This is the Issue: Framing Contests and Media Coverage

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Abstract

Political actors and public relations practitioners use frames as strategic tools to further the interest of their organisations. Often such actors hope to get the media to adopt their frames. This chapter focuses on the dynamic contest between competing frames and their reception in the media. With the help of three case studies we discuss how it is that some frames resonate with journalistic practices, but also how the media construct their own frames that might or might not overlap with the frames constructed by the organisational actors. The case studies illustrate that actors that are able to adapt to journalistic practices and fuse their issue-specific political frames with traits of generic news frames stand a better chance to succeed, and even more so when the journalists become actively involved in promoting the same frame.
Strategic communicators like political actors and public relations practitioners use frames as strategic tools to further the interest of their organisations, and one goal is to get the media to adopt the same frames. A frame is important in that it promotes a certain definition and perspective at the expense of competing ways of understanding a particular issue. This means that while it is important for strategic communicators to gain media coverage, it is even more important to influence how journalists frame the news stories and construct media versions of reality. However, little research has focused on the dynamic contests between different frames and their reception in the media (Gandy, 2001; Hallahan, 1999; Pan & Kosicki, 2001). With the help of three case studies we want to discuss what determines who wins the framing contest. The following research question is posed: What kinds of frames typically prevail in mediated conflicts where actors present competing frames?

In the following section we briefly present and discuss some theoretical approaches to framing. After this, we present our methodology, before turning to the empirical analysis devoting a section to each case study. The final part of the paper contains a discussion of the findings, as well as suggestions for further research exploring framing contests.

Theoretical Starting Point

Over the last decades, the concepts of frames and framing have gained popularity in social science as a way of analysing media content and media impact (Entman, 2004; Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Johnson-Cartree, 2004; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Frames are important because they provide context and promote a certain understanding of a phenomenon, for example in news stories. Frames represent schemata of interpretation which are as inescapable in everyday life (Goffman, 1974/1986), as they are in journalism. To tell a story involves inclusion and exclusion of possible elements, and both journalists and news sources have, more or less consciously, to choose an angle. Framing is also consequential in that it influences and effects how people
perceive what is reported (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 2004; Iyengar, 1991; Strömbäck & Aalberg, 2007).

A well-known definition by Entman (1993) indicates the political and social significance of frames, and hence the necessity to study power and sponsorship of frames: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (original emphasis) (p. 52). Our concern is with the kinds of competing frames that exist around an issue and how certain frames are manifested in news discourse as a result of negotiations between journalists and competing political actors. This frame building process takes place in a continuous interaction between journalists and news sources (de Vreese, 2003).

In general terms frames can be defined as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (original emphasis) (Reese, 2001, p. 11). Frames are seen as relatively lasting principles that are used in discursive communities. Using a cultural approach, it can be said that frames make up a cultural stock of ways of thinking about issues (van Gorp, 2007). Frames, in this sense, might operate on different levels. We think it is fruitful to distinguish between, on the one hand, generic news frames that can be applied to a whole range of different issues, be they nuclear power, immigration, or petroleum production. On the other hand, it is possible to talk about issue-specific frames, frames that characterises a specific news story and that might be subsumed under a generic frame (de Vreese, 2003).

Generic news frames are general and not confined to a specific issue; they can be seen as standard ways journalists cover issues. One study of generic news frames is Iyengar’s (1991) investigation of the “episodic” and “thematic” news frames. Another study have, for
instance, identified five typical generic frames often used by the media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000):

(1) Conflict frame: The journalist focuses on a conflict between individuals, groups, institutions, regions or nations to capture the audience’s interest.

(2) Human interest frame: The journalist uses a human face in the story and emphasises the emotional aspects of an event, issue or problem.

(3) Economic consequences frame: Here the journalist focuses on the economic consequences of an event, issue or problem for individuals, groups, institutions, regions or countries.

(4) Morality frame: The journalist might choose to focus on religious or moral prescriptions in covering an event, problem or issue.

(5) Responsibility frame: The journalist could attribute responsibility either for the cause or for the solution to problems.

