



Multimodal News Framing Effects

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English Summary

Words and images in news media play a vital role in defining, or *framing*, citizens' understanding of political issues. The European refugee crisis provides a prime example of news frames in action. On the one hand, many news outlets framed refugees in written texts as innocent victims of the Syrian war, alongside images of suffering families sleeping rough or being pulled out of stricken boats. On the other hand, other news media wrote of 'floods' of hostile intruders posing a threat to Europe, accompanied by images of aggressive (especially male) crowds. Both still and moving images were an important part of this news coverage – the widespread public outcry to the image of the drowned Syrian boy on a beach in Turkey is testament to this. So far, however, no research exists about how visual and verbal elements in news work together to frame citizens' understanding of politics.

This dissertation fills this gap by providing first evidence of how images and text combine to deliver *multimodal* framing effects. This is important since news frames influence the decision making of public and politicians alike, and, in turn, can impact policy-making. To explore the influence of multimodal media over political decision-making, I use three experimental studies employing news coverage about war, conflict and crisis – a prime source of powerful visual news coverage. I measure citizens' emotional and cognitive responses. And, in turn, how these responses influence political opinions and behaviours (such as support for asylum seekers, and donating money and petition-signing to help refugees). Finally, I examine how the effects of multimodal frames differ in different media formats – news articles and videos. Four key conclusions are drawn from this research:

Conclusion 1: When presented in isolation, news images produce stronger effects on political opinions and behaviours than text.

Visuals are more frequently taking centre-stage in news coverage, and often appear in stand-alone image galleries – especially in reporting of conflict and crisis. The second chapter of this dissertation shows that even single images presented in isolation can influence political opinions and behaviours, and in fact are more powerful than news text. For instance, citizens who see an image framing refugees as suffering victims of foreign war are more likely to support military intervention in the conflict than if they read a text with the same frame. Emotions play an important role in these image effects – sympathy evoked helping behaviour and fear triggered avoidance.

Conclusion 2: When images and text are presented together, as they are in a typical news report, the image influences political behaviours, whereas the text determines political opinions.

Of course, news articles typically contain an image and text together. A second goal of the second chapter was to investigate how these modalities interact to frame political opinions and behaviours. Findings show that the contribution of visual and textual modalities is nuanced, depending on the outcome variable. Specifically, political behaviours, such as donating money or petition-signing, are driven by the image of an article regardless of the

linked text. Conversely, political opinions, for example regarding military intervention in a foreign conflict, are influenced by an article's text irrespective of the accompanying image. This shows that images and text act differently to frame viewers' understanding of the news.

Conclusion 3: The effects of news visuals and text occur through more automatic versus systematic information processing pathways, respectively.

The third chapter of this dissertation focused on establishing *how* multimodal news media produce their effects. Results show that images are processed via a fast and automatic information processing pathway, compared to a more systematic and controlled processing of text. This conclusion fits with the intuitive idea that news images are a visual reproduction of reality, are understood quickly, and help the viewer emotionally connect with a story. By contrast, the syntax of a news text can unambiguously relay meaning, but demands more processing effort for a reader to gain an understanding of a story. Using experimental manipulations and individual differences data, this study shows, for the first time, *how* visual and textual elements of news combine to frame political opinions and behaviours.

Conclusion 4: The effect of textual content is stronger in news articles than news videos, because news articles stimulate deeper information processing.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation compares the effects and mechanisms of multimodal news frames in different media formats. News videos are increasingly prominent in online news coverage, with moving images and audio proving a richer and more visual viewing experience than the text and image of a news article. By presenting the same story in different media formats I show that articles produce stronger effects on citizens' intentions to help refugees compared to news videos. This is because articles allow for deeper information processing compared to videos. As a result, effects of the verbal modality are also stronger in news articles than videos. Thus, although news organisations are investing more and more resources into news videos, this study shows that they are less impactful than news articles.

People today are bombarded with news images more than ever before, and it is imperative to understand how they interact with text to shape citizens' understanding of political issues. Taken together, this thesis shows that visuals evoke an emotional reaction which can drive political behaviour. However, visual cues can be overpowered by systematically processed verbal content, especially when presented in news articles compared to videos. I therefore argue that visuals play an important role in connecting with an often politically-detached audience, but that the impact of visuals in the multimodal media environment is nuanced. Citizens' political preferences are not mindlessly given over to their gut-reaction to visual content. Instead, modalities, mechanisms and media formats matter when considering the effects of news frames. This dissertation shows that only by considering news media in their proper *multimodal* context do we achieve a clearer picture of their democratic potential.