominant politicians in power. By giving practical examples and insights into various aspects of media content, we can increase awareness of the level of strategic framing used. Such an approach will help the public to recognise the need to move beyond repetitive images and encourage media outlets to return to the research process and search for new and engaging stories. The change must first happen among the audience, as they are the consumers of the content so that the media can receive clear feedback and improve their content accordingly.

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