A frame will activate a cognitive schema among individual audience members, and often let him or her “fill in the lines” between the dots that are presented by a particular frame. A successful frame also ensures that the audience will not use “schemata that are contrary to the frame in interpretation of the message” (van Gorp, 2007, p. 66). Successful frames are often felt as given entities: The social construction that takes place remains invisible. Hence, critical scholars have also been interested in using the concept of frames in analysis of power (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Framing can be described as an ideological contest not only over the scope of an issue, but also over matters such as who is responsible and who is affected and which enduring values are relevant (Pan & Kosicki, 2001).

If politicians or public relations practitioners are to succeed in getting their frames wholly or partly presented in the media, they have to adhere to certain news conventions and genre demands from commercial news organisations giving priority to conflicts, power
struggles and drama which can be personalised (Allern, 2001a, 2001b). Professional news sources, representing economic, social or political institutions and organisations, value information subsidies as a tool for their strategic relations with news organisations (Gandy, 1982).

Such subsidies can involve results from polls, exclusive news interviews and other types of free news information, including pictures and offers of illustrating case stories (Allern, 1997). Cost reduction through information subsidies is also a mechanism for enhancing framing potency: Actors strategically cultivate their resources and translate them into framing power (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). Politicians, for instance, consciously try to stage events that fit conventional news values and to give comments that lower the costs of newsgathering. Being used by the media will increase the news sources’ framing power.

The media coverage might be seen as the result of a negotiation between frame sponsors and news organisations, a process Gamson (1988) calls frame sponsorship. News frames (like focusing on the elements of conflict) are supplemented by more political frames (defining the problems and proposing solutions). In this way the different and specific news episodes become elements in a more lasting news narrative (Allern, 2001a, 2001b). In the analysis section we address the research question more fully, and emphasise the difference and the similarities between the sets of frames in the conflicts. First, however, we detail our methodological approach.

Methodological Approach

In order to answer our research question we decided to draw together and utilise material from three case studies that we analysed and published on thoroughly elsewhere. This approach allowed us to highlight some of the more important aspects of the framing contests, while not getting too bogged down in the details of the extensive and complex cases that dominated the public agendas in their respective periods. The first case deals with a
conflict over gas-fired power plants (GPPs) (Ihlen, 2004, 2006); the second regards the source of the problems of a political party (Allern, 2001a); and the third concerns a scandal involving the leader of the national trade union in Norway (Allern, 2007; Allern & Pollack, 2007). The original case studies used a combination of different methods described below, and we had ready access to this material while writing up this chapter.

The main protagonists in the GPP-conflict were the company Naturkraft that applied for a building license and the ad-hoc environmental alliance--the Action Against Gas-Fired Power Plants (AGPP)--that was set up to combat the plans. For this chapter, excerpts were used from the qualitative interviews conducted with the leader of the AGPP and one of its board members. The conflict ran from 1994 to approximately 2001, but in this chapter we focus on what seemed like a crucial five-month period in 1997 (January--May). We also analysed a brochure published by the AGPP, and conducted a qualitative analysis of the coverage in two large Norwegian dailies--Aftenposten and Dagbladet--in the mentioned period using the online archive http://atekst.mediearkivet.no.

The second case study is based on a content analysis of how leading newspapers covered and framed a factional power struggle inside the social democratic Norwegian Labour Party during 1999--2000 (Allern, 2001a). The main protagonists inside the party were one faction supporting the then party chairman Thorbjørn Jagland and another supporting Jagland’s main rival, Jens Stoltenberg. Some of the media organisations played an active role in this conflict. In the analysis it was focused on the coverage in the two popular newspapers with a national distribution (VG, Dagbladet), a national business daily (Dagens Næringsliv) and three morning papers with a regional distribution (Aftenposten, Dagsavisen and Bergens Tidende). Clippings were collected from the period September 15--October 16, 1999, and January 11--February 10, 2000.

