

Faculty of Social
Sciences

Tsunami or Tragedy?

Media-attention and Framing in relation to
Immigration Policies in the Netherlands

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This study aims to develop a better understanding of patterns of media-attention and media-framing of issues related to Dutch immigration policies and the influence of media-attention and -framing on politics and policies. The research focuses on sixteen cases in the period 2011-2015 including cases with relatively low as well as relatively high levels of media-attention. This enables us to compare the cases on the aspect of media-attention as well as the implications of media attention for policies. Our cases vary in another respect as well: some cases concern concrete and visible individuals or groups, while other cases concern more abstract phenomena or policy proposals.

The central research question is: *What patterns are recognizable in the scale and framing of media-attention of individual and group cases related to immigration policies?* This involves four more specific sub-questions that speak to the central concepts of this research (patterns of media attention, frames, actors and their framing strategies and impact on politics and policies):

1. What patterns of media-attention can be identified for the different types of immigration cases?
2. What are the main frames in media coverage – in terms of problem definition, proposed solution and persons who are held responsible?
3. What actors are represented in media-attention and what strategies do they use to influence media attention and framing?
4. What impact did media-attention and framing have on the political and policy-agenda?

The research shows that cases in which multiple frames are competing for media attention and where political agenda setting has taken place, receive relatively more media-attention. The cases of Aleksandr Dolmatov, the asylum centre in the village of Oranje and the 'Complaintwebsite on Eastern-European migrants' are examples of this. A notable result is that personification of a case does not necessarily lead to large scales of media-attention. Furthermore, we found minor discrepancies in media-attention between traditional and social media. Social media have more attention for cases dealing with individuals or groups of immigrants. Abstract cases receive relatively less attention on social media.

Media-attention includes more aspects than quantitative patterns of media-attention. It also deals with the framing of the issue. Sometimes immigration cases can be framed in terms of threatening 'tsunami', in other cases for instance as a human tragedy that can be portrayed in the media with dramatizing stories and pictures. Based on a literature review on the framing of immigration-related issues, we have distinguished four 'master-frames': a human interest frame, a threat frame, a governance frame and an economic frame. Based on this typology we conducted frame analyses of media-coverage in the selected cases. We found that the human interest and governance frames are most prevalent in the immigration-cases. The threat-frame only exists in a small number of cases, but in these cases it was associated with (very) high levels of media-attention. Immigration-related cases are seldom framed in economic terms, which contradicts the importance of the economic dimension to immigration policies as recognized in the migration literature. Traditional and social media do not differ significantly in terms of the

distribution of attention to specific frames. Frame convergence between these media types does exist.

Different types of actors are involved in media coverage of immigration-related issues. Stakeholders use a variety of strategies to promote their frame. Media, immigrants and interest groups often cooperate in the personification of cases. In many cases this introduces a human interest frame with a governance frame as a counterframe. This can contribute to a 'David versus Goliath' dynamic in media coverage, where a highly personified case is put up against an impersonal governance frame. The research shows that political and policy actors are actively involved in the framing of media coverage as well. In some cases they may initiate media-attention for a certain issue, while in other cases they strategically attempt to divert media coverage and policy impact. New information on an issue only leads to a change of the dominant media-framing when this information comes from actors who are considered to be 'independent actors'.

Furthermore, this study shows that media-attention is often associated with political attention, but that it not always leads to policy impact. Important conditions for a change in the policy-frame of the issue are a discrepancy between the dominant frame in media coverage and the policy frame of the issue and attention for the issue on the political agenda. When this is paired with initiation of media-attention for the issue by a non-governmental actor or a high degree of media-attention, policy impact occurs. However, these conditions do not fully explain impact on the policy frame of the issue. Political and government actors possess agency in dealing with media-attention and – framing that puts pressure on existing policy frames. Whether policy impact occurs is partly dependent on their responses.

In conclusion, this study confirms the key role media-attention and framing play in immigration cases. We identified specific configurations of conditions that influence changes in policy framing of immigration-related issues. These configurations may have broader applicability in other policy fields. We found that the human interest frame dominate in media coverage. This dominance has repercussions for the policy agenda and often leads to a change in policy framing of the issue. By agendizing a human perspective, media coverage seems to have an important function in bringing in the human dimension into immigration cases. Also, many actors recognize the importance of the media in immigration policymaking, which motivates them to contribute to framing of immigration issues.

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