

RECENT PhD DISSERTATIONS IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

EDITED BY

NICHOLAS W.
JANKOWSKI

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Dr. N.W. Jankowski
Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9104
6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands
email: N.Jankowski@maw.kun.nl

SCHOLARSHIP

GREGOR PETRIČ

SOCIAL ACTION IN THE WORLD WIDE WEB NETWORK: INDIVIDUAL AND STRUCTURAL ASPECTS

UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2003

Contact information: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Email: gregor.petric@uni-lj.si.

The sociology of technology offers a starting point for analysing World Wide Web technology. The possibilities of its technical features, however, do not stimulate passive adoption, but offer a platform for various social actions with a certain liberating potential. The World Wide Web, like technology in general, is a result of time-bound processes, in which technological procedures and features interact interdependently with various social actors. The development of the World Wide Web was significantly influenced by ideas regarding hypertext, which are ingrained in its technological configuration. The latter offers an action niche for ordinary users to be judged beyond purely instrumental action only with respect to the efficiency of the social system. It is shown that a hypertext-based World Wide Web supports a liberating potential for individual action. This thesis is analysed in terms of negative and positive freedom, which correspond mostly to the information and communicative levels of the World Wide Web, respectively. Negative freedom, defined by overcoming the limitation of fixed, rigidly linear, and hierarchical information systems, stems from the hypertextual organization of information in a new electronic medium. A synthesis of hypertextual ideas and a postmodern discussion of intertextuality supports the idea that the former enables and stimulates individual creativity, unlimited co-operation, reader emancipation and wider, epistemological and political changes.

On the information level, the World Wide Web only partially reflects hypertextual ideas, which is illustrated by its Slovenian part and the empirical assessment of a network of more than 30,000 web sites and their interlinks, based on more than one million Slovenian web pages. The Slovenian part of the World Wide Web – which resembles the global World Wide Web distribution of essential characteristics – is predominantly a reservoir of isolated web sites. On the other hand, however, numerous minorities of intensively interconnected web sites support the conclusion that the hypertext is not the missing link of the World Wide Web. The empirical assessment of the World Wide Web's interconnectedness, decentralization and nonlinearity – as structural dimensions of the hypertext – do not imply conclusively the web's liberating potential on the information level. A detailed content analysis – based on collected data – may prove more successful in analysing this problem.

A specific liberating potential of the World Wide Web is realised on the structural level, since every user may also be an author of a web site. The latter may be a communication context for author and user; various ways of utilising this context are theoretically and empirically analysed. The theoretical discussion is primarily concerned with an assessment of the present situation and relies on ab-

stractions of concrete actions of individual authors of web sites. Beyond an analysis of this specific segment of social reality, the theoretical framework offers a starting point for a wider analysis of actions in the context of new technologies.

Following Habermas's general typology of social action, built on the ideal types of speech acts, actions of individual author's of web sites can be understood as:

(1) Functional action, situated in a normative framework, supported by the values of hypertextual ethics, which are specific to the World Wide Web. In this framework a legitimate relation exists between an author – representing his/her knowledge, incorporated by links into the wide reservoir of human knowledge – and a user, who browses the author's web site.

(2) A reaction to contemporary social processes, which demand increasing reflexivity. This reaction maintains and restores ontological security, reflected in the use of the web site for establishing intimate, personal relations, which are derived from the commonality of beliefs, values, and interests; it also represents a narcissistic preoccupation with the self-image. In the latter case, web site usage does not conform to Habermas's communicative action – oriented towards intersubjective understanding and agreement – ut reflects success-oriented strategic action, when participants in communication are reduced to means for attaining selfish goals.

(3) An expression of public opinion, derived from the possibility of reaching mass audiences through a web site to present opinions on public problems. A general theoretical framework, which is designed to understand the web site as a context of speech acts – and subject to various validity claims – overcomes the narrow focus of existing studies of "personal home pages." These studies consider the actions of web site authors as mostly private and, therefore, marginalise otherwise rich social activities. Moreover, based on identifying communicative actions, web sites are analysed as a context of liberating action, open to participants, who coordinate their actions with respect to an achieved consensus.

One aim of the theoretical discussion is the formulation of formal models designed for empirical verification. Accordingly, the discussion tries to explicate socio-psychological factors of different modes of action, which stem from various social circumstances and corresponding psychological states. Theoretically defined modes of web site usage are presented as operationalising concepts. The actions of individual web site authors are measured and explained on the level of subjective intentions. As an attempt to bridge the gap between interpretative and positivistic approaches to understanding social phenomena, it cannot avoid several shortcomings. For instance, a reduced theoretical discussion of essential factors of individual action faces operationalising efforts, which try to exert a high level of validity and reliability without being able to avoid reductionism.

Nevertheless, an empirical analysis of over 1,000 authored web sites shows sufficient validity of theoretically constructed modes of web site usage and the relevance of corresponding explanatory mechanisms. Although the latter offer only a small part of the total causal structure resulting in the establishment of web site, they prove, nevertheless, that the actions of web site authors not only reflect the logic of instrumental rationality, but also embody an idea of positive freedom. Such actions – based on intersubjective understanding and oriented toward agreement – stem from considering hypertextual ethics, crisis situations, loneliness, and stigmatisation, among others.