The third case study analyses the intense, critical media coverage of serious, personal
and political accusations against the then leader of the national trade union movement in Norway, the LO, in the winter 2007. The final outcome was that this leader decided to withdraw from her position. The analysis was primarily based on a content analysis of the coverage of the conflict in six newspapers in Oslo in the three last weeks of January 2007. The newspapers included for analysis were VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Dagens Næringsliv, Dagsavisen and the small, national daily Klassekampen.

The case study approach was chosen to gain in-depth knowledge in relation to the framing contests and the media coverage. Case studies are typically more suitable for theory building than theory testing, and our goal is to formulate some hypotheses regarding the phenomenon of framing contests and media coverage.

Case 1: Dumping Down to Steal back the Initiative

In 1994, the company Naturkraft was established in Norway and tapped into a relatively new type of discourse on climate change. The problem of climate change was now framed as one that would require a new international approach (Hovden & Lindseth, 2004). Several researchers, politicians and industrial actors argued for the principle of cost-effectiveness and so-called flexible mechanisms, such as the trading of emission quotas. If a country does not reach its specified emission level target, it can buy quotas from others that have made larger cuts than required (see http://unfccc.int). Naturkraft convinced the majority of the Norwegian politicians that power from GPPs would replace power from more polluting sources in Denmark, mainly coal-fired power plants. This issue-specific “substitution frame” would allow Norway to increase its emissions, while the global emissions would decrease.

Established environmental organisations, in particular Nature and Youth, attempted to argue against the relatively complex substitution frame. They argued that the power from the GPPs would not substitute the power from the coal-fired power plants, but only be an additional unclean energy source. Building GPPs would not take issue with the real source of
the increased pollution problem; that of growing energy consumption based on non-renewable energy sources. The environmentalists thus favoured domestic cuts and argued using a “national action frame.” Despite the efforts of the environmentalists, Naturkraft was given the necessary building permits in 1996 and prepared to start building in the summer of 1997 (Ihlen, 2004).

Now, the environmentalists decided on a new strategy and wanted to frame the issue differently (Action Against GPPs leader, personal communication, April 22, 2003). AGPP was set up to build a broad alliance that could engage in civil disobedience. The activists still favoured a national approach to emission cuts, but decided to focus on what they saw as the basic problem and to make some aspects more salient (Entman, 1993). The environmentalists chose a “pollution frame” and started to compare the carbon dioxide emission from the GPPs with the emissions from cars. GPPs “pollute like 600,000 cars,” read one brochure published by the activists. To keep the comparison simple, the focus was on carbon dioxide, rather than on other emissions from the two sources. The board member of Action Against GPPs used the phrase “dumbing down” to describe this change (AGPP board member, personal communication, April 14, 2003). The main strength of the comparison was to make the abstract issue of climate change more concrete and relate it to an everyday object; cars. The issue was said to be pollution, not substitution. The life threatening effect of this pollution, merited civil disobedience, according to AGPP. By this, they added an element of controversy and drama to the conflict, playing up the generic news frame of conflict. The activists also drew on a cultural stock of thinking about environmental conflicts (van Gorp, 2007). They wished to evoke the controversy concerning the hydroelectric power project in Alta in 1978–1982. This is the most dramatic post-war conflict in Norway, and the activists employed civil disobedience. In hindsight, most people recognise that the Alta hydropower project was unnecessary, and ignored basic environmental concerns (Ihlen, 2004).
The activists simplified and repeated their basic contention, thus exploiting the limits of the media’s modus operandi—the need for simplification and lack of space. The activists also paid close attention to other needs of the media. They knew they had to provide events and photo opportunities and roll out the campaign in such a fashion that the issue would remain interesting. A few newspapers were chosen as “allies” and were given exclusives, or what the literature calls “information subsidies” (Allern, 1997; Gandy, 1982). The media was probably more drawn to the dramatic side of the events, than to the “pollution frame” itself. Still, the activists were able to get this frame across, although the generic news frame of conflict was the overarching frame in the coverage.

The turning point came in early May, when a protest march was arranged at the location where the first GPP was to be built. The march drew 250 people and demonstrated that the activists were able to follow up on their threats and that they were seriously committed to the cause (Kapstad, 2001). The newspapers could now show something other than mug shots of activists or archival photos from other protests. The point was made that the protest preparations should be conducted in openness to gain media coverage. The fact that the organisation offered schooling in civil disobedience, for instance, did receive media attention (e.g., Berg Bentzrød, 1997). When the activists raised tents that were similar to those that had been used in the Alta conflict, this was also an attempt to make the audience fill in the lines. That is, to use the same mental scheme on this conflict, as the one in Alta (van Gorp, 2007).

The issue-specific frame focusing on pollution had been sufficiently infused with the generic news frame of conflict, to dominate the coverage. The activists thrived on the conflict frame, and through this was able to enhance the potency of the issue-specific “pollution frame” (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). The reframing, coupled with credible threats of civil disobedience and media shrewdness, succeeded in gaining substantial media coverage and
opinion polls reflected a negative public sentiment toward GPPs. In May 1997, fearing large-scale civil disobedience actions during the coming election campaign, the Prime Minister urged Naturkraft to postpone its construction (Ihlen, 2004, 2006). At the time of the writing, the plants have still not been built.

Case 2: Locating the Problem of the Labour Party

After the general elections in Norway in 1997 the Labour Party lost the government power, and the polls that followed indicated that the road back to the Cabinet could be long. Before and after the municipal elections in 1999 this led to public and internal debates about the party’s problems, focusing on the role of the party chairman and former prime minister, Thorbjørn Jagland.

The problems of the Labour Party, often described as “the eagle” among the political parties in Norway, became a hot topic in the press during the election campaign and a relatively weak result in the municipal elections accelerated the critique. One faction in the party defined and framed the party’s problems as a “communication crisis,” and blamed the party chairman for the problems: he was regarded as being to traditional and lacking the necessary personal charisma, a problem especially visible in the television debates. The proposed solution for the party would be to replace him with the then Vice Chairman of the Labour Party (Jens Stoltenberg), an economist and former Minister of Finance who was regarded as more “modern” and commonly accepted as a better communicator in the media (Allern, 2001a).

The difference between these two politicians seemed from the outside minuscule in the terms of political views. However, they clearly differed in political “style” and background and therefore, as symbolic figures, represented different traditions and tendencies in the party. Jagland had his political roots and strongest support in the local party organisations and the trade union movement and had cultivated these relationships. Some of
his strongest supporters belonged to the trade unions and the left side the Labour Party, and among them the repeated attacks on Jagland was interpreted as an offensive from the urban, media oriented and more market liberal faction of the party. None of the factions did present any alternative political strategy to cope with the party’s problems.

In two periods covered by this analysis (September 15--October 16, 1999 and January 11--February 10, 2000) the six analysed newspapers printed 214 articles about the leadership struggle in the Labour Party, 64 per cent of these were news articles and the rest editorials and political commentaries. Party members demanding a change of leadership were regarded as hot news. Commentators interpreted bad polls for the Labour Party, which both were organised and followed up by the news media, as a proof of the party leader’s inability to change the climate in a more positive direction. The “poor communication frame” confirmed the reality of internal party contradictions and therefore corresponded with generic news frames as the conflict frame and the responsibility frame. It also gave the news organisations an easy possibility to personalise the political conflict. In other words, it satisfied a particular media convention that has been consistently identified in the literature (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