CLAES H. DE VREESE

FRAMING EUROPE: TELEVISION NEWS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Contact information: Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: cdevreese@fmg.uva.nl.

The dissertation deals with the role of television news in the process of political and economic European integration. Though citizens across Europe repeatedly identify television as the most important source of information, previous studies exploring antecedents of public opinion about European affairs have largely neglected the role of media. This study provides evidence that the information provided by television news is a key resource when citizens think about European integration.

The study investigates the production, contents, and effects of television news coverage of European affairs in a cross-national comparative perspective focusing on Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The design draws on interviews with newsmakers, content analyses of news coverage, and experiments testing the effects of television news. A key concept in the study is framing. Framing implies that journalists make choices in how to package political news and thereby endow some aspects of a topic with greater salience while excluding other information. The study proposes an *integrated process model of news framing* that investigates the framing process in its totality: the *frame-building* phase with interaction between newsmakers and sources, *frames in the news*, and the *frame-setting* phase assessing the influence of news.

Based on interviews with newsroom members of the main evening television news programs, the organization of the coverage of European affairs, the perceived constraints and challenges in covering "Europe," the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria were investigated. The most important constraints and challenges perceived by journalists and editors when covering European affairs fall into four areas: "distance and time" (referring to the lack of proximity with key decisions taken in power centers such as Brussels), "access and terminology" (referring to the perception of EU institutions as closed and bureaucratic, utilizing complex terminology), "internal disagreement" (referring to battles between journalists assigned to "European" stories and their editors over the priority of EU news), and "lack of audience knowledge" (referring to a perception of insufficient audience competences and interest).

The editorial policy of the different news programs varied, but the approach of all programs was rather "pragmatic" – implying that politics (including election campaigns) are not considered newsworthy *per se* but that political events and issues compete against other topics in the allocation of time in the news. These findings are contrasted with previous research documenting European broadcasters' "sacerdotal" approach to politics in which political processes are considered crucial to democracy and therefore newsworthy *per se*.

The analysis of news coverage of European affairs included more than 10,000 television news stories during the 1999 European election campaign, EU summits, the introduction of the euro, and a "routine" news period sampled throughout 15 months.

The analysis suggested that the "European" news story is essentially a *domestic* story. Not only is the majority of actors in European news from the country in which the news is broadcast, most issues are covered from a domestic angle and focuses on implications of EU issues in the country of the news program. The study suggests that certain news selection criteria not only influence the choice of topics in the news, but also provide a template for organizing and structuring news stories. In this vein, when European issues are covered in the news this often happens with a strong emphasis on *conflict*. The considerations made by journalists when choosing events and issues for the news are translated into how these are presented in the news by providing journalists with a clear conception of how to package the news. Finally, the analysis suggested that EU-related actors in the news are most often *not evaluated*, but if evaluated then this is consistently *negative*. The study shows that the evaluation of EU actors is not different from but indeed rather comparable to the evaluation that national politicians receive in the news.

Experiments were used to address questions about the effects of television news frames. The experiments were conducted in cooperation with a national news program [NOS *Journal* in the Netherlands] to make use of realistic and professional stimulus material in the natural context of an evening news bulletin.

The first study investigated the effects of the conflict and economic consequences frames, that is news focusing on either, for example, party disagreement on an issue or, for example, the economic implications of an issue. The results show that frames in television news have the ability to direct the thoughts of viewers when thinking about contemporary political issues, such as the enlargement of the EU. For example, participants who watched a story framed in terms of a conflict between political party positions expressed thoughts reflecting public and political friction over the issue. The study also showed that a news frame plays an equally important role as core facts of a news story when individuals recap news in their own words. This in turn implies that a news frame, often present in specific textual elements, and often less prominent compared to factual information, carries great importance for the public understanding of political issues.

Analyses of journalism and news suggest an emphasis on the *strategic* aspects of in political reporting, that is news in which the actions of politicians are interpreted as a means of positioning themselves favorably in public opinion. A second study investigated the effects of strategic news coverage of European politics and found that exposure to strategic news encourages political cynicism. Moreover, strategic news activates negative evaluations of a policy issue compared to issue-based news that renders more positive issue evaluations. Strategic news neither affected the level of support for EU enlargement nor the intention to vote in, for example, a referendum on the enlargement of the EU.

The study suggests that knowledgeable citizens were both more likely to express political cynicism and to evaluate the enlargement issue negatively, but they were at the same time more supportive of EU enlargement plans. These findings may be seen as an addition to the "spiral of cynicism" argument. Knowledgeable citizens appear to be more sophisticated in their information processing and to

reflect at greater length about an issue. They rely more on a frame provided in the news when expressing reactions to an issue. However, this does not imply that a strong attitudinal change takes place. The results suggest that strategic news while increasing cynicism may play little or no role in mobilizing or demobilizing electors. It also may very well be the case that (European) voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and their support for specific policies.

The concluding chapter reviews the *integrated process model of framing* in the light of extant research, avenues for future framing research in political communication are suggested, and moderators of framing effects are specified. Finally, the conclusion offers some policy relevant comments on how journalism could be improved when reporting EU affairs and it is suggested that the media is a key component when making sense of public opinion about European integration.