In four of the six of the newspapers, namely VG, Aftenposten, Dagens Næringsliv, and Dagsavisen, the “poor communication frame” dominated both the news columns and the editorial comments. Both the opposition in the Labour Party and most of the pundits of the press argued that Jagland’s style of leadership was a problem for the party’s future. Alternative frames, raising questions concerning the political strategy and tactics of the Labour Party’s leadership, were treated as unimportant or irrelevant. However, Dagbladet showed in their political commentaries some sympathy with the Labour Party Chairman, and Bergens Tidende was more or less strictly neutral--and both papers commented on the activist role VG had taken in the conflict (Allern, 2001a).
In February 2000 Jagland, after new rounds of negative opinion polls and media criticism, proposed that his Vice Chairman, Stoltenberg, should take over as the Labour Party’s Prime Minister Candidate. A dubious poll in VG even promised the Labour Party an eleven per cent gain in support by changing leaders (Allern, 2001a; Strömbäck & Aalberg, 2007). Jagland himself still wanted to continue as the leader of the party organisation. This compromise was applauded by both the Party’s leadership and the press and gave, for some time, the Labour Party, new vitality. The Labour Party, assisted by the conservative party and the right-populist Progressive Party, succeeded shortly after in toppling the then governing liberal-agrarian coalition government. Stoltenberg formed a new Labour Party (minority) government, with party leader Jagland as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The technocratic, market oriented “modernisation” program of the new government was, however, no success with the voters. In September 2001 the Labour Party, after an election campaign with Stoltenberg as the party’s dominating spokesman and communicator, lost the election. The result was regarded as a catastrophe for the Labour Party. Jagland himself held a low profile in the election campaign. Stoltenberg was the dominant figure, especially in the television debates.

This could, as some analysts then expected, have led to a debate about the political strategy and priorities of the Labour Party, especially about the party’s unsuccessful attempt to use the recipe of British “New Labour” in Norway. Instead a new faction struggle exploded both inside the party and in the media. Now both the supporters of Stoltenberg and some of the pundits of the press, especially in VG, defined and framed “the double leadership” between Stoltenberg and Jagland as the reason for the problems (Halse, 2005). A former cabinet member declared in VG that the “power-sharing” between Stoltenberg and Jagland had destroyed the party’s election campaign (Skarsbø Moen, Mosveen, & Sønsteli, 2001).
In the literature, the frame construction process is often seen as a form of negotiations between journalists and sources (e.g., de Vreese, 2003). This was also the case in this second stage of the conflict: Journalists interacted and negotiated with news sources inside the Labour Party in this frame-building process. Many of the news sources inside the Labour Party were allowed to stay anonymous in their attacks on the party leader Jagland, including politicians which VG described as members of Stoltenberg’s cabinet (Skarsbø Moen, Sønsteli, Mosveen, & Mikalsen, 2001). The press coverage became especially intense and negative for Jagland from December 2002 and onwards. In January the party chairman suddenly got ill and he was hospitalised for a period. Shortly after he declared that he would step down as a party leader at the Labour Party’s congress the following autumn (Halse, 2005). This demonstrates how the media success of a specific political frame might be consequential.

Case 3: The Fall of a National Trade Union Leader

The third case study concerns political and moral accusations in the winter 2007 against Gerd-Liv Valla, the then leader of the Norwegian trade union confederation LO. In January 2007, VG, Norway’s largest newspaper, broke the news that the leader of the international section of the LO, Ingunn Yssen, had resigned from her job. The sensational element was that she declared to be a victim of harassment. Valla, the radical, female LO leader, was named as the villain (Mosveen, Johansen, & Ertesvåg, 2007).

The coverage in VG was based on Yssen’s long resignation letter, delivered to the newspaper soon after the LO got it. The front-page headline was: “I was harassed by Valla because I became pregnant.” The six pages devoted to the story included several other harassment accusations. Beside a short comment from a former colleague and friend, there were no attempts at documentation or evidence from other sources.

The news media immediately treated the accusations as a political and incriminating
Both women were well known public figures, something which gave the incident added commercial news value. Valla had earlier been Minister of Justice and was one of the leading architects behind the red-green coalition which won the general election and formed a new government in 2005. Under her leadership LO had flexed political muscles in discussions and conflicts with the new government, and Valla was by some circles inside the Labour Party seen as being too powerful. Ingunn Yssen, her counterpart, was also a member of the Labour Party, however, belonging to its more market-oriented, liberal-right wing. Earlier she had held positions as Under-Secretary of State and she had been director of the State Centre for Gender Equality. Valla and Yssen were both known as feminists.

One of the political factors contributing to the media priorities and public interest was of course that it is the policy of LO to defend workers’ rights and fight all kinds of harassment against employees. Harassment of pregnant women is regarded as intolerable, and Valla was known to have an active profile regarding gender questions.

In the media coverage two competing issue-specific frames immediately became visible. The dominant “harassment frame,” established by VG in their launch of the story, was based on Yssens accusations as the angle of the story and generally presenting the rude “management style” of Valla as the core of the problem. LO and Valla tried to counterattack by using a “revenge frame:” Yssen had not managed to do her job as an international secretary and section leader, and declined the other job solutions that was suggested. Yssen also sought revenge because LO had refused to pay her salary while she planned to attend a half year-course at the prestigious Military Defence College.

In the period from January 11--31, 2007, the first stage of the conflict as it played out in the media, six Oslo-papers printed as much as 599 articles about the case, 77 of them were front-page stories. The six dailies are in order of their circulation figures VG, Aftenposten,
Dagbladet, Dagens Næringsliv, Dagsavisen and Klassekampen.

An analysis of the ‘main angle’ and framing of the articles (Allern & Pollack, 2007) show that in the four largest newspapers, all with liberal or conservative political leanings, more than half of the total coverage (all genres) were critical of the LO leader, and a very low percentage presented her or the LO’s version of the conflict, defended her position or criticised her opponent, Yssen. The news coverage was even more one-sided negative than this, while the commentaries were somewhat more balanced. There were few critical articles about the media campaign in most papers; furthermore, most of the critical texts were debate articles and letters from the readers. The social democratic newspaper, Dagsavisen, was more balanced in its overall reporting while the socialist-left Klassekampen had the highest percentage of articles with an angle positive for the LO-leader and critical of the media coverage in the market leading papers.

The figures clearly indicate that the political orientation of the newspapers influenced how the different news organisations covered and framed the conflict. A qualitative reading and analysis of the news stories in the four largest newspapers reveals that very few articles were based on any critical assessment of Yssen’s accusations. None of the section leaders or other employees of the LO were interviewed as public witnesses by any newspaper.

The torrents of critique against Valla in the press were based on other sources. One of the most important in the news coverage was a female lawyer who in the spring 1997 was Valla’s Sub-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Justice. The lawyer denounced Valla’s leader style as arrogant and manipulative, and was immediately treated as an important, trustworthy character witness and her comments were made into front-page news. Later it became known that a former Sub-Secretary of State in the same ministry in 1997, now a well known judge, in the same period gave a lengthy interview to Dagbladet, were he, in contrast to the lawyer, gave a very positive evaluation of Valla’s working style and leadership. This
interview, which did not fit the “harassment frame,” was never printed (Skjeseth, 2007). An independent commentator made this observation: “Good stories about the evil Valla is on sale. You will get the whole front page in Aftenposten if you can give evidence that Valla behaved in a rude way on a trade union meeting … ten to fifteen years ago” (Hompland, 2007, p. 39).

Other critical sources were different types of politicians, some from the political parties, or with a background in the trade union movement. The reactions of Valla and the LO to Yssen’s resignation and accusations were characterised as a PR catastrophe; instead of a humble answer, promising to look into the matter, the LO leader launched a counter attack, denied the accusations and gave out information about how (bad) Yssen had done her job.

The extreme amount of news stories, combined with the one-sidedness of the coverage in the main stream press, was a shock for the LO leaders and got old conflict lines inside the organisation into the open. As a compromise and preliminary solution the LO, after some weeks of public torments, decided to establish an external, fact finding commission with three legal experts as members, all with conservative political leanings.

The group started its work early in February and was organised as an inquisition, i.e. their committee being investigators, prosecutors and judges in one body - with no right for the main actors to appeal the coming verdict. Two psychiatrists, one of them being an expert of war traumas, were recruited as part of the group. An international consulting company was engaged to make anonymous interviews among ordinary employees in the LO, while the committee of five organised their own hearings with the leading personnel of the organisation.

All in all, the commission interviewed 31 witnesses, beside Valla and Yssen. The report from the group was delivered to the LO on the March 9, 2007. In the month with investigations four of the testimonies were leaked to the press, all to the VG, the leading
organ of the anti-Valla campaign. Three of them were like Gerd-Liv Valla, elected LO politicians in top positions. The fourth witness was the general secretary of the Norwegian Labour Party. The reports about contradictions between some of the leaders holding top positions in the LO, some of the conflicts about personal conflicts years ago, were all interpreted by the newspaper as an indirect confirmation of Yssen’s accusations (Allern, 2007).

The planted leaks to VG was a clear indication of the conclusions in the coming report from the commission, delivered to the LO on March 9 and formulated as a classical verdict: the LO leader was found guilty in harassment of her former international secretary. At a press conference Gerd-Liv Valla attacked both the premises and the conclusion of the commissions report. However, her conclusion was that she, because of the media pressure and the future of the LO, had decided to withdraw from her position as leader of the organisation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The three case studies have illustrated different aspects of framing contests that take place when frame sponsors compete with each other and negotiate with journalists to obtain favourable coverage, that is, coverage that uses their frames.

The first case study illustrated how an organisational actor (the environmental group AGGP) was able to adapt to new political conventions and the needs of the media and thus succeeded to get significant parts of its frame incorporated in the media coverage in competition with the frame of the industrial actor. In other words, the case study showed the importance of being media savvy when framing an issue. An issue-specific frame was fused with a generic news frame focusing on conflict (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), and journalistic conventions were utilised with great effect: Simplification, concretisation, and repetition. The issue was made tangible, the activists provided photo opportunities, gave exclusives or “information subsidies” (Allern, 1997; Gandy, 1982), and also tapped into a
cultural reservoir making use of a well-known previous environmental conflict. In other words, they attempted to activate a particular mental schemata (van Gorp, 2007). At this time in the conflict the competing issue-specific frame of “substitution” had become old hat, and was far less interesting from a journalistic angle.

The second case study was concentrated on a conflict over problems of the Norwegian Labour Party. The then leader of the party was accused of lacking modern communication skills and the party opposition who wanted a change of party leader successfully launched “poor communication” as a frame of reference and a change of leader as the solution. This was a media success. One of the reasons was that the attacks on the party leader corresponded with established generic news frames, like the conflict frame, the morality frame and the responsibility frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). This gave the news media possibilities to intervene in the inner party conflict and develop the contradictions through news interviews and opinion polls. The faction who wanted a change of leadership experienced that “information subsidies” in the form of offers of public criticism of the party chairman easily became news. The communication skills of the faction who agitated for Stoltenberg as the news party chairman was even recognised by VG in a commentary: “So may be it is no coincidence that the uproar is lead by media professionals, Labour Party-members with smart experience from TV, radio, advertisement and [the PR agency] Geelmuyden.Kiese” (Simonsen, 2000). This gave the “friends of Stoltenberg” easy access to the news columns in most news outlets. The supporters of the party chairman had a more complicated, and less newsworthy, story to tell, and no specific framing of the conflict to offer.

Another reason seems to have been the political congruence between the opposition in the Labour Party and editorial departments of the newspapers most engaged in the conflict, namely VG and Dagsavisen. The newspapers’ pundits themselves used the “bad leadership
frame” in their commentaries and argued that a change of leadership was necessary for the party to recover and mobilise new enthusiasm. The party press is history in Norway. However, the new role of news organisations as an independent institution does not exclude political engagement, political bias and the possibilities for news organisations to intervene in political, even inner party, processes.

The third case study concerns a classical political scandal with accusations of transgressions of moral values, norms and codes. Both commercial and political factors were involved. Political scandals sell because they represent moral tales that appeal to collective curiosity and maliciousness and can be highly personalised and dramatised. At the same time they seem to confirm and demonstrate the power and potency of journalism and the will of the media to criticise people in power.

In the Yssen versus Valla-case the basis for the media campaign was a resignation letter from Yssen, delivered as a “information subsidy” to VG. The story was framed as a “harassment case,” both in the resignation letter and the media coverage, based on accusations partly of a private character that was as difficult to deny, as they was to prove. This issue-specific frame corresponded with several well-known news values and generic news frames, like the conflict frame. The personalised attacks, and questions concerning individual responsibility, made it even easier to personalise the news coverage. Another factor, which made the exposure especially “scandalous,” was that harassment in work situations throughout the last years had been a topic prioritised both by the LO and public authorities.

The LO leader’s counterattack, presenting the accusations as unreliable and framing the story as “revenge” because of the accuser’s failure in her job, had less of a chance to succeed. First of all, this frame was more complicated, and could only be confirmed through fact finding, investigative reporting. The counterattack was also quickly interpreted and
denounced by leading media outlets as a confirmation of the “brutal” character of the LO leader. The media scene became wide open for different actors who wanted to undermine both her or the LO’s political power and position.

Taken together, the three case studies suggest at least two hypotheses regarding framing contests and news coverage: First, and as indicated by the literature on source strategies (Allern, 1997; Ihlen, 2004; Palmer, 2000), actors improve their chances of gaining coverage for their chosen frame when they are able to identify and exploit media conventions like the need for visuals and exclusives. The literature has consistently demonstrated how the latter form of “knowledge capital” is valuable for source. It has also been pointed out that this resource can be used when actors attempt to frame issues (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). What we argue, however, is that the dynamic contest that takes place can be fruitfully analysed using the twin format of issue-specific frames and generic news frames like conflict or moral drama.

Our second and most important hypothesis is that it seems likely that actors that can fuse their issue-specific frames with standard generic news frames stand a better chance to obtain coverage. In political conflicts, the commercial media’s orientation is largely geared towards the political play as such, often focusing on personalities and individual responsibilities. When actors can feed into this generic news frame they seem even more likely to succeed with their framing goals.

Furthermore, the potency of an actors’ frame is greatly enhanced when journalists actively partake in co-constructing this frame. The active and intervening role of leading news organisations in the framing process is an important point, not least the active and leading role of the market leading popular tabloid VG in the two last case studies. The influence and penetration of specific frames is clearly dependent on the market power of the journalistic medium that launches them. These case studies also illustrate how a chosen frame
colors the remaining coverage, turning most different and specific news episodes into elements in a more lasting news narrative (Allern, 2001a, 2001b). Potential news stories that do not fit into the dominating frames are easily dropped as ‘not newsworthy’.

In Norway, this has led to a public debate about the political actor roles of media organisations (Allern, 2001a). In interviews conducted by Thorbjørnsrud (2000; 2003) the journalists strongly opposed the view that they and their news organisations could be interpreted as political actors in the Labour Party-conflict. They insisted that they had “no agenda role” outside reporting good news stories and that a power struggle inside the Labour Party clearly is such a story. In their view, it is always necessary to focus on the qualities of the leader during political crises. However, this is done “without intentions to intervene or influence” politically (Thorbjørnsrud, 2001, p. 65).

This ideology of “pure journalism” represents a naive positivism typical in news departments (“we just report the facts”). However, it can also be interpreted as a conscious attempt to avoid public debate about the political and ethical aspects of political news framing. The choice of perspective, focus, angle and news sources, as well as the exclusion of other aspects, is treated as journalistic professionalism, pure and simple. Ironically this also means that the professional news sources and political actors who are invited to dance on the media scene will avoid any search light on their steps and motives. This also becomes troublesome, given the potential power of frames to decide who is responsible, and which values and perspectives are relevant (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Pan & Kosicki, 2001).

A qualifier has to be added regarding the possible framing success of actors that are able to draw on knowledge about media frames and media conventions: When “everyone” has become adept at communicating on the media’s terms, the competition hardens. Furthermore, the journalists might also use generic news frames that do not necessarily benefit any of the sources, for instance by focusing on the “political horse race,” rather than
the issue in question (Ihlen & Nitz, 2007). The business of frame sponsorship is not always straightforward. Further research should be conducted to obtain more systematised knowledge of the relationship between issue-specific frames and generic news frames. Another interesting avenue to pursue would be to research which actors use what type of frames. There is a wealth of insight from news sociology on offer that could assist in this endeavour.
References


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